

Proficiency in English as a Second Official Language (ESOL) in Lesotho: A Survey on Views of Examiners and Moderators¹

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Abstract

The purpose of this article was to survey the views of external examiners and moderators regarding written English at the National University of Lesotho (NUL), Lesotho College of Education (LCE/NTCC) and other education institutions in the country. This has been motivated by the general concern that the standard of English in Lesotho is very low. The paper first presents a background to English as the international and global language and the second official language as well as the medium of instruction in Lesotho. It further discusses the meaning of proficiency in English and the rationale for teaching and learning English as well as using English as the medium of education. The authors then specifically present examples of poor performance in English at the NUL, LCE (NTTC), COSC, LJC and primary schools as seen through the eyes of examiners, moderators and researchers. Most importantly, the article proposes ways and means of how written English can be improved in Lesotho's educational institutions. First, there has to be a drastic change of attitudes towards English. It should be considered positively as a global language that is here to stay. Secondly, all that whose responsibility is to teach English and through English should always strive to create communicative atmospheres for the students of English. Thirdly, the educational institutions should introduce and use consistently the concept and practice of language and learning across the curriculum (LLAC). That is, every teacher should be conscious of the position of English in the education system and,

therefore, make every effort to help improve English. Finally, the article proposes that another strategy to improve performance in English writing skill is to establish a close cooperation and liaison between and among departments of English at the NUL, LCE, and Language and Social Education Department in the Faculty of Education at NUL. The article concludes by indicating that these are the challenges that face every English language teacher and teacher educator specifically and the entire teaching profession generally.

Introduction

To contribute to the conference theme: **Mapping Africa in the English speaking world**, it had been necessary to survey the ideas and opinions of relevant education participants in examinations written through the medium of English. As it stood, the theme suggested the central position that English occupies in Africa. For instance, in Africa English can be considered to be in the second circle of crystal's (2003) three circles of English.

This article is, therefore, a literary survey on the views of examiners and moderators of examinations written in the English Language. To the extent that English has, over the years, been generally the language of teaching, learning and examinations, it is an important instrument in the education system of Lesotho. Of course any language accorded that role can occupy the centre stage of education and development anywhere in the world. Can or should such a language be taken for granted or lightly by the educators, policy makers and learners? The answer is obviously in the negative.

Every means used to advance and improve the teaching and learning of English in schools should be taken very seriously in all respects if tangible results are to be achieved. This is the motivation behind the writing of this article. That is, every effort

should be made to improve proficiency in English at all levels of education especially the writing skill. After all it does not seem likely that English will ever vacate the place it has occupied in the education system of this country particularly in written examinations; at least not in the foreseeable future. It is the continuing significance of English in Lesotho (and perhaps in other countries in Africa) that has been the driving force behind this article.

Brief Background - English as a Language of the World

English has been in existence as a second official language in Lesotho since the nineteenth century. This clearly indicates that English is one of the oldest commodities in the colonial and western civilization package in Lesotho. In sharing the same sentiment and with reference to other contexts, McCrum, Cran and MacNeil (1987:39) assert that “the English language is now one of Britain’s most reliable exports”.

In further expressing the global nature of English, and perhaps, its significance throughout the world McCrum and his associates (2002:xi) claim that some twenty or so years ago as they were researching and analysing what they referred to as ‘global English’ they never suspected that the linguistic phenomenon they were researching “was on the brink of becoming a worldwide sensation”. In indicating the global status of English in the world today these writers assert in these words:

Language has always been about power first, and culture and learning second. A language, as the saying goes, is ‘a dialect with an army and navy.’ In the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s demise, there was a global flight from the Russian Language. Quickly in countries as diverse as China, Russia and Brazil, the language most commonly taught as a foreign language became English. Parts of Europe formerly under

Soviet domination—for instance the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary and Romania—switched enthusiastically to English as a lingua franca (2002: xvi).

According to McCrum and his colleagues (2002: xiii)

At the dawn of a new millennium, if ever a language had the right to represent the planet to distant galaxies, it is the language that more and more commentators refer to as 'global English'.

If at the European Parliament most members speak English and that any Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) "who can't speak English in Brussels have a 'miserable time' ", who are we in Lesotho with the population of about 1.8 million not to realize that English is a world language, and therefore our language too?

