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In terms of sheer volume the major issues in the teaching of English in South Africa are those connected with its use as a second language by non-mother tongue speakers. Because of this, there is a very real sense in which the future of English in our country is dependent upon its strength and effectiveness as a second language. In this paper it is proposed to consider its position in the Black educational system: firstly as a school subject and secondly as medium of instruction.

For a full appreciation of the problems and possibilities inherent in the situation it is necessary to give a very brief indication of its magnitude. At present there are some 3,7 million pupils in 12 000 schools taught by nearly 70 000 teachers. Every one of these pupils, from the moment of entry into the school in Sub-standard A until he leaves, at whatever level up to and including Form V (Std 10), and apart from whatever else forms part of his curriculum, takes English as a subject, together with Afrikaans and a Bantu language (normally his mother tongue). It is important, therefore, to realise that English takes its place as one of three languages that are compulsory throughout the school system. Its position cannot be considered in isolation but only in relation to the total language situation. There are very few of the teachers who are not concerned with English in one way or another, either as subject or medium. Every primary school teacher is a teacher of English, while the majority of post-primary teachers use it as medium. In so far as the teacher's competency in English is the vital factor in the whole situation, it will be clear that one is concerned here not with the specialist teacher of English, important as he is, but with the standards in English of the teaching corps in general.

Decentralisation of control

A further important consideration is the very wide variety of situations in which English teaching operates. Black education is no longer a unitary system: the central department is responsible for only about 40 per cent of the 3,7 million pupils; the eight homeland education departments jointly carry the major responsibility therefore, from the 25 000 pupils of Qwaqwa to the 600 000 of KwaZulu. These children come from very different backgrounds: from the mountain recesses of Vendaland and Zululand, from the White farms of the Orange Free State, from the teeming urban sprawls of Soweto, Umlazi and Langa.

Wherever they come from, however, and whatever school they attend, the one-teacher farm school to the thousand-strong city school, their contact with English before coming to school has been minimal if not non-existent. For many the first English they hear is that of the Black teacher in the Sub A class, and for most the only English they hear for the next four to seven years is that spoken in the classroom — and in this classroom they compete with at least 50 other children for the attention and help of the teacher. On the positive side there is a very high level of motivation and a potential for language learning common to children at this stage all over the world.

English in the primary school

In **the primary school** the pupil spends from 2½ hours (in the sub-standards) to 4½ hours (Std 5) each week in learning English as a language: together with Afrikaans and his mother tongue this means that he is spending from 40-45 per cent of his total curriculum time on language learning. The syllabuses, particularly those for the first four years, are fairly up-to-date and have taken into account many of the basic research findings in second language teaching. As always, however, the essential factor is the competency and insight of the teacher, and her capacity to translate the syllabus in terms of classroom practice.

The hard facts are that 18 per cent of primary school teachers are professionally unqualified, 25 per cent (this the older group of women teachers for the most part) have a primary school education of eight years followed by three years of professional training, while the majority of the remainder have Form III (Std 8) plus two years of professional training. Only about 2 500 primary school teachers have academic qualifications of senior certificate or higher.

Models of English speech

The standards of English among these teachers vary considerably and cannot always be equated with their qualifications. The older teachers, with apparently lower qualifications, very often had the advantage of direct contact with English-speaking lecturers in their training college days, while the younger, otherwise better-qualified teacher, most often learnt his English from Black or Afrikaans-speaking lecturers. (This is a price English has had to pay for the abdication of the English-speaking teacher from Black education in the 1950s and 60s.) Obvious, too, is that much depends on the area in which the teacher is employed: stimuli towards the improvement of her English are much more powerful in Soweto than in the Soutpansberg. What is true everywhere is that if the teacher is provided with detailed, structured language materials geared specifically to the requirements of the syllabuses, is supported with authentic models of spoken English on tape and backed up by an effective in-service training programme then, whatever her qualifications, she is ready to adopt new ideas, willing to accept help and guidance, and achieves a competency in the classroom which transcends the difficulties of the everyday classroom situation. There are a number of programmes in action which have adequately proved this: the task of the education departments, with the support of the English-speaking community, is to make these conditions effective on a much wider scale.

At present, if one is to speak in general terms, there is certainly no room for complacency about the standards of English of Black primary school pupils: passing a primary school leaving school examination at border-line level is not providing an adequate base for the further use of the language as a means of communication.

Secondary school English

At the **secondary school** level all Black pupils take English as one of six or seven subjects forming the curriculum. The syllabuses, broadly speaking, are very similar to those used for second language teaching at this level throughout South Africa, while in Forms IV and V (Stds 9 and 10) they are as laid down by the Joint Matriculation Board or the Department of National Education, the bodies responsible for examining Black pupils at this level.

