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Negotiating the context in multicultural classrooms in South Africa

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Teaching English as a Home Language in the South African context is fraught with challenge because students are drawn from a diverse variety of cultural backgrounds. Even though English is the language of teaching and learning in their schools, teachers' exposure to English is often from a second or third additional language background. Teachers are endeavouring to manage the dual responsibility of ensuring that students acquire the requisite level of proficiency as Home language students whilst trying to establish a common framework upon which the learners can ground their understanding.

This paper will focus on a variety of the methodologies being adopted in classrooms to negotiate the multicultural context amongst students as well as the strategies that teachers are employing to ensure that students are simultaneously acquiring the necessary proficiency for their age group in English Home Language. Further, it will delve into some of the different methods of assessment that are being employed to measure teachers' progress in the language of teaching and learning within their multicultural context.

Key words:

Multicultural context

Methodologies

Scaffolding

Assessment

“The child's mind does not move to higher levels of abstraction like the tide coming in.....As a teacher, you do not wait for readiness to happen; you foster or 'scaffold' it by deepening the child's powers at the stage where you find him or her now.”

Jerome Brunner

Before embarking on the theme of this paper, it is useful to provide some background with regard to the South African educational context. With the advent of democracy in 1994, the South African education system underwent a significant transformation. Whereas previously schooling had been segregated according to race, with the exception of independent schools, 1994 began the shift to ensure equity of educational resources and adequate provisioning for all. The draft White Paper on Education and Training (15 March 1995) brought an end to apartheid models of schooling. The National Education Policy Act of 1996 looked to provide quality education across the system. In opening schools to all races teachers found themselves with classes that were academically; racially; linguistically and culturally diverse.

Children, from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, were now able to have access to all schools provided they lived in the feeder area. South Africa has eleven official languages but English is the predominant language of learning and teaching. While students attended schools that employed English as the language of learning and teaching, it did not mean that the students were competent in speaking or writing English in a Home Language context. While students had a rudimentary grasp of the language, their exposure to English was often at a second or third additional language level, which created a further barrier to learning both in the language classroom as well as across the curriculum. Initially these students were perceived as intellectually challenged and little effort was made to accommodate them. They were expected to fit in and cope with the classroom in which they found themselves.

On the other side of the coin, students who had always attended an ‘advantaged school’ found themselves side by side with children from different races, cultures, languages and educational background. The classroom context changed, almost overnight, from being homogenous to one in which both teachers and students needed to negotiate new meaning. However, initially teachers simply did not conceive that there was a need to change their teaching approach. Furthermore, there was inadequate training provided to orientate teachers as to how to cope with the formidable challenges they now found themselves facing.

The focus of this paper is to establish what a multicultural classroom is in the South African context and explain how South African teachers are embracing the shift to a more dynamic methodology geared towards a multicultural approach. It will discuss how students are acquiring the requisite level of proficiency at Home Language level whilst also establishing a common context upon which they can ground their understanding. It will address one or two of the methodologies that are being employed in the classroom to negotiate a common context, and focus on the difficulties teachers are experiencing in assessing students with fairness and validity given the broad diversity of their backgrounds.

How then do we define the multicultural classroom in the South African context? A multicultural approach focuses on transformation in which according to (Gorski: 2010):

- Every student must have an equal opportunity to achieve his or her full potential.
- [Teachers] must be prepared to effectively facilitate learning for every individual student, no matter how culturally different from her- or himself.
- Schools must be active participants in ending oppression of all types... by producing socially and critically active and aware students
- Education must become more fully student-centred and inclusive of the voices and experiences of the students.
- [Teachers], activists and others must take a more active role in re-examining all educational practices and how they affect the learning of all students. These include testing and assessment methods, pedagogies... educational materials and textbooks

Thus, a practising South African teacher of English Home Language must ensure that he/she is adopting an inclusive approach which does not provide any barriers to learning. Despite the varying language proficiency of the student in the teacher's class, the teacher must up skill the student to a level of Home Language proficiency ensuring that the content of the texts that are employed for this purpose is applicable to all students. Furthermore, the student must be given an opportunity to develop an authentic voice which is cognisant of bias; positioning and issues of power and be able to justify his/her stance in evaluating a range of texts. Coupled with that, the teacher is expected to improve reading and decoding skills, as well as ensure that the students are able to express themselves with fluency and linguistic accuracy. When outlined in this manner, it seems an incredible challenge.

The IEB is an assessment board for independent schools in South Africa. Many schools report an influx of ill-equipped students at Grade/Year 8 level. Teachers in IEB schools report that they have to confront the stark reality which is that the learning outcomes of: listening; speaking; reading and viewing; writing; thinking and reasoning; and language are not being met satisfactorily in the primary schools. Their observations highlight that in their experience:

- listening skills seem to happen rarely and under contrived conditions. Teachers often rely on texts that have no relevance to the learners.
- students are not doing enough talking. Oral work is often limited to reciting poetry or a reading activity, rather than giving students an opportunity to present a viewpoint which is meaningful to them.
- students are only being exposed to questions that target lower order thinking levels and so struggle to respond to cognitively demanding questions.

