

WHAT WE WANT FROM LINGUISTICS: A PLEA FROM HIGH SCHOOL
ENGLISH TEACHERS

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Introduction

Over the past few years rapid and sometimes unexpected changes have taken place in South African education. As more and more schools attempt to meet the needs of their communities or follow the structural regulations of the state in the form of various models, so they have become racially mixed. This has happened in varying degrees. Some previously all-white classrooms, for example, are now 80, 90 or even 100 percent black, while others have remained mainly white with maybe 1 to 5 out of 30 students being black. Similar changes have taken place within both independent schools and schools within the different houses in the Department of Education and Culture.

The result of these changes, whether one agrees with them or not, is that classes in these schools have become multilingual. The nature of the multilingual classes may differ, but what they have in common is that students who speak different languages as mother-tongue are now sitting in the same classroom, working within the same curriculum and using the same medium of instruction.

Teachers have been caught off guard. Suddenly maths or history teachers are not only concerned with teaching maths or history. They have now become aware of the language situation in their classes. Students do not only perform variously with their maths or history work, they also exhibit different levels of proficiency when using the medium of instruction. If the medium is English, these teachers run to the English teachers for guidance. Unfortunately, many of the English teachers are experiencing similar problems and are usually unable to help.

My focus in this paper will be on English teachers teaching in multilingual classrooms. Furthermore, my focus will be on what happens inside these classrooms, rather than on broader issues relating to language policy and planning.

Teaching English in Multilingual Settings (TEMLS)

Most of the English teachers in schools which have recently become multilingual have been trained to teach English to students who speak English as their first language (L1). There are a few teachers in these schools who have had some training in teaching English as a second language (TESL), usually as part of an English method course during the post-graduate teaching diploma year of study. Most, however, have had no formal training in teaching ESL (Chick, 1992). The situation becomes more problematic now that classes are becoming multilingual. The classes are no longer homogeneous L1 or L2 groups. Instead, in the English Multilingual Setting (EMLS), there are students who speak English as L1 and those who speak it as L2. I believe that training in TESL will benefit the English teacher in these classrooms. But even more important is that there should be appropriate training in TEMLS.

What complicates the matter even further is that teachers "very often pay lip service to the ideas presented to them in their training and then proceed to teach in the way in which they were taught" (Ridge, 1990, p.37). The problem here is that because of apartheid education many of the English teachers teaching today have not had the experience of being taught in an EMLS. So not only have they not been trained to teach ESL or EMLS, they do not have their personal experiences as students to fall back on.

This is, therefore, a traumatic time for many teachers of English in South Africa. There is confusion, a sense of panic and certainly a fair amount of stress. Fortunately, there are teachers who have started to do something about the situation. In the next section I will examine some of the concerns and needs of these teachers. The focus in this section, as well as throughout the paper, is on inservice teachers; those who have already qualified as teachers and who are presently practising as English teachers in schools. Much of what is said, however,

certainly informs those involved in preservice English teacher training.

Teacher Training and TEMLS

Because of the attention now being paid in the school curriculum to the communicative use of English, and because classes are becoming multilingual, English teachers have been forced to take a closer look at the language being used in their classrooms and also at their own teaching of language, as opposed to the teaching of school-based literature. Some teachers see this as a challenge and are attempting to change their teaching methodology. The formation of EMLS has resulted in these teachers having to go through a learning experience. Many of the English teachers undergoing this experience are having difficulties.

These difficulties or problem areas I have grouped as follows:

1. those resulting from lack of training in linguistics, language or grammar
2. those resulting from lack of training in TESL

I have identified these problems during my informal conversations with teachers who teach in EMLS, and during my interaction with English teachers involved in workshops specifically organized to explore EMLS. In addition to this, I collected data by means of a short questionnaire (Appendix A) which I distributed during a recent conference in Natal organized by the Society of Natal Teachers and the Natal Association for the Teaching of English. The theme of the conference was Teaching English in the Multilingual Classroom.

