

The changes that have occurred in English teaching in South Africa over the last ten years.

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ABSTRACT: This paper reflects on the changes which have taken place, in the teaching of English, over the last 10 years in South Africa. It discusses the changes in education and how these have been shaped by the constitution of this young democracy. The focus is on how the new curricular policies have been implemented and the impact these have had on classroom teaching. The changes are illustrated by describing the activities of a Grade 8 class, in a private church school in Johannesburg, South Africa. The paper also looks at how the social changes in the country have brought about significant changes in the learners and how these have driven the curriculum.

KEYWORDS: Change in education, South Africa, outcomes-based education, Revised National Curriculum Statement, social change, assessment, curriculum.

INTRODUCTION TO A GRADE 8 CLASS

A typical day in my Grade 8 English class may seem chaotic. Looking closely, one sees 13 and 14-year-old boys and girls from a variety of traditional, cultural and multilingual backgrounds, abuzz around two-page spreads. Although somewhat noisy these learners are grossly engaged in reviewing each others' pieces. They are involved in discussions around the comments they have made on the assessment sheets regarding their partners' articles. The tasks they are reviewing are articles that they have prepared to add to their magazines. The articles are closely designed in layout and content to resemble those seen in commercially produced magazines. These have been designed using a combination of computer skills and self-produced headings and layout techniques which they have gained by closely analysing magazines and web-pages.

The music magazines which the learners are producing are for a teenage market. The class decided to create these magazines collaboratively within self-appointed friendship groups as writing tasks for the theme "Our Music". Through the medium of popular culture, specifically music, the learners were able to develop their English skills. This was achieved by drawing on the learners' interests and bringing their out-of-school knowledge into the classroom (Hull & Schultz, 2003). The learners were also encouraged, with my guidance, to negotiate the criteria against which they would review each other's tasks.

This could be any English class in the world; in fact it may be very close to what you are practising in your class at present. The difference is that, in this South African class, this would not have been the norm pre-1994. Firstly the theme would have been teacher-driven. Secondly, the notion of peer-assessed tasks was unheard of, and no one would have taken peer assessment seriously enough to have used it as a form of assessment worthy of being reported to parents. The notion of the learners deciding on

the criteria for assessment would have been even more shocking in a South African school, as would have been the fact that the task in question was multimodal and assessed as such. What caused all of this to change?

THE CHANGES IN EDUCATION POST-1994

The turning point was 1994. A new democracy and a new nation was born. The country as we knew it was not going to be the same because changes were reshaping our futures. With change came excitement from many and resistance from others owing to the insecurities that come with change. Education was an area of South African life, which had to be addressed because of the injustices created by the Apartheid education system.

The changes in education were put into place quite soon after our newly elected government took over. A notable change was that the education system as we knew it had been restructured. The fragmented departments of education based on racial segregation became a single Department of Education with nine Provincial Departments accountable to it. To redress the wrongs of the previous system the Department of Education instituted an Outcomes-Based Education policy (OBE). The first change occurred when new *learning areas* replaced our subjects. English fell under the learning area of *Language, Literacy and Communication* and was either taught as a home language or as an additional language. Teachers were presented with the Critical Outcomes (CO's) and the Specific Outcomes (SO's) for each learning area. The critical outcomes applied to all the learning areas and underpinned the principles of our democratic constitution. The specific outcomes were particular to each learning area. The first obstacle which many educators were faced with was the changes in semantics. These puzzled many because they were often not communicated effectively and educators had to work out what the new documents meant.

A further change in education occurred in 1997, when the Minister of Education at the time, Kader Asmal, acknowledged that the current policies needed to be revisited. This resulted in a move away from *Curriculum 2005*(1997) to the *Revised National Curriculum Statement* (RNCS) (2002), which became the refined curriculum policy which we now follow. The RNCS became a more accessible document, which also focused on National Identity. Changes came just as teachers began to understand the Specific Outcomes outlined in the learning areas. Yet again we had to negotiate new documents. As far as English was concerned, this learning area was renamed *Languages* and the Specific Outcomes became known as *Learning Outcomes* (LO's).