- teachers are avoiding writing skills because of class size, so students are not practising writing skills.
- teachers expect students to be able to think without ever showing them how to think.
- students are rote-learning language in isolation and cannot identify aspects related to the language in a broader context. They don't know how to use the language successfully for effective communication.

Reasons for many students being ill-equipped can be attributed to large class sizes in state primary schools where classes often average between 40 and 50. Students simply get lost in the cracks and are not given sufficient support to achieve. This is borne out by the results released in the Report on the Annual National Assessment of 2011 which states: "Fewer than half of all [students] in the country perform at a level that indicates that they have at least partially achieved the competencies specified in the curriculum. In Grade 6, the results indicate that only around 30% of [students] fall into this category. At the top end, too few [students] are able to achieve outstanding results." Thus, [students] that have attended other schools prior to the commencement of high school may or may not have been successful in grasping the fundamental skills that are required at this level. This is wholly dependent on their previous educational background. Parents often choose to wait until high school before enrolling their children in independent schools with smaller numbers of students. (Generally the average number of students per class in an independent school environment is 25.) Many independent schools also make financial provision to include students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds as part of their cohort. This is in an effort to give students that show potential the opportunity to achieve better than they might have done had they continued in their current schools.

A typical Grade/Year 8 class in an IEB school can be comprised of the following categories of students: those that are from an English Home Language background that are academically strong; those that are from an English Home Language background with special needs as well as those students that come from a disadvantaged background with academic promise - where English may be only their second or third additional language.

South African teachers have had to confront the following questions: how does a teacher negotiate the context to begin teaching in the midst of such diversity of experience, culture and language proficiency? Furthermore, how does a teacher assess a cohort of this nature without marginalising students from any specific categories?

Teachers in IEB, and other, schools are grappling with these issues and have realised that in order to achieve success they need to negotiate a more effective way of meeting the learning outcomes. These include:

- A consideration of what will make the teaching of home language meaningful for students regardless of their linguistic strengths or weaknesses.

- A move away from a 'traditionalist' approach in which teacher reteach the same concepts every year and concentrate on grammatical structures in isolation without ever seeing significant improvement.
- Encouraging more talking and writing to enable students to find their own authentic voice.
- Empowering students to communicate first, then focus on correction.
- Giving students the opportunity to become familiar with questions that are cognitively demanding.
- Changing teachers' thinking on how to deliver the curriculum.
- Developing fresh, relevant material.
- Teaching with an intentional focus on the multicultural classroom context.

Teachers are desisting from using textbooks, which contain dated and predominantly Eurocentric texts and are developing their own material using newspapers focusing on what is topical within the South African or international context. It has proved to be an attractive option since newspapers are readily available- some newspapers deliver 200 free copies twice a week to schools- and offer a variety of different viewpoints and voices. Since so many of this generation of current students are not engaging sufficiently with current local and global events, it has had the added value of generating an awareness in each student about the world beyond his/her own doorstep. Thus, the class negotiates the context of each text together which removes the barriers created by the different levels of language proficiency as the vocabulary employed in each text is explained within its specific context.

This newspaper approach is also being used with success across the curriculum where different learning areas are focusing on those articles that are relevant to the teacher's teaching subject. As a consequence of this methodology students are building vocabulary which is provided in a context that is relevant to each specific learning area.

One of the weaknesses that have been identified at Grade 12/Year level is the students' lack of ability to make links between different texts in their final school-leaving examinations. By encouraging students to engage with different newspapers which present them with similar or contrasting viewpoints much earlier, teachers are able to introduce students to aspects of critical literacy such as: the purpose of a text; the way in which a text can position the audience; the issue of who is empowered or disempowered by a specific text; whether to accept or challenge the way in which a text has been constructed as well as voicing (either orally or in writing) an independent opinion of the text in relation to their personal attitudes and values. This is empowering students to gain an understanding of how to substantiate their opinions on each article by grounding their responses from evidence in each specific text. Further, the students' ability to synthesise is developing earlier as students' are continually being confronted with having to make inter-textual links.

Yet a further challenge for teachers is how to improve writing strategies when the range of writing abilities is so diverse across each class. One of the areas of concern that has been identified is that because of large class sizes in primary schools (as mentioned earlier), learners are not being exposed to sufficient writing activities. Students can complete the intermediate phase (end of Grade/Year 6) without having ever written more than a paragraph of between 5-8 lines. Thus, their ability to structure an argument and sustain an extended piece of writing is, without exaggeration, often non-existent. Teachers are having to adopt a different approach where they provide students with more opportunities to complete a range of writing tasks where the focus is on the creation of the text and the process involved.

