

“Why can’t Johnny write? He *sounds* okay!” Attending to form in English second language teaching¹

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This article addresses the problem of poor written English amongst many South African learners who study English as their First Additional Language (FAL) at secondary school level, and the effect this has on their tertiary education and their future careers. The reasons for this poor mastery of written discourse are explored and, in particular, it is argued that the problems that have arisen are because of the communicative meaning-focused approach that has been the raison d’être of the second language syllabi for many years. This approach has also underpinned the OBE curriculum for English as FAL. An alternative method, in which the form of the language is focused upon, is explored and it is argued that this methodology would be a more successful one for South African learners and go a long way to solving the problem of the poor standard of English of matriculants.

Keywords: English second language, communicative language teaching, form-focused instruction

Introduction

In South Africa there are many learners and tertiary students who are in a similar position to our metaphorical “Johnny”. While Johnny “sounds okay”, the apparently fluent spoken variety of his discourse is not matched by his written variety. This perception that his speech is competent is probably due to the fact that during linguistic interaction in his second language (L2), he is using short utterances (shorter than a sentence) and behavioural gestures and facial expressions — or those aspects of his communication that fall into the pragmatic and paralinguistic domains — to compensate for his ill-formed utterances. His interlocutor, especially if she is an educator and Johnny a learner, often becomes a conspirator in this deception and colludes with him in the interests of social equanimity. The educator-participant might compensate for his deviant utterances by filling in the omissions of information in his discourse because of shared knowledge and the wish to maintain mutual communication. Johnny’s perception that his second language is good is thus reinforced and he is surprised when his written discourse is rejected because it lacks well-formed sentences. To use Cummins’s terms (1980), Johnny has acquired basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS), but not cognitive/academic language proficiency (CALP).

Thus Johnny “sounds okay”, but his written discourse is so poor that it has unleashed a plethora of criticism. This criticism ranges from letters to the editors of the popular press to official international reports that South African learners rank near the bottom on various tests. The *Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality* (SACMEQ, 2008) showed that about half of our grade-6 learners could not comprehend a standard, age-appropriate text, while South Africa is one of the twenty countries considered below standard by the *Education for All* (EFA, 2008) global report commissioned by UNESCO. The dismal situation is acknowledged in speeches by Ministers of Education (Motshekga, 2009; Pandor, 2005) while a draft report by the National Benchmark Tests Project (2009) produced for the vice-chancellors’ association of Higher Education South Africa (HESA) revealed that

1 Ayliff, D. 2010. “Why can’t Johnny write? He *sounds* okay!” Attending to form in English second language teaching. *Perspectives in Education*, 28(2):1-8.

the majority of first year students do not have the required academic literacy skills to cope at university without support.

Many of these students are what Cross has called “new students” who are unable to “express their own system of values and express themselves in the mother tongue” (Cross, 2009:15). Tertiary institutions respond to this lack of literacy and written skills in the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) by pouring more and more money into development programmes, and academics research the phenomenon and write up their findings in papers exploring “academic literacy” and “language of academic purposes” such as those by Ferreira and Mendelowitz (2009), Uys *et al.* (2007) and van Rooyen and Jordaan (2009). In short, Johnny has been taught to express himself, albeit inaccurately, in spoken, but not written discourse.

Why has Johnny not been taught to write?

The reasons Johnny has not been taught to write with accuracy are complex and involve multiple challenges found in our schools and communities; however, three crucial reasons explored in this article are OBE, the way English as FAL is taught and the teaching corps which is expected to teach it.

Outcomes-based Education

The Outcomes-based Education policy (OBE), introduced by Professor Bengu in 1998, has probably had unintended consequences. It has become the whipping-boy for many of the woes of the education system, (Bloch, 2009; Olivier, 2009), but is probably not the problem in itself. It is an imported system that might work well in first-world countries like the United States of America, Canada and the United Kingdom. According to the Department of Education National Curriculum Statement (NCS) for Grades 10-12, First Additional Language (FAL) is characterised by a “learner-centred and activity-based approach” (2) that encourages both independence and group work where learners use resources such as the internet, databases, libraries and laboratories to self-discover and learn. While this is sound educational policy, it is very difficult to implement in rural and township schools because many function without libraries, the Internet or even electricity.