In his second edition of *English as a Global Language*, David Crystal (2003: 3) advances this notion of English as a world language. He contends that a language attains global status "when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country". He points out that such a special role will be

evident in countries where large numbers of the people speak the language as a mother tongue—in the case of English, this would mean the USA, Canada, Britain, Ireland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and several Caribbean countries and a sprinkling of other territories (2003: 4).

He further argues that by being a mother tongue (MT) **only** English cannot achieve global status. In order for it to achieve this status it must be spoken by other countries in which it is not an MT. Crystal argues further that in such cases there are two ways in which English is given a special place in such communities in which it is not an MT. He asserts as follows:

Firstly, a language can be made the official language of a country, to be used as a medium of communication in such domains as government, the law courts, the media, and the educational system. (Crystal, 2003: 4).

He advises that to cope with life in such societies it is advisable to master the official language as early in life as possible. The second way in which English may be given a special place is to make it a priority in a country's foreign-language teaching, even though it has not been accorded official status. (Crystal, 2003: 4).

Lesotho has chosen the first way to give English a special place in the linguistic landscape of the country. It is the second official language; and not only that, it is also the most important communication medium in government, business and education, to name but a few domains. It is also the medium of instruction from upper primary school through university. It has even been accorded an added significance as a failing subject. So, in Lesotho this is the language that has to be taken very seriously in all its facets if the nation has to gain much out of it. If there is lack of seriousness in the teaching and learning of English, then it is essential to review the country's language policy, language teaching approaches and methodologies. Or, then everything in the teaching and learning of English will just be a mockery.

For many decades, and in some instances centuries, English became the linguistic instrument for British colonial administration and thus predominated in key social domains such as the legislature, education, government, judiciary, and many others in several parts of the world. Naturally, it must have been convenient for the colonial masters to run the general administration of the African peoples, Basotho included, and other peoples of the world that formed part of the British Empire, and to execute socially and politically important duties

as well as to impart the British civilization through their own language. In this connection Khati (1988:6) argues thus:

the British did not only assert their political power and influence but also imposed and implanted their language through formal constitutional use in government, education, law, commerce, and other important spheres of life...

Therefore, today many African countries are either bilingual or multilingual in English and their indigenous languages.

Proficiency in English and the raison d'être

It is, perhaps, essential to explain what proficiency in English entails in this article. In the linguistic context of this discussion, proficiency refers to the advanced knowledge and skill in the art of communicating in English. In more familiar and concrete terms it means effective use of the four basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. In the sociolinguistic literature, this is what is popularly termed communicative or functional competence – the ability to use language elements, for example grammatical constructions, sounds, vocabulary, etc. appropriately in genuine interactive contexts in order to achieve the intended results. In the words of Low (1988: Preface), a proficient communicator should possess a

...facility in expression that he is able to present his ideas not only in correct English but in the language best adapted to his subjects and likewise to appreciate the skilful use of language in the texts he studies.

Because awareness and use of structural aspects, extra linguistic signals and sociolinguistic factors become central in achieving the appropriacy referred to previously, perhaps it can be argued that Fishman's (1986) famous question " ...who speaks what language to whom and when" forms the rubric of proficiency in a language. It must be stated however, that in this paper the

focus is on **proficiency in written English**, i.e. on the writing skill. To this end Fishman's sociolinguistic statement (1986) can be roughly rephrased as: who writes what language to whom and when.

Having explained in a nutshell what proficiency in (ESOL) in the main entails in this paper, it is essential to proceed to the question: What is the significance of proficiency in ESOL in Lesotho, generally, and at NUL, LCE and other educational institutions in particular? As pointed out earlier, the Western civilization that has today broadly and deeply permeated the world has been achieved primarily through the European colonial languages, particularly English that currently boasts of approximately 750 million speakers spread across all continents (McCrum, *et al* 1987:19). More than twenty years following McCrum's and others' approximation, the number could be a lot more today. As in other places, in this part of the world English provides a linguistic aperture for entering that Western civilization, i.e. to participate effectively and efficiently in the world economy, politics, diplomacy, education and other important aspects of that civilization. In other words, English can be viewed as a linguistic qualification for Basotho to become bonafide members of the world community, especially during this era of globalization. That is, during this era of relatively easy inter-connectedness of peoples and groups across the globe through free international trade and rapid changes in information technologies.