Those students that are weak in this regard need to feel that they can contribute to the writing process without being ashamed of their efforts. One of the ways teachers are overcoming this is by commencing with peer composition as they have found that joint construction of a written text is proving less threatening. Students begin in groups of mixed ability and diverse cultures; then are reduced to working in pairs with one strong student and one weak student before submitting their individual efforts.

However, before the students can begin to respond to the writing task they need to allow each member of the group to articulate his/her own ideas. Often the attitudes and values of each student might be quite different to the other members of the group. Students are learning to negotiate and create a collective meaning which is an assimilation of each student's culture and personal values. As a consequence each student is adapting his worldview and gaining a broader perspective with which to explore and redefine his own context.

In addition, a strong focus on peer editing and feedback is being built into the writing process so that students are also gaining fundamental language skills from the overall process. This is also building confidence within each student as well as collaboration within the class.

While these ideas are bearing fruit, many teachers are still hyper-conscious of the need to meet their quota of assessments each term and often disregard process and remediation so that they can gather marks from multiple assessments. It becomes clear that there needs to be more focus on the important role of formative tasks.

The instituting of a national assessment protocol where 17 pieces are required in the Grade/Year 12 portfolio has meant that teachers have become fixated on completing these tasks as part of the requirements of the National Qualification. While this is, to some extent, understandable in Grade/Year 12, the protocol has also been imposed in lower grades/years with teachers being required to complete 19 pieces in Grades/Years 10-11 and 16 pieces in Grades/Years 8-9. The rationale behind the assessment protocol was to ensure that meaningful assessment was taken place in all schools in the country. However, by being bound to impose the same modus operandi in the other grades/years it is understandable that many teachers are losing sight of "learning for life" as they find themselves constrained by the onerous assessment demands.

Linked to this is the question of how to set an assessment that is fair and valid for each student within the multicultural classroom when teachers have such varied abilities at English

Home Language level. Where teachers only use summative tasks to compile their school-based assessment mark, students become discouraged and feel inadequate about their abilities. While one cannot negate the importance of setting assessments that are age-appropriate and at the correct level, there are those students that require a great deal of scaffolding as preparation before they can begin to grapple with the summative task.

One of the strategies – introduced by Belinda Williams at St Mary’s School in Waverley, Gauteng- that teachers are employing in assessing comprehension is setting two comprehensions on a similar theme. The first comprehension is a practice task and the vocabulary is negotiated within the classroom. This enables those students with less than adequate vocabulary skills to become familiar with the vocabulary that will appear in the summative task. The student is also guided as to how to respond to the different types of questions that are set such as questions that focus on: reading for information; reading for inference; reading for prediction or evaluation. In this way all students are scaffolded through the process of how to identify and respond to different types of questions. Furthermore, through a discussion of the correct responses in the practice comprehension, students are successfully identifying their own areas of weakness and can focus on these before the summative task is written. This ensures that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed in the assessment that is being used to measure the student’s overall progress. While the concept is not ground-breaking, it can be applied with ease to all facets of the Home Language curriculum and beyond.

The assessment of writing tasks has presented another formidable challenge. Many of our teachers have a blinkered approach to the assessment of writing believing that they are obliged to mark the content, structure, language and style of each piece. This is a throwback from the period before 1994 when writing was assessed in a very rigid way. In order to ensure that students feel confident enough to develop their own voice, the focus is shifting to assessing individual aspects in each formative task with specific rather than generalised rubrics which make the assessment criteria clear to all students, despite the varying levels of language ability. This provides students with the opportunity to express themselves to the best of their ability without feeling continually constrained by the limitations of their language usage. By encouraging teachers to mark only each aspect of the summative assessment, students are not repeatedly penalised for errors of language and style. They are able to learn from their errors rather than feel inadequate because of them. In addition, sufficient scaffolding of different aspects of the writing process is enabling all students to perform better, so that when they do have to confront the challenge of a summative task their overall skills are showing improvement. This has proved empowering for the students who no longer feel that their ideas, beliefs, culture and personal voice are valued a great deal less than their ability to write grammatically correct sentence structures.

In conclusion, given South Africa’s previous educational context prior to 1994, teachers have had to immerse themselves in multicultural education, often without ever having had the opportunity to fully define what they understand the concept to be. Within the IEB schools,

workshops are held which offer teachers the opportunity to grapple with different approaches that are developing and evolving to enable teachers to negotiate the context, both in terms of relevant content and meaningful assessment, better and more effectively. However, the need to address gaps in learning outcomes proficiency at the commencement of Grade 8 remains a problem and developing language ability effectively across the curriculum remains the greatest challenge.

It is hoped that each cohort that write the IEB National Senior Certificate Examination will reflect an improvement due to the intentional focus on the various, transformative approaches that are being adopted in Home Language classrooms.

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