These changes meant that as educators, we had not only to understand the changes but also the focus of our teaching needed to shift in many ways. An example was the shift in focus of the Learning Outcomes, from the previous Apartheid system's view of writing as being of utmost importance, to acknowledging other modalities which are in line with the world outside the confines of the classroom. These modalities include orality/aurality, reading, writing and viewing. Previously, in the schools where I worked, oral tasks barely featured and writing was the main component of assessment. Now English teaching acknowledges the need for the different modalities and different Englishes spoken in South Africa. Thus, the focus is on modes of

representation which are broader than only language. This is supported by Cope and Kalantzis (2000, p. 5), who show that multiliteracies create a different kind of pedagogy: one in which language and other modes of meaning are dynamic representations of resources, constantly being remade by their users as they work to achieve their various cultural and social purposes.

I teach in a Catholic school situated in Johannesburg. This school was one of the first schools in South Africa to open its doors to black learners, just after the 1976 Soweto uprising. The school has always been at the forefront of education. To maintain its status at the cutting edge of education, the school encourages its staff to continue lifelong learning. I felt I needed to gain a deeper understanding of English education because I had trained as a primary school teacher and had recently moved in to the junior high section of our school. I thus enrolled in an Honours course in Applied English Language Studies at the University of the Witwatersrand. As the new education system acknowledges experience, I was able to enrol in a post-graduate degree with only a Diploma in Education.

In keeping with the history of our school, changes in education were embraced and the necessary changes in the schools structure and curriculum were made. In classes prior to 1994, English was taught in compartmentalised components where language seemed disjointed. Lessons were created where one would teach poetry, spelling, grammar, comprehension and writing in isolation. As this system was not meeting the needs of the learners, the school felt the need to rethink its curriculum. Thus in the late 80s and into the 9's, recognising that English was an additional language to many of its learners, the school adopted a policy of language across the curriculum. The school consequently adopted an integrated curriculum. It was hoped that with this approach the learners' exposure to English would be increased and at the time it served the particular needs of our learners. However, with OBE, languages are taught as separate learning areas and the focus of teaching language has changed. Thus the school has tailored the curriculum to suit the needs of its current learners. With globalisation and the vision of our constitution, our learners' interests and world have evolved dramatically over the last 10 years.

A structural change made by the Department of Education is that OBE has different groupings in the schooling system. The previous system divided schooling up into Primary and Senior School. The new system divides education up into 3-year phases: Foundation (Grades 1-3), Intermediate (Grades 4-6), Senior (Grades 7-9) and the final stage, Further Education and Training (Grades 10-12). Our school has incorporated the Grade 7's (who were previously and still are in many schools the exit year of primary school) into a new structure where we have created a Junior High (which is made up of the senior phase as described above). This new section is made up of Grades 7, 8 and 9. Grade 9 is now an exit point for learners who do not wish to continue their education. Thus, all Grade 9 learners are involved in Common Task Assessments (CTA) which are in the form of tasks set by the Department of Education. The tasks in Section A of the CTA are designed to cover a variety of areas from the prescribed curriculum. These tasks are carried out over 2-4 weeks in class and form the basis for a national examination (Section B), written by all Grade 9 learners. Section A is worth 15%, and Section B 10% of the final year mark. The other 75% is made up from the learners' portfolio work. A number of schools have been involved in this pilot project and, as of 2005, learners will receive a General

Education and Training Certificate on successful completion of the grade. This exit point exam will be a national exam as of 2005.

