

'PEOPLE'S ENGLISH' IN SOUTH AFRICA  
THEORY AND PRACTICE

THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

Communicative Language Teaching, an approach to language teaching currently widely prescribed, has been criticised for its unquestioning acceptance of the cultural and political norms of the target language. People's English (an aspect of the larger People's Education movement), on the other hand, offers a philosophy and methodology that takes an actively critical view of language and its relationship to power. In the context of South African society, this stance has had clear political implications.

Although still imprecisely defined, the concepts of People's Education and People's English have been debated and discussed by various anti-apartheid movements in recent years. Attempts have also been made to translate the evolving theory into practice through the development of materials and methodologies. This has been achieved on a relatively small scale, with varying degrees of success.

Recent reform measures by the South African government have, however, prompted the proponents of People's Education to reassess their position.

This thesis presents a historical overview and critical assessment of the development of People's English in South Africa.

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## PREFACE

It is now seven years since the slogan "People's Education for People's Power" was used at the first National Consultative Conference to symbolise the delegates' belief that an alternative to the existing system of education in South Africa was needed. That same conference set out some of the parameters that would define the new system; subsequent conferences and their committees added to and refined on them.

"People's Education" is, however, still a nebulous entity, recognisable by its rhetoric but imprecise in its practical implications. Recent political developments have also prompted its proponents to reconsider its continued validity, or at least to look at ways in which a revamped, revitalised People's Education could be adapted to the needs of the now imminent post-apartheid South Africa.

The aim of this study is to provide an overview of the historical development of the concept People's Education, and more particularly, its application to English as a curriculum subject. However, to establish that the perceived need for an alternative approach to the teaching of the language arose within a particular context, it will be necessary first to examine briefly the peculiar and often ambiguous position of English in the modern world.

The theory and practice of People's Education and People's English (as this specific application of People's Education is generally known) will then be considered. A selection of materials and resources which embody (explicitly or implicitly) the philosophy of People's English will be analysed and assessed in terms of what they purport (or appear to aim) to achieve as radical alternatives to mainstream language pedagogy. I shall also give an account of a course taught by myself and a colleague which included some aspects of People's English.



In the last section, current developments in and the future prospects of People's English will be examined. Finally I shall attempt to offer a concluding assessment of People's English, informed by my experience and observation.

A brief account of my research methodology may help to provide the reader with the framework within which to view this study. As I have already implied in the outline above, the aim of the research is essentially to provide an historical account, based on a survey of relevant primary and secondary texts. My information is, in fact, drawn from the three, often overlapping, sources briefly described below.

Primarily, my understanding of People's Education is based on my reading of the documents published by the National Education Crisis Committee (a body set up after the first consultative conference) in which resolutions and proposals regarding People's Education and People's English are set out. In addition, I have taken account of the discussion and debate that has subsequently surrounded the two concepts. My interpretation of these has been guided by a critical (although, I realise, ultimately subjective) assessment of the extent to which each proponent of People's Education has been able to offer a concrete, viable and consistent alternative to the existing system. Included among the documents that I have examined are the invaluable collections and resources produced at the University of the Western Cape, in many ways the 'home' of People's Education.

An equally useful source of information has been the correspondence that I have had with practitioners and theorists in the field of 'progressive' education, particularly adult literacy and ESL teaching. Valuable insights have been generated from their responses to my (deliberately open-ended) queries about their language teaching theory and practice, their positions vis a vis

People's Education, and any thoughts they might have on it. The responses were generally interested and concerned; and provided a useful corrective to the vague rhetoric that very often characterises public utterances on the subject. (All correspondence quoted in this study is reproduced in the Appendix.)

My third source was in some respects a development of the second. My enquiries had shown me that some materials writers and teachers worked consciously within the framework of People's Education. In these cases an interesting comparison was made possible: I could attempt to assess the extent to which the practice reflected, supplemented or contradicted the professed theory. Material which was meant to give practical, concrete expression to People's English thus provided another source of information, another perspective from which to understand and analyse it.

In other cases, however, the link between theoretical statements on the nature of People's English and materials which, in my judgement, to some extent embodied it, was less deliberate or even conscious. This was not necessarily a problem: it only served to confirm my initial impression of People's Education as a shifting, imprecisely defined concept - an area of discourse and a process (to use terms often applied by its own proponents) rather than a set of articles of faith in which one either did or did not express belief.

More needs to be said about my own position as researcher and writer. I have already indicated that I have adopted a critical attitude in my reading of some of the texts on People's Education: although my commentary is generally sympathetic to the professed aims and methods of People's Education, the reader will more than once detect a note of scepticism.

Sympathy and a critical distance are, of course, not

incompatible positions to maintain, especially as far as People's Education is concerned. That language and power are linked is the underlying assumption of almost every pronouncement on People's English. Consequently, a recurring preoccupation in all the literature is the need to cultivate a critical attitude to language which would enable one to see beyond its surface manifestations and so to resist its effects. Deconstructing People's Education is, consequently, to apply its own principles. The corollary, however, is that the deconstructor - in this case myself - also needs to be deconstructed. The researcher cannot hide behind an illusion of 'objectivity', any more than the activist or propagandist can.

My reading of People's Education and of People's English is essentially that of an outsider. I have not participated in the formulation of their principles, nor have I been an active proponent in the processes of their development. As a teacher of English at a university which is a product of a policy of racially exclusive education, I am, however, keenly aware of the deficiencies of apartheid education, and recognise in People's Education an attempt to redress the balance, to give people control over their own lives and minds. I have, in my own teaching, experimented with materials and approaches that embody the spirit of People's English. Yet there are aspects of it which I find alienating: the empty rhetoric that often surrounds it; the facile optimism in the immediate benefits that it will bring South Africans at every level of their daily lives; the naively patronising veneration of 'the people', a mindless deference which ultimately dehumanises them by turning them into symbols.

The adjectives with which I deliberately littered my reservations highlight the inherent subjectivity of any position, even those held and articulated with less emotive force. The subjectivity of one's position will colour attempts

to understand or come to terms with other positions. Acknowledging and making allowances for this does, however, make one's own position more authentic and releases one from the impossible goal of 'objectivity'.

I have, nonetheless, attempted to apply to my own writing the same critical scrutiny to which I have sometimes subjected pronouncements on People's English. In the spirit and words of People's English itself I have tried to think and speak in non-racial, non-sexist and non-elitist ways, to say and write what I mean, and let the reader hear what is said and what is hidden.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

The Communicative Language Teaching approach, widely prescribed in South Africa and still enjoying considerable support among teachers of English internationally, has shown the need to set language learning and teaching in a wider context than the narrowly linguistic one that characterises the more traditional, grammar-based approaches. For practitioners of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), 'knowing a language' involves more than a knowledge of its lexicon and grammatical structures: more important than these, in fact, is an ability to communicate effectively in the language. To do this, the learner needs to know the social and cultural norms of the society that uses the language; appropriate language use involves putting this knowledge into practice. Consequently, a CLT approach emphasises the view of language as discourse, rather than as isolated linguistic structures, in which communication is a process and in which meaning is constantly negotiated and modified by context.

The pedagogical techniques employed in CLT are designed to reinforce the view of language as interactive communication: the approach is learner-centred and co-operative and, whenever possible, based on the experiences of the learners.

In short, the aim of CLT is to take language learning and teaching out of the classroom into the 'real world' of human interaction and communication. The teacher is not only a language expert: s/he assumes a much more 'humane' role, interacting with the students and functioning as their guide to the social and cultural norms implicit in the language's appropriate use.



But for many workers in the field, this widening of the scope of language teaching is both insufficient and potentially dangerous. Setting the language in a larger communicative context will enable the learner to see it 'in action' and alert him or her to its subtlety of use and function: however, one might argue, this strategy also runs the risk of requiring from the learner an unquestioning acceptance of the norms and ideology of the particular speech community with which the language is associated.

The perspective offered by CLT is, in other words, still too narrow. It does not permit either the teacher or the learner to view the language subjectively and critically, to question the very communicative norms with which CLT aims at acquainting learners. What is needed, it has been suggested, is a more socially and politically informed approach, one that would lay bare the implicit assumptions and conventions of the language.

Such radical questioning of the assumptions underlying a language may seem unnecessarily demanding in many, if not most, second language learning situations. But in the case of English, at least, a very convincing case can be put forward. In the section that follows I shall attempt to flesh out some of the points made above by referring to research done by some prominent writers in the field.<sup>1</sup>

#### A brief survey of the literature on ESL and EFL teaching

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<sup>1</sup> The discussion and authorities cited in this chapter are not, nor do they pretend to be, in any way exhaustive of the topic. Rather, they are presented as a point of departure, a representative sample of the debate which will provide the context for a more detailed study of People's English. For further discussion of the relationship between language, education and political power, the interested reader is referred to: Fairclough (1989), Giroux (1989), Simon (1987), Judd (1984), Pennycook (1989) and van Zyl (1987).

reveals the belief of many writers that the context in which English is taught is an important variable in determining the strategies to be adopted by the teacher. Social and political conditions are clearly factors to be considered. The broader implications of learning and teaching English are suggested again and again: from an account of how anti-Western feeling in the Middle East leads to Arab students adopting a purely instrumental approach to studying English<sup>2</sup>; to an analysis of the social and economic rewards that a knowledge of the language can offer a Japanese business executive.<sup>3</sup>

From articles such as these a picture of the ambivalent attitude to English in many parts of the world begins to emerge. On the one hand the language represents social prestige and a practical solution to the problems of cross-linguistic communication. But against these advantages there is also a perception of English's imperialist heritage. Under the aegis of the British Empire the language had spread rapidly; to-day American imperialism - cultural, commercial, political - sustains the process.

Yet, according to Sandra Lee McKay (1989), not enough attention has been paid by researchers to this vitally important aspect of English language teaching. Her paper is a plea for just that: greater social and political awareness on the part of English teachers.

A perception of the socio-political ramifications of English has been growing in South Africa in recent years, however. In a frequently quoted paper delivered to the English Academy of Southern Africa, Njabulo Ndebele (1987) suggests that the teaching of English and the perpetuation of Western imperialist interests are far from unrelated. His

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1 See El-Sayed, A.M. (1988); and Merghelani, A.R.A. and Yassin, M.A.F. (1983).

<sup>3</sup> See San Antonio, P.M. (1987).

paper was partly in response to Guy Butler's address to the Academy a year earlier, in which he had celebrated the growing appreciation of English in South Africa. Butler had urged (white) English-speaking South Africans to assist in the spread of their mother-tongue by teaching it, and so providing "good models of spoken and written English" (Butler 1985:173). This, he suggested, would be an altruistic and patriotic act: "The English pose no political threat to anyone. Their language, is wanted and needed by all" (Butler 1985:165).

Butler's views on the future of the English language in South Africa seem, to Ndebele, politically naive. Far from being a neutral language, as Butler suggests, English cannot escape its imperial heritage:

Indeed, the history of the spread of the English language throughout the world is inseparable from the history of the spread of English and American imperialisms. This fact is important when we consider the place of English in formerly colonised multi-lingual societies. The imposition of English effectively tied these societies to a world imperialist culture which was to impose, almost permanently, severe limitations on those countries' ability to make independent linguistic choices at the moment of independence (Ndebele 1987:3).

In Butler's call on mother-tongue speakers to uphold standards, Ndebele sees the perpetuation of this linguistic and political hegemony. Faced with the spread of English and the consequent proliferation of 'non-standard' varieties, "metropolitan English speaking policy makers" attempt

to weave a web of containment around this spontaneous, world-wide transformation of the English language so that English can continue to serve various kinds of metropolitan interests; interests which may have very little to do with the concerns of those who, out of specific needs arising from their own forms of social interaction, have to fashion a new language for themselves (Ndebele 1987:2-3).