To compound these problems the NCSs that are founded on OBE are couched in language that is relatively difficult to penetrate as OBE-specific jargon is used:

Integration and applied competence:

Integration is achieved within and across subjects and fields of learning. The integration of knowledge and skills across subjects and terrains of practice is crucial for achieving applied competence as defined in the National Qualifications Framework. Applied competence aims at integrating three discrete competences. (DoE, 2003a:3)

As Blignaut (2007:49) points out, it is “difficult to translate policy into practice”, and to implement a curriculum that is so alien to the average South African teacher’s epistemological understanding and pedagogical practice is to court disaster. I concur with Blignaut that policymakers must begin “where the teachers are” (Blignaut, 2007:55) and I suggest that they be offered a methodical syllabus reflecting the linguistic forms of English that will lead to their learners mastering accurate written discourse in that language. While OBE might work successfully in first-world countries where the numbers in the classes are relative small, schools are well resourced and teachers well qualified, it is less likely to be successful in South Africa where the opposite is often the case.

The way English-FAL is taught

For many years now second-language learners of English have been taught through a communicative meaning-based approach. This communicative approach is not unique to South Africa, but has been a trend across the world since the 1960s. The assumption, however, that a communicative meaning-based approach to teaching an L2 leads to levels of grammatical accuracy and fluent written competence has not materialised. Some thirty years of using this kind of methodology in South Africa has exploded this myth.

The NCS for English-FAL is based on a communicative or meaning-focused approach to language teaching. This method involves language teachers having to direct their learners to the meaning of the discourse in the belief that the form, including the grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and pronunciation will be acquired almost unconsciously. This method of instruction is modelled on the idea that the acquisition of an L2 is much the same process as that of an L1 where a child simply picks up the language in a seemingly effortless way while exploring and concentrating on the world around him or her.

It was argued during the 1970s and 1980s (Widdowson, 1978; Brumfit, 1984) that if children acquired their L1 by interacting with others, then by reproducing those natural conditions in the classroom, learners of L2s would acquire that language too, notwithstanding the difference in age between L1 acquisition and L2 learning. Learning, it was believed, should take place in a meaning-focused environment in which learners negotiate meaning when a gap in understanding occurs. Genuine message-focused language use should lead to language acquisition when learners participate in role-play and simulation exercises, where the message is paramount and some learners, who have the knowledge, are able to fill the information gaps of others, who lack the knowledge, by exchanging genuine messages. It was hoped that the real world of communication would thus be transplanted into the classroom. The role of the teacher in this kind of classroom is that of a supporter of the learner, who takes control of her learning and, in theory, progresses steadily along the natural route of language development (Krashen, 1985) unaffected by intrusive instruction.

It is now accepted by many researchers (e.g. Day and Shapton, 1991; Harley, 1989; Lyster, 1994; Schmidt, 1983; Spada, 1997) that while meaning-focused instruction leads to confident and apparently fluent speakers of an L2, it does not result in accuracy. Ellis, Loewen and Basturkmen (2003:151), for instance, comment that meaning-focused instruction “is not successful in enabling learners to achieve high levels of linguistic and sociolinguistic accuracy” while Laufer (2005:223) writes that the “realization by applied linguists that second language learners cannot achieve high levels of grammatical competence from entirely meaning centred instruction has led them to propose that learners need to focus on form”.

The whole thrust of the section *Content and Contexts for the Attainment of Assessment Standards* found in the NCS for FAL on page 47 is towards a hands-on, active approach to language learning that is “embedded in situations which are meaningful to learners and so assist learning and teaching”. In addition, while teachers are encouraged to use a wide range of texts that include visual, oral and written forms, they are also expected to encourage their learners to learn their FAL in a “natural, informal process carried over into the classroom where literacy skills of reading/viewing and writing/presenting are learned in a ‘natural’ way — learners read by doing a great deal of reading and learn to write by doing much writing”.

These goals are there to promote high standards that are spelled out in the section on *Language levels* (DoE, 2003b:11). There it is stated that the FAL should be of such a standard that it may be used as the language of learning:

Learning Outcomes for the First Additional Languages provide for levels of language proficiency that meet the threshold levels necessary for effective learning across the curriculum, as learners may learn through the medium of their First Additional Language in the South African context. (DoE, 2003b:11)

So, while teachers are encouraged to use a communicative meaning-focused approach, they are also expected to raise the level their learners achieve in their FAL to one that is acceptable at a formal academic level.

Certainly, the way the communicative meaning-focused approach has been applied in South Africa has generally not produced high levels of grammatical competence, nor has it produced learners who are able to operate in a cognitively demanding academic domain in their FAL. This is a serious situation since English is the *de facto lingua franca* of South Africa and the language of learning in most tertiary institutions and schools. Despite the movement amongst some academics (Webb, 2004; Prinsloo, 2007) to convince the language policy makers and parents of school-going learners that the mother-tongue should be the language of learning for as long as possible, English remains dominant.

