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Learning another language: How good is instruction in South Africa? Three interviews

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learning another language. how good is instruction in south africa? (three interviews)

V. RODSETH

	English	second		Afrikaans		difficult.
The teaching of	Afrikaans as	third	language to	Zulu	speakers is	not easy.
	Zulu	foreign		English		challenging.
		target				

Exercises like the one above are often found in second language* course books. How good are they? How satisfactory was the second language instruction you received at school or after? How satisfactory is the second language instruction pupils and students are getting today?

The interviewer (Mr V Rodseth, Johannesburg College of Education), equipped with trusty Japanese tape recorder, sought answers to some questions on this subject. Three experts in the field were interviewed: Mr J Engelbrecht (who concentrated on Afrikaans for English speakers); Prof. L W Lanham (who emphasised English for African pupils); Mr W H Boshoff (who spoke mainly on English for Afrikaans pupils).

Interview One:

Mr J Engelbrecht, Inspector of Education, Transvaal Education Department, Pretoria.

Int. Mr Engelbrecht, could you begin with some comments on what you believe are major weaknesses in second language instruction in South Africa?

Engelbrecht. I need to begin with weaknesses in first language instruciton. Owing to weaknesses in this area there are, consequently, problems in second language instruction. I believe that the four major skills: listening; speaking; reading and writing are not being systematically developed in the mother tongue. A basis for second language instruction is thus not being established.

Int. Is this a problem of passivity? If pupils are too passive in first language classes, then this could be carried over into second language classes.

Engelbrecht. Certainly — and this applies especially to the development of oral skills. Pupils who are not encouraged and trained to express themselves verbally in the mother tongue are obviously going to have difficulty expressing themselves orally in a second language.

Furthermore, if the pupil is trained to **listen** in first language instruction — to discriminate sounds, stress and intonation — then he is better equipped to listen in second language classes.

Int. Do you agree that, given the large classes teachers are faced with today, first language instruction should be so designed that pupils are frequently organised into groups in which they can learn to talk effectively? And similarly, in second language classes, group work should be used extensively to improve the oral aspect of instruction.

Engelbrecht. Granted — but let's not forget the importance of training in **listening** skills; something which can be done in small groups.

Int. If you believe that the development of speaking skills in the second language is being neglected, then it follows that reading and writing is over-emphasised and that there is probably too much teacher-talk.

Engelbrecht. Yes. I think teacher-talk should be limited to about 10 per cent of the lesson — the rest of the lesson should be devoted mainly to exercises in which pupils are allowed to practise speaking. Pupils cannot internalise a language without speaking it.

* The description "second language" will be used in this article to cover all target language learning situations.

Int. It would seem that the growing popularity of small group work in first language teaching (we all know about the resistance to it) is going to assist the second language teacher if he, too, opts for this technique.

Engelbrecht. I welcome movement away from formal language instruction. Too much time is spent on formal written exercises — the "masculine-feminine", "singular-plural", "present tense to past tense" type. This time could be so much better spent creating opportunities for pupils to do what they really want to do, but often lack the confidence to do: that is; expressing their thoughts and feelings.

A warning here: more pupil-centred lessons, in which the teacher becomes more a guide, must not degenerate into casual hit-or-miss lessons. The type of instruction I am advocating involves very careful planning.

Int. Could you say more about the formal lessons which you feel need replacing?

Engelbrecht. I think a major problem is the provision of language books which tend to over-emphasise written work. This, of course is related to our examination system which stresses written work. Teachers depend far too much on the written exam for assessment. There is little knowledge of the methods available for assessing oral proficiency. What we need is continuous oral evaluation. The teacher who learns to stop talking for most of the lesson will find numerous opportunities to do continuous assessment. Listening in on groups is just one example of how this can be done. But a lot of guidance for teachers on this matter is required.

Another weakness, and this relates to formality in a way, is the undue emphasis on correctness. Insistence on using well-formed sentences, for example, is inhibiting — as the half-sentence, the phrase, sometimes even the grunt, are all part of natural speech. Emphasis on correctness at the expense of fluency is a serious mistake.