This kind of "prescriptive open-mindedness" (Ndebele 1987:4) is, he believes, symptomatic of South African political life on a more general level.

Having looked at the issue from a "broad social perspective", Ndebele maintains, one must see that English "cannot be considered an innocent language" (Ndebele 1987:11).

In his concluding remarks Ndebele makes reference to a functional approach to language teaching. His observations are worth noting here for the light that they throw on my earlier observations on the shortcomings of a CLT approach. Describing an SATV language instruction programme designed to teach African languages to whites, Ndebele notes how the contexts in which the language is presented to the learners mirrors the inequalities of South African daily life:

The situations are often ones which involve employer (white)/employee (black) relations. Remarkable about the segments is the functional context of language use. Clearly, the lessons are not designed to promote meaningful communication between humans; rather, they are designed to enable whites to make better use of their black workers (Ndebele 1987:13).

This approach, he says, "typifies the context of learning that characterises the traditional teaching of English to Africans", and adds:

What may need to be emphasized is that if the recognition that English belongs to all who use it is more than academic, then in multi-cultural societies, English will have to be taught in such a way that the learners are made to recognize themselves through the learning context employed, not as second-class learners of a foreign culture, or as units of labour that have to be tuned to work better, but as self-respecting citizens of the world. The idea of teaching English through the exposure of second language learners to English culture should be abandoned. If English belongs to all, then it will naturally assume the cultural colour of its respective users (Ndebele 1987:13-14).

Ndebele's observations return us to a consideration of the limitations of a communicative approach that stresses the functions and notions of language in society. While attempting to present language and social interaction as they normally occur - and so prepare the learner for real language use - the teacher runs the risk of legitimising and perpetuating inequalities such as those mentioned by Ndebele.

The tension between 'what is' and 'what should be' is taken up by Bronwyn Norton Peirce in a persuasive and incisive paper.

Norton Peirce takes it as axiomatic that "teaching is a political act" (Norton Peirce 1989:402), especially when so controversial a subject as English is involved. Furthermore, she insists, the ambivalent status of English in the modern world is more than a matter of passing academic interest:

This debate is important for teachers of English internationally: If we are implicated in producing and perpetuating inequalities in the communities in which we teach, we are accountable for our actions (Norton Peirce 1989:402).

For Norton Peirce the political ramifications of English are complex and deep-seated. It is not simply its heritage as a colonial language that makes it such a bone of contention. To view the matter in this way would be to imply that the language itself is neutral, and that it is the context in which it is being taught that makes it problematic. Rather, she maintains, there are ideological meanings embedded within the language itself which render any claim to neutrality meaningless.

In making this claim, Norton Peirce says she is drawing on a post-structuralist theory of language, according to which discourses are viewed as

the complexes of signs and practices that organize social existence and social reproduction. In this view, a discourse delimits the range of possible practices under its authority and organizes how these practices are realized in time and space. A discourse is thus a particular way of organizing meaning-making practices (Norton Peirce 1989:404-405).

Language, as revealed in discourse, is thus implicated in our daily social and cultural practises. Discourses constrain and regulate our ability to make meaning of our lives. Within them we must find 'subject positions' for ourselves. If, however, we find ourselves unable to do so we may be driven to rebellion and attempt to contest the dominant discourse.

Viewed in this way, a language, such as English, becomes "a site of struggle over meaning, access and power" (Norton Peirce 1989:405).

To read this much significance into discourse is, of course, to add a further dimension to the view of discourse from which CLT derives its theoretical underpinnings: namely, that discourse is "a continuous stretch of...language larger than a sentence (Crystal 1980, quoted by Norton Peirce 1989: 404). And in this difference, according to Norton Peirce, lies the ultimate inadequacy of the communicative approach. For her, as for Ndebele, any account or theory of English that ignores its socio-political dimension is at best, naive; at worst, redolent of sinisterly manipulative intention. Norton Peirce argues that

the teaching of English for communicative competence is in itself inadequate as a language-teaching goal if English teachers are interested in exploring how language shapes the subjectivities of their students and how it is implicated in power and dominance (Norton Peirce 1989:406).

Important as it is that the learner is acquainted with the

language's 'rules of use', it is equally important that s/he adopt a critical, questioning attitude to those very rules:

If we teach students to use the English language in a way consistent with appropriate usage at a particular time and place, we may run the risk of limiting our students' perceptions of how English can be used in society. We may indeed be implicated in perpetuating inequalities in society (Norton Peirce 1989:407).

But, Norton Peirce goes on to say, the teacher does have another option: "to expose these inequalities and, more important, help students explore alternative possibilities for themselves and their societies". Such an option envisages an actively partisan role for the language teacher, one through which s/he deliberately attempts to shape the socio-political context of the language. S/he adopts, in Norton Peirce's phrase, "a pedagogy of possibility" (Norton Peirce 1989:407). Having accepted that neither teaching nor language can ever be politically neutral activities, the teacher seeks to 'empower' language learners by encouraging a critical questioning of the language. In such a scenario both teachers and learners cease to be the passive pawns of the language; rather, they are empowered to resist its hegemony, and to set up their own 'counter discourses'.

The remainder of Norton Peirce's paper is devoted to an application of these theoretical insights to the situation in South Africa, where, as Ndebele's paper has already shown, English teaching is far from being a neutral activity. 'People's English', Norton Peirce now suggests, provides a concrete means to implementing just such a 'pedagogy of possibility'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere Norton Peirce has compared the DET syllabus for English with the proposals made by the People's English Commission. Her observations echo the contrast between language as it is and as it should be used, noted in the foregoing discussion: "In essence, while the DET syllabus designers concentrate on what language competence they consider

Norton Peirce's argument has led us to People's English, the real focus of this study, and at the same time provided us with its raison d'être. People's English is a bold attempt to take on and resolve that ambivalence towards English which has often resulted in a loss of confidence in ESL teaching. It aims at giving learners more control over the language - and, by implication, over their lives - rather than making them its uncritical, passive pawns. Exactly how and with what success this is being done will be considered in the chapters that follow.

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'appropriate' given the status quo in South Africa, the People's English Commission concentrates on what might be desirable in a new South Africa" (Norton Peirce 1990b:5). In South Africa critical linguistics has played a significant role in drawing attention to the ideological nature of language. See, for example, Janks (1990a) and McKenzie (1987). Both writers have pointed to People's English as an approach that will empower learners through demystifying the language.



## CHAPTER TWO

### THE THEORY:

#### PEOPLE'S ENGLISH AND PEOPLE'S EDUCATION

It is always easier to coin a slogan than to give it serious content and direction (Levin 1991:125).

The dissatisfaction and frustration felt by black South Africans at the inequalities of the education system reached a climax in the Soweto riots of 1976. Significantly, the major ostensible grievance centred on the question of language: students objected to the burden that being taught through the medium of both official languages placed both on themselves and on their already hard-pressed teachers. They clearly indicated their rejection of Afrikaans and preference for English, as the only medium of instruction.<sup>1</sup>

1976 witnessed the beginning of an era of disrupted schooling marked by continual unrest, class boycotts and further state repression. By 1985 black education was in total disarray: in many places it had ceased to function entirely.

It was in this context that a national conference was called by the Soweto Parents Crisis Committee (SPCC) at the end of 1985 in an attempt to address the continuing crisis. The first National Consultative Conference (NCC) was held at

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<sup>1</sup> It is debateable whether the students' protests were directed against Afrikaans specifically (see, for example, Norton Peirce 1989:409), or more generally against the whole unworkable 50:50 system which stipulated that all subjects not taught in the mother-tongue should be divided equally between English and Afrikaans as media of instruction (see, for example, A survey of language policies in education in South Africa: 1948-1989 (1990) in Towards a language policy for post-apartheid South Africa).

the University of the Witwatersrand in December 1985, with the theme of "People's Education for People's Power". The slogan was chosen deliberately as a counter to the "Liberation now, education later" philosophy that had motivated student protest until then, and it was here that the idea of an alternative to the despised Bantu Education took root. Hitherto opposition to state education had usually been expressed in negative terms: delegates to the conference felt that the time had arrived to offer a viable option rather than to continue to dwell on the, by now, self-evident, inadequacies of the system. The concept of a 'People's Education' that has since developed involves a radical re-thinking of some fundamental conceptions of education. It was, the delegates felt, no longer enough for black students to want the same opportunities and access to facilities as their white peers: White education was itself seen as tragically flawed and, in its own way, as disadvantaging and limiting as anything that Bantu Education had to offer.

What then does People's Education involve? What do its proponents mean by the term, and how would they seek to give concrete expression to it?

The answers to these questions are by no means clear-cut, which may account for the scepticism often expressed by teachers when first exposed to the idea of People's Education. This was succinctly expressed in a letter I received in response to my enquiries into the nature and development of People's English. The editor of Learning Press, after explaining that her editorial philosophy is to provide a supplement, rather than an alternative to the inadequate education currently given to black school-children in South Africa, goes on to express the reservations that she and others have about 'popular' or 'people's education'. She writes:

When talking to a black headmaster last week about people's education, he said to us, when someone can

provide him with a syllabus and a curriculum, he will perhaps be in a position to evaluate it. No-one has been able to do that. Perhaps you will be able when you have completed your thesis. It seems to be such a woolly concept and I don't think it has been adequately conceptualised by its proponents (Leon 1991 pers. comm.)

But uncertainty of this kind is not only to be found amongst the 'uninitiated': the absence of any clear definition or of analytical rigor in conceptualising it has been noted by some of the foremost supporters of People's Education. For example, Ann Browne of the English Resource Unit, having mentioned that the organisation's approach, aims and principles "would be that of People's Education broadly", goes on to point out that the concept still lacks precise definition. This, she feels is attributable to its historical context:

People's Education came out of struggle, and is an oppositional dialogue. The challenge of People's Education in the current context is to translate that dialogue into something far more concrete - People's Education has to start delivering this alternative education that it has been sloganeering about for so many years. Apartheid education has been rejected but we need something to put in its place. Clearly this is no easy task, especially when one considers the range of different understandings that exist about what this education is. Participation is a key factor and how this participation of "the people" will happen is a difficult question (Browne 1991 pers. comm.).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See also Levin (1991:125). A further complication is that, for some, People's Education is synonymous with 'alternative' or 'popular' education (e.g. see Alexander 1990:62). Others, however, clearly distinguish between them. The writer of a pamphlet published by the Education Policy Unit at the University of the Witwatersrand distinguishes between the three terms, and asserts that "people's education is different from alternative education because alternative education usually works within the system while people's education strives to change the system" and that "People's education is a broad concept which includes the idea of popular education" (Alternative, Popular and People's Education 1989:3).



In the light of this, attempting any such definitive statement would, certainly at this stage, be premature. We might however begin to unravel some of the 'wool' in the concept if we begin by examining what some of the proponents of People's Education have said about it.

The Resolutions of the First National Consultative Conference in December 1985 devote two sections to the topic of People's Education. Having indicated its total rejection of apartheid education, conference resolved "to actively strive for people's education as the new form of education for all sections of our people". People's Education they defined as education that

(i) enables the oppressed to understand the evils of the apartheid system and prepares them for participation in a nonracial democratic system

(ii) eliminates illiteracy, ignorance and the exploitation of one person by another

(iii) eliminates capitalist norms of competition, individualism and stunted intellectual development, and replaces it with one that encourages collective input and active participation by all, as well as stimulating critical thinking and analysis

(iv) equips and trains all sectors of our people to participate actively and creatively in the struggle to attain people's power in order to establish a nonracial democratic South Africa

(v) allows students, parents, teachers and workers to be mobilized into appropriate organizational structures which enable them to participate actively in the initiation and management of people's education in all its forms

(v) enables workers to resist exploitation and oppression at their workplace.