Further, the economic prominence of the English-speaking nations in the world today (e.g. the USA, Canada and Great Britain as part of the G8), is another reason why we should, more than ever before, strive to improve proficiency in ESOL because as Fishman observed at the CATESOL conference in 1977 (cited in Kohn 1980:44) "...the learning of English as a

second language has become synonymous with participating in that economy" in which it is the dominant linguistic force. The association of the English language with economy and economic transmutation has been succinctly and forthrightly captured by Kachru (1985:vii) when he says:

...the power of change attributed to English in materialistic, social, and technological senses has contributed to the phenomenal spread of this language on practically every continent and its retention in the former colonies of Asia and Africa. It is therefore understandable that the colonial associations of English and its Western cultural values, are now underemphasized. Instead, what seems to be stressed is the power of English as an instrument of individual and social transformation. (Emphasis added).

An additional contention is that competence in English does not only signify a potential for material gain but also implies possible linguistic authority and social advantage as it is widely viewed as a symbol of modernization and a "key to expand functional roles and an extra arm for success and mobility in culturally and linguistically complex and pluralistic societies" (Kachru, 1985:vii). Kachru (1985:1) eulogizes English figuratively by making allusion to the legendary figure thus:

...knowing English is like possessing the fabled Aladdin's lamp, which permits one to open, as it were, the linguistic gates to international business, technology, science, and travel.

The truth of the assertion made in the quote above is testified by the ease, convenience and success with which speakers participate in discussions during travels abroad and contributions made in international negotiations and conferences. The benefits and enjoyment in the use of this facility are always remarkable to the users and observers.

Statement of the problem

There is a general concern in the school system and tertiary level institutions that generally students' standard of English is very low. The argument is that since English is a failing subject in the schools, poor proficiency in English results in high failure rate in the schools and tertiary level institutions. On the basis of this general concern it has been necessary to find out what the views of External Examiners and Moderators (usually from outside Lesotho) as well as researchers are on this issue.

Purpose of the study

The purpose was to gather data on the views of Examiners, Moderators and researchers on students' written English. The focus has been on what their comments are regarding the students' expression in English, e.g. on grammar, spelling, cohesion, coherence and diction. The researchers further suggested strategies and approaches that could be used to improve students' expression in English.

Significance of the study

This article will be significant to all relevant stakeholders in language, namely, language policy makers, university and college lecturers, education administrators, curriculum development officers, English language teachers and all education practitioners as it provides important information on students' performance in English across the entire education spectrum. From the light shed by this paper every one of these stakeholders can realize the low levels of performance in written English. Consequently, they will see the need to do everything in their power to improve the situation in order to uplift performance in English specifically and throughout the education system generally.

Methodology

The researchers surveyed the views and opinions of External Examiners and Moderators at two teacher education institutions, namely Lesotho College of Education (LCE) and the National University of Lesotho (NUL). To do this the researchers used available External Examiners' and Moderators' reports from the 1990s to the first decade of this century. Further, the researchers surveyed Examiners' reports at Junior Certificate (JC) and Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) levels and research reports regarding primary schools. Because of very poor record keeping, the researchers did not find it useful to do any sampling of the reports; instead any available documents within the stipulated period were used. As evidence of poor performance in written English the authors have provided qualitative information in the form of excerpts and references of External Examiners, Moderators and researchers for every level of education. These quotations and references constitute the results of this literary survey on the views of relevant participants in written examinations.

Unsatisfactory levels of proficiency in written English at NUL, LCE and other institutions of education in Lesotho: the findings

In addition to the functional significance and status of English as the second official language in Lesotho, the great concern about it accrues from the appalling standard of proficiency in this language that currently has been accorded the opportunity to overarch all important social domains. Naturally, the question arises: do the people of Lesotho, in general, and the students of the National University of Lesotho (NUL) and Lesotho College of Education (LCE), in particular, possess and adequately exploit the linguistic and social power inherent in English? Do the students of NUL and LCE perform well enough in examinations carried out through written English?

According to the reports, the response to the preceding question is obviously in the negative. From the educational reports of the University and the College of Education, it is clear that the level of proficiency in written English of the products of these two educational institutions is highly questionable. In the end-of-year reports, negative remarks concerning poor performance in English as a subject and as a medium of other subjects, resulting generally from poor linguistic expression, are not an unusual feature.

The National University of Lesotho (NUL)

A very clear case in point regarding written English is the University. In spite of the fact that this is an institution of higher learning, and as such it is supposed to be exemplary as the centre of academic excellence, the English language factor continues to be a source of great perennial concern. The poor performance in written English continues to beset the institution notwithstanding the University's entrance qualification which stipulates that: "The normal requirements for entrance to degree courses shall be a Cambridge Overseas School Certificate in the 1st or 2nd Division **with a credit in English language...**" (National University of Lesotho Calendar, 2006/07:15). (*Emphasis added*).

