

mno
..M.S__ . am zpu .
..4:m mzmtn: 52m 2mm anEzm
53325. 52 nm24:m

EDITORIAL

This issue of the ELTIC Reporter deals with a variety of levels of concern for ELT practitioners: learners' writing, the marking of learners writing in the matric examination, reports on two non-formal projects and, finally, the perennial polemic surrounding directions in South African applied linguistics.

Norton Peirce argues that there is a mismatch between the aims of the Standard Ten DET syllabus for English Language and the marking system for students' writing in the matric Paper 1. The importance of assessment outweighs - in the minds of both teachers and pupils - that of aims defined in the syllabus, and assessment emphasis on errors therefore undermines the communicative approach which is recommended, interestingly, by both the BET and the People's Education Commission. Adendorff's article underscores the importance of an objective assessment of communicative effectiveness: he examines the extent to which features of students' writing such as word order in indirect questions interfere with the communication of meaning, and concludes that while "errors" in this syntactic area may lead to "negative social evaluation" of the writer, they do not impede communication. Insights of this kind are of great value for the status of South African Black English, and should lead to a reassessment of the way in which we evaluate learners' writing.

Two projects are described in the issue. Esterhuizen, of the Storyteller Group, describes an exciting project which involves the production of 1 000 000 copies of a comic to promote literacy in South Africa. Coming hard on the heels of the International Year of Literacy, this is a welcome attempt to provide accessible and appropriate reading material in a medium which may have its "purist" critics, but which is a literary genre in its own right.

The involvement of learners in the development of the material is an interesting feature of the project, as is the plan to research the effectiveness of the material in classrooms all over the country. Rodseth defends the role of language in learning across the curriculum, and has produced a video of great interest for teachers of any subject who are concerned about how their learners learn.

LAC is a widely accepted notion, but, unfortunately, one which has not been successfully implemented; It is to be hoped that Rodseth's subject-specific approach will have greater impact in South African schools than, for example, the Brin's attempts to involve language teachers in the "domain" of content-subject teachers. The issue concludes with a debate about the relevance of the 1990 Conference of the Southern African Applied Linguistics Association. Gough and Ries attack, Chick defends. While leaving readers to judge this polemic for themselves, an obvious conclusion is that there is a great onus on the organisers of conferences relating to education -- now that our education system is on the verge of great opportunities .. to creatively examine relevant issues. SAALA conferences have, in the past, made significant contributions to language policy and language teaching in South Africa; we hope that they will continue to do so.

ELTICMVOIISNO3-1990
.335

On
Ta
Th:
is s
Th:
dcpz
of t
asse
moo
curt
(Car

._._t(..., ,t .. -

STUDENT WRITING, THE DET SYLLABUS AND MATRIC
MARKING: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

By Bonny Norton Peirce

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
Toronto

The communicative aims of this syllabus imply positive marking and a concern with what is successfully communicated.

Syllabus for Std 9 and 10

English Second Language, HG

Department of Education and Culture, 1985

The general principle applied is that the symbol to be awarded (A-H) is dependent on the W.

Marking memorandum of Essay and Letter

Matric exams: English Second Language, HG

Department of Education and Culture, 1988

I have always liked Brendan Carroll's simple model of the curriculum triangle, which is depicted below. The diagram illustrates the relationship between the communicative needs of the language learner, the language programme designed to meet those needs, and the assessment instruments that evaluate the learner's needs and language learning progress.

The

model is powerful because it acknowledges the crucial role that assessment plays in curriculum planning.

W

Communicative
needs

Language Testing
programmes systems
(Carroll, 1982)

Student writing. the DET syllabus and
marking: A critical evaluation 3

Unfortunately, the model does not always work in practice. All too frequently it is not the

language programme and the testing system that are a function of the learners' communicative needs - it is the language programme that is derived from the testing system, with scant regard for the learners' communicative needs. Indeed, Carroll acknowledges that the nature of assessment can invert the priorities of the curriculum so that, in many language courses, "the end examination not only provides the learning motivation, but dominates the content and pedagogy of the courses." (1982:6)

This observation comes as little surprise to language teachers in different parts of the globe.