SOCIAL CHANGES IN THE LEARNER BODY

As our democracy matures and our society has evolved with the social and economic changes taking place within our country, the learners I teach seem to be very different from the learners 10 years ago. To illustrate this I will describe one of my classes. My Grade 8 English class is made up of a representative cross section of South African children from different traditional and cultural backgrounds. Prior to 1994 this would not have been the norm in many classrooms, barring a few church and private schools who defied the Apartheid government. Although I taught at a private church school during this period, and there were children from different cultural backgrounds, they were usually in the minority. The learners in this class are 13 and 14 year-old boys and girls from predominantly middle-class urban backgrounds and the class is made up of 32 learners (a fairly rare luxury in South Africa as the pupil to teacher ratio is often as high as 60 learners per class).

Until a few years ago, learners' cultural differences were fairly evident, particularly in their interaction with their peers. However as our new democracy matures and our learners interact cross-culturally, I have found that this is changing within our school community. Although the learners' in my Grade 8 class come from very different cultural backgrounds, their traditional cultures seem to be melting and are often not evident in the production of their work. What is clear, though, is that they are urban teenagers very much influenced by their social environments, particularly the media. Being influenced by fast-moving media, these learners need to be stimulated regularly and are keen to learn new skills. This is a huge change from the learners of the pre-1994 era, who were happy enough to sit quietly in rows being fed information. Learning for this age-group has changed in many respects. For example, learners often question and challenge what they learn. This is probably ascribed to the OBE view of the teacher as a facilitator rather than the source of knowledge in the past system.

The dynamics of the learners have evolved with the impact of technology and it has become increasingly necessary to make sure that the English curriculum is geared to technology. It is also necessary more than ever before to incorporate the learners' interests and the world in which they operate into the curriculum. Thus as an educator I have had to reflect on the content of the themes that I choose to develop their communicational skills. Most learners at our school have access to computers and the internet at home and those who do not have access are able to use the school computers after school hours. The internet is a major source for research as learners use it more often than the library for sourcing information. During Technology lessons the learners are taught computer literacy and often final drafts of tasks are produced on computer. The learners also seem to be moving to becoming a paperless society and often email tasks to teachers or hand in their work on disk which was totally unheard of even until a few years ago. Presentation of tasks has also been influenced by the media and particularly web pages. In the past, learners tasks were hand written on paper in blue pen. Now, however, tasks are typed up using bold and

colourful text on different coloured backgrounds. These are often accompanied by pictures, borders and diagrams.

PEDAGOGICAL CHANGES

OBE has allowed for pedagogical changes as teaching has shifted from the “chalk and teach” method of the past where educators controlled learning. This has been replaced by learner-centred, activity-based approaches to education. Although it is important to note that many teachers in the previous system used a learner-centred approach, there has been a shift to focusing on the learners as the explorers of knowledge. The teacher’s role is now as a facilitator guiding the learners along their path to learning. In my classes, I have certainly been able to follow this route and explore many different approaches.

To illustrate this, in the past I would never have allowed the learners to decide on a task and negotiate the criteria against which to assess it. My Grade 8 class came up with the idea of creating a storyboard for an advertisement after seeing how a storyboard was created in a magazine article that one of the learners brought to class. As a class we negotiated what they thought should make up the storyboard and what they thought would make it a good piece of work. My role was then to create a way in which this could be carried out effectively. To do this I used the genre approach, as developed from the Australian model. The learners looked at television advertisements to familiarise themselves with the genre of advertising. The advertisements they taped from television were then analysed and used to model their own advertisement storyboards. Following the genre approach, the learners not only analysed the style of writing but also investigated presentational skills. With OBE and the Learning Outcomes, popular culture has become an acceptable medium to explore language and the techniques necessary to develop writing skills.