One of the questions (QUESTION 2) asked the following:

In your preservice training did you study any linguistics, language or grammar? If yes, please say how much and briefly describe the content of the courses.

Only 21 out of 61 respondents (34.4 percent) had some training which involved the study of linguistics, language or grammar.

40 of the 61 (65.6 percent) had absolutely no training in this area at all.

Another question (QUESTION 3) asked the following:

Have you had any preservice or inservice training in second language teaching? If yes, please explain.

Only 16 out of 61 (26.2 percent) answered yes, and 45 (73.8 percent) answered no.

The response to QUESTION 2 is perhaps to be expected, since it is well-known that university English departments tend to concentrate on the study of literature and fail to provide sufficient language training (Chick, 1992; Ridge, 1990; Young, 1988). Only a few of the respondents who did receive some language training undertook formal language study, such as a course in linguistics or applied linguistics. Mostly, the amount of English language study mentioned in this question was minimal, ranging from a short course during the post-graduate teaching diploma year, to studying the linguistic structure of another language, to "incidental" learning about language during a close study of the set literature. One respondent remarked that the only useful language training she had had was the grammar she had been taught when she herself was at school.

One of the respondents to the Natal questionnaire wrote, "A literature-based university study of English does not lend itself to effective language teaching." There is surely no doubt about the validity of this statement. What is shocking is that so many of the English teachers in EMLS, where there should be constant awareness and teaching of the communicative use of English, have had no formal language study.

The solution to this problem is not easy to find. Linguistics has provided a number of descriptions of English in the form of grammars, such as traditional grammar and transformational grammar, but these are as relevant to teachers in EMLS as grammatical descriptions of Ancient Greek. A Natal teacher found that the grammar she studied in her training was of "minimal help in that ... heterogeneous classes make specific help problematic and limited in effectiveness." What

is needed, and hopefully linguistics can help teachers out here, is a grammar that is appropriate to TEMLS; in other words, one that describes the communicative English being used in multilingual classes and one that is applicable in the sense that teachers can actually use it to teach communicative language use in their classrooms.

The response to QUESTION 3 is even more alarming. Almost three quarters of the English teachers in EMLS have had no training in TESL, and this includes inservice training. And almost all those who indicated that they have had some training in this area stated that the nature of this training was either minimal or self-directed. 9 of the 16 respondents who have had TESL training received it, in varying degrees, during their post-graduate teaching diploma year. Including some form of TESL training in the diploma year is a recent development in South African universities. This is a move in the right direction, but perhaps it is included in the training a little too late, especially when one considers all the other content that is crammed into that diploma year. The remaining 7 respondents who have had some TESL training received it through self-study ("my own reading"), and by transferring skills acquired from training in teaching another language as second language.

Young (1988) asks the question, "Is not the future of English teaching in this country far more firmly located in TESOL than it is in the traditional context of 'English' teaching?" I would agree that it is, and add that it is just as firmly located in TEMLS. As far as I know there are no courses or training programmes, either preservice or inservice, that prepare teachers to teach EMLS. This is another area in which I am sure linguistics has something to offer.

What is the solution to this problem? Just as with language study, appropriate training in TEMLS must take place both for preservice and inservice teachers. The substance of this training must not only consist of learning about a selection of prescribed methods (especially those adopted or

adapted from TESL), nor must it involve becoming familiar with a collection of vague theories of language acquisition. It must be much more than this. Hopefully, linguists will help with providing answers. I suspect what teachers want is for the content of training in TEMLS to be appropriate, practical and easily transferable to their own particular teaching contexts. It is unfair and unsatisfactory for teachers to grope blindly in the dark while attempting to be effective English teachers. One of the Natal teachers said, "I learnt through experimentation. Having to survive and having energy has helped me." Unfortunately, not all teachers have the will or the stamina that this teacher has.

Coping with TEMLS

QUESTION 4 on the Natal questionnaire asked the following from English teachers in EMLS:

Do you think studying linguistics, language or grammar has or would have helped you? Give reasons for your answer. Please be specific. Give examples.

