

Introduction

The Good Hope College in Khayelitsha has had a chequered history. It has been, in the last ten years, a DET teacher training facility, a Technical College and now, finally, an FETI (Further Education and Training) Institution. FETI's, according to the recently promulgated FETI Act, are meant to be a sort of "midline" point between school and Technikon/University. Entry level can be achieved with a Gr 9 certificate according to the FETI Act which aims to "restructure and transform programmes and institutions to respond better to the human resource, economic and development needs of the Republic" (Further Education and Training Bill 1998 : Preamble). It is in this very restructuring of programmes that the problems of language can and must be addressed. This study will look at an FETI in which the student population is exclusively Xhosa- speaking. This means that they are all studying, writing exams and being taught through the medium of ESL (English as Second Language).

The focus will be on the students' interaction with prescribed and other text and how this, in turn, affects the policies of the Library (or Resource Centre, as it is now being referred to – on account of its being obliged to offer, according to the new dispensation, varying forms of student support apart from academic). The study will examine the problems of cognition of said text and offer ways of improving it or mitigating its negative effect on the results of students. It will also be suggested that because of their nature (with the emphasis on the practical side of training rather than the academic), FETI's are in a strong position to be proactive in the area of language reform and that the Resource Centre can and should play an active role in re-designing and generating suitable materials for ESL students. Of course, it is acknowledged that the whole issue of language policy is a huge and complicated one and much has been suggested and written by vastly more informed people than this writer. That is why the study will not specifically debate policy issues but only observe and make

recommendations from the point of view of written prescribed and support materials in Resource Centres at FETI's where most or all of the students are ESL. The study will isolate a specific group of ESL students, i.e. those engaged in N3 (Matric level) Business Studies, with Business English as a subject. It must be remembered that this study has broader implications for all FETI Resource Centres as the FETI Act specifically states that "flexible, open learning programmes, through distance education and *resource-based learning*, should be fully utilized and expanded, as a significant means of *broadening access* to FETI" (FETI Green Paper:1998:43) (Italics mine). This was earlier asserted by Desai and Trew (NEPI Language Working Paper 1992:3) when they speak of extending access to English by means of "access to adequate language services (principally written translation and oral interpreting."

AIMS OF THE STUDY

The study aims to demonstrate that the text of currently prescribed materials, by its unnecessarily obtuse nature, contributes to the high failure rate of N3 students. The word "unnecessarily" must be clarified here. Many observations have already been made about the struggles of ESL students to access English in their particular discipline. These observations make for disturbing if not painful reading (Clark:2000:7) and open the debate about whether it is not possible to substitute mother tongue for English. Much has already been researched about the issue of mother tongue instruction. Parallel to this runs the debate about the most advantageous point at which English should be introduced as a LOLT. Many scholars, such as Neville Alexander, advocate the additive bilingual approach (Alexander:2000:23) while others support the "straight for English approach" (Taylor and Vinjevold 1999 in: Alexander:2000:19). Unfortunately, this paper cannot accommodate detailed discussion on the rights and wrongs of these stances from the point of view of their implementation in the

classroom, but it is hoped that some helpful suggestions will be born out of the observations made at the Good Hope College, especially for the Resource Centre. It must be stressed that the problem being investigated concerns the use of a particular type of English which, the writer believes, could easily be modified to cater for ESL students, while at the same time retaining the necessary framework of meaning. It must be noted that part of the debate about access to English concerns the issue of the necessity of access to the discourse of the particular discipline. It is suggested that in the specifically academic environment, the discourse of certain disciplines, especially science, cannot be dispensed with (see Clark:2000:15) because this can result in meaninglessness. However, in an institution such as an FETI, where the emphasis is on practical, market-driven skills, it may be argued that the language constraints need not be as restrictive as those imposed by academia, thus allowing for some leeway in the planning of the written word for ESL students, especially those who are Xhosa speaking. It must also be borne in mind that our students reach us at the end of the language line when, it may be said, the damage has already been done by the school system (with regard to LOLT).