I can explain this by referring to what is called "inter-language". The pupil on his way from his first language towards a second language speaks an "inter-language" and makes many (what we call) grammar mistakes. The teacher should deal with these mistakes by providing more practice in the correct form rather than by discouraging the pupil continually pointing out the mistakes. Teachers should not interrupt pupils while they are expressing themselves; they should note the mistakes and then devise appropriate remedial measures.

Int. By frequent exposure to and practice in the correct model the pupil will learn to imitate the model?

Engelbrecht. Yes — but I am wary of this word "imitation". It is frequently misunderstood with unfortunate consequences. I have often seen an exercise headed "Imitation". An instruction is given to: "Repeat the following sentences until you can use them". This can't lead anywhere — when and where can these sentences be used?

The same applies to lists of words the students are required to learn out of any situational context. This is a useless exercise.

Int. Can we go back to your misgivings about language course books?

Engelbrecht. A course book is far too prescriptive. Teachers feel they must work through the exercises laid down. A book can be useful if it is used for written reinforcement. But lessons involving oral situations and small groups can develop in many unexpected directions; the teacher must be able to adapt and improvise according to how the lesson develops. A prescriptive text book only gets in the way.

Int. Your argument presupposes a highly competent language teacher who can work in a versatile way. Are there not many teachers who have not had the training necessary to teach as you suggest? Do they not require a text book to assist them in planning lessons?

Engelbrecht. A text book for the teacher is a good idea, but not for the pupil. A book for pupils may result in numerous written exercises being done in class — and that we don't want.

Int. But couldn't a book for pupils provide numerous illustrations to assist them and the teacher in creating conversational situations? What about an integrated system: a book for the teacher providing help with the planning of oral situations, a pupil's book providing illustrations as well as exer-

cises for written follow-up work and reading reinforcement?

Engelbrecht. This is feasible as long as the teacher is sensible enough to keep a balance. I fear, though, that the competent teacher will object as his personality and individual approach will not be catered for. A text book pressuposes a method — and the method may not suit many teachers. We don't want robot teaching.

Rather than tackle the problem through a text book, I would use in-service courses and teacher centres to assist the teacher. Of course working with training colleges is of paramount importance. We are going to have to look closely at the existing syllabuses. A prescriptive syllabus resulting in prescriptive text books (very much the case at the moment) is counter-productive.

Int. You have recently been involved in the planning and running of North Sotho courses for English- and Afrikaans-speaking teachers. You obviously used the methods advocated in this interview. Can we hear about those courses?

Engelbrecht. In planning the courses we considered both a structural approach (an ordered progress of structure-teaching) and the situational approach which involves the planning of situations familiar to the pupil. We chose the latter. In working out the situations we naturally considered the structures which would be needed and settled for twelve of these. The structures are not used in any specific order (I don't believe it is possible to grade structures according to difficulty); the situation determines what structures will be needed.

Perhaps I should say more about this perplexing word "situation". We did not create situations through reading passages (a common technique in Afrikaans language books) and we did not bother to simulate situations by bringing real objects into the class. For example, a simulated "meal" did not involve real knives, forks, plates, etc. We underestimate the power of the imagination; pupils can imagine themselves in a situation without being surrounded by paraphernalia.

We used what the Americans call the "dialogue method" — for our purposes dialogues involving five exchanges each. The dialogue is "done" by the teacher and the pupils repeat it. In doing so, they learn to talk naturally; natural intonation and stress must be imitated. We encourage slurring — something I know upsets certain language purists. After the dialogue (involving the structures and vocabulary necessary for the situation) has been learned in chorus, pupils are then given the opportunity to conduct the dialogue in pairs.

Int. How do the pupils understand the language of the dialogue?