The fact that this requirement appears at a strategic place under the General Academic Regulations for Undergraduate Degrees, accentuates the prominence and significance of the English Language at the University. This is an entrance requirement that generally cuts across all faculties and academic departments of the University. This requirement has only been relaxed in one faculty in recent years. Less than a credit pass in English has inconvenienced several candidates and still continues to do so. In some instances it has caused some

students to change from their first career choices to second or even third career alternatives. The importance of this entrance provision is in line with the Senior Secondary School promotion or progression requirements in which the nature of a pass in English is significant in determining whether the overall pass is a 1st, 2nd or 3rd division. To underscore the eminent status of English in the institution's programmes, the University even offers a compulsory First Year Communication Skills course the objective of which is, in the main, to afford students academic and learning skills as well as essential skills in communicating in English.

In spite of all these stipulations and course offerings the command of written English at the University is still very much a cause for great concern. The concern runs through virtually every External Examiners' Report. The 1993/94 Consolidated External Examiner's Report is one of the documents that reflect this problem quite succinctly. For instance, with reference to the Faculty of Education's performance in respect of poor expression in English the External Examiner notes as follows:

The candidates generally demonstrated the ability to understand and interpret questions well. However, the weak candidates failed to use relevant factual information sequentially in support of their arguments. In most cases, the English language expression marred otherwise what would have been good work (External Examiners' Report, 1993-1994:2).

As the Faculty charged with the responsibility of preparing teachers in both content material and the language of instruction—English—the Faculty's External Examiner is concerned that the majority of the candidates have problems in articulating their examination responses in English. The Examiner further contends that the poor expression has a

deleterious effect on what would otherwise be considered good work. That is, poor expression waters down the responses of students.

While it is acknowledged in the Report just referred to above that “that standard of written English of our students remains an issue of major concern to External Examiners across the board”, (External Examiners’ Report, 1993-1994:2), another example of this concern as testified in another University Section may be essential. From the Institute of Extra Mural studies (IEMS) the External Examiner harps on the self-same constraint in these words:

Perhaps, taking into consideration the limited English language communication skills that manifested itself during the course of the exercise in respect of the majority of candidates, the recall type of questions does not submit itself to elaborate discussion and application, etc...(External Examiners’ Report, 1993-1994:12).

If comments such as these ones have become an annual feature in the External Examiners’ Reports, the implication is that the medium of instruction and examinations at the National University of Lesotho is not a matter to be taken lightly. Even as recent as the academic year 2006/2007, some External Examiners still indicate their concern about the unsatisfactory levels of proficiency in English as reflected in the examination scripts. One External Examiner writes: “The language in a number of scripts was also found to be glaringly poor.” The Examiner went further to advise that the concerned departments should address the issue of the English language urgently as it is an important vehicle of communication and instruction at the University (Consolidated External Examiners’ Report, 2006/2007: 26).

Lesotho College of Education (LCE)

The University is not alone in this predicament and outcry. In other educational institutions the following observations and criticisms are typical, and form important beacons in the statement that English is a problem. The former NTTC, that is, the precursor to the current Lesotho College of Education (LCE) had the following concerns regarding performance in written English in the early 1990s as expressed in different reports of moderators:

- (a) "There is need to lay greater emphasis on paragraphing, word usage, and correct tenses and spelling..." (NTTC Moderator's Report, 1992:1).
- (b) "There is need to focus on language use, punctuation and correct spellings" (NTTC Moderator's Report, 1992:1).
- (c) (i) "The External Examiner realized that students' expression continued to be poor in the Third Year" (Consolidated External Examiners' Report of 1997: 7).
- (ii) "The External Examiner of CS (Commercial Studies) expressed her concern on the issue of students' self expression in English which left much to be desired" (Consolidated Report of 1997: 8).

Within the parentheses the compiler of the Consolidated Report writes as follows with reference to poor performance in written English at the then NTTC: "A genuine concern for the prospective teachers in the secondary schools". This parenthetical statement indicates the significance of a good command of the language of instruction especially at secondary school level where recourse to the mother tongue, according to

language in education policy, would be considered inappropriate.