53 out of 61 respondents stated that some form of language study would have helped them in their teaching. 4 people did not respond to this question, and 2 of the remaining 4 said that language study was not necessary if the teacher focussed on a communicative approach to language teaching.

The following is a list of some of the reasons respondents gave to explain why language study would have helped them in their teaching. I have been selective and have included some points which other teachers have highlighted in their conversations with me. I believe that this list provides us with potential areas of research. Linguists and those involved with the training of English teachers should pay particular attention to the following.

1. Many teachers are concerned about their ability to assess students' work, especially written work. This comment relates mainly to the L2 students in their classes. The teachers have suddenly been exposed to language structures that

they have not encountered before in the language of their L1 students, and they do not know what to do about them; how to identify them, how to correct them, and what reasons to give for their corrections. One respondent remarked, "With English speakers one can get away with it: 'It sounds right.' With ESL one has to give certain rules." Another teacher who had some language study during training said, "It has helped when trying to analyse difficult passages of comprehension as well as with poetry. When correcting pupils' work I know why I make certain corrections." A teacher who did not study language or linguistics responded, "I feel that studying language would have helped me. At times pupils ask why a particular construction is wrong and I feel that I have difficulty in answering them."

2. Because teachers are unable to assess and comment on their students' work effectively they lack a certain amount of confidence as language teachers. Ridge (1990) while discussing the English language proficiency of teachers, points out that a teacher who lacks confidence in using English "will be seriously inhibited in the classroom " (p.33-34). I feel the same is true for teachers who lack confidence in teaching and assessing the language structures of English, even those who are English L1 speakers. One Natal teacher who had linguistics included in her training said that "it has helped. I'm more familiar with [the language] for a start and thus more confident. I don't have to first learn it and then teach it. I can anticipate and hopefully teach it before it becomes a problem."

3. Teachers in EMLS are encountering varieties of English in their classes that are what Kachru (cited in Morrison, 1989) would call "non-native varieties." These are varieties of English spoken by students who use English which is different from the "native-speaker" variety. The non-native varieties have their own linguistic characteristics and therefore appear to be a somewhat different creature from the native variety. Both native and non-native varieties have, furthermore,

acquired distinct South African English characteristics, different from standard English. Teachers, therefore, in the EMLS are confronted with a range of Englishes in their classrooms. They need sociolinguists to describe these varieties and to present the descriptions to them in a way that will enable the teachers to recognise the varieties used by the students in their classes and to teach them effectively. Approaches, methodologies and materials will have to change to accommodate these varieties. At the moment there is a mismatch between methods and materials on the one hand and the performance of students in EMLS on the other. If this remains the case, non-standard varieties of English will not be acknowledged, and this will not encourage students "to be themselves and take pride in their own cultural heritage" (Young, 1988).

QUESTION 5 on the Natal questionnaire asked the following from English teachers in EMLS:

Do you think training in second language teaching has or would have helped you? Give reasons for your answer. Please be specific. Give examples.

57 out of 61 respondents felt that training in TESL has or would have helped them. 2 people did not answer this question, 1 did not know that it was possible to be trained to teach ESL, and 1 teacher did not think that "any specific training would act as a magic wand." Instead she felt that "ability to adapt and intuitive feeling for problems are more valuable."

This teacher may be right, but unfortunately not all English teachers have this intuitive ability. I believe that even if they did it would not be enough to ensure that they would function as effective English teachers. Teachers are aware of this and thus acknowledge that training in TESL would benefit them.

The following are some reasons the Natal respondents gave for why training in TESL has or would have helped them. Once again I have been selective and I have included findings from informal discussions with other teachers in EMLS. A number of

important issues and questions are raised concerning TEMLS and applied linguists could contribute through research to clarify these for the teachers.

