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English Language Awareness and the Issue of Teacher cognition

Abstract

There is an inherent relationship between the teachers of English language and the learning of English. This is because teacher proficiency plays a pivotal role in the achievement of quality education through the medium of English. But concerns have been raised around the issue of English language teaching/learning in the country which has remained unsatisfactory to date and this has been due to teachers' low proficiency levels in the English language generally. Therefore, as the mastery of discourse in English by both preservice and in-service teachers is of vital importance to the country's educational landscape, this article proposes the adoption of a discourse perspective in the training of teachers in South Africa. The article is anchored on a theoretical exposition that contends that South African teachers' cognition (what language teachers know, believe and think) is steeped in the social institutions that give rise to it. This is because cognition has a critical relationship with teachers' classroom discourse as a result the transformation of teacher training has to be informed by the understanding and interpretation of the needs of the teachers in context. This is because the impact of teachers' English expression on students is a fact that cannot be ignored any longer. As the reality of the outcome of teacher language competence is continuously thrust into a discourse that is underpinned by fluent discoursing in English, this is at the core of the effective functioning of the South African education system.

Keywords: Teacher cognition; discourse; professional knowledge; community of practice; pedagogy.

Introduction

The fact is the world has become increasingly interconnected and as a result, multilingualism and diversity have become an everyday experience in several dominions. In this sphere of operations, English is the most important abstract language in the world. As such, critical English language awareness has become more important with respect to usage. In other words, the pressing matter here are the issues of language awareness in education and the role that English plays in the interconnected world that South Africa finds itself. English language awareness in the education system is horned in the cognitive domain because it is focused on language patterns. Hence, its promotion in the teaching and learning of all subjects across the curriculum needs to be given recognition as a subject that bridges the space between MT and Second/Foreign Language Instruction. This means addressing all areas in teaching/learning of the English language ensures a rich understanding of the subject area being taught.

1. The Problem

It has been acknowledged that the limited English proficiency levels of the teachers of yester years in South Africa are still prevalent and this has resulted in the prevailing teachers' English language cognition. This is attributable to the fact that teachers lack the skills for effective teaching and learning in English to take place (Nel & Muller¹; Janks, 2014; Krugel and Fourie, 2014). The wrong English usage levels have become even more pronounced amid the demands and the discourse complexities of the 21st century. As such, the teaching and learning of English and learning in English problems continue to prevail right through to university (Neeta & Klu, 2013). The majority of the teacher trainers themselves lack the English proficiency that is needed for positive impact on their charges (both preservice and in-service teachers). In this regard, Hutchings (1990), states that the degree training programmes for the graduates has left massive gaps in their knowledge base and this cuts across all forms of knowledge as English proficiency is lacking to facilitate the required interaction in comprehension, reading, writing and speaking modes. What is disturbing is the fact that teachers overestimate their knowledge of English (Nel & Muller, 2010), and this is true from

personal experience and the implication of this, is that they have nothing to learn as they know it all.

There is another aspect worthy noting, which is the advancement of a 'South African English'. Some academics resort to the scapegoat of 'this is South African English' when their discourse or wrong use of vocabulary (lexicon) is brought to their attention. The use of wrong forms, the misapplication of vocabulary and the flawed discourse are appropriated by students. This triggers off a vicious cycle through which students internalise flawed discourse from their teachers, which is then reproduced by the students who are oblivious to the fact that it is flawed and the resulting fossilized English becomes a permanent feature in the teaching/learning of English in the country. The outcome of this, is the entrenchment of incompetence from start to finish and yet the emphasis should be on proficiency grounding and not on the promotion of mediocrity. In this regard, Schleppegrell & Colombi (2002), are in favour of the promotion of model forms of 'good English' to be pushed to the forefront as opposed to the localized versions. The bottom line is that English is a global language and as such, the worthwhile goal to pursue is to find solutions to the perpetual problem of the lack of English proficiency in teachers and students as it is a medium of instruction.