In the June, 2005 report the External Examiner of LCE complains about students who write without paragraphing and punctuation. The Examiner further notes that some students have problems especially with commas and that “proper nouns are not capitalized. Book titles are written in small letters and are not underlined.” Generally, these college students lack the basic writing skills necessary for someone doing college studies. Additionally, the Examiner goes further to write as follows:

Students' language was appalling. Not only were students unable to express themselves intelligibly and explicitly, but also the grammar, spelling and punctuation were poor... But for year 3 students to make mistakes in basic sentence structure of subject verb agreement and simple spelling of words such as 'everybody', 'anybody', 'cannot' is disturbing (External Examiner's Report, June: 2005).

This is a terrible indictment on the level of English of these students who are at third year level of their college studies.

In the General Report of December, 2005 one External Examiner again complains about sentence construction and that “most students' continuous writing was very disappointing ...”. In a somewhat desperate tone the External Examiner provides a concrete example by writing one student's introduction on the composition entitled **A Person who is my role model**. The student writes:

His body is huge jungle of the trees in the mountains. He has a sharp chiselled nose and a gigantic ears like a Mosotho warrier chasing a wild lion in mountains.

The name of the person who is my role model is ... The place he is living is ... He is very tall and enormous like a Mosotho

warrior. His nose is sharp like a needle. He has a big ears and a cat eyes. His teeth are straight like a dog chasing a wild hare (Sic) (Verbatim excerpt from the External Examiner's Report, Dec., 2005).

Clearly, the spelling and grammar are horrendous. The imagery used does not make sense. This is the written English of someone who was soon going to teach the nation's children.

The External Examiner for 2006/2007 examinations once again harps on the problem in language usage. Specifically, the Examiner singles out problems of sentence construction, spelling, grammar and illegible writing, and suggests that such errors should be punishable by deduction of marks. The Examiner fears that if the errors fossilize they may be a carry over to school students when the trainees complete and assume duty in the school system. The Examiner cautions: "... these students will not discourage these errors being made by their pupils when they graduate" (External Examiners' Reports 2006/2007:3). This clearly suggests that if the weakness goes unchecked, it can easily create a vicious circle. In support of his/her observations in the moderation assignment, the Examiner mentions that he/she noted these glaring errors in one candidate's script:

- every body
 - training collages
 - by so doing this pupils
 - herdboys has to be educated
 - the should be no discrimination
 - teachers will not be charged to much tax because they be the brain drain
 - government has to see that the build them
- (External Examiners' Report, 2006/2007:4).

Some of these errors could be considered just silly mistakes, but others are serious errors of spelling and concordial agreement, not befitting a college student. The Examiner, therefore, suggests regular tutorial lessons specifically in English grammar and sentence construction.

Another Examiner for year 2007/2008 cautions that students' weaknesses in English should be taken seriously, and that students should not be allowed to pass examinations "... just for the sake of numbers [as this] cannot help to improve the disappointing standards, but will also embarrass the teachers in their respective schools." This refers to the same college students who will soon be teachers following completion of their studies. The magnitude of linguistic weaknesses causes him/her to conclude with a lament:

It is hard to believe that admission requirements for future teachers are a good pass in COSC. One wonders how proud the tutors are of their products and how contented and proud the teacher-trainees themselves are when they leave the institution (External Examiners' Report, 2007/2008: 52& 54).

We can conclude this section by making another reference to the LCE External Examiner's Report of June, 2005. The Examiner notes that

"It is generally acknowledged that the standard of English is poor throughout the education system of Lesotho ... [and that] unfortunately the Lesotho College of Education bears the onus of moulding the first learners of English as they lay the foundation of everything that the pupils learn."

Further, the Examiner asserts that "Lack of linguistic competence in students is every teacher's nightmare." It is, therefore, mandatory that "a concerted effort has to be made by all the educators" (External Examiner's Report, June, 2005).

Junior Certificate (JC) and Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC)

Other levels of education such as the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC) and Lesotho Junior Certificate have the same problem regarding written English as depicted in final examination scripts. For instance, the COSC Chief Examiner writes: "Indeed, one of the most common faults is repetition of ideas and language which leads to monotony and error." (Cambridge Overseas School Certificate Chief Examiner's Report, 1991: 2). The Chief Examiner continues with his concern in these words:

Understandably, there is an over reliance on the mother tongue so that Sesotho idioms and proverbs intrude into English. There is an overuse of 'and' as a linking word and too often there are no links at all, thus leading to short, simplistic sentences and 'flat' English... Commas are too often used for full stops and there is too much imprecision in vocabulary... Omissions, the indiscriminate use of capital letters, ambiguity in the use of pronouns, poor verb forms and agreement, poorly used prepositions and articles are all aspects of linguistic ability which are capable of improvement if candidates are prepared to check (Cambridge Overseas School Certificate Chief Examiner's Report, 1991: 2).