(Section 9 "On People's Education I", "Resolutions from the First National Education Consultative Conference". Reproduced in Nkomo 1990:425.)

The resolutions in this section amount to a statement of educational and political principles, as well as being an

indication of the benefits that the delegates anticipated would follow from People's Education. The concerns range from the immediately relevant to the broadly ideological, reflecting the conference's earlier stated belief that "the struggle for a unitary, nonracial democratic education is an integral part of the struggle for a unitary, nonracial and democratic society, free from oppression and exploitation"

(Section 5(ii) "On Student Organization" in the Resolutions. See Nkomo 1990:423). Or as Glenda Kruss puts it:

"People's Education for People's Power" is . . . at the same time an educational strategy and a political strategy. Through People's Education, people will be mobilised and organised towards the goal of a non-racial democratic South Africa; but at the same time through People's Education, people are beginning to develop a future education system (Kruss 1988:19).

Uniting all the resolutions is a vision of an education system inspired, formulated, organised and implemented at grass-roots level, in which 'the people' will be able to gain control of their lives and be 'empowered' through the medium of education. The ideals of People's Education and the methods by which they will be implemented are radically democratic and communal - in contrast to what were perceived to be the undesirable authoritarianism and individualism of the existing order. But, although People's Education is explicitly linked to a particular socio-ideological vision, great value is attached to critical and creative thinking.

The second section on People's Education deals with the urgent need to implement programmes to promote People's Education. The delegates express their belief that

(i) all student-teacher-parent and community-based organizations must work vigorously and energetically to promote people's education

(ii) all programs must enhance the organizations of all sections of our people, wherever they may be

(iii) the programs must encourage critical and creative thinking and working methods

(iv) the program must promote the correct [sic] values of democracy, nonracialism, collective work, and active participation.

And consequently resolve

(i) that the recommendations of the commission on people's education be referred to the incoming committee for use as a guideline for the formulation of programs to promote people's education at all levels

(ii) that all local, regional and national structures mobilize the necessary human and material resources in the first instance from within the communities and regions and then from other sources.

(Section 10 "On People's Education II", "Resolutions from the First National Education Consultative Conference". Reproduced in Nkomo 1990:425-426.)

In March 1986 the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) was formed. At the same time the second National Consultative Conference was held in Durban. Here the delegates were able to re-affirm their commitment to the resolutions of the first conference, and urge "[all] progressive teachers, parent and student organizations to take immediate and urgent steps to implement the ... recommendations" (Section 9 "On Implementation of People's Education", "Resolutions from the Second National Education Consultative Conference". Reproduced in Nkomo 1990: 432-433.).

These then are the parameters of People's Education as they were formulated at the first two National Consultative Conferences. They do not, however, provide a final answer to the question, 'What is People's Education?', being little more than outlines of vague ideals, a specific application of the rhetoric commonly associated with the broader political struggle. Despite the delegates' reiterated sense of the

urgency of overcoming the educational crisis, the resolutions they formulated offer little indication of how People's Education could or would find concrete expression. The conditions of state repression<sup>3</sup> in the period before and subsequent to the second conference were perhaps the major inhibiting factor in this respect. Nor, for that matter, should the vagueness of the resolutions necessarily be seen as a weakness. Kruss, for example, considers that they "provide a basis for action, a set of guiding principles" and asserts that they "can and have been interpreted in a variety of ways and have been shaped by subsequent conditions" (Kruss 1988:15)<sup>4</sup>

In order to flesh out these bare bones it is necessary to examine the rhetorical and analytical pronouncements of some of the proponents of People's Education at that time.

Father Smongaliso Mkatshwa, delivering the keynote address at the first National Consultative Conference, describes People's Education as "a devastating indictment on Apartheid slave education". But, in keeping with the general tone of the conference, he goes on to emphasise its positive aspects. By Alternative or People's Education, he says

we mean one which prepares people for total human liberation; one which helps people to be creative, to develop a critical mind, to help people to analyse; one that prepares people for full participation in all social, political or cultural spheres of society. (People's Education: A collection of articles: 11)

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<sup>3</sup> For a more detailed account of these events, see Christie (1991).

<sup>4</sup> Kruss does, however, go on to say "that People's Education, at least initially, was easier to define in terms of what it is not, than in terms of what it is" [emphasis hers] (Kruss 1988: 17). She nonetheless provides a very useful summary of the key features of People's Education, as formulated at the two conferences, as well as a critical analysis of some of their implications (See Kruss 1988:Section 2).



His words capture the essence of the conference's resolutions; and his vision of a holistic education is echoed in Zwelakhe Sisulu's keynote address at the second National Consultative Conference. Like Mkatshwa he stresses that People's Education is both a rejection of and an alternative to the existing system:

What do we mean when we say we want people's education? We are agreed that we don't want Bantu Education but we must be clear about what we want in its place. We must also be clear as to how we are going to achieve this.

We are no longer demanding the same education as whites, since this is education for domination. People's education means education at the service of the people as a whole, education that liberates, education that puts people in command of their lives (People's Education: A collection of articles: 37).

Few educationalists would find anything to disagree with, or even be surprised by, in these generalisations. But, as Sisulu makes clear, the crisis in education is part of the national crisis: "[A]partheid education cannot be separated from apartheid in general". The corollary of this follows: "The struggle for people's education can only be finally won when we have won the struggle for people's power". And later, he again links the ideals of People's Education with those of the national struggle:

The demand for free, democratic people's education we have said, is part of, indeed, inextricably tied, to the struggle for a free, democratic, people's South Africa. The struggle against apartheid education is not a question for students and teachers alone. A conference like this demonstrates the concern of the entire community with the problem of gutter education (People's Education: A collection of articles: 37).

Community involvement and participation in the political struggle are to be realised in concrete, political ways. People's Education does not only involve principles of education: it encompasses their practical implementation as

well. At the first National Consultative Conference Lulu Johnson had predicted that "people's power" would make itself felt within the very structures of apartheid, and eventually take over:

People will take a degree of control of schools. For example, they will decide when the schools, colleges and universities will start and finish, how much college, university and school fees should be and so on. In this process we are breaking the shackles of oppression (People's Education: A Collection of Articles: 17).

In his speech Sisulu suggests how this process might take place: via democratic SRCs, school committees, and the inclusion of teachers in "the fold of the people". Under apartheid educational policy had been imposed upon the people; people's education, by contrast, is democratic in its organisation and implementation as well as in its ideals.

To be acceptable, every initiative must come from the people themselves, must be accountable to the people and must advance the broad mass of students, not just a select few. In effect this means taking over the schools, transforming them from institutions of oppression into zones of progress and people's power. Of course this is a long term process, a process of struggle, which can only ultimately be secured by total liberation. But we have already begun this process.

When we fight for and achieve democratic SRCs, and parents committees, we are starting to realise our demands that the People Shall Govern and that the Doors of Learning and Culture Shall be Opened (People's Education: A collection of articles: 36-37).

Ihron Rensburg, writing shortly after Sisulu's address, also emphasises the organisational aspect of People's Education, but sees it from a slightly different perspective. Schools and other educational institutions provide a convenient base from which activists can operate. He says: "Pupils can only organise and become a force for change to

combine with other such forces if they are at school"  
(People's Education: A collection of articles: 44).

Kruss summarises these two perspectives on organisation in this way: "People's Education is at the same time a means of organising people and, in turn, its success depends on the organisation of students, teachers and parents which will enable them to take control over education" (Kruss 1988:13).

Rensburg also considers how the ideals of People's Education can be translated into practice through appropriate programmes, courses and materials. The process, he warns, "will not be completed overnight, and it will be constantly changing and dynamic". He maintains: "The next two months [Rensburg's article was published in May 1986] will give us the embryo, but real people's education is a process rather than a rigid written doctrine" (People's Education: A collection of articles: 44-45).<sup>5</sup>

'Process' is clearly a key word in an understanding of People's Education. This attribute, in fact, does much to explain the woolliness of the concept as a whole. Thus Kruss argues that "People's Education is a process [her emphasis] which could lay the foundations for a future education system, while transforming present educational institutions" (Kruss 1988:4). Yet it would seem that the matter goes well beyond this. To say that People's Education is dynamic, flexible and constantly changing is not merely to indicate that the concept has not yet been fully formulated or that the conditions for its implementation are not ripe. Such characteristics seem, rather, to point to the essence of People's Education, to be

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<sup>5</sup> Another noteworthy aspect of Rensburg's article is his insistence that People's Education "is not a blue print for African schools alone" (People's Education: A collection of articles: 48). The article by Cynthia Kros is also worth noting in this respect: she looks at People's Education from the perspective of 'white education', suggesting that it can do much to counter the "deep passivity" fostered by white schooling (People's Education: A collection of articles: 68).

integral and definitive aspects of it. Its very 'fuzziness' is an indication that it is being true to its stated mission: to adapt constantly to the changing needs of the people it serves, to be part of the ongoing process of consultation and negotiation, in the political and educational struggle. Even in 1990 Nick Taylor is able to assert of the 1985 resolutions that

[m]uch work still needs to be done on giving more specific content to these ideas. If the work is not carried through to the grassroots level by means of vigorous debate, then the educational policies of the future cannot reflect the basic needs and demands of the people (Taylor 1990:5).

In her examination of the concept of People's Education, Kruss, in fact, devotes a section to the 'process' whereby it has and is being developed, implemented and contested. She lists a number of important debates which have developed among supporters of People's Education: some of these have already emerged in the comments of the proponents already quoted.

One of these is the issue of control over education, already touched upon in the quotations from Sisulu and Johnson. Initially there was great optimism about the extent to which communities could take over the running of schools in the way that Lulu Johnson had called for. The National Education Crisis Committee had called on the state to hand over the control and management of schools to the community which, it believed, was in a better position than the Department of Education and Training to provide effective education. The state did not respond to the call, however, and the NECC eventually had to abandon its ideal of People's Education in community-controlled schools. Increased repression by the government, acting under the state of emergency, made any such hopes even more remote. In the light of this the original idea of 'control over the schools' had to be reassessed. Kruss, writing in 1988, explains: "Proponents of People's Education have subsequently tended to concentrate



on developing more limited ways of changing education in the present and, through this, to lay the basis for a national education system in a post-apartheid South Africa. Two of the options that she mentions are: setting up community-based private schools to implement People's Education and an Academy to train headmasters [sic], administrators and teachers within a People's Education approach (Kruss 1988:23-24).

An equally important aspect of People's Education as process is the development of alternative curricula. The need for these had been recognised in the resolutions of the second National Consultative Conference. In due course People's Education Commissions were set up to look into the matter.

Once again, as Kruss points out, there was some uncertainty as to the scope of the task. Many, working from the assumption that communities would take control of schools, believed that they were meant to produce a new curriculum for all subjects. According to Kruss, however, most workers in the field had, at the time of her writing, set themselves "more limited tasks", concentrating on material for People's English, History and Mathematics. Such material could be used either within or outside the existing education system.

Kruss mentions the principles according to which the subject commissions were working:

People's Education in schools would be aimed at students of all races. An important stress is that it would not merely be political education or propaganda. Rather, it is an application of the principles of People's Education to the content of each subject, and importantly, the method by which it is taught (Kruss 1988:25).