Engelbrecht. We use pictures where possible in the early stages the situation is explained in the mother tongue. But it does not take long before the pupils acquire enough knowledge of the second language to understand an explanation of the situation in the second language. We find that the need to use mother-tongue explanation diminishes very quickly.

Pupils are soon able to move on to more creative work. When they are ready, a lesson is divided into four phases: ONE: Vocabulary is introduced. TWO: A dialogue is taught. THREE: Pupils have "listen and say" reinforcement in the language laboratory. FOUR: Creative application work is done; pupils improvise a similar dialogue.

The basic idea involves learning structures which can be adapted for a variety of situations. For example, if the structure: "I'm going to A"; is taught, then: "I'm going to B, C or D"; follows on quite easily.

Int. This sounds like pattern drill. What is your opinion on this controversial subject? It has been said that pattern drill is killing second language teaching.

Engelbrecht. It is a killer in many cases — because it has become a starting point and because the patterns have become divorced from any meaningful context. This has led to examination questions like: "Rewrite in the passive", or "Rewrite in the past tense". Pupils can master the skills required to make these changes, but there is no guarantee that the pupils know what the sentences mean.

A further weakness in many pattern-drill techniques is that pupils do not move beyond the single-sentence level. They are not required to use several sentences put together in a meaningful context.

Int. You do accept pattern drill as long as it remains subservient to situational needs?

Engelbrecht. It is a tool. This implies that the time spent on a pattern must be reasonable. It takes a minute for a pupil to learn a pattern or five minutes for a number of patterns; thereafter the lesson must be spent in applying the tools in situational contexts.

Int. Are you satisfied with the course results so far?

Engelbrecht. On the whole yes. But there is still a lot of evaluation to be done.

Interview Two:

Prof. J W Lanham, Head of the Department of Phonetics and Linguistics, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg.

Int. Professor, although you will be dealing mainly with one of your specialist subjects, teaching English to African pupils, could you begin by referring briefly to the second language learning situation in this country?

Lanham. The first thing is to distinguish second language teaching in which the learner has the language immediately at hand in his environment, from teaching in which the second language is not readily available. The Afrikaans child in the cities for example has a sustaining language environment — he is continually exposed to written and spoken English outside the classroom and will often find himself in situations in which he is required to use English. The Black child on the other hand has far less opportunity to experience English and Afrikaans in an environment outside the classroom.

So we have two broad language learning situations in this country — one in which a second language can be naturally assimilated and one in which it is learned largely by being taught. These are obviously not mutually exclusive and overlap to some degree. So the Afrikaans child, and to a lesser extent the English child, have more opportunities of learning the other official language than does a Black child of learnin one of the official languages.

The language learner who is in a compelling language environment is at a great advantage. Take the example of a White immigrant child who finds himself in a small Orange Free State town. He very quickly picks up Afrikaans through the process of natural assimilation.

Such a situation is a very powerful one and highly conducive to the acquiring of oral skills and the use of language in the normal situations of every day life. The language teacher should, of course, cash in on this fact when planning his strategy.

Int. It seems that social, economic and political forces in South Africa, which keep groups apart, work against creating a compelling second language environment for the Black pupil.

Lanham. The Black child is in a very different situation. You find that even in Johannesburg's township, Soweto, the young child has little or no exposure to English outside the classroom. The Black child learns very largely by being taught and the class teacher has very little from an outside environment to exploit. This is even more the case in the homelands.

Int. How should the Black teacher plan his strategy, given this problem?

Lanham. The pupil must learn by doing — through meaningful contexts or situations created in the classroom. Teaching pupils by talking to them while they sit in rows is an utter failure and leads to a great number of the problems we are faced with now.

When I talk of pupils learning through activity, through doing things, I have a number of ideas in mind. There is Henry Widdowson's idea of teaching English through Science. The Science lesson is used for very deliberate instruction in language skills. This is good for second language learning as the situation becomes so compellingly meaningful.

I would like to see many important situations brought into the classroom. For example a course in first-aid is something which should be taught in schools and which lends itself ideally to language instruction.