This quotation criticizes COSC students' written English on many points: language interference, grammar, punctuation and diction. In short some students' written English is hardly comprehensible.

The dissatisfaction is also demonstrated at Junior Secondary level. To this end the 1989 Examiner's Report expresses as follows:

The general poor performance in this sub-section was due to a very low standard of English where students could not write

English words properly let alone sentences” (Junior Certificate Examiner’s Report, 1989: 2).

The 1991 Report also indicates that the majority of the candidates displayed weaknesses in these areas:

- (i) *“grammar, e.g. sentence construction, vocabulary, spelling, use of punctuation marks and/or capital letters”, and*
- (ii) *“other factors such as mother tongue interference and use of Sesotho words...” (Junior Certificate Examiner’s Report, 1991: 1).*

Primary School Level

The foregoing excerpts from the examiners’ reports for Junior Certificate and COSC exams, the teacher training college and the university, corroborate the observation made in the *Education Sector Survey: Report of the Task Force* (1982) that among the weaknesses of Education in Primary schools “particularly distressing were the standards in English”; and that:

One headmistress said that it would be better if the students learned no English whatever in primary school. They had been taught so badly that much of the time in Form A was spent on re-teaching them the foundations of the language (Ministry of Education, 1982:12).

In the quotation above there is a sense of desperation and despair in the sentence “it would be better if the students learned no English whatever in primary school”, because of the characteristic low performance in the subject. Due to the learners’ lack of adequate proficiency in English in primary schools, the students later experience almost insurmountable problems in learning English and learning through the medium of English in secondary and high schools. To this end the

Education Sector Survey: Report of the Task Force (ESS, 1982: 91) claims:

...the single greatest barrier to students learning at secondary schools is the inadequate grasp of English upon entry from primary school.

Of course this could be, among other things, the result of the multiplier or ripple effect from teacher training institutions. How could teachers teach English and through the medium of English when they themselves are not sufficiently proficient in the language of education as shown in the preceding remarks of Examiners and Moderators?

In the research conducted by Khati (1985) it was found out that, indeed, one of the greatest problems in primary schools in Lesotho is the inappropriate expression in English, especially spelling. In a number of compositions marked, a large majority of the pupils could hardly spell English words correctly. Most of what they wrote were either clear Sesotho words or idioms or even nonsense words parading as English expressions. From the foregoing exposition, it becomes crystal clear that the problem of poor performance in written English cuts across all levels of education: primary, secondary and tertiary levels. It is a never-ending process – a vicious circle.

Occurring on this broad spectrum of education, the performance weaknesses outlined above are sufficient indicators of low proficiency in written English in the school system and tertiary institutions; and by extension, perhaps, throughout the nation. The reports can be appropriately summed up in a brief statement that the general performance in written English in educational institutions, generally, and in the teacher education institutions, in particular, is not up to scratch and, therefore, naturally, impacts negatively on the local and

external written examinations and written communication, generally.

How to break the vicious circle: possible solutions

While generally weaknesses in written English can be ascribed to the poor foundation laid in the primary schools, in recent years teachers have developed a tendency whereby one level of education criticizes the one immediately preceding it, thus resulting in a chain reaction of criticisms. Those in higher education blame the senior secondary schools for their poor school products; the senior secondary schools in turn reproach the junior secondary schools for their unsatisfactory graduates too; the junior secondary schools lay blame on primary schools; and the general school system accuses the teacher education institutions for inadequately and inappropriately prepared teachers. Some of the learners' language weaknesses may be a carry over from their teachers who themselves performed poorly at teacher training institutions thereby creating a vicious circle. The question is, where do we begin in breaking this vicious circle in an attempt to improve the situation? That is, what is the starting point? How do we improve proficiency in English as a subject and a medium of instruction?

The NUL External Examiners are conscious of the fact that something needs to be done urgently about improving the standard of English. They are agreed that

We have to rigorously insist on raising the standard of English usage and its teaching in our schools, colleges and universities. As it is, it is alarmingly 'low' in most cases.