From Japan, China and India, to Jordan, Nigeria and Chile, language teachers go to great lengths to prepare students for local and international language tests that will determine

whether their students can pursue tertiary education either at home or abroad. If students

are taking the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the teacher will prepare students to take multiple-choice tests of their language ability; if they are taking the Cambridge Proficiency Examinations, the teacher will alter the curriculum accordingly. Curriculum planners should not complain that teachers are simply "teaching to the test" rather than meeting the students' communicative needs. For many students, success in these tests is essential for their future careers -- students would become dissatisfied if the content

and pedagogy of their language courses were not geared to the final examination.

(Given the crucial role that language testing plays in the learning/teaching process, it is

imperative that curriculum planners pay very close attention to the kind of language tests

that are superimposed on classroom pedagogy. If teachers are going to teach to the test, the

test should be designed to encourage optimal language learning and teaching. Perhaps more importantly, curriculum planners should take careful note of the way language tests will be

marked. For example, what weight will be given to the skills of listening and speaking as opposed to those of reading and writing? In writing, for example, what emphasis will be

placed on the importance of grammatical correctness as opposed to communicative effectiveness? Is it indeed possible to distinguish between these two characteristics?

Language tests inevitably validate some language skills over others; they give unequal weight

to disparate abilities.

It is important to point out that giving "equal weight" to different language skills does not

necessarily constitute a good test. The weighting that is given to disparate language abilities

should reflect the weighting that is given to different aspects of a language syllabus. Ideally,

as Carroll indicates, both tests and syllabus should derive from the students' communicative

needs. Thus, if a language curriculum is to be fair to both learners and teachers, it is imperative that there be close correspondence between the needs of the learner, the

language syllabus, and the development and marking of the language tests that are superimposed on the learning/teaching process. There should be no mystification in the curriculum triangle, and the entire process should be open to constant scrutiny and revision.

This brings me to the main point of my article: student writing, the DET syllabus, and the

matric examinations. I will argue that there is a lack of congruence between the

4 BLTICRcWVOIISNo3-1990

_____. em. Wu '

the
 :r 5
 roll
 so
 be.
 eat
 ine
 nts
 are
 the
 :5!
 n
 v
 ent
 ' is
 :sts
 the
 ore
 ing
 be
 We

expectations that are created in the 1985 DET language syllabus and the marking of the essay and letter scripts in the final DET matric examinations. The implications of this mismatch between the three apexes of the curriculum triangle have profound implications for the future prospects of countless DET students. I will consider each apex of the triangle in turn.

First. what are the perceived communicative needs of student writers in South Africa? This is not an easy question to answer. It depends on who the curriculum planners are and what theory of communicative competence they subscribe to. The issue is fundamentally a political one. Compare, for example, the principles on which the 1985 DET syllabus is based with the proposals of the Peoples English Commission, 1986 (see Gardiner 1987; Janks 1990; Peirce 1989). The DET syllabus designers stress the importance of English as a means of communication in South Africa and the need for teachers to assist pupils "to meet the challenge of living in a multilingual environment". They state that "the overriding concern of this syllabus is communicative competence for personal, social, educational and occupational purposes". With reference to writing skills, the syllabus aims to develop pupils' ability to write English "appropriate to their purposes". The Peoples English Commission, in contrast, redefines language competence to include the ability to understand the relationship between language and power; "to hear what is said and what is hidden". The proposals aim to assist all learners inter alia "to understand the evils of apartheid and to think and speak in non-racial, non-sexist and non-elitist ways." The proposals stress the importance of being able to write with confidence and make "one's voice heard". In essence, while the DET syllabus designers concentrate on what language competence they consider "appropriate" given the status quo in South Africa, the Peoples English Commission concentrates on what might be envisaged in a new South Africa.