She also draws attention to the 'principle of consultation'. The writers of material did not wish to work in isolation but to test their drafts and invite feedback from students, teachers and the community at large. This, however,

proved difficult in practice, largely because of state harassment and its attempts to prevent the use of People's Education material in schools. These circumstances, perhaps, also account for the lack of rigour, direction or thoroughness that many critics have considered to be a weakness in much of the material produced (see Kruss 1988:28).

The resolutions adopted by the two consultative conferences targeted teachers as one of the groups who could "participate actively in the initiation and management of People's Education in all its forms" (Section 9, "Resolutions from the First National Education Consultative Conference". In Nkomo 1990:425). But Kruss points to some of the difficulties of involving teachers in the processes of People's Education. However well-intentioned, many teachers are hampered by fears about job security, their own limited (perceived or real) training and the psychological difficulty in having to adjust to more critical, open-ended and potentially threatening methods of teaching.

Attempts have been made to resolve this impasse by developing training programmes and building 'progressive teachers' organisations', as well as forming alliances with existing professional organisations. The latter move evoked some controversy as organisations such as the African Teachers Association of South Africa (ATASA) and the Cape Teachers Professional Association (CTPA) were regarded by many as politically conservative. Students and teachers opposed a move which seemed to grant them undue recognition, and the organisations were themselves forced to re-examine their own political stance. Kruss, however, sees such manoeuvring as yet another aspect of People's Education in process: these are "conflicting interests and demands which will shape the outcome [of People's Education]" (Kruss 1988:31).

People's Education has developed mainly through national co-ordination by the NECC. This appears to have been by

default. According to Kruss,

People's Education was initially intended to be a concept broad enough to include all opposition groupings to work around the crisis in education. However it has predominantly been developed and promoted by the NECC, which has entered into a particular set of alliances (Kruss 1988:32).

These alliances include the teachers organisations already mentioned, student organisations, the United Democratic Front and the Congress of South African Trade Unions.<sup>4</sup> Through united action the NECC was able to popularise People's Education and involve others in its processes. Action of this kind gave concrete expression to the principle that the struggle for an alternative education is part of the broader struggle for a non-racial democratic South Africa. As Kruss puts it:

The NECC sees itself as primarily an educational organisation which will work together with political organisation, sharing their goals. It is argued that the NECC is a specialised educational organisation of the people, the embryo for a future educational system (Kruss 1988:33).

In concluding her discussion of the process of People's Education Kruss shows that its proponents have also been

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<sup>4</sup> The sectarian biases of the proponents of People's Education has evoked some criticism. Neville Alexander, after warning against the sloganeering and "the hopelessly myopic, uninformed naivete" that all too often characterizes thinking about alternative education, complains about the way in which People's Education is often high-jacked for narrowly sectarian, party-political purposes. While acknowledging the important role played by the NECC in developing strategies for alternative education, he indicates in no uncertain terms his reluctance to grant it the right to pontificate on the subject: "To believe that only those groups who pay allegiance or genuflect to the NECC are 'kosher' is to negate a priori everything we say about so-called democracy" (Alexander 1990:62). Alexander's comments provide some balance to other accounts (such as Kruss's) which lay great emphasis on the part played by the NECC and allied organisations.

active in areas outside the schools. One of these is the universities. Here a commitment to People's Education can take a number of forms. Universities are encouraged to re-examine the concept of academic freedom, seeing it in closer relation to social life and freedom. Areas in which they would need to consider their practice include: accountability within the university itself and beyond it, to the broader community; implementing People's Education within the universities themselves and giving support to its development in schools.

More significant, perhaps, is the role of People's Education in the community and the workplace. The conference resolutions made it clear that People's Education was not intended for students at formal institutions of education only. It was aimed at the education of all in the community, in particular the workers. One of the resolutions defines People's Education as one that "enables workers to resist exploitation and oppression at their workplace" (Section 9, "Resolutions from the First National Education Consultative Conference". In Nkomo 1990:425). In the process of People's Education being developed the workers have come to occupy a privileged position. A COSATU pamphlet "June 16 and the Working Class" (published in November 1986) baldly asserts that "People's Education involves the working class". The writer goes on to suggest that 'alternate education' is "a very important area where workers and youth can unite", having "common interests in the struggle over education". Most dramatically it is claimed that "[i]t is the working class who will benefit most from alternate education" (In People's Education: A Collection of articles: 138-139). On other occasions COSATU has reiterated its commitment to the process of People's Education (see Kruss 1988:38). Representatives have expressed their belief that People's Education, unlike the existing system of education in South Africa, aims to involve the workers by giving them a voice in the distribution of educational resources and in deciding what kind of



education should be provided.

Another, related, aspect of People's Education is literacy training. Giving people basic literacy skills, it is argued, will put them in a position to overcome many of the disadvantages with which they live: it will empower them, help them gain control over their own lives. A number of projects have grown up with aims such as these in mind, operating on the principles of People's Education. Equally important, People's Education has provided many erstwhile autonomous organisations with a framework within which to articulate common goals and methods, and to develop them further in the light of shared insights and discoveries. As Kruss comments:

Many educational institutions and organisations have been working for years, using principles and theoretical understandings of education similar to those embodied in People's Education, but in isolation. The rallying call of People's Education for People's Power, with the stress on organisation and unity, makes the difference. (Kruss 1988:40)

The NECC held a third Consultative Conference in September 1987, in spite of the state-imposed restrictions that made it virtually impossible for it to operate. Here it restated a commitment to "non-racial, democratic and People's Education as an integral part of the overall struggle for national liberation and freedom from economic exploitation" while recognising that this would be "a long and arduous process" (quoted in Christie 1991:289). The recognition was a prophetic and timely one: in February 1988 the NECC, along with a number of other liberation organisations, was banned, and work on People's Education ground to a halt. At the same time the state did all it could to regain control of the schools by setting more stringent regulations for enrolment.

The political climate eased somewhat in 1989, and although still banned, the NECC held a National Conference of the Educational Movement. Here it was decided that the NECC's activities should be separated into two distinct areas. These Christie describes as:

- \* activist work (which involved political mobilization)
- \* programme work (which involved the development of programmes and other educational work for People's Education)

(Christie 1991:292)

The former would continue to fall in the ambit of the NECC; a new group, the Education Development Trust (EDT), would devote itself to the latter. Separating the two kinds of activities, it was argued, would ensure that the programme work would continue, even in times of state repression. Thus the kind of hiatus that had occurred in the period just prior to the conference could be avoided.

A fourth National Consultative Conference was called in December 1989, in the context of a more liberal political climate. The conference's theme was: "Consolidate and advance to People's Education". After a careful and critical survey of its past activities the conference conceded that little progress had really been made in developing People's Education, either on an organisational or an educational level. Nevertheless, it reaffirmed its commitment to continuing its work in the field. The NECC also resolved to shed its 'crisis' image, and consequently changed its name to the more permanent-sounding National Education Co-ordinating Committee.

Christie lists fourteen points defining People's Education, as adopted, by the 1989 conference. It is worth reproducing them in full here since they might be seen as the

culmination of years of process, an attempt to define and encapsulate all that had gradually come to be understood by the concept of People's Education.

1. It should be education which is controlled by people [sic]. It should not be hierarchical or dictatorial.
2. It should enhance society as a whole.
3. It should serve the interests of the masses.
4. It should enhance patriotism and the self-esteem of the working-class.
5. It should be relevant to the actual needs of society and geared towards the development of skills.
6. It should use resources optimally for all people and not be run on racial lines.
7. It should discourage individualism and promote a collective outlook.
8. It should promote welfare [sic] of the people as a whole.
9. It should create a working class consciousness.
10. It should be used to fight illiteracy among the working class.
11. It should create values that will be relevant in protecting the gains of the working class.
12. It should destroy division between mental and manual labour.
13. It should provide people with skills that are useful to production.
14. It should destroy sexism in school.

(Christie 1991:295)

Repetitious and vague though many are, the points do represent an attempt to come to grips with a concept that had often had little more than rhetorical force. This initiative was further developed in July 1990 when the NECC organised a

workshop, the main aim of which was "to develop and build a common and coherent understanding of the concept of People's Education" (quoted in Christie 1991:296). As usual, a number of diverging interpretations were offered, dealing with such diverse but related issues as curriculum planning, consultation with 'the people', democratic teaching methods, and political and economic empowerment.

Two further observations may serve to round off this overview of People's Education. Although unrelated, both present a view of the concept from a slightly more distanced perspective than the chronological account, seen largely through the eyes of its proponents and practitioners, so far presented.

This chapter has examined the concept of 'People's Education' at some length, noting differences in interpretation and application among those who have used the term. What is worth observing here is the further ambiguity lying in the term 'the people'.

The phrase is found in an address given by Lebamang Sebidi at the Education for Affirmation conference in 1988, "Towards the En-fleshment of a dynamic idea: The People's Education". His speech is full of rhetorical flourishes and dramatic assertions, but lacks the kind of critical rigour that would make it informative or insightful to someone reading it outside the particular context in which it was made. The phrase 'the people' is used repeatedly, with increasing weight being attached to its significance and with increasing emotional impact: yet no attempt is made to define it or even to indicate that such a definition might be problematic. Sebidi does, in the course of his address, consider the concept of 'the people's education' in some detail in order to show how it might be "enfleshed in the concrete socio-political and economic situation the people find themselves grappling with" (Sebidi 1988:50). He does



not, however, apply the same analytical scrutiny to 'the people': rather he seems to assume tacitly that his audience shares his understanding of it.

In fact, Sebidi's own use of the term appears inconsistent and unconsidered. At times he speaks of 'the people' (using the definite article), seeming to mean some (undefined) political pressure group; at others, he refers to 'people' (no article), implying humanist values. The two uses, he seems to suggest, are linked, if not synonymous. In summing up his view of People's Education, he says:

In short, the people's education, however one may want to look at it, must be people-oriented and, therefore, by definition liberatory and democratic. In fact, one can even say that once the democratic principles underlying people's education can be respected, the rest will almost automatically fall into place. Educational aims and objectives, content, methods and evaluation, etc - all these, in order to be good and beneficial will be dependent on whether or not they are based on democratic principles. What this means, in common parlance, is this: wherever people are respected, everything is just fine. And whenever people's human dignity is trampled upon, no amount of flowery rhetoric will redeem that situation.

This is so, because at the centre of the people's education stands MAN [sic] - and not things [emphasis his] (Sebidi 1988:59).

Reduced to this level of vague triteness, People's Education - as seen by Sebidi - is everything and yet nothing at all. Certainly it does not seem to offer anything nearly as startlingly radical as his own "flowery rhetoric" would imply. If anything, his implicit sexism suggests a socially retrogressive approach, one that other accounts of People's Education would present as part of the culture of oppression that alternative systems of education seek to eradicate. Much of Sebidi's speech would not, in fact, stand the kind of critical scrutiny that is central to most conceptions of People's Education.

Sebidi's tacit assumption that the reader will share the unstated meaning that he gives to 'the people' is typical of many writers on People's Education. Christie, on the other hand, tackles the issue of who 'the people' are head-on. The term, she points out, is unclear, with the consequence that considerable debate has arisen over its interpretation (Christie 1991:283-284).

This is certainly apparent in the discussion notes prepared by the Education Policy Unit at the University of the Witwatersrand (April 1989) which break the concept of People's Education up into 'people' and 'education'. Responding to the question 'Who are the people?' the writer implies that there is no clear-cut answer. Two main conceptions do, however, emerge from the discussion, each associated with a particular political stance. A conception of 'the people' which includes "all the people of South Africa, black and white, engaged in the struggle for liberation" characterises the Charterist position. This definition recognises that there are class divisions within 'the people', but grants a special status to the working-class as "the main and leading force within 'the people's camp' ". Contrasted with this position is that adopted by the Black Consciousness movement. Here 'the people' refers to Africans only, irrespective of class (What is People's Education? 1989:4).