Some of them argue for "more remedial language teaching (to do with usage rather than description at, perhaps, all levels in the study of English)". They further caution that "this is a matter of some urgency". Others contend that an English

language proficiency test may be one of the entry requirements into the University (External Examiners' Report, 1993/94: 2-3& 12).

While all these are important measures to improve proficiency in English, they appear narrow in scope and too focused on specific institution(s) and classroom situations. They need to be backed up with more general and all-embracing approaches to the problem. It is important to support the existing programmes and syllabi as well as classroom methodologies with the following broader and more encompassing approaches.

First of all what seems to be immediately imperative in improving proficiency in written English is the change of perceptions and attitudes towards the language. With all the good intentions to raise both the linguistic and political consciousness with a view to improving the vernacular language of the country, it is essential to realize that English together with some of its corollaries are here to stay. The English Language cannot be wished away. McCrum and his colleagues would express it in this manner with reference to the former British colonies such as our country, "...English as a second language, has become accepted as a fact of cultural life that cannot be wished away" (McCrum, *et. al*, 1987: 39). It is, of course, a global language whose currency is fast gaining ground, all the time.

With this awareness, we therefore have to change drastically the love-hate tendency, i.e. get rid of the feeling of ambivalence towards English. It would be linguistically healthier and more beneficial to treat this language, with all the local adaptations, as **our own language** – a language that makes us international and global. Many sociolinguistics (Fishman at CATESOL Conference, 1977, Crystal, 2003, McCrum, *et. al*. 2001)) and language teachers in recent years, have come to view

English as a world language. Because of the “spread, functions and models of non-native English” throughout the world, (Kachru,1985: viii) subscribes to the idea of English as a universal language in these words:

One also sees in this a new awareness about English, which is now seen less and less as a European Language and an exclusive exponent of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and is instead viewed more as a language with multiple cultural identities and traditions (Own emphasis).

It is necessary to ‘enter’ English by first being part of this new awareness about it, and accept it unreservedly as either our second or third language – a world’s lingua franca or language of wider communication. It is essential to be prepared to exert concerted instead of half-hearted effort in improving competence in English, noting that hitherto the pragmatic problems of governing in Lesotho and international participation are largely addressed through it.

Although there may be an overlap between the nationalist and nationalist (Fasold, 1985: 15 - 16) functions of the languages co-existing in any one country, it is important to note that some languages are functionally biased towards internal communication while others are inclined towards international communication, basically. A diglossic relationship, in a broad sense, exists almost everywhere in bilingual and multilingual societies. For instance, in Lesotho Sesotho mainly signifies and symbolizes cultural identity, patriotism, nationalism and nationality as well as largely being an instrument of both formal and informal local interaction. On the other hand, English is the language that largely ranks higher on the educational, official and international utility scales (Khathi, 1988). However, it may not be impossible to upgrade Sesotho to the same or nearly the same level as English, and this could be medium to long-term

objective of Basotho in an attempt to improve and upgrade Sesotho. It would be a retrograde step, linguistically and in other respects, if the intention could be to downgrade English on the pretext that it is a foreign language. In any case, Lesotho is one of the least linguistically empowered country in the SADC sub-region, with only two major languages–Sesotho and English and three or so functional minority languages.

Second to perceptions and attitudes, another problem of great magnitude, possibly in Lesotho as one of the least multilingual countries, is lack of environment conducive to the learning of ESOL. In Lesotho where the country is **almost** linguistically homogenous in Sesotho, exposure of ESOL learners to English is, indeed, minimal and in some cases even non-existent. The environment, for instance, in which primary school pupils learn and use English is predominantly Sesotho if not entirely so. To this extent Khati (1985: 110) comments as follows:

Their communities are Basotho, the language surrounding them is Sesotho, the teachers are Basotho who speak Sesotho virtually all the time even in English lessons, and all the children in the school are Basotho.

As a result of this ESOL context, the pupils' performance in English is affected adversely. To a considerable extent their ESOL output exhibits a mother tongue – target language syndrome. The following extract from Khati (1985:107) corroborates the observation made in most of the examiners' reports referred to previously:

It is clear that in large measure pupils think in Sesotho and the result is the Sesotho-English thinking, pronunciation, and writing pattern. The data show that pupils call words to themselves before they can write them. Since they are familiar with the sounds and spelling of Sesotho, they approximate the

English sounds and spelling to those of the vernacular language.