It is important to state that, at least on paper, the principles of the DET syllabus and those of the Peoples English Commission are not in direct conflict. The Peoples English Commission would no doubt agree that South Africans are living in a challenging multilingual environment and that language competence is important for personal, social, educational and occupational purposes. However, the crucial questions that are not addressed by the DET syllabus are: What personal, social, educational and occupational opportunities are available to students in DET schools? Who will determine what kind of "communicative competence" is considered "appropriate" for these students - the students, the teachers, the curriculum planners or the matric examiners? The Peoples English Commission is unequivocal on this issue. The Commission stresses the need for parents, teachers, and students to play an active role in determining the communicative needs of students in their communities and the kind of curriculum that would meet these needs.

This leads me then to the second apex of the curriculum triangle: what language programme would meet the needs of student writers in South Africa? The 1985 DET syllabus states that the minimum objectives of written work are that pupils should be able to use reference works; punctuate skilfully; express themselves comfortably in creative, expository and narrative writing; apply conventions to formal modes of written communication; and plan, Student writing. the DET syllabus and manic marking: a critical evaluation 5

draft and revise their work. Significantly, formal grammar teaching is specifically discouraged

in the 1985 DET syllabus. Teachers are encouraged to be alert to individual pupils' needs. With regard to the idiomatic and functional use of English grammar, but "it should not occupy the focus of the lesson for longer than is necessary." Consider the following: This syllabus is concerned with developing pupils' communicative competence. Accordingly, all parts of it involve the study of language. A formal programme of work on language structures and usage is neither required nor appropriate.

Many language teachers, particularly those familiar with theories of communicative competence, would applaud such a syllabus. Indeed, The People's English Commission stresses that "Thinking, not memorising" is important for language learning and places little

emphasis on the formal study of English grammar. Thus, while the People's English Commission gives greater attention to the importance of community-based experiences in the learning/teaching process than does the DET, both the DET and the People's English Commission seem to be in agreement that formal aspects of grammar should play a secondary role in English language pedagogy.

On paper, then, the communicative needs of student writers and the language programme developed by the DET to meet those needs are consistent with much research on language learning and teaching. But what of the third and final apex of the curriculum triangle -- the

assessment instruments used to evaluate the students' progress through the curriculum? How

does the DET determine whether students have learnt to communicate successfully in writing? Once more, the 1985 DET syllabus serves as a reference point, and it is necessary

to quote the assessment guidelines in some detail:

The communicative aims of the syllabus imply positive marking and a concern with what is successfully communicated. The pupils who actively engage with a subject and are adventurous in their use of language are likely to learn more than those who keep to simple, prosaic structures; yet they are also likely to make more mistakes. They should be given full credit for what they have achieved, taking into account both the sophistication and vigour of their work, and the extent to which their errors impede communication and distract the readers.

Pupils' knowledge of language structure: should be tested only insofar as it is useful in communication (i.e. functional speech).

Teachers are encouraged to adopt an integrative approach to evaluation.

Given these sensible guidelines, why do I argue that the DET's curriculum triangle is substantially flawed? I address this question as I turn to an analysis of the way in which

the writing skills of DET students are actually measured in the matric examination.

BLTICMVOIISNOS-lm

A muu-v-.-.-.-.-. . . . unymw

Significantly, the BET syllabus only outlines what students can expect to be tested on in the matric examinations -- it does not specify what criteria will be used to judge the quality

of the students writing. The only guidance that teachers are given is that "all tests and examinations must be designed to assess how far the stated objectives of the course have been attained." Given this guideline, it is not unreasonable for teachers to assume that student writing will be judged on its communicative effectiveness.

My argument, however, is that it is precisely at this point that the curriculum triangle disintegrates. Notwithstanding the 1985 BET syllabus, the focus on communicative competence, and the integrative approach to evaluation, student writing in the matric examination is judged almost entirely on grammatical rather than communicative criteria (see Appendix A). In the introduction to the marking memorandum, markers are informed that the symbol to be awarded to matric candidates (A-H) for their essay and letter is "dependent on W". "Language", as defined in the memorandum, refers to the preponderance of what are called "major and minor errors". Markers are given specific instructions to 'circle the major errors and underline the minor ones. The memorandum indicates, however, that it is impossible to lay down 'hard-and-fast' rules as to how many

major and minor errors "equal" a particular language rating. Markers are therefore encouraged to take the writers use of lexis and structure into account in their general assessment.

