

We are what we speak

Old assumptions about language use and learning languages are proving to be somewhat off the mark in our changing classrooms. RUTH VERSFELD makes a few observations.



Research now shows that second language development goes hand in hand with first language development.

ERIC MILLER

"If you paint a foreign language on my skin my innermost soul cannot breathe. The glow of my feelings will not get through the blood pores."

— Pirico Liberato Morli, Finnish immigrant to Sweden.

SOUTH AFRICA, as we all know, is a fabulously multi-lingual land. We are now just starting to nibble at the edges of communicating with one another on a more equal basis. We are debating national language policies like never before.

An assertion that English just has to be the lingua franca has sprung up in the past couple of years. All this is leading us to certain assumptions and conclusions which, I think, bear some careful contemplation.

I shall limit my comments to what I have observed in schools where English is the medium of instruction and where the vast majority of the teachers are English first language speakers with whom I have had countless conversations.

Our common concern is how best to deal with the increase of English second language speakers in traditionally English first languages classes. I'm sure that similar points of view would be held in schools where other languages are dominant. Just replace the word English with the appropriate language.

"They came to this school in order to learn English and so they must speak English at all times. It's for their own good. The parents also insist on it."

The first assumption here is that one learns a second language by speaking it all the time. I

am not convinced that this is so and much of the research I read is strengthening my conviction. It seems that what is important in acquiring a second language is meaningful recognition of one's first. Our sense of identity and self-worth is inextricably bound up with the language(s) we speak.

"More even than religious traditions, or social or domestic customs, it is language – the way people communicate and share their thoughts – which symbolises and embodies a culture and its values." So say John Twitchin and Clare Demuth, authors of "Multi-cultural Education".

In order to learn a second language we need to feel confident and happy in our learning environment. Isn't this what child-centred education is all about?

The second assumption here is that a new language is best learnt by cutting out the mother language(s). But once again, research is telling me that second language development goes hand in hand with first language development. Children who cease to grow in their first language battle more with learning a second. On reflection, this now makes sense to me.

Finally there is the problem of parent protests when English is not insisted upon. Parents want what they consider to be best for their children but, like teachers, they don't always take time to consider the assumptions they are making. Schools need

to involve parents, not only in fundraising activities, but also in thinking through and coming to an understanding of educational issues. They are, after all, the primary educators.

"If we let children speak their own languages they form cliques and don't mix properly. This encourages racial prejudice."

Does an enforced language really encourage proper mixing? I have found that children of different language backgrounds interact best in schools where those languages are meaningfully recognised and given status. I think especially of a primary school where children played in their own Afrikaans and Xhosa huddles during break, although there was a teacher on duty insisting on Afrikaans.

The school then introduced a Xhosa teacher who insisted that everyone in the school, including the Sub A pupils and the teachers, learn Xhosa. Within a week those huddles had dissolved. Although Afrikaans continued to be the dominant language, it seemed that giving the Xhosa language status enabled the Xhosa-speaking children to flourish.

"When in Rome do as the Romans do."

This is an assimilationist view of education. It assumes that children must change to fit in with the school, without considering the idea that schools exist to accommodate children. Rome has changed significantly since the days of the Forum and it continues to



"My problem is all these new kids with huge language difficulties. They are holding back the rest of the class."

The question to consider here is who, in fact, has the language difficulty. A child may not be able to speak English, but she will surely speak one or more other languages. Both the teacher and the rest of the class could regard the multi-lingual nature of their situation as a rich resource rather than as a problem.

Now is our chance to hear one another's languages and to compare and think about them. It is often asserted that people who speak many languages are more cognitively agile than monolingual people. Surely a classroom containing a number of languages has greater possibilities for cognitive development? Once a teacher has acted upon this idea, the English second language speakers may help in bringing the rest of the class forward.

"I don't see why my child should be wasting time learning Portuguese or Tswana at school when she could be learning useful things like needlework."

This person seems to think that our brains have limited space for learning, and that learning one thing eliminates the possibility of learning another. However, one could argue for an additive rather than a subtractive approach. This is based on the notion that some learning facilitates more learning.

There is also the concern about time on the school timetable. Traditionally subjects have been slotted into periods. Our thinking about what is learnt when, tends to limit us: 10 to 10.30 is physical education, 10.30 to 11 is history. Language is perceived as being learnt only in a specific language lesson.

Yet language is used, and therefore acquired, in all lessons. Why not, for exam-

ple, encourage Tswana in the needlework class? If the teacher can't speak Tswana, some of the children may be able to help.

"I'm just the geography teacher. English is the English teacher's job."

Firstly, I'd like to dwell a little on a point made in the previous paragraph. This relates to the idea that every teacher is a language teacher.

As babies we do not acquire language in language lessons. We hear language being used in all sorts of situations. Sounds start to make sense. We understand their meaning and so learn to shape our own sounds in order to communicate with others. Babies don't learn language for the sake of language but for the sake of communication.

Linguists such as Stephen Krashen argue that we acquire language better when focusing on understanding the content of a subject other than language. So, if you want to learn English, do geography in English. The job of the geography teacher is to ensure that her lesson is understandable.

I would argue further that the job of the English teacher is to help the geography teacher think of ways of making her input more understandable. A greater range of classroom activities would shift the focus from the written or spoken word to an understanding of the concepts themselves. Words would naturally follow as a means of providing form to these understandings.

This working together of teachers would have more far-reaching effects than the "extra lesson" syndrome so many language teachers get locked into.

What matters is that we continue to ask questions and to try out new ideas so that the process of developing our schools never comes to a standstill.

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change. Schools cannot stay the same – and wouldn't it be sad if they did?

Some schools have attempted to adjust to the wider variety of cultural backgrounds among their pupils by adding bits and pieces to the syllabus, and by acknowledging particular festivals in their assemblies. So, for example, a Christian school may celebrate Diwali or the Chinese New Year.

Such practices further crowd the timetable without having any significant impact on the ethos of the school. Some continue to flourish as it did before. A school genuinely working to accommodate and affirm all of its community does not take this tokenist route. Rather it evaluates its ethos or hidden curriculum as well as its taught curriculum, and ensures that change is constant. Acknowledging in a meaningful way the different languages pupils speak goes a long way in this direction.

THE opening of South African schools to all has

Multi-cultural challenge

brought with it many challenges that pupils, teachers and parents are struggling to meet. However, a seminar held recently by Idasa in East London on new approaches to multi-cultural teaching found that the challenges are not insurmountable.

Senior House of Representatives education official Mr E Fray outlined some of his experiences while headmaster at Greenpoint Secondary School in the city. He said that admitting Xhosa students to the school had brought with it the challenge of dealing with circumcision initiates.

These pupils returned to school after the

winter holidays wearing khaki instead of school uniform. It was sometimes difficult for teachers to deal with them because they had now graduated to the status of "men".

These had not turned out to be insurmountable problems, however. Rather they had contributed significantly to a growth in sensitivity at the school to the new students' cultural background.

The principal of St Anne's Primary School, Mr B Lahoud, shared his experiences with the intergration of children of different races over a period of 10 years, when Catholic schools opened their doors to all.

The third member of the panel, Ms N Barry, lower primary project leader at the Independent Teacher Enrichment Centre, spoke about the development of materials for anti-bias education suitable for use in a multi-cultural, multi-lingual situation.

Participants in the seminar all felt that it was useless simply to criticise schools, but that parents and educationalists should take an active interest in school affairs. It was felt that most black parents have yet to clarify in their own minds what they mean when they say they want a good education for their children.

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