Hutchings (1990), draws attention to one other aspect of the problem, that is, the emphasis on literary texts - literature. Hutchings' stand is that the teaching and learning of literary canon does not translate into expertise in the linguistic matters of English language teaching and learning. He argues to the effect that, although literary training could give a student a genuine love for literary works, it is not itself enough to facilitate students' strategic abilities in the language. As a result, he (1990:117), adds that 'any teacher of English is daily confronted with a set of problems, of which his or her degree training has not explicitly prepared him or her for'. The author of this paper is in agreement with this view, as expression in literary works is an art form that cannot be equated to discourse across academic disciplines and other equally important communication situations. The fact of the matter is that quite a number of these graduates end up as teachers and teacher trainers.

2. Aim of the article

Therefore, the aim of this article is to illuminate an English awareness stance that is steeped in a theoretical framework that is foregrounded in the connections between teachers' English language learning background, their professional knowledge and beliefs and a possible way forward. That is, that of embracing the discourse perspective. The contention is for relating South African teachers' teaching/learning challenge to the social institutions that give rise to it, has to be illuminated by the theoretical framework of cognition and its related dimension of distributed cognition. This is because cognition and its ramifications impact on both the teaching of English as a discipline and on the overall instruction through the medium of English.

3. The theoretical framework: Teacher cognition

In employing cognition as a theoretical base, this article's leverage is steeped in distributed cognition as its scope covers psychology, education, conversation, language and communication (Resnick, Levine, & Teasley, 1991; Salmon, 1993). As the language of social groups can be used to describe what is happening in an individual's mind, this means that cognition and knowledge are not confined to an individual but they are distributed across individuals, tools, artefacts, and objects in the environment (Hutchins, 1995a). As distributed cognition includes interactions between the distributed structures of the phenomena in the system, this means there is an underlying principle of sharing access and knowledge. In the light of the aforementioned, it means that expectations emerge, that form the basis of coordinated action and it is through this coordinated action that vicious cycles are entrenched. In this regard, distributed cognition is useful in the identification of shortcomings in the commonalities of usage within the prevailing practices. This results in the illumination of the salient features of the discourse of teachers and students, so that solutions can be sought for teacher education.

The recognition of the South African language teachers' personal and biographical life experiences with learning English locates what they know, how they come know it and

what they think and do. Since teaching and learning in general have to do with cognition and knowledge, this article's theoretical thrust is based on an appreciation and understanding of language teachers' cognition (Borg, 2006) with its accompanying aspect of being a distributed phenomenon (Cole and Engestrom, 1993). Researchers in language teacher education (Freeman 2001; Borg, 2015), have advanced the reasoning that prior experience has a critical impact on the formation of teachers' overall professional knowledge, beliefs and patterns of action as this is what is referred to as language teacher cognition. According to Borg (2006), teacher cognition, means that the mental lives of language teachers at any given stage of their professional lives. In a nutshell, it is what teachers think, know and believe which translates into: prior language learning experience; teacher education; and classroom practice. It should be noted that the many hours that preservice teachers have spent observing their own teachers when they were students themselves, have formed undeniable footprints in their minds and the footprints are not so easily erased and in the case in point, they are enhanced by like minds within the same environment. Hence the interface between teacher cognition and the teaching and learning of and in English is fundamental to discoursing in English in South Africa. This is because discourses are forms of life, ways of being, and they are frames for social action. Hence it is a given that teachers have stored a lot of knowledge from being students themselves and this can be referred to as "apprenticeship."

Since apprenticeship and distributed cognition together can lead to descriptions that demonstrate that patterns of communication can produce particular cognitive properties in a group. This establishes an understanding of the history of language teachers' cognition from a sociocultural perspective. It has been pointed out that sociocultural processes strongly influence students' access to cognitive, language and academic development and this has a link to the interactions that take place in the teaching and learning context. Gee (in Neeta & Klu, 2013), states that human cognition is in a very fundamental sense a cultural and social process for it is mediated by the tools and resources that are in existence in a particular context. In other words, the ways in which communication takes place are constructed by the structures and forces of the social

institutions within which students and prospective teachers live, learn and interact. This is because people speak, read and write in ways that are socially determined. That is, through accepted conventions for the conventions get legitimized in the teaching and learning contexts through the recurrence of familiar ways of expression (reading, speaking and writing), and this applies to first, second and foreign language. When teachers choose from a range of lexical and syntactic items and adopt a typified stance, it is because in the instructional system, this action has been operationalised and stabilised in typified ways (Neeta, 2010).