The writer implies, however, that the latter conception is less important in the present context since the debate about People's Education "is documented by the non-racial democratic movement" which subscribes to Charterist principles. Consequently it is the Charterist concept of 'the people' that has been most influential in the formulation and interpretation of People's Education (What is People's Education? 1989:4). This has, broadly speaking, become evident from the examination of the concept undertaken in this

study.<sup>7</sup>

From even this brief examination of the concept it should be clear that definitions of 'the people' are, ultimately, highly subjective, dependent on one's political stance. While individual users of the term may, if pressed, be able to explain what they mean by it, it is by no means certain that another speaker will have the same definition in mind, or be able to identify with the first. Perhaps Levin's discussion of the concept 'the people' comes the closest to showing the significance of the term in the context of 'People's Education'. He mentions the two traditions referred to in the EPU pamphlet, but, more significantly, suggests that the solution to the problem of definition "does not seem to be to construct an all-embracing concept, but rather to acknowledge that 'the people' are constituted in struggle through their antagonistic relation to the state". Levin suggests that such an understanding of the notion helps explain why the South African state made every attempt to repress People's Education - a philosophy which, for all its revolutionary aspects, "also contains much which is acceptable within bourgeois democratic discourse" (Levin 1991:118-120), much which the state would, otherwise, have been happy to endorse or even co-opt.

My final observations about People's Education as a concept involve seeing it within its broader educational and political contexts.

Neville Alexander, who regards the term People's Education as one of many synonyms for liberation pedagogy, insisting that it is not unique to Charterist-aligned organisations like the NECC, sets his account of its development in South Africa within an international perspective. He shows how it has its origins in radical movements which arose during the post-war period. In North

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<sup>7</sup> See pp. 22-23, above.

America and Europe the youth, women and blacks - traditionally disempowered groups - began questioning the received wisdom and authority of the establishment; liberation movements in the territories under Western colonial rule added to the undermining of the old power structures. The socio-political movements found expression in the field of education with the development of radically new conceptions of learning and education. The link between the "new pedagogies" and the broader social movements was usually made explicit: "The new pedagogies tended to be linked more or less to a critique of the orthodoxies of the received capitalist system and were, therefore, intended and perceived to be politically committed in one direction or another" (Alexander 1990:52).

From these new pedagogies Alexander singles out for special mention the work of Paulo Freire, a figure in whom the radical cross-currents of the First and Third worlds found a meeting place. What was remarkable about Freire's theory and distinguished him from other radical and liberal educationists of the time was his emphasis on praxis, the unity of theory and practice. Freire believed that reflection and learning should be acted upon; equally, action which is not preceded by cerebration is pointless. As Alexander explains it, "[e]ducation ... must help the learner(s) to objectify the world, to understand it critically and to act to change it" (Alexander 1990:55).

It was via Freirean pedagogy, Alexander goes on to say, that the concept of "alternative education" entered South Africa. In the 1970s young activists at black universities found a parallel between their situation and that against which Freire's teachings were aimed; his influence meant inevitably "the radicalisation and overt politicisation of the educational arena" (Alexander 1990:58).

To-day, some twenty years later, many literacy organisations in South Africa acknowledge their debt to



Freire's philosophy of education. These include Use, Speak, Write English (USWE), the English Literary Project (ELP) and the English Resource Centre (ERC). All three also endorse and practise the tenets of People's Education, whether explicitly or implicitly. In Never Too Old To Learn the authors in fact make the generalisation that the "progressive literacy organisations" in South Africa "have adapted methods used in other countries to fit in with the South African call for a people's education" and that an "important source of inspiration was Paulo Freire" (Never too old to learn 1991:27).<sup>9</sup>

Although the focus of my study is People's English, I have chosen to devote a considerable part of this chapter to an examination of People's Education in general. This has been necessary to provide an adequate context for a more specific analysis of People's English, to which I intend to turn now. The emphasis is also justified by the very nature of the concept itself. As David Gough points out:

...People's English is part of the broad movement of 'People's Education' where education is seen as an integral part of the struggle to liberate and transform society....Language teaching then, by implication, is also part of the struggle, and the need for the liberation and transformation of society is thus at the heart of People's English (Gough 1991:29).

In drawing attention to the relationship between People's

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<sup>9</sup> The methodologies and materials employed by some of these organisations will be analysed in the following chapter. For a statement of Freire's theories, the reader is referred to: Freire, P (1972). Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Harmondsworth: Penguin.



English and these broader movements, he is, as he indicates in his references, echoing a view expressed by Michael Gardiner. The latter believes that it "is the transformative function which People's Education for People's Power is intended to have that lies at the heart of the proposals put forward in People's English..." (Gardiner 1990a:162). Similarly, Kruss suggests that People's Education is, in practice, "an application of the principles of People's Education to the content of each subject, and importantly, the method by which it is taught" (Kruss 1988:25); and Norton Peirce states that the "struggle for People's English in South Africa must...be located within the struggle for People's Education because the proposals of the People's English Commission are informed by the resolutions of the National Education Crisis Committee" (Norton Peirce 1989:410).

An analysis of the Commission's proposals - set out in the NECC's press release on 27 November, 1986 - would seem to bear out these assertions. The press release is reproduced in full below:

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#### PEOPLE'S ENGLISH FOR PEOPLE'S POWER

A committee working under the People's Education Commission of the NECC has drafted proposals based upon the positions emerging from

- the Freedom Charter
- resolutions of the December 1985 and March 1986 Education Crisis Conferences
- the Education Charter
- the priorities of community and worker movements

These proposals aim to assist all learners to

- understand the evils of apartheid and to think and speak in non-racial, non-sexist and non-elitist ways
- determine their own destinies and to free themselves from oppression
- play a creative role in the achievement of a non-racial democratic South Africa

- use English effectively for their own purposes
- express and consider the issues and questions of their time
- transform themselves into full and active members of society
- proceed with their studies

Do you support these aims?

Do you agree with the specific proposals which follow? Do you believe that the specific proposals match the aims?

The specific proposals which follow depend upon an understanding of

### EDUCATION AS PROCESS

The term process here means exploration through language. It involves discussion and revision, and an understanding of how parts are eventually related to the whole.

Process values the contributions of all the learners and makes every member of the group responsible for the learning experience. The teacher's role is to make this possible.

The committee needs your response to these specific suggestions about method, content and language competence.

#### METHOD might include

- discussion, debate, argument, speeches
- group and pair work
- sharing and pooling of ideas
- collecting and recording community based experiences
- storytelling, readings, retelling
- participation by members of the community
- research
- dramatization, performance, song
- the actual production of newsletters, pamphlets, notices
- co-operation, not competition
- collective development, not individualistic selfishness
- thinking, not memorising

#### LANGUAGE COMPETENCE includes the ability

- to say and write what one means
- to hear what is said and what is hidden
- to defend one's point of view, to argue, to persuade
- to negotiate
- to create, to reflect, to invent
- to play, to joke, to rejoice

- to explore relationships: personal, structural, political
- to speak, read, write and listen with confidence
- to make one's voice heard
- to read print and to resist it where necessary
- to understand the relationship between language and power

#### CONTENT might be drawn from

- popular culture
- biographies and life histories
- oral literature including song
- talks by people of the community
- written literature from the whole world including translations
- written literature of our place and time
- newsletters, pamphlets, newspapers, advertisements, magazines
- public documents and statements by politicians
- public documents such as the Freedom Charter
- essays, speeches, sermons and orations
- cartoons
- radio, television and film
- material from other subjects in the curriculum
- the range of languages and dialects in South Africa

If there is broad support for these suggestions for People's English, the next stage in the process is the production of teaching/learning materials which integrate the proposals with the aims.

The committee believes that resources centres and parent-teacher-student associations are important to the development of People's Education.

#### Resources centres

These can provide

- regional meeting places for parents, teachers and students
- workshops for teachers on materials and methods
- bases for the co-operative production of appropriate teaching materials
- equipment for the production of such materials
- collections of references, resources and data

#### Parent-teacher-student associations

These associations should provide the basic structures for the development of People's Education. They support the teachers, they form the link between schools and the community and they offer students influence over their own education. Without such structures there can be no democratic

basis to People's Education.

People's English for People's Power has two major functions in the present situation.

The first is to educate the young in such a way that they can shed the effects of oppression and play their part in the organization and mobilisation of the forces against apartheid.

The second is to lay the foundations for education in a liberated South Africa.

(Reproduced from People's Education for teachers 1987:38-39.)

The overall aims of People's English are clearly a restatement of the resolutions adopted at the national consultative conferences with respect to People's Education generally, although the writers acknowledge other sources as well. The aims also centre on the ideal of a non-racial, democratic society, the antithesis of the apartheid state, in which 'the people' will enjoy a liberty tempered only by critical and responsible civic duty. Most of the aims have a broadly social focus, implying life-, rather than narrowly academic or intellectual skills. The only hint of subject specificity lies in the proposal that learners should aim to "use English effectively for their own purposes".

The proponents of People's English are not, of course, alone in envisaging that such far-reaching benefits could be derived from the study of the subject: liberal humanist apologists for English studies have often - implicitly or explicitly - justified them in terms of the moral and cultural values that they would supposedly impart to the student.

Echoing the principles of People's Education in their stated aims, the People's English Commission at the same time gives practical expression to the principles of consultation and process through the presentation of the document. This is

found in the repeated requests for feed-back and responses from readers, and in the tentativeness of 'might' in the headings of the sections on method and content.

'Process' is, in fact, presented as the philosophy informing the specific proposals that follow on from the general aims of People's English. Defined tersely - and hence somewhat ambiguously - the term appears to suggest an on-going, dynamic exploration of reality, undertaken and refined through group co-operation and consultation. These principles are then given a more concrete realisation in the list of activities suggested under 'Method', 'Language Competence' and 'Content'.

The methodology, as might be expected, lays emphasis on group work, community involvement and active, productive co-operation in the learning process.

'Language Competence' includes the skills typically associated with a functional/communicative approach to language teaching: the socio-political consciousness that distinguishes People's English from mainstream CLT is, however, implicit in all the points. The relationship between language and power, the ability to resist print, the need to make oneself heard, political relationships - all these references point towards an acknowledgement of and determination to fight against unequal power relations. To be in control of, rather than controlled by, English seems to be the aim uniting all others here.

The section on 'Content' presents what is perhaps the most radical departure from the traditional English syllabus. It proposes that teaching material be drawn from a variety of discourses. Most noteworthy are those intended for 'popular' consumption, and for that reason not usually considered worthy of attention by educators who believe that students learn a language best through exposure to the 'good' models to be



found in the great classic texts of imaginative literature. This preference for the popular is a natural development of the endorsement by People's Education of the principles of democracy, working-class culture and 'non-elitism'. Related to it is the inclusion of specifically political texts. At the same time an awareness of the special (and sometimes problematic) role played by English in South Africa is shown in the mention of "material from other subjects in the curriculum" and "the range of languages and dialects in South Africa".

The last two sections of the press release, "Resources centres" and "Parent-teacher-student associations" recall what was probably the most important aspect of People's Education at the time of its inception: organisation. Here the point that effective organisation is vital is reiterated. Through it the process of People's Education is facilitated and, even more significantly, the movement's essential nature is defined by the democratic community involvement in organisations and associations.