The study aims to show that these students are a singular group with regard to their needs and experiences regarding studying and writing exams in English. They should therefore receive special consideration from the authorities concerning the kinds of study materials which are chosen for them. The Resource Centre in such an institution can play a leading role in guiding the programmes policies of the college while establishing a carefully considered acquisitions strategy at the same time. The study will look at how students interact with English text, especially that from their existing textbooks and support materials. The results of these tests may guide us to identify textual problems and offer possible solutions. This in turn would enable the choice of more appropriate stock for course work so that we may execute our obligations in terms of the FETI Act with its insistence on the institution's

“responsiveness to needs” (Green Paper 1998:16) and “institution-based curriculum development”(Ibid: 87). The hypothesis for this study, therefore, is that text of presently prescribed and support materials contribute to failure of N3 ESL students of Business English by exacerbating an already formidable language impediment.

- Prescribed textbooks as units of analysis

It is ironic that some of the prescribed textbooks have been touted as aimed at ESL students, but on examination it is found that the audience catered to is the Afrikaans –speaking ESL student and that the author, too, is first –language Afrikaans speaking. This presents even more subtle, but no less treacherous barriers for the Xhosa-speaking ESL student. Not only must he¹ negotiate new concepts in his second language, but must also avoid the pitfalls created in that language by the textual aberrations of an ESL author who is Afrikaans-speaking. The research will examine text such as this and look for other inappropriate aspects such as content. For example, in the Business English course, the framework for text is unequivocally ‘Western’, in that it predisposes a unicultural society. There are superficial references to ‘African’ identity by artificial inclusion of, say, a Xhosa proper noun or the use of a character with a Xhosa name in a comprehension exercise. But no attempt is made to place the content as a whole within the experience and background of the Xhosa-speaking ESL student, especially not those that attend Good Hope College. (The research will, it is hoped, reveal that this group is strongly homogeneous). It is recognized that ‘content’ and ‘framework for the content’ are two separate aspects of text. As regards content, there is much that can be made more accessible to the student without loss of meaning.² Unsuitable idiomatic style will also be scrutinized. To be more specific, an example of the latter would be the heading for a travel brochure (to be used as a comprehension exercise on

¹ In the interests of readability, this writer will use the pronoun ‘he’ but will implicitly include both genders

² The writer acknowledges that the terminology used in this paper regarding language may be viewed as somewhat ‘homemade’ by linguistics experts. Nonetheless, the aim is to describe the situation as bluntly as possible so that ambiguities may be avoided when remedies are suggested at a later stage.

advertisements) proclaiming that “Mauritius is delicious!”(Cilliers 1997:163) or the question asking the student whether he would like to visit a ‘turistic village’ (sic) (Ibid:156). The reader may only guess at the confusion engendered by such text which, when it is not completely obscure, is just plainly wrong! The other important aspect that must be studied is that of cultural mores. At present, the content is unable to adapt itself in any way to accommodate the belief systems of any society other than ‘Western’. It may be argued, for instance, that ‘African’ styles of communication are just as valid in a business setting as ‘Western’ styles. For example, (in the current text books) when writing a letter of condolence to a business colleague, certain norms of expression are prescribed. These are all rooted in ‘Western’ values and any intrusion of a different cultural style is vigorously rebuffed by the system – in other words, the student can expect to be penalized for it even if his writing is otherwise without fault. Thus the student must wrestle not only with the language and the unfamiliar concepts of the subject, but also with the divestment of his own, deeply-held personal belief-system.

All of the above, it is hoped, will help to clarify not only what the research will be targeting in terms of text (its primary aim), but also the areas where solutions are most desperately needed if FETI’s are going to discharge their mandate as envisaged by the Act (its secondary aim). The Resource Centre, as a powerful support mechanism, needs to become more proactive in the reform of resources being used in the institution.

Apart from textbooks, it is possible that cognition of text should also be studied at one other critical point, viz. national examination papers. This is a particularly problematic area, and vividly encapsulates the ESL student’s battle with Business English text, especially with reference to how it (text) is manipulated by examiners who not only make NO concessions for ESL (African language) speakers, but aggravate the problem of incomprehension by adding their own inappropriate usage of English.