4. Rationale for the Article

The most important element in the teaching and learning of any subject is the teacher. This puts the English language awareness and the teaching/learning of it in a special relationship with literacy in English. This is because the teachers of English are best placed to take fundamental interdisciplinary teaching roles as the learning of English begins and ends with the qualitative competence of the teachers. This means appropriate English language teacher education and continuing professional development are essential for the effective functioning of South Africans in English both at the local and at the global levels. Teachers of English are *social* beings, as such the contents of their consciousness are socially produced. The recognition of 'teacher cognition' in teacher training and development (teacher learning) is central to the process of understanding teaching as it includes constructs such as teachers' practical knowledge, pedagogic content knowledge, and personal theories of teaching (Golombek 2009). What is fundamental in this view is the inclusion of the discourses of lived experiences to the teaching and learning arena for English language awareness and transformative learning. This engagement entails a deep, structural shift in the basic premise of thoughts, feelings and actions. Hence the academic perspectives of social inquiry, cultural life and ways of interacting and living have to be part of the teacher development agenda in such a way that curriculum becomes a set of creative opportunities that leads to English language awareness generally.

Since the recognition of teachers' and students' social needs and aspirations are inseparable from linguistic needs, it goes without stating that discourse plays an important role in shaping reality by creating patterns of understanding which teachers and their students then apply in social practices (Thornborrow, 2002; Tietze et al., 2003; Talbot, 2007). This is because in the increasingly interdependent world of knowledge, the substantial base for teaching/learning of English is awareness through discourse because it is critical in bringing together language, literacy and the human mind. Therefore, in describing teachers' competence in English language - their history, their educational developmental stages form an integral part of their achievements as it is the basis of their cognition since there is reflexivity between their discourse and "reality". As already stated, the limited communicative competence in English among graduates is attributable to teacher discourse (Grosser & Nel 2013; Neeta & Klu, 2013; Kruger & Fourie, 2014). In the light of the dismal teacher competence in English language teaching in the country, an understanding of what the language teachers know, believe and think is in the final analysis important knowledge. As teacher English language awareness is lacking, discourse in English is at best limited and at worst wrongly used, it follows then that it is incapable of targeting higher level thinking processes. This is because these processes are at a more abstract level, and abstract level thinking depends on good English language proficiency.

5. The Discussion

As language is a social meaning-making process, it follows that human beings learn language from being in the presence of others. This renders the English language awareness and meaning making undertakings not to be isolated functions of an individual as they are accomplished within communities of practice. In the country, the forces that shape communities of practice in English have a critical foothold on the individual psyche, as it is not just the nature of these cognitive resources that is socially determined, but also the conditions of their use. This means the South African communities of practice in English language act as norm enforcers, and this accounts for the similarities in speech, habits and attitudes that teachers adopt.

South African English language pedagogy generally speaking, is currently in a state of flux. As such, teacher trainers have to seriously reflect on where the teaching/learning of English has been and where it is going as this is English language awareness itself. To date, the responsibility of negotiating meaning through a myriad of academic discourses has been left entirely to the students, while the teachers do not take up the challenge of repackaging teaching approaches and materials for the benefit of the students. The teachers are not as well reflecting on their own perceptions and the way they perceive their identities and those of their students. But student teachers need to be enabled to become linguistic investigators using “everyday texts” as these form an integral part of the teaching/learning as this is where the epistemic level of literacy is occurring in the lives of the teachers and their students. As English is claimed to be the medium of instruction in the country and the lingua franca globally, there is an urgent need for the mediation of academic and linguistic practices for teaching/learning in South Africa. It is the task of all teachers generally, and teachers of English to bridge the linguistic schisms between practices in education and communities of practice.

Therefore, it is an imperative that South African teachers of English perceive it at the level of discourse, which is beyond the level of the sentence. The fact is fluent discourse represents the totality of successful English language teaching and learning which gives prominence to the facilitation of the development of an all-embracing collective capability in the teachers as it marries critical language awareness and practice and the building of experience. Hence English language has to be taught and learnt as discourse. That is, preservice teachers’ attention has to be concentrated on discourse because for successful communication to take place, discourse takes cognisance of context. As it is, teacher training courses do not give the much-needed emphasis on the discourse view of the English language. This is obvious when interacting with teachers and teacher trainers alike as they are oblivious to the fundamental value of the nature of language as discourse. This stance is juxtaposed with the understanding and appreciation of the critical importance of context in the establishment of meaning as acknowledged by researchers, such as Bachman (1990).