Our present system of education has made the curriculum more fluid as it acknowledges the fact that there cannot be a prescribed curriculum for all learners in the country. Instead, the Department has provided educators with guidelines in the form of the Learning Outcomes and the *Assessment Standards* it expects to be covered in each grade. It allows for a curriculum which can be adapted to suit the needs of the learners. The assessment standards are guidelines as to what skills, knowledge and values the learners should achieve by the end of each grade. In my case, a theme about computer games suits my learners, but in other schools this may not be the case as resources in these schools may not be as sophisticated as ours or the theme might not be in the realm of the learners’ lives. This system has thus allowed for educators to draw on the learners’ lives, experiences and interests to develop their skills in English. It also realises that we need to develop the learners so that they can interact successfully within their communities as described by Street (1994). This is evident in the OBE curriculum as it encourages learners to read and write texts that include visual, graphic and numerical material which will be of use to them in the adult world.

The focus of the English curriculum is to develop effective communication skills which will allow the learners to interact successfully within their communities. OBE, as practised in South Africa, assumes that it is through language that we shape our

identity and knowledge. As outlined by the Revised National Curriculum Statement (Department of Education, 2002) the aim of such a curriculum is:

A curriculum not only for the sake of personal development, but also to ensure that individuals act in the interest of a society based on respect for democracy, equality, human dignity, life and social justice. The curriculum also seeks to create lifelong learners who are confident and independent, literate, numerate, multi-skilled, compassionate, with respect for the environment and the ability to participate in society as critical and active citizens (p. 3).

This means that, when designing curriculum materials, educators need to make sure that these values form part of the material. In the past all that was necessary in designing curriculum material, was making sure that knowledge was imparted through a few skills.

Language learning outcomes

In designing curriculum material for our classes, we are required to fulfil the outcomes as outlined by the RNCS. These are: listening, speaking, reading and viewing, thinking and reasoning and language structure and use. Each outcome is broken down further into assessment standards.

To illustrate this, here is an example of one of the outcomes – Learning Outcome 6 for home language – from the RNCS (2002) for Grades 7-9:

Learning Outcome 6: Language Structures and Use

The learners will know and be able to use the sounds, words and grammar of the language to create and interpret texts.

Learners will begin to explore how language works. They will start to develop a shared language for talking about language (a “meta-language”). For example, they will learn and use terms like “sound”, “syllable”, “word”, “sentence”, and “full stop”. This will enable them to discuss and think about such things as how words are spelled and how simple sentences are structured and punctuated.

The Assessment Standards are the tabulated per grade. To illustrate this, I have included a section of the assessment standards for Learning Outcome 6 for home language for the Grade 7 level from the RNCS (2002, p. 118).

Assessment Standards

We know this when the learner:

Works with words:

- uses different strategies to spell unfamiliar words;
- creates personal spelling list and dictionary words across the curriculum;
- uses common abbreviations and acronyms appropriately;
- identifies and uses word families and words of the same field in context to develop vocabulary in context;
- identifies a range of prefixes and suffixes to work out meaning;
- analyses how languages borrow words from one another, and how new words are coined and uses these appropriately.

Works with sentences:

- identifies and uses nouns, verbs, modals, adjectives, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, and articles;
- identifies and uses a variety of subordinate clauses correctly and appropriately (e.g. “When she was fifteen, her mother died.”);
- identifies and uses relative clauses and relative pronouns (e.g. “There are many people who do not have jobs.”);
- uses different types of sentences, such as statements, questions, commands, instructions and exclamations;
- identifies and uses the components of a sentence such as subject, verb predicate, direct and indirect object, main and subordinate clauses;
- uses the full range of punctuation appropriately (e.g. dash, semi-colon).

Works with texts:

- varies use of topic and supporting sentences (e.g. putting topic sentences at end) to develop coherent paragraphs;
- uses connecting words such as “although” to develop a logical line of thought in a paragraph;
- links sentences in cohesive paragraphs using, for example, collocations, repetition of words, and pronouns;
- sequences paragraphs in a logical order to create longer texts.

Develops awareness and use of style:

- uses a variety of sentence lengths and types;
- distinguishes between formal and informal language;
- uses idioms and idiomatic expressions of the language appropriately.