The teaching corps

South African teachers, especially those in rural areas and townships, are faced with multiple challenges. These have been explored by many, for example, Chrisholm (2005), Knowles, Nieuwenhuis and Smit (2009), and Nel and Theron (2008) and are well documented. They include problems within schools, such as large numbers of learners in classes, ill-discipline, lack of resources, and administration overload for teachers. These problems are partly caused and certainly exacerbated by conditions external to the schools, such as poor socio-economic conditions, unsupportive and illiterate parents or caregivers, dysfunctional home environments, and historical and political challenges. Given these overwhelming odds it is hardly surprising that some teachers are apathetic and unenthusiastic about their profession.

These challenges have resulted in stressed teachers who lack accountability. Steyn and Kamper (2006) give an overview of stress amongst South African teachers and cite various studies that show the high number of teachers (up to 20% in some regions of South Africa) who suffer from severe stress. The cumulative effect of these challenges has resulted in teacher and learner absenteeism, a lack in the culture of teaching and learning and a dearth of professional pride on the part of the teachers in some areas.

Quo vadis?

Given this scenario it is hardly surprising that “Johnny can’t write”. The problems are multiple; however, part of the solution involves changing the meaning-focused communicative curriculum in English FAL to one that focuses on the form of the language. This will help to support our overworked and stressed teachers by giving them a curriculum that is easier to implement, in that it is more methodical than the free-for-all environment in which the teacher is encouraged to collude with the learner in a conspiracy that accurate communication has been achieved.

What is form-focused instruction?

Form-focused instruction refers to any deliberate concentration on syntactic or morphological aspects of language by learners or by the teacher. Attention is drawn to the form of the language, rather than the meaning alone. This distinction is a matter of degree rather than an absolute, as linguistic forms are used to convey meaning. While at one end of the continuum linguistic forms may be taught as discrete linguistic structures in separate lessons, at the other end of the continuum there is a focus on form approach in which structures are dealt with incidentally, during the course of a lesson that is primarily directed to communicating the lesson content.

Form-focused instruction has its roots going back to a paper (unpublished in its original form) presented by Long at the 1988 European-North-American Symposium on *Needed Research in Foreign Language Education*, Rockefeller Centre, Bellaggio, Italy. A decade later he, in collaboration with Robinson, wrote:

Focus on form refers to how focal attentional resources are allocated. Although there are degrees of attention, and although attention and attention to meaning are not always mutually exclusive, during an otherwise meaning-focused classroom lesson, focus on form often consists of an occasional shift of attention to linguistic code features — by the teacher and/or one or more students — triggered by perceived problems with comprehension or production. (Long & Robinson, 1998:23)

Long and Robinson, then, see the focus on form to be a temporary side-stepping from the important business of the lesson, which is the meaning and the communication of that meaning. Although they do say in the above extract that “attention and attention to meaning are not always mutually exclusive”, there seems to be the perception that the linguistic form can be separated from the meaning. While the learner’s attention is taken up by the lesson content there might be an occasional, and fairly fleeting, detour to focus on a feature such as the plural -s that the teacher notices is missing from a learner’s interlanguage while the class is concentrating on a lesson on South African geography.

These incidental foci on form occurrences are the implied approach laid down in the NCS for FAL: *Thus, in a text-based approach, language is always explored in texts, and texts are explored in relation to their contexts. The approach involves attention to formal aspects of language (grammar and vocabulary) but as choices in texts and in terms of their effects, not in an isolated way.* (DoE, 2003b:47)

This approach can include a range of teaching techniques such as recasts by the teacher, a simple indication that something is incorrect, to more explicit techniques such as rule explanations and examples.

The problem with this incidental focus on form occurrence is that the learners’ concentration is redirected from the lesson content to an aspect of linguistic form and he might not have the capacity to process both simultaneously. He will therefore probably choose to concentrate only on the one which he perceives as the most pressing at the time, and this will probably be the meaning whether it is the meaning of a line of poetry or how to set out at formal letter. In the lower grades, where the same teacher takes the class for most learning areas, it might be a mathematical problem or how plant species cross-pollinate. The learner, who is trying to cope with the lesson content in his additional language, is now also asked to process new information about linguistic form.

The teacher will also need to make a quick decision as to whether to divert from the meaning-focused content of the lesson to deal with a question of linguistic form. She must weigh up whether she has sufficient examples for the form, a succinct and clear enough explanation to hold the class’s concentration, the time to discuss the form and whether there are sufficient numbers in the class who need the tuition on this point of grammar. It would seem that in the average South African classroom, where the language of learning is not the home language of the majority of the learners, the lesson content will take priority every time.