The document ends on the same general note as it began. It states that People's English for People's Power has two functions: the first to contribute to the struggle against apartheid; the second to prepare the way for education in a future "liberated South Africa". Together they amount to a broad strategy for the present and the future. English, having been considered as a language to be taught and learnt, is once again subsumed into the more general discourse of "the struggle".

Nevertheless, in spite of the Commission's tendency to revert to vague rhetoric, noteworthy insights into the learning and teaching of English do emerge, some of which have been touched upon in the foregoing commentary. Norton Peirce summarises these as four "alternative principles" - alternatives, that is, to the mainstream CLT that she regards

as inadequate to the task of language teaching (Norton Peirce 1989:411-413).

She sees the first principle as involving a "recognition of the political nature of language". Implicit in the aims of People's English, she maintains, "is the view that language, and English in particular, is not a neutral practice. It plays a constitutive role in determining how people think, speak, and act." Thus, redressing the imbalances in South African society requires language teaching practices that do not simply reinforce the norms of 'accepted' behaviour, but actively resist them. This point leads to the second "alternative principle": "a reconceptualization of the meaning of language competence". It is "redefined to include an understanding of language as socially and historically constructed, but at the same time open to dispute".

The third alternative principle that Norton Peirce generalises from the Commission's proposals involves "an understanding of language education as process". She points out that an emphasis on process in language learning is not confined to People's English but has received considerable attention in the literature on ESL recently. Nevertheless, she believes that the emphasis on process is especially significant in the South African context, where "product-oriented teaching and learning receive an inordinate amount of attention in schools".

The last alternative principle is "the importance of consultation in the language learning and teaching process". This, in Norton Peirce's opinion, is clear indication that the People's English Commission was working "within the tradition of consultation that characterizes much of the literature and debate over People's Education". As with the other alternative principles, a stark contrast is presented to the current situation in South African education.

A different perspective on pronouncements on People's English - those in the press release and others expressed elsewhere - might be gained by seeing them as falling into three broad categories, following demarcations not unlike Norton Peirce's alternative principles.

A large number of the Commission's proposals involve the pedagogy of English. The sub-sections on method and content clearly fall into this category. General principles (class participation, collaboration, relevance, accessibility, etc) and specific techniques or materials (group work, newspapers, oral literature, etc) are addressed. Similarly, in a paper which has also often been interpreted as an authoritative statement of the principles and practices of People's English,<sup>9</sup> Michael Gardiner elaborates on some aspects of teaching English. Referring particularly to the study of literary texts, he suggests that a "range of approaches" should be employed "so that learners are not subject to the limitations that a single, dominant method imposes". He also offers some insight into the benefits to be gained from actively involving students in the learning process, allowing them to be discoverers and creators of their own meaning rather than merely passive recipients of information:

The importance of such a climate of critical and interpretative responsibility must be stressed. The purpose is to enable people to develop confidence in the formation of conclusions and opinions. Far from imprisoning people within the limitations of their own resources, this process allows them to encounter ideas and arguments as enquirers rather than as victims. Received wisdom is not discarded by such an approach. But the sacrosanct is open to scrutiny and questioning. Most important is the sense in the learners that the text and its provenance are to be explored in terms of what the learners (and the teacher if there is one) can bring to that enquiry. Misconceptions - so-called - are bound to occur, but they are likely to have more meaning than external,

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Kruss's exposition of People's English is based almost exclusively on the NECC Press Release and Gardiner's paper (See Kruss 1988:26-28).

authoritative opinion (Gardiner 1990a:163-164).

Other discussion of People's English centres on the function of English within South African society. This is implied in the stated aims of People's English and the Commission's conception of language competence. Dawn Norton captures the essence of the matter when she suggests that English will be guaranteed a position in a future South Africa only if it is "an English which is appropriated - by the people - for the people". Otherwise it will remain "in the hands of an elite". She goes on to say:

People's English could be an empowering English - Speakers could appropriate the language (be it vocabulary or grammar) for their own advantage - to disagree, to argue, to encourage, etc. The language does not necessarily have to be used to serve the upper classes (e.g. political expressions - people power, ANC, SOSCC, ELP). This will be created by people on the ground and not by language policy makers.... People's English could start to challenge the arguments of elitism and cultural superiority which have been so allied with colonial English (Norton 1990:30).<sup>10</sup>

The third category concerns the language itself. Purely linguistic matters are touched upon only briefly in the press release, but reference to "the range of languages and dialects in South Africa" in the last item under "Content" points to a debate that has come to the fore in current language policy and planning. Concern over the social implications of

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<sup>10</sup> Similar views are found throughout the literature on People's English. See, for example, Gardiner who believes that the entire community has a stake in People's English, not only the school-going youth (Gardiner 1990a:159); and Kruss, according to whom the Commission's proposals focus "on the transformative function that English could play, its ability to empower students and teachers, and indeed the entire community, for it would not be solely school-based" (Kruss 1988:26).



traditional (and value-laden) distinctions between the 'standard' and 'non-standard' varieties of English is not new, either in South Africa or internationally. Political developments and a related interest in the role of English in a future South African society have, however, lent the debate a new urgency.<sup>11</sup> For the proponents of People's English especially, the debate has a direct bearing on the principle of English being a language 'of the people'. For some, in fact, the term People's English is virtually synonymous with an Africanised variety of English - or at least an English that is open to the possibility of indigenisation. This is what McKenzie seems to imply when he anticipates that English will function as a lingua franca in a future South Africa, but hastens to add: "It...does not mean that the English which will be spoken and taught will necessarily be the English of to-days's English speaking South Africans.... a substantially new English, a People's English, might emerge in South Africa" (McKenzie 1987:228). Similarly, in Norton's view, "English as we know it will probably evolve into an Africanised English" (Norton 1990:30). Both commentators refer to Ndebele's now famous assertion that "South African English must be open to the possibility of its becoming a new language" (Ndebele 1987:13).

Norton Peirce, on the other hand, expressly refutes this interpretation of People's English. For her the concept is ideological rather than linguistic, and the status of 'standard' English is not being called into question. She states:

It is clear that the proponents of People's English do not view it as one of the "New Englishes"

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<sup>11</sup> This was certainly apparent in the papers presented at the ANC Language Workshop held in Harare in 1990. Having stated their reservations or ambivalent feelings at the prospect of English continuing to occupy a favoured status in a post-apartheid South Africa, many speakers went on to question the dominance of 'standard' English over other, non-standard varieties. See, for example Schoon (1990) and Cronin (1990).



such as Indian English, Nigerian English, or Singaporean English (Kachru, 1986, p. 121). People's English is not distinguished syntactically, semantically, or phonetically from the spectrum of English usage currently found in South Africa. Thus, it does not operate within a sociolinguistic frame of reference. If it did, it might have been referred to as South African English or Azanian English. The intention, however, is not to distinguish People's English from British English or American English, but People's English from Apartheid English.

The issues at stake here are not the linguistic features of English spoken in South Africa, but the central political issues of how English is to be taught in the schools; who has access to the language; how English is implicated in the power relations dominant in South Africa; and the effect of English on the way speakers of the language perceive themselves, their society, and the possibilities for change in that society. Thus, in South Africa, where language is an ongoing site of struggle, People's English is best understood as a counterdiscourse to the dominant discourse in which the English language is implicated in the current power relations in the country (Norton Peirce 1989: 113-414).

She emphatically reiterates this view elsewhere:

To interpret People's English as a dialect of international English would do the movement a gross injustice; People's English is not only a language, it is a struggle to appropriate English in the interests of democracy in South Africa. Thus the naming of People's English is a political act because it represents a challenge to the current status of English in South Africa, in which control of the language, access to the language, and teaching of the language, are entrenched within apartheid structures (Norton Peirce 1990a:108).

At first glance, Norton Peirce's ideological distinction between People's English and Apartheid English appears to be similar to the English / ESL dichotomy expressed by Gardiner and Young. According to Gardiner: "In South Africa to-day, 'English' is for whites and ESL is for blacks." Consequently,

he insists,

It is very urgent that we move away from such linguistic racialism in our thinking about language in a future South Africa. If standard English is to be the official language, or the means of assisting the process of national unity, or as the means of communication in the future society, let it be South African English for us all (Gardiner 1990b:44).

In the same vein Young invites us "to consider how socially and politically divisive it is to continue using the ESL label". He asks:

Has the time not come for us to look towards what we can all find in common in our teaching, learning and use of English? Instead of English and ESL, might we not simply all learn English as English, allowing it, in the process, to become a rich, natural South African English which tolerates all the spoken varieties used by 30 million inhabitants of this country? At the same time, one agreed written standard would need to be used to maintain maximum intelligibility (Young 1988:8).

However, in an article entitled "English, difference and democracy in South Africa", Norton Peirce rejects the logic of their argument. She maintains that the reluctance to name the differences between English L1 and ESL "could exacerbate rather than alleviate inequalities in a post-apartheid system". In practice, first language speakers would be in a better position to acquire standard English, which both Gardiner and Young continue to uphold as the goal for learners of the language. This would, in turn, place them at an advantage as far as access to employment and education is concerned. Thus, the inequalities practised under apartheid would be perpetuated in a new guise. Democracy, Norton Peirce maintains, would be best served by acknowledging the unequal linguistic and social backgrounds of L1 and ESL speakers. Such an approach would, moreover, be in keeping with the spirit of People's English. The relevance of the latter, she

claims,

derives from the fundamental premises that South Africa has been stratified on both racial and linguistic lines, and that English should serve the democratization process in the country (Norton Peirce 1992:6).

The paradox revealed by Norton Peirce's counter-argument should serve as a reminder that the means by which People's Education - or People's English specifically - can achieve its goals are not as obvious as some of its less subtle proponents would like to imply.

In this case, the assessment of the English / ESL divide offered by Gardiner and Young, while a refreshing demystification of often unspoken assumptions about ESL in South Africa, is not entirely correct. In practice as well as theory ESL is not only "for blacks": it is also for, among others, white Afrikaners. Nor, for that matter, are all mother-tongue speakers of English in South Africa white. The argument is essentially an emotional one, and its effect is easily blunted by a minimum of analysis.

But, even granting Young and Gardiner their equation of ESL with blacks, the alternative that they offer is, as Norton Peirce points out, an illusion. It avoids the appearance of discrimination at the cost of ignoring history and the consequences of historical injustices: it is likely to lead to continued injustice under another name, more difficult to identify and resist because not intentionally discriminatory. One is reminded of Guy Butler's well-intentioned, but ultimately naive, hopes for the future of English in South Africa - persuasive and enticing, but against which, as Ndebele rightly warned, a critical alertness must be

maintained.<sup>12</sup>

The fact that 'process' lies at the heart of People's Education and People's English means that a similar critical scrutiny can - and should - be exercised, especially by those operating from within its theory and practice.

According to Norton Peirce, People's English is "an English for all those people who support the principles and methods of People's English, whether black or white, rich or poor, male or female, native speaker of English or native speaker of Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho, or Afrikaans" (Norton Peirce 1989:414). Such rhetorically inspiring flourishes are typical of the discourse of People's English: the real challenge, however, lies in translating these ideals into reality.

With this in mind, an examination of materials designed to give concrete expression to the principles of People's English may now be undertaken. The next chapter will be a survey and analysis of teaching resources produced by individuals or organisations committed to People's English.

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<sup>12</sup> See Butler (1986) and Ndebele (1987), and the discussion in Chapter 1, above.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE PRACTICE

#### MATERIALS AND RESOURCES FOR PEOPLE'S ENGLISH

At both the first and second National Consultative Conferences the delegates included in their resolutions a call for materials and resources through which People's Education could be implemented. The proposals by the People's English Commission went some way to answering the call by suggesting what form the methods and content of People's English might take, as well as recommending the establishment of resource centres in which workshops could be held and teaching materials produced. The Commission also invited all interested to make their contributions to the ongoing process of putting the theory of People's English into practice.