Hence, teaching/learning in South Africa should aim at equipping teachers in general with a proper model of the English language (discourse) to help in the acquisition of discourse types for the facilitation of the improvement of their teaching. Presently, the language used is mostly task-oriented whereas language use (discourse) is supposed to be empowering teachers to 'deal with communicative situations overall. So, there is a need for unravelling what the content knowledge is as it has a bearing on English language, its use, the language teaching and the language learning. Woods (1996), makes a distinction between declarative, or content knowledge (that is, the 'what' of teaching) and procedural knowledge (which is, the 'how' to teach English). This renders the exposition double pronged because it has to do with the content of the English language itself, as well as the content being the medium of instruction. This is the reason Woods amplifies the issue by raising questions such as: what does the teacher need to know about English language or the English language use in order to manage the teaching and learning of it effectively. And adds another question as to whether it needs to be known consciously (Woods, 1996: 194).

In the teaching/learning of the English language, content knowledge is the knowledge of the English language. Wright & Bolitho (1997), point out that English teachers need to be both proficient users and skilled analysts of the English language. As such, the two aspects of necessary content knowledge can be considered as the teachers' knowledge of English from an analytical perspective which are: phonology; grammar; syntax; lexical properties; generic structures; pragmatic realisations; and literacy conventions. An addition to content knowledge is the teacher's knowledge/experience of the acquisition of the content in formal contexts. It follows from this that when the acquisition is flawed from start, it is carried right through by the teachers in question. This underlines the rationale behind the importance of having the appropriate experience of learning the language. In this connection, a parallel from another discipline drives the point home. For example, teachers of geography have acquired the knowledge about geography through learning it as students in order to teach it. When we take the English language knowledge as derived from having formally learnt the content of it, this highlights the contention of this article - which is that if it was not taught and learnt properly, this leads

to the experiential knowledge being flawed and this is passed on to the students by the teacher.

6. The Discourse Perspective for Teachers of English Training

Therefore, as the issue of language teachers' knowledge and skill base is fundamental to the understanding of effective teaching and to the approaches to second language teacher education (Richards, 2011), 'language teacher cognition' as expounded by Borg (2006) becomes the mainstay for teaching/learning in English. The fact that teachers' linguistic and knowledge abilities play a catalyst role in the scaffolding of English teaching/learning education means that the teachers are not only responsible for comprehensibly facilitating learning but they are also responsible for initiating the process of critical thinking through the incorporation of lived experiences. Teachers have to be socialized (trained) in a manner that enables them to identify and incorporate successful principles and practices from the knowledge capital that is made available in context as this is a vital input for English language pedagogy. This is the reason for Suarez-Crozco and Sattin (2007) suggesting that language development needs to be fully integrated into the inquiry-based pedagogy, which validates disciplinary-based constructed knowledge that is mediated and modified.

As it is a given that South Africa's multiple discourses impact on institutional domains of teaching, learning and practice, as languages co-exist, English language discourse development in education should be tackled through perceiving it as part of the institutionalized community-development strategy so as to nurture a participative approach to problem-posing and problem-solving and the ability to contribute to a multi-faceted understanding of the world the students live in. Discourse in English is an apprenticeship of students, as such it can only be best achieved through a focus on authentic communicative activities that are of meaningful significance to the lives of the teachers, teacher trainers and students. This is because the tenets of discoursing encapsulates the epistemic level of literacy as it is intended to act upon and transform knowledge and experience. Discourse provides an understanding of the world of social experience, as it carries meaning for the human experience through a concern for the

inner workings of society. The making of meaning or the making of knowledge, therefore, is linked to the production of discourse. In this way, students in school and university make meaning and learn through the use of discourse and the construction of texts as discourse becomes part of both content and context exploration, which are critical to both teaching and learning.