Develops critical language awareness, for example:

- identifies text where language does not mean exactly what is said – recognises implied meanings;
- identifies manipulative language;
- examines how language is used to construct gender, race, the environment, health, etc;
- uses meta-language (e.g. talks about simple, compound and complex sentences).

Although these are an improvement on the previous system, it is often difficult to gauge at what level to engage with the assessment standards. However, one must note that this *does* give teachers the flexibility to tailor the level to the needs of their learners. Another problem which we have found is that it can be difficult to measure some of the assessment standards.

Literature

Literature has evolved with OBE, for in the past texts were read and analysed in a fairly rigid manner. I find that literature, in Grades 7, 8 and 9, is being used primarily to develop the enjoyment of different texts as well as to raise social awareness within the diversity of our society. The focus of these texts is then used to develop literary skills through multimodal activities, which allow the learners to reflect on the text or issues which the text may raise. As pointed out by Kress (1997, p. 29), and in accordance with the vision of OBE, it is hoped that through the curriculum, the learners’ exposure to literature will produce individuals who are at ease with

difference and change, whose fundamental being values innovation and are therefore able to question, to challenge and above all to propose alternatives constructively.

Research

Research has become a focal point in OBE. Previously it was the role of the teacher to provide most information and material. However, as the concept of learning has developed, learners now have ownership of many aspects of learning. For their magazine tasks, my learners used magazines, the internet and various other multimedia sources to find information. In finding multimedia resources it has become evident that learners draw on each other as resources as well as the communities in which they operate. They draw on the members of their communities in a variety of ways and seem to learn in an apprenticeship manner. This would be in keeping with the findings of Rogoff (2003) in which she explains the apprenticeship way in which we learn from more knowledgeable members of our communities.

Group work

The learners have now been entrenched in group work and it has become evident to me that they need to work collaboratively. They enjoy discussing and learning from each other. It seems to be an effective way in which to learn as shown by Rogoff (2003). One must note, though, that learners also work as individuals and that group work is carried out only for appropriate tasks.

In the past, group work was not often a form of pedagogy used in the classroom; although learners often sat together in groups they operated individually. With the changes in OBE, group work became a buzz word and we had to restructure activities accordingly. Collaborative work is an area that OBE has acknowledged as desirable to meet the needs of our society, and this form of work has been encouraged. In the early days of OBE, group work caused anxiety amongst teachers. Once the group members began working on task, certain group members tended to carry the rest of the group. This led to concerns around assessment as the task was assessed. Again, we had to work through to make sure that assessment of collaborative work was fair. Now each group member is given a specific task which is assessed and the group members assess or reflect on their participation within the group.

Assessment

A pedagogical change means that assessment techniques have had to develop in order to be fair and transparent. With the previous system, pieces of work were given a global mark and marking was the sole responsibility of the teacher. With OBE, I now have to rethink assessment in terms of the Assessment Standards outlined in the Learning Outcomes. What this means is that assessment criteria need to be clear in my mind and I have to explain or negotiate these by making them transparent to the learners from the outset of a task. One way of assessing is to use a rubric; another is to outline the criteria and comment on the learner's achievement for each one.

As outlined in the Revised National Curriculum Statement (Department of Education, 2002), assessment provides an indication of the learners' achievement. It should also help learners to make judgements about their progress and provoke further learning.

This has become achievable as tasks are collected in a portfolio and learners are regularly required to reflect on their progress.

Assessment now operates differently. Previously, marks were calculated by having term work contribute 50% of the final mark, and the other 50% would have been made up from the term exam. With OBE, continuous assessment means that the learners' progressive tasks are continuously added together and this accounts for 75% of the final mark. The other 25% is made up from a Common Task Assessment. The learners are assessed according to their knowledge, skills and values. Another change in assessment is the move away from marks to level descriptors. At present we are in a transitional phase where we have linked marks to the various levels. The Department of Education has outlined four levels where learners exceed the outcomes, achieve the outcomes, almost meet the outcomes or do not meet the outcomes. At our school, however, we have divided this further and will be assessing according to six levels. Although the Department of Education has proposed four levels, we are able to take this further as we are a private school. However, in Grade 9, we have to assess according to the criteria outlined by the Department as this is an exit point and the learners write a National exam at the end of the school year.