In spite of this, relatively little usable material has been produced to date: there is much that still needs to be done. Writing in 1992, Jeppie comments on the NECC's failure to live up to expectations in this regard:

Parents, Teachers and Students expected the respective commissions of the then National Education Crisis Committee, namely the English, History and Maths commissions, to have produced tangible materials for the classroom.

It does seem, however, that these commissions have involved themselves in discussions around the processes and politics of respective subject specific areas rather than producing usable material (Walker and Jeppie 1992:48).

Jeppie believes, however, that the need for alternative curriculum material is critical. The dawning of a 'new' South Africa makes it imperative that society and the education



system in particular be reconstructed. For this "educationists need to contribute the skills acquired during protest in reconstructing [sic] alternative materials". What has been produced so far, he goes on to suggest, has been on an ad hoc basis: "Oppositional materials development has occurred largely as supplementary guides to the existing syllabi. There has been a dearth of actual text which could be used at primary and secondary levels in a future schooling system" (Walker and Jeppie 1992:35).

Jeppie's views are echoed by his co-author. Walker also points to the urgent need for reconstruction. She adds, however, that valuable work has been done on a small scale in Cape Town, the area to which she has confined her research (Walker and Jeppie 1992:1).

Walker and Jeppie's studies of 'alternative' curriculum materials in South Africa do, in fact, provide an overview of what has been done in the field recently in Cape Town, the PWV and Natal. English is clearly one of the subjects that has received the most attention. A number of organisations have been active: Walker mentions work done by Using Spoken and Written English (USWE); the Teaching and Learning Resource Centre (TLRC) at the University of Cape Town; the South African College of Higher Education (SACHED); the Materials Development Project (MDP) and the Teachers Resource Laboratory (TRL), both at the University of the Western Cape. She also lists magazines and newspapers such as Upbeat, Learn and Teach, Staffrider, The Weekly Mail and Learning Nation as particularly valuable resources for the English teacher. In the category of Language, Jeppie's 'alternatives' include: Heinemann Publishers; the English Language Educational Trust; the Storyteller Group; the English Language Teaching Information Centre (ELTIC); the English Resource Unit; David Philip Publishers; Maskew Miller Longman; the Midlands Education Development Unit (MEDU); as well as material produced by the Sacred Heart College and English Methodology

students at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Extensive though Jeppie's and Walker's surveys are, their use to the student of People's English is somewhat limited. They have been published by the Education Policy Unit, which is described in a note at the beginning of the book as a joint venture of the NECC and the University of the Witwatersrand. The Foreword, written by the Unit's coordinator, further indicates that the research was undertaken in compliance with a request from the Education Desk of the ANC for information on 'alternative' materials currently available. All this leads the reader to expect that the writers' understanding of the term 'alternative' would be one in keeping with the spirit, if not the letter, of People's Education.

Their use of the word is, however, far broader and often confusingly vague. For example, in his entry on Heinemann Publishers, Jeppie describes their Let's Use English series as following a communicative approach, seeming to imply that it is in this that their 'alternativeness' lies (Walker and Jeppie 1992:37). On another occasion he seems to see it as a matter of degree: a text published by Maskew Miller Longman is "probably the most alternative text to current Afrikaans books in school use" (Walker and Jeppie 1992:42). In neither case does the reader get a very clear idea of what makes the material in question 'alternative': in both Walker's and Jeppie's surveys the entries are not detailed enough to throw more light on the typically imprecise (or even muddled) categorisation.

Independent research does, nevertheless, confirm that many of the English resources cited by Walker and Jeppie are informed by the approach and philosophy expressed in the People's English proposals. In some the link is explicitly acknowledged; in others it is either unconscious or unstated. Some of this material will be considered in the section that

follows.

As Walker points out, in the period following the NECC's press release on People's English attempts were made to translate its proposals into classroom practice. Workshops and conferences were held to exchange ideas and disseminate the philosophy of People's English at grassroots level.

One such workshop was part of a conference organised by the Education Faculty of the University of the Western Cape in conjunction with the NECC, in October 1987. The purpose of the conference was "to provide a place where teachers could come together to workshop collectively the meaning of People's Education, both in theory and in practice" (People's Education for teachers 1987:1). Workshops were held on specific curriculum subjects. The group discussing People's English had as its specific aim "to explore and develop the ideas about English teaching which have been formulated by the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) English Commission in their press release of 1986". Divided into small groups the participants addressed three questions:

- \* Does our present teaching of English perpetuate an oppressive educational system ?
- \* What are the differences between English teaching in the present, and proposals for people's English in a future South Africa ?
- \* How can we as English teachers begin to transform the present system to implement People's Education ?

(People's Education for teachers 1987:36)

Participants were thus encouraged to compare the existing system (suggested in the first, rather loaded question) with that envisaged in People's Education, and then to find ways of reconciling the two. As at the NECC conferences, People's Education was seen as both a blueprint for the future and as a way of transforming the present.

Discussion in the workshop then centred on just how such a transformation could be effected in practical terms via the use of materials and methodologies which reflect the spirit of People's English. These, it was decided, included such strategies as linking classroom activities to community concerns, allowing pupils to generate their own materials, using group work to facilitate learner-centredness and co-operation, and focusing on the connection between power and language. At the same time the participants felt that teachers should work towards intervening in the education system itself, not merely undercutting it from within.

Taken overall, the workshop had the effect of affirming the central role of teachers in giving concrete expression to People's English.<sup>1</sup>

A similar grassroots attempt at giving People's English practical expression in the classroom is found in an article by Amanda Shaw, "Teacher as innovator within the framework of the principles of People's Education". Although she describes People's Education as "an attempt to develop an education system to meet the needs of all South Africans", she concentrates on its application to black schools, in which there is "a pressing need for the development of an alternative relevant system of education". The need for change is the subject of much debate and discussion; yet "any conclusions reached are seldom implemented within the classroom itself" (Shaw 1989:1). Her paper is an attempt to counter this tendency.

Shaw centres her discussion on the four tasks for teachers outlined by Randall van den Heever at a People's Education Workshop of the Cape Teachers' Professional

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<sup>1</sup> For further details, see People's Education for teachers (1987), 36-37. The proceedings of other similar conferences suggest the on-going process by which People's English has been given some practical expression. See, for example, Teaching for a People's Culture (1989) and Light on learning (1990).



Association. Teachers, in his opinion, need to:

- \* abandon their authoritarian positions of the past;
- \* relate their lessons to the vision of liberation;
- \* stimulate a critical awareness in pupils;
- \* stimulate a creative response in pupils.

(Quoted in Shaw 1989:2)

Shaw's explication of van den Heever's tasks is clearly related to the fundamental tenets of People's Education. Its usefulness lies in the way in which she makes an attempt to bring the vague rhetoric down to the level of the everyday classroom experience of teachers and students. She illustrates the need to stimulate critical awareness (the necessity for critical thinking is emphasised both in the resolutions on People's Education and in the proposals for People's English) with an anecdote from her own teaching experience:

I had to teach the setwork Jock of the Bushveld with a Std 7 class in a Black school on my teaching prac. During one lesson a student raised the point that the novel implied that there were no people in the Bushveld except the author and his companions. If this was so, he asked, where did the person who came to look for work on the author's wagons come from? An interesting discussion ensued in which it was established that indigenous tribes had always inhabited the Bushveld and the point was made that books are written from a particular perspective and that an important part of reading a book was to identify that perspective.

That student had identified a major flaw in the setwork and by discussing it, the class was able to examine that flaw more closely and realise that books aren't always correct and perhaps now a more critical reading of the text will be taking place (Shaw 1989:3).

Shaw does not try to hide the difficulties that an

innovative teacher is likely to encounter in attempting to implement the principles of People's Education. The students' previous experience of schooling, the teacher's own training and probable sense of insecurity, lack of facilities - these are all factors which might militate against effectiveness.

Cautionary reminders such as these do, however, show the reality with which any philosophy of education has to contend; they also provide a salutary counter to the facile optimism that all too often characterises pronouncements on People's Education.

Efforts have also been made to produce material for classroom use. Two resource books, Some ideas for English teachers and More ideas for English teachers, compiled by English Method students and published by the Materials Development Project at the University of the Western Cape, are clearly in the spirit of People's English, even though the term is not actually used. The writer of the Introduction to the first book makes reference to concepts such as "relevance", the pupils' "own personal experiences and opinions", lays great emphasis on group work ("The process of learning therefore becomes a social activity not an individual one."), and believes that "the English teacher has a decisive role to play" in countering the effects of Christian National Education and Bantu Education. Overall, the English teacher "would have served his/her purpose if through teaching a critical thinking, socially committed student can emerge" (Some ideas for English teachers 1987:2-6).

The themes and content of the worksheets in both books reflect these preoccupations. Themes include: violence, television, music, domestic work, protest, poverty, travel, education. These are given expression through more specific topics such as poverty in farm schools, a letter from prison, tsotsis, battered children, a critical look at the Coon Carnival, and so on. All are 'relevant' in fairly obvious

ways; or, as is all too often the case, made so in a rather heavy-handed manner. For example, a worksheet on the theme of travel begins with a reproduction of an advertisement for a holiday in the Caribbean, moves through various group work activities centring on holidays and travel, and concludes with an invitation to think of other reasons for travel. The final task, however, points the students very firmly in the ideological direction that the writer wanted their thinking to take:

Imagine you have to travel somewhere as an exile. You have just escaped from your native country for political reasons. Write a letter to your mother, telling her that you are safe. Describe how you feel about leaving your family, friends and possessions (More Ideas for English teachers 1988:67-71).

Most of the exercises follow a similar pattern: basically a communicative language teaching approach applied to contentious political issues. One is tempted to use the word 'propaganda' for some of them, such is their intellectual crudity. Although students are encouraged to adopt a questioning, critical attitude to their everyday experience of society, the writer's own (unacknowledged) bias is usually transparent. While this is perhaps to be expected, given the political commitment which is an integral part of People's Education, it does very little to promote critical thinking.

Another Materials Development Project production, Grammar in context, is more successful in this respect. By focusing on language use and function, its writers encourage a more critical, analytical approach to English. The introduction reiterates the MDP's commitment "to building a non-racial and democratic system in South Africa, and an understanding that teachers need to be integrally involved in the process of change". The book's purpose, therefore, is to publish materials which have been developed by teachers at workshops organised by the MDP: these materials "are characterised by

content which highlights the everyday experience of South African students by a methodology based on co-operative inquiry, and by a process of collective design and reflection" (Grammar in context 1990:1).

The basis for the approach employed at the teachers' workshop was that grammar should be taught in context, the teacher showing how "grammar serves a particular purpose, in a particular context"; the point of learning it is "to be able to select and manipulate the language to best communicate one's message effectively" (Grammar in context 1990:2). Furthermore, grammar is regarded as important because:

The process of being able to translate one's private thoughts and conversations into a public language is a process of empowerment. And one should [sic] argue that, in order to do that, one needs to be able to structure a language in the standard grammatical form (Grammar in context 1990:3).

This apparently conservative attitude to "the standard grammatical form" is, however, modified by a subsequent distinction between prescriptive and descriptive grammar:

If we teach grammar prescriptively, we are telling students they are doing the wrong thing by using non-standard English.