Among the many problems of teaching English in the secondary school there are three that justify some comment. If one accepts that what one should be evaluating in the senior certificate examinations is the pupil's ability to understand, speak and write English at a level which can reasonably be expected of someone who has had 12 years' tuition in the language, then one must come to these conclusions:

- The spoken word is being badly neglected at secondary level, and examination results do not reflect adequately this aspect of language competency.
- The use of the 'essay' as an evaluation of competency in writing the second language does not seem to be an adequate means of testing the ability to express straightforward meaning.
- Finally, a matter I have discussed at length in a previous paper,* the written testing of literature in the second language is not conducive to acceptable or positive attitudes towards what is the main new component in language teaching in the secondary school.

The quality of English teaching

Measured in terms of examination results there would seem to be little need for concern. In 1974 95,2 per cent of Black pupils writing English Lower Grade in Senior Certificate passed, with a median mark of 47,7 per cent: this position has been maintained over the last 10-15 years. In practical terms, however, when these pupils come up against

* Literature Across Cultures: English Literature in Bantu Schools.
English Studies in Africa, p 6.7: 13 January 1970.

the demands of university, training college or other tertiary levels of education, or of job requirements, serious gaps in oral and written communication in English become apparent. In spite of these difficulties, however, the tri-lingual product of the secondary school need not be ashamed of what he has achieved in the total language field: he measures up well both against his White compatriot in South Africa and his Black equivalent north of us.

That he does so stands to the credit of the teachers in the secondary school, nearly all of whom are professionally qualified but limited in terms of academic background. Only 15 per cent of secondary school teachers have degrees, 16,4 per cent partial degree qualifications, 52,8 per cent matriculation/senior certificate, while the remainder (15,8 per cent) hold even lower qualifications. That they achieve what they do, can in the first place be attributed to a high level of motivation and an attachment to English which ensures positive attitudes in the classroom. Increasingly, too, they are being supported by an effective departmental in-service training programme, started at Mamelodi, near Pretoria, some years ago but now being extended in scope as homelands such as Bophuthatswana, the Ciskei and KwaZulu start their own programmes. Credit must also go to the support given by the English Academy, initially through conferences and the work of its Oral English Committee, latterly through its English Language Teaching Information Centre (ELTIC) set up after the Roma Conference of 1972.

While problems abound it is not a situation in which there is any need for undue pessimism: one of the most powerful forces in the learning of a second language is the attitude of pupils and teachers. This is overwhelmingly positive. That the teachers themselves have formed an Association of Teachers of English is but one symptom of the strong attachment, based partly on realism and partly on sentiment, that the profession has towards the language.

Important as the teaching of English as a subject is, the use of English as medium of instruction is a much more critical area.

Mission influence

Prior to 1955 when Black education was a shared responsibility of the mission churches and the provincial education departments, the general usage was mother-tongue medium up to and including Std 2, except in Natal where Zulu tended to be used up to Std 4. English was then used as medium from Std 3 upwards, except in a very few Dutch Reformed missionary institutions in the OFS and Transvaal, where use was made of Afrikaans. The strong position held by English was largely due to the influence of the English-speaking missions during the previous hundred years, and to the comparatively late entry of the Afrikaans churches into the mission field in South Africa.

From 1955, when Black education became a centralised state responsibility, the policy that was adopted was mother-tongue medium throughout the primary school (8 years), followed by the 50-50 use of English and Afrikaans in post-primary education. In practice, however, English has been the dominant medium of the secondary school, particularly in the Form IV and V classes.

In the last two years some far-reaching changes have taken place in the situation, particularly in the homelands. The central department has implemented a recommendation of the Bantu Education Advisory Council that mother-tongue medium be used up to and including Std 4 (6 years), while a number of homelands, including the largest, KwaZulu, have followed the earlier (1963) example of the Transkei and limited mother-tongue medium to the first four years of schooling.

While the central department has re-confirmed its policy on the 50-50 use of English and Afrikaans from Std 5 upwards, the homelands almost without exception have opted for the exclusive use of English from the point (Std 3 or Std 5) at which a change of medium has been decided on. It should be noted that this in no way affects the position of Afrikaans as a subject in the school: in some cases more time is being given to it to "compensate" for the use of English as the exclusive medium.

As a footnote to this statement of the present position it should be pointed out that very strong pressures are being exerted on the

central department by the Black teaching organisations, urban school boards and homeland leaders for it to follow the same road as the homelands.

The continuing debate

Language, understandably because it is the essence of the culture of people, is a highly emotional and explosive issue, and in the hot debate which has ranged over medium for the past 20 years, the rational voice of the educationist has not always been heard. One has to accept that, ultimately, decisions over language are political decisions and this will remain true whether the politician is White or Black. If the choice were left to parents one would also have to accept that their decisions would not always be well-considered or in the best interests of their children. Even the educationist cannot free himself entirely from the emotional climate in which language unfortunately so often operates.