Previously teachers were considered the only assessors. Assessment changes mean that we can include others in the role as assessors of tasks. With clear criteria we can now get parents, members of the community and the learners themselves or their peers to assess or reflect and make suggestions around the learners' production.

Peer assessment was introduced with OBE and we have had to teach our learners to take it seriously. To carry out peer assessment properly, we have had to guide and in a very structured manner teach the learners to see it as a learning tool. In my classes, I have found it an invaluable tool as my learners are quite insightful in their reflections and comments on one another. In a recent debate, my learners compiled listener reports in which they commented on the techniques used, the evidence of research and the content of particular speakers. Having also had to partake in debating, the learners were sensitive but extremely constructive in responding to their peers. I felt that the peers' comments were more useful to the learners than my assessment of them. This was because the comments came from an experienced authority who had been in the same position as themselves and responded with first-hand experience of the task. In addition, self-assessment has been beneficial to many of our learners as they have been able to reflect on their weaknesses and have been able to address these in other tasks.

Recording and reporting

Recording the learners' progress has also been transformed, as we not only collect marks and levels but also make detailed observational comments on the learners' progress. We also acknowledge the assessment of peer and self which were totally rejected in the past. Many schools have opted to capture and record learners' progress on computer. This allows us to keep a comprehensive record of learners' progress throughout a phase.

Previously, reporting meant that summative assessment was reported in the form of percentages attained in learning areas and these were norm referenced. Reporting is

now summative and formative. The summative assessment, however, is not norm referenced. Formative assessment is reported as a level indicator form which lists the outcomes and the level achieved by the learner. To expand on the formative assessment, educators comment on the learners' progress describing the learners' strengths. The areas of weakness are then discussed and suggestions for improvement are made. This means that practices have become more thorough.

Multimodality

With the changes in the communication landscape as described by Kress (1995), the opportunity for learners' creating multimodal tasks has increased. OBE has created the space for multimodality and acknowledges the importance of drawing on the learners' interests and world when designing and redesigning their tasks (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). The learners' production of tasks shows clearly the influence of their resources. In the past, writing tasks were not accompanied by other modes. Now tasks are regularly enhanced or clarified by a variety of different modes of communication which are closer in production to what is happening in the world outside the classroom.

Materials

In the 80s and 90s, our school recognised the needs of our learners and we designed material to suit these needs. Thus we moved away from prescribed textbooks which were not designed for our learners. As we wanted to teach language across the curriculum, we designed material thematically with a focus on developing the learners' skills in English. At present we continue to design our own material, as a single textbook does not always meet the needs of our learners. We draw from a number of different texts and adapt tasks for our learners. With OBE, publishers have developed textbooks for the South African market. In recognising that texts need to be closely related to the world of the learners, publishers have focused on producing such texts. However, these are often geared to rural rather than urban learners.

CONCLUSION

Where to from here? Education in South Africa is evolving. Curriculum, pedagogy and the needs of the learners are constantly under review, as the focus is to improve the learners' learning experience. Language teaching has become more user-friendly as the curriculum is tailored to best suit the needs of the learners and extend their literacy skills and knowledge. Outcomes-based assessment, however, has become a laborious task for educators and the Minister of Education has set up a panel to review the taxing assessment practices teachers have to endure. As our system evolves and the world changes, I am sure that education in South Africa will be "fine tuned". In many schools, educators are implementing the changes in curriculum but there are numerous schools that do not have the resources to implement these changes. What is clear, though, is that the current system is shaping nation-building and giving learners a fairer chance to succeed.

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