The NCS for FAL (grades 10-12) lays down that learners are expected to understand how “texts are constructed” and “need to be able to interpret and respond to produce a range of different genres” (DoE, 2003b:47). They are also expected to have a “meta-language” to “describe different aspects of grammar, vocabulary and style, [so that they may] talk about different genres”. So while teachers are exhorted to teach in a manner that is close to the focus on form end of the continuum, they are also expected to produce learners, who are able to employ the terms used to describe grammatical concepts, types of style and literary conventions. These high ideals are laudable, but they are far from the reality attained by the majority of those who have passed the matriculation examination.

If learners are to succeed in mastering these abstract concepts in their FAL, it is important that the teachers are given a curriculum that encourages attention to the form of the language. South Africa needs a curriculum that promotes a more structured and logically paced method of instruction in English as FAL to ensure that as many of the major linguistic structures (tenses, sentence types, prefixes, punctuation marks) are covered in an age-appropriate way. This would provide the more balanced curriculum that de Clercq discusses in her article in *Perspectives in Education* (2008). It would be a support intervention targeted at giving teachers a curriculum that provides a framework of which linguistic forms to teach. These language activities must be complemented by plenty of practice in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in a variety of domains. Such a curriculum would provide for a mix of form-focused and meaning-focused methods of instruction that promote both accuracy and creativity.

Has the focus on form approach been tried and tested?

The body of research that began in the late 1980s interrogating this approach is now considerable and the debate has moved from whether to use a form-focused approach in L2 teaching, to how it should be implemented. Theoretical issues such as the importance of “noticing” and the “teachability hypothesis” underpin whether a reactive versus a proactive focus on form approach should be used, and how explicit the instruction should be.

Noticing is important because the learners should recognise when their output is non-target-like. Schmidt (1995) hypothesises that there is no learning without understanding and he claims that there is no understanding without *noticing*. He defines noticing as implying a “recognition of a general principle, rule

or pattern”, while “understanding refers to a deeper level of abstraction related to (semantic, syntactic, or communicative) meaning” (Schmidt, 1995:29).

Pienemann’s teachability hypothesis (1985) claims that learners can be speeded up if they are taught at the stage just beyond their current stage. The difficulty with this hypothesis is that the research is at too early a stage to predict exactly which of the multitude of structures in all the human languages follows which. There is an intuitive, common sense reasoning, however, that militates against attempting to teach forms that are way beyond the learner’s stage of interlanguage development.

While most researchers have recommended that form-focused instruction should take place within meaning-focused instruction, some, such as Laufer, have explored ways of complementing this kind of instruction by planned “pure” form-focused lessons unrelated to any other task and concentrated on one particular form. It is this kind of form-focused instruction that needs to be incorporated into the English curriculum for FAL, particularly in the higher grades where learners have the cognitive and conceptual abilities to absorb the theory. As a rule of thumb, in the lower grades there should be an emphasis on communicative meaning-focused activities that build confidence and relative fluency, while in the higher grades the emphasis should be on form-focused activities that build accuracy and sound standard syntactic knowledge.

Conclusion

There should be no apology called for in studying language as an object in itself, but it should not be studied as an end in itself at school level. There is nothing wrong with learners coming to grips with the internal workings of a particular language system in its standard form and coming to understand that form encapsulates meaning. Ideally, by focusing on the form of the FAL, the learner will come to master that language more completely and by doing so convey his or her message precisely. When learners have mastered the linguistic structures of their FAL, and they are both fluent and accurate, they should come to the realization that *how* they say something impacts on *what* they say.

It is, thus, difficult to draw dividing lines between such concepts as thought, intention, language and style. The relationship between language and thought, and how meaning is made, has been explored by many and goes back to Plato and Aristotle in Western thought. If our learners are not able to master the correct standard forms their meaning will become blurred and muddled. This is particularly the case with the written form of the language as without the help of paralinguistic aids such as gestures, voice tone, and other pragmatic and deictic markers the written words stand alone, unadorned, and usually in unrelenting black and white.

In our English FAL classrooms there should be far greater emphasis on form to promote accuracy. This may be achieved by adapting the present NCS so that it itemises the forms that should be covered in each learning phase as it has been shown that the meaning-focused methodology has not promoted accurate grammatical competence. Intervention is required to tighten and order the curricula for English as FAL at all learning phases as they are currently too vague and woolly. Teachers would probably welcome more supportive curricula that would help them to achieve the outcomes in a more guided, ordered and predictable way. Only by mastering the form accurately will our grade 12s cope with abstract, symbolic levels of thought needed in English in higher education and professional circles.

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