On one issue there has been broad agreement — the use of the mother tongue in the first years of primary school. The debate has been over the stage at which the change to another medium should be made, and to what medium. Where the change to English has been made at the Std 3 level the argument used has been that exposure to English at an early stage will improve the child's competency in this language, variously seen as a "bread-and-butter" language of economic value within South Africa, and a "window to the outside world" in its value as a means of international communication.

Problems and policies

Unfortunately, mere exposure to "more English" does not necessarily improve the child's standard in the language: this is the lesson to be learnt from the Transkei, which after 12 years of following this policy does not achieve as well in English as the remainder of Black pupils, in the Junior and Senior Certificate examinations. The "exposure theory" could have worked if the teachers using English in Std 3 and 4 were mother-tongue speakers of the language. This is not so and the Black teachers using it at this level have themselves very limited language resources, and in the process of teaching re-inforce non-standard forms of English in their pupils' usage. Moreover, there is the added danger that pupils using the second language as medium before they have an adequate background may become concerned in their learning with the superficial, outward forms of words and not the fundamental concepts of the subject they are studying.

The lesson to be learnt is that the earlier the change from mother-tongue to English is made the greater the care that must be taken with the preparation of both teacher and pupil for this transition. From the beginning English will have to be taught in the light of its position as a future medium at an early stage, with all the implications for comprehension, reading ability, directed vocabulary, oral expression that this entails. Unless homelands give specific attention to these issues, decisions to use English from Std 3 upwards may radically disappoint the expectations that have been aroused by changes in language policy. They may well find that they would have been well-advised to delay the change-over of medium to Std 5 as is the policy in the central departments.

In whatever class the change to English as medium takes place it is a critical year in the pupil's school career, and in general there is not sufficient awareness of the radical nature of this transition. Not only is a change of medium involved, but often the pupil who has had the security of personal contact with one class teacher, now finds himself faced by a dozen different teachers, each of whom has particular subject interests and demands. All, or many, of these teachers are using English, and the pupil has to "tune in" to a variety of usages and vocabularies, of speech patterns, tempo and expression. On the whole it is true to say that the primary school teacher has been more careful of the level of English he has used, and has had a better understanding of the problems of the pupil than the average secondary school teacher, whose main interest is Mathematics, for example, rather than English.

Nowhere is the commonplace that every teacher is a teacher of English of more significance than where English is the second language of both teacher and pupil. In the junior classes of the secondary school the most effective subject teacher is the one who can clothe the content in language within reach of the pupil, and who is able to achieve understanding of concepts rather than knowledge of words. He is dealing with English in

a particular situation, where it has immediate reality and relevance, and it may well be that he is having a greater influence than the teacher of English, who unfortunately often tends to deal with the language in isolation or in artificial contrived situations.

In this transition year the pupil, also for the first time, is plunged into the use of various textbooks written in English. Apart from the problem of the use of the second language in textbooks, an issue to which much more attention needs to be given, he is thrown back on comprehension of the written word in a way which he has never experienced before.

That the pupil survives these very considerable stresses and strains during the transition year, and on the whole manages to cope with the new experience so well, is a constant witness to his toughness and resilience. Nevertheless, for those who have come up from the primary classes ill-prepared, the demands of the new medium too often lead to failure and drop-out. Competency in language continues to be a major factor throughout the secondary school, and lack of it is too often the cause of the failure of the pupil to master other subjects.

Homelands

The administrative changes made in the application of medium policy, particularly in the homelands, have meant that English has become of increasing importance as a medium, and that it will touch a much larger number of pupils at an earlier stage of their school careers. The major question therefore is what kind of English they will be exposed to. If it is acceptable, authentic standard English it will fulfil its purpose for the pupils using it; if it is deviant and non-standard it can insulate and separate them from the English-speaking community both here in South Africa and elsewhere.

As always the key is the teacher, and most of all the secondary school teacher, who has a much more powerful influence in this area than the university. It is the secondary school that creates the level of English which has status and is socially accepted: this is where the public image of the language is set up. The English of the older generation was not formed by Fort Hare but by institutions such as Lovedale, Healdtown, Adams and Kilnerton. Now, however, the English-speaking teacher is very thinly spread, secondary education is developing at an increasing tempo, and standards of English are the responsibility of the Black teacher. There are obvious dangers in this position, but it has to be accepted as the situation in which, increasingly, English will operate. It is a vulnerable situation and much will depend upon the efficiency of teacher-education, the "back-up" resources provided for the teacher and the continuation of healthy, positive attitudes in teacher and pupil, if quality and standards in English both as language and medium, are to be maintained in the Black school.