1. Many teachers who have had no training in TESL are intrigued by it. Some do not know precisely how it would help them as teachers and others feel that it is a miracle cure for the problems in their classrooms. There are teachers, however, who know what TESL is, and who have a very good idea about how training in TESL has or would have helped them. One teacher remarked that TESL training gave her a base from which to work. She was able to transfer successfully what she had learnt during her training to her language classroom. She had to adapt teaching skills, methods and materials to suit the teaching context in which she found herself. To a certain extent she knew what to do and was therefore able to cope. Teachers without TESL training are not so lucky. They feel ill-equipped to deal with the problems of L2 speakers. Some of these teachers believe that TESL is remedial work and others think that it consists of teaching grammar only. Teachers in EMLS, both those trained in TESL and those not, have been forced to struggle with the problem of having a mixed class of L1 and L2 speakers. Up to now they have had to rely on trial and error to explore TEMLS. This situation is unsatisfactory. Obviously what is needed is specific training in TEMLS, and the teaching skills acquired must be easily transferable to different EML contexts. The question is: What must the content of this training be?

2. Some teachers stated that all they need is an awareness of approaches to TESL. In other words, they want methods and teaching techniques which they can take into their classrooms and use on their L2 students. Some of these said that they know they have to teach communicative competence, and that there are methods available for doing this, but they do not know how to apply these methods to their classes. One teacher, for example, said that if he could he "would be able to cope easily than struggling which is not good it makes you

feel shy and not free to talk." I doubt if the answer is simply one of methods, especially if one adopts wholesale the approaches used in TESL. The EMLS is a different context and methods and materials should reflect this difference.

3. Teachers maintain that a knowledge of the processes of second language acquisition, or at least of the debates taking place in this field, would help them in their teaching. The process of acquiring a second language in an ESL class is probably different from the process in an EMLS. Teachers need to know what these differences are and how they can make use of this knowledge in their classes. They want practical advice. The following are some ways in which teachers have articulated their thoughts about second language acquisition.

a. Many teachers are concerned about the reticence of the L2 students in their classes. They do not participate in class discussions, they do not respond to questions, they are withdrawn and they do not articulate their problems. Teachers battle to get the L2 students to be more verbally active. One Natal respondent said that knowledge about second language acquisition "would certainly be helpful in understanding and empathizing with these pupils."

b. A knowledge of second language acquisition may also help teachers to identify the needs of the L2 students in their classes. It also helps them to anticipate and identify problems. One teacher believes this is very important. She says, "as English is not their mother-tongue, one cannot assume that pupils understand all instructions; for example, a pupil was told that if she could not swim she must 'stand aside' but she jumped into the pool, not understanding the instruction." Another teacher believes that the ability to anticipate problems, "would save trial and error and prevent walking an uncharted course." The anticipation of problems and needs is a point consistently made by teachers in EMLS. I suspect it has something to do with having a base to work from, with having a feeling that they know something about what they are

doing in the classroom, and together with this, a sense of some security.

c. Teachers also want to know if what they are doing is having any effect on their students. A few Natal teachers reported that they simply did not know. Besides knowing about the needs and problems of their students these teachers require information about language assessment. This, of course, is important for the students, but teachers too must know if they are "getting it right."

d. The question of extra-lessons is one which keeps coming up. This extra time spent with L2 students outside of normal class time has many names: tutorials, workshops, remedial programmes, enrichment classes, for example. Whatever their names their purpose is to improve the English proficiency of the L2 students. Some teachers feel that they are not a good idea (for various reasons including not wanting to discriminate against the L2 students in any way) and attempt to deal with the problems in the normal English class. Other teachers, especially those who do not teach English, tend to rely on the extra-lessons totally and simply ignore the L2 students during normal class time. Research on second language acquisition in EMLS could possibly help to provide answers to this dilemma.