Since in Lesotho the educational institutions are the major centres for acquiring proficiency in ESOL, the onus is on all those involved in education to create a functional and communicative ESOL environment on their campuses in order to expose the learners maximally to the target language, especially at the primary school level where most of the learners are still fairly young and their brains comparatively more receptive to language. In supporting the idea of learning a foreign language at an early age Asher (1969: 334) writes:

The brain plasticity theory suggests that the young child's brain has a cellular receptivity to language acquisition. The receptivity may be a function of cellular plasticity or elasticity which is controlled by a sort of biological clock. With age the biological clock changes the cellular plasticity which reduces the organism's capacity to learn languages.

As suggested by Khati (1985:115) teachers should be resourceful and “always strive to create a strong communicative atmosphere through actually communicating in English themselves, through the use of relevant language games, activities, instructional aids...” and many other ways that lend themselves to near genuine communication.

Another imperative strategy in which all school teachers and university lecturers in Lesotho are still to be “schooled” in is the concept and practice of language and learning across the curriculum (LLAC). The LLAC concept can simply be explained as referring to the claim that every teacher is or should be a teacher of the language of instruction—in this case English. Teachers of content subjects such as geography, history, science, etc. should, to a reasonable degree, be knowledgeable in the language of instruction and language arts

generally in order to be able to attend to some basic aspects of the English language and its use and usage. Conversely, teachers of English should also be acceptably knowledgeable in some subjects and subject areas so that they can use authentic content-based materials to teach English as a subject.

After all has the LCE External Examiners (June, 2005 Report) not so aptly expressed that lack of students' linguistic competence in English is every teacher's nightmare? On the basis of the preceding discussion, LLAC therefore, can briefly be defined as co-ordination or integration of content subject materials with English language instruction, i.e. language skills are taught within the framework of content subjects. If this becomes the basic approach to the teaching of English, proficiency in the four language skills can be improved, it is hoped, in a matter of a few years throughout the entire country. Understood properly and implemented consistently and resourcefully, LLAC as an English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching approach and strategy is capable of improving competence in English to the required level.

One other important strategy could be close cooperation and liaison between the English department at LCE on the one hand and the Department of Language and Social Education and Department of English at NUL on the other hand as language teacher training institutions. Such cooperation could facilitate exchange of ideas on improvement of English in both institutions initially, and through the entire education system subsequently. Through close cooperation, the lecturers in the English departments and English Education Units at both NUL and LCE could get a golden opportunity to cross-fertilize one another's theories, experiences and good practices. The lecturers would get an important opportunity to reflect on their own course offerings, their own practices and methodologies in the

teaching and use of the English language. Such reflections could help lecturers to be aware of weaknesses in their teaching approaches and, therefore, make the necessary changes and improvements.

It has to be borne in mind that proficiency in English as a second language has never in any sense implied emulation of educated native writers' of English. Nonetheless, for those who can reach the native writers' level, well and good. Instead, the objective is to be able to write accurately, intelligibly, grammatically, persuasively and convincingly so as to pass messages and views in an effective and efficient way. In short, the goal should be to communicate appropriately and successfully.

If prospective teachers at the NUL and LCE cannot write English properly, it means they will encounter another problem in teaching through the medium of English. It would be difficult for their pupils to grasp the subject matter taught, let alone to write intelligible messages and responses in English. In this way the teachers being churned out of these two institutions are, generally, of a doubtful calibre of mediocres, linguistically speaking; and it is well known that mediocrity begets mediocrity, thus resulting in an ever continuing circle of weak educational products and a weak education system.

Conclusion

This paper challenges teachers, generally, and English language teachers, specifically, to review the status of the English language and its use in their education environment, and to address the general language policy concerns and practices. An attempt has been made to explain in simple terms what proficiency in English means in the context of this article, and what the significance of English proficiency is. The article

further discusses the low levels of proficiency in written English in education as seen through the eyes of external examiners, moderators, chief examiners and researchers. The final part suggests that the following approaches be used in order to improve proficiency in English: inculcation of positive attitudes in the English language, creation of communicative environment by teachers and the use of the construct and approach of language and learning across the curriculum (LLAC) as well as close cooperation and frequent contacts and communication between LCE and NUL departments responsible for training teachers of English.

- 1 This paper was initially presented at the 5th International Conference held at the University of Botswana on 2nd-4th June 2009

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