A first-aid handbook is full of conditional clauses for example. Its concepts are conveyed in logical sequence and the concepts are readily available in the mother tongue — you have blood, bones, skin and so on.

Int. To what extent should English be taught through the medium of other subjects?

Lanham. This is only one method and there are many others which must be used. ETA (English Through Activity), which is widely used in Natal Black schools, is based largely on the sort of situations with which we are familiar in situational teaching. There are some limitations, but it is certainly proving very effective. One reason for the success lies in the fact that the pupils find meaning for words and sentences in real situations and that English and the world meet up conceptually.

If I can come back to learning English in the History, Geography or Science lesson. This aspect of English instruction is virtually neglected. I don't believe that the study of literature helps the pupil much to acquire basic skills and a knowledge of English at second-language level. Studying the great poets or Shakespeare may be useful for other things, but is is not a means of laying down basic skills. To commit children to the study of fine writing and, worst of all, to force children to ape or mimic fine writing is of little worth in teaching writing skills. I would far rather see written work based on exercises taken out of the history or social studies text book, or based on a first-aid lesson. Pupils should handle material that means something to them immediately or that they can see will fulfil needs in their present or future life.

Int. Where is the time going to be found to teach English through other subjects?

Lanham. First of all you will have to scrap some of the prescribed literature. Studying Shakespeare and the great poets is fine for those who will make it into the A-stream in Matric. But the others have very different needs.

Int. Would the changes you envisage include restructuring the time table?

Lanham. To some extent probably. But many opportunities already exist within the present system. More than a restructuring of the time table we need changes in teaching methodology. This of course would include changes in teacher training. The English teacher must be trained to use texts from the content subjects and the content subject teachers will have to learn how to include deliberate language instruction in their lessons.

Int. So we really need to get away from the idea of teaching English as a separate subject.

Lanham. No — there is certainly a place for the well-planned English lesson. Well-structured lessons on the teaching of English grammar(instruction on how to use the dictionary and other reference works, lessons on meaning-finding must all take place at the same time as the English-across-the-curriculum lessons. Lessons on the grammar of questioning, on tenses, on fixed expressions are all very necessary.

Int. Subject teachers are going to need a lot of persuasion that they are also English teachers.

Lanham. Yes — and there are other attitudes which must change. Teachers must realise that English should be learned in meaningful contexts where purposeful things are done. Reading that deals with fairies, magic mirrors, etc., isn't going to help much. You obviously have to start with simple readers, but there comes a time in second language learning where one should cease with themes from the dream world of English culture. I don't want to remove totally the heritage of great writing in English, but I do think that a pupil must be able to handle the basics of language very well before he commences a study of great literature.

Take this for example: many Black pupils are failing Science papers — not because they don't know the Science but because they don't understand the language of the Science paper. In a recent paper every student failed a question involving the phrase: "as much again"; "A is as much again as B". They failed not because they couldn't multiply by two, but because they didn't understand the expression. This sort of thing is happening frequently.

Int. These opportunities for teaching English across the curriculum present themselves in Black education because English or Afrikaans is used as medium of instruction. But the same does not apply in English or Afrikaans schools where the mother tongue is the medium of instruction in content subjects.

Lanham. True — but the Afrikaans subject teacher, if he commands English, could for example repeat an instruction or revise something in the other language and so

help the language teacher. And mother tongue instruction could certainly be improved if more attention were given to the language of content subjects.

There are so many skills to be developed, and so many are neglected. An important point to be remembered when planning the teaching of skills is the age of the learner. Oral lessons based on English through activity are fine up to the age of say, thirteen, but nearing this age the writing of English becomes increasingly more important. In the teaching of English through the content subjects there can be a shift of emphasis from oral to written. There are many excellent written exercises which can be based on the texts of Geography or History books. An exercise involving rewriting of passages in different ways is an excellent means of reinforcing patterns, structures or fixed expressions — and, of course, the facts of the content area. Pupils doing these exercises pick up and later use useful expressions which they would never otherwise learn. The finest language learners in the world in my knowledge are the Russians and their courses involve a large amount of writing, deduction, study of grammar, etc.