Once the markers have given the student writers an evaluation based on their use of language, the markers are invited to assess the "content" of the essay or letter. The quality

of the content of the essay or letter is determined with reference to the following questions:

- How well did the candidate relate to the topic?
- Is the topic introduced and concluded effectively?
- Does the essay hold the reader's attention through interesting description, or imaginative writing, or perceptive ideas?
- Is it generally coherent?

On a 70-point scale in the essay, a positive evaluation of content can raise the students' marks by 6 points; on a 25-point scale in the letter (which incidentally is out of 30 marks

-- what happened to the other 5 marks?), a positive evaluation of content can raise the students' marks by 2 points. Markers are warned not to become "so involved in the language" that they forget the content. It is suggested that the remedy for this is to "read the essay again aim: marking the language" (my emphasis).

Therein lies the rub. No matter how sensitively the DET outlines the communicative needs of the English Second Language learner, no matter how progressive and 'enlightened' the syllabus, student writing in the matric examinations is judged with reference to "major and minor" grammatical errors. Rewards for effective communication, imaginative writing, and coherent argumentation are limited to a mere 8% of the student's global mark for the essay and letter. This in turn constitutes one-tenth of the students total mark out of 300 for

Student writing the DST syllabus and

matric marking: I critical evaluation 7

matric English. (This is despite the fact that there is another section of the matric English examinations -- worth 45 marks -- that is devoted exclusively to the testing of "Language f") This situation is cause for great concern. The 1985 DET syllabus sets up an inaccurate set of expectations for teachers and learners alike. Teachers who conform to the spirit of the W85 guidelines by encouraging students to develop their writing skills for effective communication will not be acting in the students best interests as far as the matric examinations are concerned. Given the criteria by which student writing is judged in these examinations, teachers would do better to focus their writing classes on the grammatical structures of English. (Clearly, most teachers would cover both aspects of writing in their classes - the issue is one of admin.)

There are other features of the DET marking memorandum that give cause for concern. (1) A student whose language use is considered "competent" is given a C symbol. Surely a second language student who is using English competently deserves more than a C symbol? What percentage of students are deemed "very competent" and "outstandingly good"? (2) The memorandum makes the assumption that a student writer whose language is weak is incapable of writing an interesting essay. Thus, according to the memorandum, the best an F student can do is write an essay that arouses "some interest". (3) The memorandum begins with a description of the weakest student writing and then progresses to the strongest. It seems to me that if markers are to "mark positively", in the DET's terms, it would be more appropriate to focus the memorandum on positive rather than negative aspects of the students' writing ability.

In good faith, I assume that the DET is not deliberately misleading teachers and students.

I prefer to believe that the DET is attempting to improve pedagogy in DET schools by introducing a communicative syllabus, but has neglected to bring its assessment instruments

in line with its new curriculum. Such neglect can have devastating effects on the future careers of DET matric students. Should the DET choose to align its marking memorandum with the spirit of its 1985 syllabus, there are a number of scoring guides the DET curriculum planners might examine in the process of revision. Consider, for example, the scoring guide (Appendix B) developed by the Educational Testing Service, Princeton, USA, for their new international Test of Written English, which is part of the TOEFL. (This test,

incidentally, was developed partly as a result of public dissatisfaction with the multiple choice format of the TOEFL test.) This scoring guide was developed to mark essays holistically. It attempts to balance both linguistic and communicative (or rhetorical) criteria

in a way that gives markers the opportunity and flexibility to "bias for best", in the words of Merrill Swain (1984).

At the very least, the DET should make its marking memorandum public. This would enable teachers and students to make informed decisions about the focus of their language classes. They may decide, despite the guidelines in the 1985 DET syllabus, that a formal programme of work on language structures and usage is both necessary and appropriate.

REFERENCES

Carroll, BJ. (1982). W Oxford;
Pergamon Press.

Department of Education and Culture. (1988). Marking memorandum for Essay and
Letter: Matriculation examinations: English Second Language, HG.

Educational Testing Service. (1986/1990). Test of Written English Scoring Guide. Princeto
n,
NJ..