The Research Information Gap (RIG)

I have urged and challenged linguists, applied linguists and those involved in the training of English teachers to investigate the TEMLS. Two broad areas of exploration which I have highlighted are: (a) how the study of language, linguistics or grammar could benefit teachers in EMLS; and (b) how training in TESL could benefit teachers in EMLS. Within these two categories I have mentioned specific problem areas which need to be examined. It is essential that any research carried out relates very closely to the EMLS. Researchers must be careful to avoid what Sheen (1990) calls "the applied linguistics gap." This is the gap between the basis for the

findings of the applied linguist and what actually happens in the classroom.

When discussing approaches to English teaching Sheen states, "One seldom finds that the approach proposed has been researched and thoroughly trialled over an extended period, and, probably because of this, one rarely finds discussed the practical difficulties of applying the approach in the day-to-day task of teaching" (p.48). South African English teachers in EMLS are confused enough and can do without having imposed on them research findings which could create further uncertainty and doubt. Research must, therefore, be firmly rooted in the reality of TELS.

There is another gap which concerns me even more. This is what I call the "Research Information Gap" (RIG). The RIG is the gap that exists between the linguistic researchers and the teachers operating in the classrooms. There has been extensive research into the processes of second language acquisition, for example. The findings are interesting and informative, and have the potential to be extremely useful to English teachers. However, there are three major problems here:

1. Where is this research? How can teachers get hold of it? I suppose the library is the best place to look, or one could visit the university and ask the linguistics department. And there are no doubt academic journals and textbooks in the bookshops. But where are teachers to find the time to go hunting for this information when they have a full load of teaching every morning, hockey practice in the afternoon and compositions to mark and lessons to prepare in the evening? Linguists must make their research work more easily available.

2. What do teachers do with this research when they eventually find it? The nature of much applied linguistic research is such that those who benefit the most from reading it are other applied linguists. It would be a pity if the purpose of carrying out research was for applied linguists to exchange ideas. The research must not only be made available to practising teachers, it must also be of practical use to

them. After reading an article on second language acquisition teachers want to go back into their classrooms the next day with new ideas and strategies that they can implement, monitor and evaluate. Linguists must make their research work applicable.

3. In South Africa at the moment the RIG is at its widest in the area of TEMLS. Teachers are struggling and they want information that will help them to cope in their EML classes. Multilingual education research exists in other countries. This may be useful to us here in South Africa, but every multilingual context is different. We should start our own investigations and distribute our own findings.

Conclusion

To conclude this paper I want to raise one more issue, an issue that complements everything I have said about undertaking research into TEMLS. I have urged, and perhaps even begged, linguists to help English teachers who find themselves lost in the world of their EML classrooms. I now make a plea to teachers to help themselves. As Leibowitz (1991) says, "The teacher is well placed to conduct certain micro aspects of ... research, such as the classroom dynamics, how the L2 students learn in the classroom, or what methodologies benefit them." The teachers are the practitioners. They have the experience. They identify and deal with the problems in the reality of the classroom. Because of this advantage they must not sit back and grumble about how confused they are. Asking for help and then hanging around waiting for it is disempowering.

Teachers must also make an effort to fill the Research Information Gap. While linguists are working on their research on TEMLS teachers must do their own research. If they do not know how they must learn. It could be very informal and very small-scale. Even better would be for the teachers to work together with the linguists. They could inform each other. By doing this linguists would not, after completing a research project, deliver findings as the truth. The relationship

between teacher and researcher would not be one of knower and passive recipient of information. Freire (1970) warns us of the danger of ignoring this:

The contents, whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified. Education is suffering from narration sickness. (p.57)

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Please respond to the following

1. Very briefly list the three biggest problems you experience teaching in your multilingual classroom.

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

2. In your preservice training did you study any linguistics, language or grammar? If yes, please say how much and briefly describe the content of the courses.

3. Have you had any preservice or inservice training in second language teaching? If yes, please explain.

4. Do you think studying linguistics, language or grammar has or would have helped you? Give reasons for your answer. Please be specific. Give examples.

5. Do you think training in second language teaching has or would have helped you? Give reasons for your answer. Please be specific. Give examples.