Again I say that the type of material used for writing exercises must be related to real needs. A pupil who writes on "My Mother" on "The happiest day of my life" can get away with murder; you really don't know what he wants to say. Conceptually you have given him the whole world and he has picked his way through it like a mine field. He knows what he can't say correctly and so avoids the problems. Why not rather put him in a corner where he has to communicate something far more definite and train him so he can communicate in such a situation?

Communication to an audience should be the basis of writing exercises; the essay on "My dog Spot" is not communication as I see it, as it is not really directed to anybody. For a talented writer such a subject can become a meaningful piece of communication, but it is fatuous to expect a second language pupil with poor linguistic skills to gain anything from having to write in this way. Compellingly meaningful communication is what teachers must aim at. What I want to see involves a high degree of structuring. And the structuring must take into account the language problems of the pupil — the tenses for Black pupils for instance. This sort of structuring for remedial work can't be done successfully in so-called "Free Writing" exercises. I know that grammar teaching is often dreadful, due mainly to the grammar books which are used. But the systematic teaching of grammar is absolutely essential. The grammar of the paragraph, for example, must be taught; pupils must learn to join sentences with logical connectors (hence, as, while etc.) and learn to develop concepts logically. Relative clauses, indirect questions — these must be taught, not by giving labels but by making them work. Given rules and occasionally going over to explanations in the mother tongue are essential.

Int. Your advocating of a far more practical approach makes a great deal of sense. But if there is a strong shift of emphasis away from literature will there not be a sense of loss? There is in Black education a very great interest in much English literature.

Lanham. Let's start with Shakespeare. Teachers and many pupils certainly do want Shakespeare — because it is part of the Great Tradition. And the Great Tradition concept comes from the days of the early missionaries when the notion was formed that great literature equals high culture. So literature becomes a dim, distant peak one is striving towards. I'm not denying the great intellectual value of literature, but certain things come first. You don't try to make a Chippendale chair before you have learned to handle a saw. The aesthetic aspect must come quite late. It is more than just aesthetics, it is also a question of the other man's culture. These are certainly of great importance, but must be introduced at a stage when the pupil is equipped to handle them linguistically. If we are using literature to teach a cultural view then we must select the material carefully. A novel about English social life might be useful, for example.

Literature selection must anticipate future pupil needs. Many pupils leave school early to work in factories and so on. For them articles about factory life and labour relations (like those put out by the Ford Company) would be highly relevant.

Interview Three:

Mr H W Boshoff, Head of the Department of English, Goudstad College of Education, Johannesburg.

Int. May we begin with the bad news and come to the good news later. What are the major weaknesses in English language instruction to Afrikaans-speaking pupils?

Boshoff. Basically we have the problem of a vicious circle. At primary school level we find many Afrikaans speakers teaching English who cannot cope — their command of English is poor. Many pupils, having had poor instruction and example, enter the high school with serious shortcomings in English. High school teachers are therefore required to do a great deal of remedial work, for which there is insufficient time. And so we find pupils matriculating with a poor command of the language, and many of these entering a teachers' training college.

If we could have subject teaching throughout at the primary school stage we could be more selective in choosing language teachers and perhaps be more successful in leading students towards a confident and accurate use of the language.

It strikes me that a general pattern has emerged: Pupils at junior primary level enjoy English classes and speak with some confidence, but there is a relapse at senior primary and junior secondary level. One finds some improvement in the matriculation years, mainly owing to more competent teaching, but the final matriculation product still does not measure up to acceptable standards.

Int. Can you elaborate on this relapse?

Boshoff. In the grades one tends to find a dedicated type of teacher. We find at College that junior primary work attracts a very able student. After training, these students enter schools with a high degree of motivation and prepare their lessons well. And so the pupils actually enjoy their English lessons. Furthermore, the junior primary students prepare a great number of teaching aids while at college; when they commence teaching they are very well equipped.