Gardiner, M. (1987). Liberating language. People's English for the future. W:
W Bcllvillc: University of the Western Cape

Janks, H. (1990). Contested terrain: English education in South Africa, 1948-19811111

Goodman I and Medway P (eds) W

W 242-261. Lewes, East Sussex: Falmer Press.

Peirce, EN. (1989). Toward a pedagogy of possibility in the teaching of English
internationally: Peoples English in South Africa. W 23(3) 447-468.

Swain,- M. (1984). Teaching and testing communicatively. m 15, 7-18.

MmmmDEflyulbn-md

mutmlmdevm

www.w-mv.-- -1 _ - .4- -6....A...._ . V. . _ - . W

H. 5_ _13 Extremely weak
 almost unintelligible
 (o - 19%)
 G. M Patcntly below
 standard
 (20 - 32%)
 F. m Doubtful
 (33 - 39%)
 D. M A comfortable pass
 (50 - 59%)
 C. M Competent
 (60 - 69%)
 B. M Very competent and
 A. M Oumtandingly good use
 10
 pleasing
 (7o : 79%)
 of vocabulary and
 structures
 (80 - 100%)
 . Extremely poor
 . Entirely dull
 . Arouscs a faint interest
 . Very poor
 . Dull
 . In a measure interesting
 . Dull
 . Some interest
 . Ordinary
 . Interesting in parts
 . Interesting
 . Interesting with Hashes
 of impressivncss
 . Interesting
 . Interesting with flashes
 of impressivncss
 . Superb
 ELTICKpoerollsNoS-IQO
 . m, . _ , _ - . . -
 Ranu-
 by w.
 Paws
 Paw: o

APPENDIX B

SCORING GUIDE (Revised 2/90)

Raimuum'gn mun!!! Iallaaolngxuringguue. TMugheMlichmlWlkw.mofWMMNm

by bnpllralon. Rude" lould low: on m III! examiner doe: wll

599.352

6 WndeampamhWhabahlkmadmmkvmnhwwkuymmm

A paper in this category

- effectively m the writing test
- is well organised and well developed
- uses clearly appropriate detail- to mwon a thesis 0: illustnte idea
- d'nphylcomhentfacilityintheuseofhngulge
- demnnntee syntactic vnriety end Ipplopri-te word choice

5 WWhMMMIhWHMMMQAEWMyMMM

A paper in thin category

- mylddreulomepnmoftheulkmoteeffectinlythnothen
- isgen.enny well organieedmddevebped
- ueeldetaihtompponatheciorilhuuueuidel
- disphylflcilityintheu-eofhnguage
- demonnnteseomexynucdcvuietyudnngelvolvocaluy

4 WWMhwhmbahtkdehm

A paper in thin category '

- nddlethewritingtopicadequntetybutmyslightplmdthetnk
- il adequately omnlised Ind devebped
- uneuome detaihtompponathesisotilhmitemiden
- demonstrates adequate but pouibly inconsistent facility with xyntu and nag
- may conuin tome errors that occuionlly obscure meaning

3 Wmcsmavdow'minwrithinbluremdullavdondherdnrmarmucn

A paper in thin cnegory my reveal one or more of the following weakness:

- inadequate omnhction or development
- inappropriate or imufficient detlih to mpport or munte generalisation
- a noticeably inappropriate choice of worth or won! form .
- an aecumuhtion ot enon in nemenee mane Ind/or usage

2 Suggest banner: in wiring.

A paper in this category in Ieriomly flawed by one or more 0l the following weekn-ee:

- serious disorganiution or nnderdevelopmem
- little 0! no detlil. or irrelevant specific
- serioultm:lflequentenoninscntellzmorw
- serious problem with focu

1 We: bmnpan in Why.

A paper in this category

- my be incoherent
- my be undeveloped
- may contain mere Ind peninent writing error:

rmmmmunumwmwmmsumwrrwm

Pmlhwmynmddldmknwthfdhw.

Student writing. the DET syllabm and

matricmrkingzacriticdevahnrbn II

.t n. M V . .59.- _t-V _- . n... t. .t. .t.,...l....., ,M,n-_p.m