Therefore, teachers have to critically deal with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world because discourse fits into global realities and their implications. Discourse provides insights that point to the everyday manifestations and displays of social problems both in the local and the global knowledge arena. This is the reason for regarding English teachers as agents for bringing about the changes needed for the country through discourse. In this connection, the education in English for a sustainable future, has to be steeped in a system that assists preservice and in-service teachers in the understanding of the world in which they live through addressing the complexity and interconnectedness of problems, such as the degradation of the environment, population growth and health related issues like HIV/AIDS and COVID 19. This is the English teaching/learning that reorients the aims and content of education away from rote learning to critical reflection as well as English Language awareness.

The English teaching/learning programme needs to have lots of opportunities for teachers to explore their own inquiry questions using appropriate ways of discoursing through reading, speaking and writing so that they are enabled to gather information; change perspectives; theorise issues; and take reconsidered new social action. In this manner, English teaching/learning is centred around the use of content disciplines as lenses for examining the world the teachers and their students live in so that content disciplines become pivotal to the inquiry questions of the students. In this way, students choose certain disciplines in order to have perspectives for unpacking and understanding issues. The ultimate objective of the cognitive backdrop for the socialization of teachers, is to facilitate the reconstruction of the teacher's everyday beliefs and experiences in order to develop an engaging worldview through which

disciplinary borders become porous for the hybridization of knowledge as this engenders reflexivity for teaching/learning teacher development.

Since discourse serves the scaffolding of the performance of social activities and also to scaffold human affiliation within cultures and social groups and institutions' (Gee, 2005: 1), the power to share and shape that which is relevant of social groups, and institutions is vested in the scaffolding of performance as discourse is action and affiliation. This means that teaching/learning has to play a critical role in helping students to become more aware of how language functions in the varied modes of communication across disciplines as this serves as English language awareness in its crucial need. Teachers need the understanding of how language works, well enough to be able to select materials that can assist students in the expansion of their linguistic horizons and have plans in place for instructional activities that give students opportunities to use the new forms and modes of expression to which they are being exposed. In this regard, teachers have to be capable of playing the unique role of being agents for socialising students to English discoursing.

Hence it makes sense to state that South African Universities need to [rethink how to train preservice teachers for the teaching/learning of English and how to upgrade in-service teacher trainers](#). The organisation of preservice as communities of practice entails preservice teachers' direct involvement in the development of the programme they are going to follow as a starting point. Since preservice teachers of English who are active in their programme, are more likely to approach their professional development positively, they can be catalysts for change, especially when they are targeted and recruited at the right time as they are an essential component to the whole engagement. Teaching materials developed by the targeted group can be approached from actual realities and practices, as they make warranted assumptions about the teachers' needs, capacity and experience. The overhauling of existing teacher training materials for teaching/learning could be ideal as a way of making certain that the correct cognitive and language levels would be achieved. Some preservice teachers could be invited to become co-researchers and co-developers of the discourse-based

teaching/learning materials as learning is never effective if students do not take responsibility for their own learning and become active builders of their own meaning. Since this is aimed at improving preservice teachers' teaching/learning content knowledge and classroom performance, this could make a meaningful contribution to the improvement of teaching and learning in the schools generally and substantially improve practising teachers' performance throughout the system up to university level for a sustainable future. This whole approach imbeds the building of an English language awareness mode. In the light of what has been stated in this article, it is a given that English teachers need to be continually upgraded if they are to be of any use to the students and the country as a whole.

7. Conclusion and Recommendation

I conclude by stating that the teaching/learning has to revolve around what work the English language does and how it does it, as this informs the crux of curriculum in context and in real terms. This requires the helping of students in the understanding of how a preferred reading is constructed in a text through linguistic encoding that cuts across disciplinary borders. This is because to be literate in English in 21st century South Africa, teachers need to be capable of making explicit comments on forms, structures and functions of the discourse that is used in the transmission of content while keeping a focus on meaning. This entails the enabling of teachers in accessing information and knowledge in context through discourse, while facilitating the building of vocabulary of specialised language within learning areas as this is the ambit of English language awareness in totality.

Finally, since the teaching of English is a profession in the field of educational specialisation, I recommend that membership be through the upholding of stringent entrance requirements and standards which command an above average English language knowledge competence base that is obtained through academic rigor.

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