Int. Junior primary teaching is characterised by much pupil involvement — in language classes this could probably mean much talk. Do you find pupil passivity and teacher-talk on the increase at the senior primary level?

Boshoff. Absolutely! Senior primary students often fail to relate theoretical methodology to the practical classroom situation. When they commence teaching they disregard much of what they learned, have few teaching aids, and so have to fall back on their own resources which are too often inadequate. The unimaginative use of unimaginative text books often becomes a feature. Add to this a widespread communicative incompetence and you have an obvious result — loss of interest among pupils in the subject.

The fun goes right out of English classes and a very formal approach takes its place. Lessons often degenerate into boring pattern drill exercises. Pattern drill is an extremely important ingredient of language teaching but it is not the beginning and end of language teaching, something a great number of teachers seem to believe it is.

There tends to be an improvement again in the first year of high school — due mainly, I think, to the motherly or fatherly teacher one so often finds in the standard six class. Pupils, bewildered in their first year out of primary school, respond very well to sympathetic treatment and rediscover an interest in the subject. One can detect a relapse in standards seven and eight and then an improvement in nine and ten. Although the improvement often relates more to coaching for the exam than teaching.

Int. Does the growing importance of the exam, starting in about standard eight, work against the acquisition of communication skills?

Boshoff. It certainly does — one finds, for example, teachers preparing compositions and answers for pupils to learn off by heart — instead of getting them to do the preparation. All designed, of course, to get good results; good **written** results, to be more exact.

Int. Is there not enough oral assessment?

Boshoff. Not nearly enough — only about sixty marks out of three hundred and thirty go towards the final matric mark, and these marks for oral achievement are not too accurate either.

Int. What can be done to improve this situation?

Boshoff. We should have a close look at the oral and aural tests which are widely used overseas. These tests are conducted with tapes in language laboratories and the evaluation is very carefully standardised. There is an extraordinary ignorance in South Africa of this type of testing.

Int. If pupils worked towards more demanding oral and aural examinations, then teaching would have to change accordingly and show a shift of emphasis from the written to the spoken.

Boshoff. The examination certainly does tend to determine the nature of instruction. The written examination itself needs much improvement. One finds, for example, that a disproportionate number of marks goes towards the mere memorisation of facts in literature and very little goes towards appreciation. I think the inability of many teachers to cope with appreciation accounts for this emphasis on fact. An easy way out has been found — but how valuable is it? Here is a problem for the colleges — we must produce teachers who are capable of helping pupils towards appreciation of literature.

Int. Would you agree that the problems you have outlined are compounded by the existence of large classes and the inability of most teachers to devise techniques which take into account the large class? I am thinking specifically of the need to use small group work.

Boshoff. This is certainly so — in Afrikaans schools the emphasis on strict discipline often prevents the use of group work. Some principals actually ban group work as it disrupts the orderly routine of the school and because the noise generated will create a bad impression on visitors.

Group work involves the pupils in the expression of their ideas and group leaders reporting back to the teacher on what the pupils think: this would not be tolerated in many classes. Teachers, more than principals, are to blame for this — there is a fear that authority will be undermined. Many teachers are very nervous of pupils, especially the brighter ones, questioning the methods used in the classroom.

Int. And so conservatism, or the conservation of old methods, leads to a classroom situation involving pupils who sit quietly in rows; reading, or writing and listening to the teacher, but not talking very often.

Boshoff. It is no wonder that so many of our pupils are unable to speak much English when they leave school. An aggravating factor here is the selection of teachers. So many students who enter teacher training are people who are inclined to "toe the line", to follow blindly the guidance of others. Such students are unlikely to work for change when they enter schools where a rigid adherence to text book and syllabus is to be found. And students who are anxious to work with updated methods are often confronted with the problem: junior teachers must obey the dictates of the senior teachers. A junior teacher can find himself most unpopular if he questions the methodology of a teacher who has been in the profession for twenty years and therefore "must know how to teach English".

