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[Report of the conference ‘The role of language in black education’]

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THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN BLACK EDUCATION - A CONFERENCE HELD UNDER THE AUSPICES OF THE H S R C IN PRETORIA: 17 AND 18 FEBRUARY 1986

The aim of the conference was to assemble those concerned with the teaching of languages in black education to discuss ways of tackling and solving on a co-ordinated and co-operative basis language-related problems in Black education.

The problems have been identified as:

communication breakdowns between teachers and pupils;
an uncommonly high failure rate, and
a high dropout rate.

This situation leads to students entering tertiary education and the teaching profession without an adequate degree of competence in the particular medium of instruction (English/Afrikaans) thus perpetuating the problem of inadequate language skills in Black schools. It is generally agreed that competence in the medium concerned is indispensable for an effective education.

The opening session was devoted to outlining the problems and specifying some of the issues that would take up delegates' time. The opening address by Professor Len Lanham (Director of the Institute for the Study of English in Africa) drew attention to another dimension of readiness in L 2 (second-language) learners. Readiness would normally refer to a kind of baseline of reading skills, mostly known as "decoding skills". But a more complex and interesting dimension to reading is the "comprehension" process and it was to this level of readiness that Lanham addressed himself.

Drawing on some of the basic ideas from schema

theory, Lanham suggested that early experience sets up in the learner "cognitive structures" and it is these structures (not immutably fixed in an individual) that provide the input for any discourse process that involves the "construction of coherence". Different language groups structure early experience differently and Lanham pointed to differing conceptions of numeracy to illustrate differing cognitive structures among different language groups. He contended that since reading is central to most educational processes after the junior primary phase, more attention should be paid to the cognitive structure dimension of reading readiness. The opening address was followed by six sessions over two days, each devoted to an aspect of language teaching.

Session one addressed itself to the issues of instruction medium and that often-mentioned but little-understood phenomenon "Language across the curriculum". Professors A Mawasha (University of the North) and D. Young (University of Cape Town) led the discussion.

Mrs. M. Odendaal (Institute for Language Teaching at the University of Stellenbosch) and Mrs. B. Malefo (Tlhabane College of Education) discussed the language-learning environments both inside and outside the school.

Session three on the topic of syllabuses was chaired by Mr. L. Nel from the Department of Education and Training. The panel comprised Professors S. Ridge (U W C), J.Snynman (UNISA) and Mr. F. Strydom (RAU)

Sessions four and five were concerned with issues of language-teaching methodology and teacher-education and training, and were chaired by Professor E. Jenkins (VISTA) and Dr. K. Hartshorne (CCE

- Wits)

The final session set out to co-ordinate the discussions of the conference and to draw together some of the very diverse thoughts that had been expressed during the course of the two days. More of this later.

Perhaps one can say that the paper delivered by Professor Douglas Young in which he made some very concerete proposals for the implementation of an LAC programme on a national scale embodied some of the more cogent thoughts at the conference. The real enemy of all effective language-learning is the teacher-dominated style of most so-called language teachers. When challenged on the issue these charlatans can often squirm out of their responsibilities by pointing to "other culprits" - the syllabus or the text-book or the inspector. I was reminded of some of the excuses made by students of this college when on School Experience in defence of thoroughly bad practice, they point to the same scape goats. The authoritarianism implicit in teacher-dominated practice does a damage often irreparable to learners. Young suggested that nothing short of a reform programme involving the deliberate blurring of subject boundaries and a demolition of vertically ordered curricula would ever resolve some of the urgent language-related problems students and pupils face in our universities, colleges and schools today.

He pleaded for pre-service and in-service teacher-training courses to include, as a matter of some urgency, language-across-the-curriculum courses at all levels.
Invoking Mike Torbe, Young summed up his call for a different approach by quoting:

> "A teacher who begins to see that language is the core of learning and therefore of

the entire educational process is forced to recognise that learning does not only occur because he causes it to."

By the concluding afternoon, despite the cogency of arguments offered by people like Prof. Lanham and Prof. Young, there was a mood of impatience among a large number of the delegates. There was dissatisfaction with the way the conference had been run: no clear aim stated at the outset (it had to be deduced afterwards); only one type of discussion allowed (response to the speakers in a gathering of 200 delegates by means of press button microphones which seriously inhibited the flow of discussion); and, most significantly, hardly a mention by the main speakers of the cause and dynamics of the present educational crisis. This last issue was particularly noticeable in Session Two, when an attempt was made to describe the environment inside and outside the school, but not a single mention made of army/police presence.

Until Heather Jacklin (from TELP Wits) from the floor, made a plea that we name "the mountain" instead of trying to pretend it wasn't there.

Other comments followed, and it became clear that although, as for example Mrs. Webb of the Soweto College of Education showed us in her paper, much can be done by individuals and groups working despite hindrances of various kinds, the larger dimension needs to be considered as well. Forexample, one of the phrases frequently used at the conference was "communicative competence" - the aim, as Prof. Stan Ridge pointed out, of the new joint core syllabuses for English first and second language. Speakers agreed that the development of communicative competence is inhibited or completely prevented by authoritarian methods in the classroom. But it was not made

clear until the end of the conference that it is pointless to blame the authoritarian teacher, because he is merely the last in the long line of people operating on the pupil in an authoritarian system. If we are really serious about the importance of developing communicative competence (and the phrase needs more thorough definition than it received at the conference), we must work to change the autocratic nature of our society, which prohibits its development.

Another issue raised was the obvious one of shortage and inadequate training of teachers and paucity of facilities in Black education. Allied to this is the fact that, in order to be competent in a second language, one must be exposed to the language of first language speakers. This led to an equally obvious conclusion, of particular importance for Teacher Training Colleges. It seems absurd that the government is currently planning to build three new Black Teacher Training Colleges when most white colleges are far below capacity. (We heard that Edgewood has 500 students out of a possible 1,500, and some have been forced to close entirely.)

It became clear that the only really sensible proposal to make was the following (which was presented as the only formal motion of the conference, and carried by a favourable vote of approximately 80% of the delegates present on the last afternoon):

> "Given that many of the problems in education (specifically the issues in language teaching raised at this conference) result from segregated education and the enforced separation of language communities, we move that this conference recommend that the government effect the immediate desegregation of all education, and request

it to respond to the expressed needs of the majority of parents, teachers and pupils".

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