Int. The formal, "non-oral" approach is going to die hard.

Boshoff. I'm afraid it is often more a matter of a "wrong-oral" than a "non-oral" approach that slows down language acquisition. Unfortunately a true assessment of oral competence is never made. A reading-writing knowledge of, say, German or French is perhaps sufficient for a South African, but learning the other official language should be primarily a learning of oral skills. The syllabus does lay this down, but it is not always adhered to because the written exam determines the classroom procedure.

Int. I think the time has come for mention of encouraging features in second language teaching.

Boshoff. Methodology as a subject at colleges and universities is beginning to come into its own. Methodology was frightfully general and abstract in the past, but these days there are many dynamic, practical courses which really involve students.

Then we find that the better students are fully bilingual — but unfortunately some of these are lost to Afrikaans schools as they prefer to work in English schools. And they don't teach English, but content subjects.

Int. We seem to be back with problems already. Do these students feel that the modern methods they have learned at college will meet less resistance in English schools?

Boshoff. No — they are more concerned with the relaxed, informal atmosphere they believe exists in English schools. They are very much against the regimentation and strict discipline characteristic of some Afrikaans schools. It is a great pity that many of the very students we need in Afrikaans schools to effect change prefer not to go there.

On the encouraging side again, in-service courses are often very effective. But there is not nearly enough in-service training.

Int. On the subject of solutions to the problems you have outlined: Would intensive, "total immersion" courses (designed to lead pupils towards **oral** competence) be effective? These courses (lasting, say four to eight weeks) could be held at the beginning of each year and could result in a stronger oral basis for the subsequent year's work.

Boshoff. This is a short-term solution. Unless you can convert teachers to the new way of teaching, then there will be a relapse. There could well be resentment and frustration amongst pupils who enjoy the intensive oral course but then find themselves plodding along in the old routine. One needs proper follow-up work to justify such a "total immersion" course.

Frankly, the only real solution is one which is not favoured by some authorities, nor by a significant section of the population, apparently. That is, to bring Afrikaans and English pupils together in parallel medium schools. If the average Afrikaans pupil speaks English for one minute a day at school, it is a lot. What a difference having English-speaking class-mates would make! Acquiring a language through natural assimilation is so much more effective than "learning" a language in simulated classroom activity. The opportunities to integrate classroom work with language work outside the classroom could improve teaching methodology enormously. And then there is the whole area of acquiring another person's culture and the problems of cultural "blocks" (usually related to prejudice) interfering with language acquisition. I can't see any linguistic justification for separating the two language groups.

Int. Isn't there a fear amongst Afrikaners that Afrikaans will be swallowed up by this powerful, international language called English?

Boshoff. I think it is a diminishing fear. On the other hand, there is also a section of the English-speaking community that would outright reject any attempt at establishing parallel-medium schools, or converting their schools to parallel medium.

Int. We talk of a bilingual country. But the time is coming fast when we will be at least a tri- or quadri-lingual country. The principles you have outlined pertaining to English or Afrikaans acquisition should therefore pertain to learning African languages. In short, we will need to go beyond parallel medium schools to multi-racial schools.

Boshoff. A nice thorny one! In terms of language acquisition the proposition is sound, but the social and political problems are enormous, probably insurmountable at this stage.

To return to bilingual considerations, I might mention that at present we have the situation, particularly in urban areas, in which some Afrikaans parents concoct stories for the authorities in order to get their children admitted to English schools. Amongst the so-called upper-middle classes there seems to be a desire to break away from language separation in education.

Our methodological solutions to language learning problems are so limited. I often grow weary of devising classroom situations which approximate to real life. If we could work out a system that would bring us together so that we can get to know one another, then we would be approaching an ideal I have always had in the back of my mind. We would then have a chance of developing bilingual South Africans — and perhaps solve a lot of our other problems into the bargain.