If we teach it descriptively, we try and teach students why certain grammatical forms are used, how different languages affect one another, and how to understand the rule (Grammar in context 1990:3).<sup>2</sup>

Part One of the book consists of two background readings on the theory which informed the approach taken at the workshops. The first, an extract from Jane Jackson's Speaking Freely, takes a communicative approach to the teaching of

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<sup>2</sup> Compare the debate on standard and non-standard varieties of English, above pp. 42-44.



grammar, focusing on the functions, rather than merely the forms, of grammar. (In the Introduction to Grammar in context it is made clear that one of the aims of the workshop was to "introduce ideas for communicative language teaching" (Grammar in context 1990:1).) Nevertheless, Jackson's insistence on a descriptive rather than prescriptive approach suggests a step beyond CLT to the critical questioning of language which is an integral part of People's English. She advises teachers: "Try not to teach prescriptively - i.e. as if there are eternal unchangeable rules for correct English, and only standard English can be correct" (Grammar in context 1990:3).

The second background reading is a reprint of Hilary Janks's "A critical look at existing language awareness materials". Here the focus is on a critical view of language. Janks compares A book about language, four volumes of material produced by HDE students at the University of the Witwatersrand and edited by herself, with two other titles on language awareness, The awareness of language series and The language book. What emerges from the comparison is that the former adopts a far more critical view of language. The other two are part of the Language Awareness movement which does not, in Janks's view,

seriously question the hegemony of English or consider the role played by language in maintaining existing patterns of domination and subordination. To the extent that language materials contribute to the reproduction of existing social conditions, they are uncritical and conservative (Grammar in context 1990:22).

It was these very aspects of language that Janks's students were encouraged to highlight: they were asked "to design materials that would lead to a consideration of the relationship between language and power in the South African context" (Grammar in context 1990:23). Language awareness was, in other words, to be given the social and political dimension usually ignored in the CLT approach to language

teaching.

Janks later returns to the importance of specifically South African materials for South African students: it will, she suggests, her words echoing the People's English proposals, help them to "hear what is said and what is hidden" (Grammar in context 1990:37-38). She goes on, in fact, to make explicit the link between the critical work done by her students and the vision embodied in People's English. Speaking of South African varieties of English, she says:

It is not enough for Language Awareness materials to explore linguistic variation in the society. We need to work towards establishing the kind of society where those of us who have never even heard these [i.e. 'non-standard'] varieties are able to mix freely with the people who speak them.

And as far as teaching English in South Africa is concerned, she goes on to say,

We need the kind of Language Awareness materials that do not simply reproduce existing social practices and conditions....Conscientization of ourselves is an essential dimension in the process of change. Were Language Awareness materials able to achieve this, they would be able to make a contribution to People's English for People's Power (Grammar in context 1990:39-40)<sup>3</sup>

Part Two of Grammar in context consists of the worksheets written by teachers in the workshop, informed to a varying degree by the approaches outlined by Jackson and Janks. One worksheet with "gangsterism" as its topic reproduces language "heard on the streets of Mitchell's Plain". The student is invited to contrast it with the 'standard English' version,

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<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, space does not permit a detailed analysis of the material in A book about language and the extent to which it gives expression to People's English. Janks's own material in Language and position will, however, be considered in the next chapter.

and to consider whether it constitutes 'bad' use of English. The student is clearly being led to see varieties of English as context-bound; no value judgement about any variety is implied. The questions and topics for discussion are also sufficiently open-ended for the teacher or students to consider the question of language variety from the perspective of politics and power relations.

Worksheets dealing with the use of adjectives, fact and opinion, and the active and passive voices encourage a similarly critical approach to language. Another, using a poem by Bertolt Brecht, explicitly invites comment on South Africa's political system. On the other hand there are, surprisingly, some worksheets which are politically conservative in the sense that the grammatical constructions and forms with which they are concerned are completely decontextualised. One worksheet is downright reactionary in that a piece of 'erroneous', 'non-standard' speech is reproduced, and the student instructed to rewrite it in "correct, standard English".

Nevertheless, in spite of such ideological inconsistencies, it is possible to see all the material (as well as that contained in Ideas for English teachers and More ideas for English teachers) as being, in a very real way, a contribution to the process of developing People's English. In an authoritarian education system such as that found in South Africa, any action which allows teachers to have some control over their teaching, or students over their learning, is doubtless a form of empowerment.

As has already been indicated, many literacy and adult basic education programmes in South Africa - in particular those that would regard themselves as 'progressive' - use methods and materials compatible with the tenets of People's English. In most cases, however, their approaches have antedated the NECC's use of the term: many would probably only

describe their work as People's English when pressed to do so. A few examples may be adduced to illustrate this.

A guidebook for literacy teachers compiled by the Department of Adult Education and Extra-mural studies at the University of Cape Town called Group leader's notes uses the Language-Experience Method. Emphasis is placed on equality between learner and teacher; the content of a course, it is asserted, should be relevant to the learner's everyday experience of life; and the teaching process should be democratic, encouraging active participation by the learners (Group leader's notes 1988:vii). Although no mention is made of political conscientization, the examples of lessons given in the book tend to focus on the socio-economic deprivation which is likely to be typical of the learners in a literacy group.

The English Literacy Project (ELP) locates itself firmly within the same political arena as the proponents of People's English, without actually using that term in describing itself. An information pamphlet issued by the organisation presents literacy as a means to empowerment; furthermore, it is asserted, the "struggle for literacy is a part of the struggle for more equality and justice in SA" and "literacy work needs to be located within the Mass Democratic Movement that is organising for social change" (What is literacy? No date), words that echo the rhetoric of People's Education.

ELP's methods are also consistent with the philosophy of People's Education. Learner participation is emphasised, and the content of lessons is explicitly political. Freire is obviously a major influence: in fact his dictum that "People must learn to read their reality and write their own history" has provided the inspiration for ELP's publication of literacy books, the ideas for which are the result of requests for information from learners (English Literacy Project: Annual report: September 1989 - August 1990).



Basia Ledochowski of Use, Speak and Write English (USWE) is reluctant to use the terms People's Education or People's English to describe USWE's approach to literacy, preferring to speak of "popular education" or "education for critical consciousness" and "English and empowerment" (Ledochowski 1991 pers. comm.). A brief examination of USWE's methods would, however, suggest that the issue of nomenclature is irrelevant: their approach is clearly congruent with that proposed for People's English. Witthaus describes USWE as having "alternative or progressive views on education", and subscribing to an ideological model of literacy. In keeping with this their methodology favours democratic principles which find expression in learner-centredness, Freirean dialogical pedagogy and the idea of political empowerment. Linguistically, the goal set for learners is communicative competence. Although Witthaus goes on to point to the limitations of these approaches, both under current conditions and for the large-scale intervention that will probably characterise literacy work in South Africa in the future, she does conclude her paper with an overall endorsement of their continued use by USWE (Witthaus 1991: 59-64).<sup>4</sup>

The English Resource Unit (ERU), unlike ELP and USWE, does use the term People's Education to describe its programme of Adult Basic Education, while at the same time conscious of the ambiguity and vagueness that often surrounds it and related concepts, such as empowerment (Browne 1991 pers. comm.; Literacy for all 1991:1).<sup>5</sup> The unit's workers do, nevertheless, believe that

People's Education should be an education which helps people to understand the society in which they live. People's Education should encourage people to look at ways of making that society better. It is

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<sup>4</sup> For further discussion on the methods employed by ELP, USWE and other literacy organisations currently operating in South Africa, see Clifford and Kerfoot (1992).

<sup>5</sup> See Browne's comments, page 12 above.

also an education which is democratic, and enables people to participate in a changing South Africa (Literacy for all 1991:2).

ERU's willingness and ability to identify with the philosophy of People's English clearly springs from a conception of literacy which sees it as enmeshed with social, political and economic reality:

To do away with illiteracy, you cannot just teach people to read and write. You must also deal with the problems which cause illiteracy. These are problems like poverty, unemployment, shortage of schools and so on. We need to work for democracy in all areas of people's lives. We need to make sure that all people have a political voice, so that their demands will be heard (Literacy for all 1991:7).

This is a vision that ERU shares with other progressive literacy organisations in South Africa (which include USWE and ELP, already considered briefly). Together they form the National Literacy Co-operation (NLC), and share a common methodology. An important aspect of this is the Group Discussion Method which involves principles such as group learning, an equal relationship between teacher and learners, and learner involvement in decisions about their learning. The content of lessons is based on the learners' experiences, aspects of everyday life that they are able to understand and relate to (Literacy work in South Africa 1991:14-17).

Organisations in the NLC acknowledge their obvious debt to the work of Paulo Freire in their methodology. But ERU, at least, does not endorse Freire's pedagogy in all its aspects, tempering its application with an eclectic mixture of other appropriate language teaching techniques (Literacy work in South Africa 1991:14-17; Browne 1991 pers. comm.).

In view of ERU's explicit endorsement of the principles

of People's Education, it is interesting to examine a sample of the materials actually used in their literacy courses. What follows is a brief analysis four learner's workbooks, Books 1 - 4 of the Learn English series. Although the books have been produced and published by ERU, the Acknowledgements on the title pages of each indicate that the material has been drawn largely from materials written by other literacy organisations. Nevertheless it is safe to assume they have been collected and compiled with ERU's own methods and approaches in mind. It should also be mentioned at the outset that any analysis of materials out of the context of their actual classroom use is bound to give only a limited if not distorted impression. The analysis is undertaken, and should be read, with this proviso in mind.

Book 1 is entitled Greetings and personal information. The approach to language learning is communicative. Lessons are structured in such a way that learners must think about what they are doing and respond creatively: there is little opportunity for parrot learning. Items are structured - as the title suggests - according to function rather than form.

While there is little in the content to suggest a political agenda, the lessons are empowering in the most fundamental sense of the word. They simultaneously teach English language skills and equip learners with the life skills that they are likely to need in their everyday lives. Dialogues take place in such settings as an advice office or a doctor's waiting-room. After reading the dialogue and completing exercises which involve manipulation of structures and content drawn from it, the learners are then given an opportunity to apply the information or skills they have acquired to their own experience of the world. Thus, following the dialogue in which "Ntombi" is interviewed at the "Clermont Advice Office", the learners are asked to give similar personal details about themselves, and later to fill in blank forms with the appropriate details, both for

"Ntombi" and for themselves.

Book 2, Naming things and naming people, follows a similar pattern. The approach is predominantly functional, the "things" and "people" to be named being drawn from the kind of working-class environment with which most learners are likely to be familiar. As in the first book, material is presented in such a way that the learners' cognitive faculties are constantly engaged. Even when an exercise requires no more than the copying down of words, the pictures which accompany it encourage the learner to focus on the meaning as well as the form of the word.

Book 3 picks up and develops the theme introduced in the first book. Its title, Asking for and giving information about yourself and other people, clearly indicates a functional approach to language learning, although there is also evidence of a grammar-based approach (for example, a number of exercises systematically contrast positive and negative constructions).

As in the previous books, the situations through which the material is dramatised are drawn from the everyday experiences of the working class. There seem to be the beginnings of a 'conscientizing' message, appropriate to this more advanced stage in the course, in the recurring theme of unemployment. The socio-political implications of the contrasting words "employment" / "unemployment" are not spelt out (although they may very well be in class discussion); and any impact that they might have on the learner is probably neutralised by the presence of other apparently more innocuous contrasts such as "married" / "unmarried", "husband" / "wife", etc. The learners are, however, encouraged to apply the new terminology to their own lives by writing something about members of their own families.

Political conscientization is undoubtedly evident when



the manipulation of the contrasting terms is given a slightly sinister turn in a cartoon sequence entitled "Where is Bongani?" The pictures show a woman being taken from her home (where she has been depicted as surrounded by a loving, attentive family) to a police station where she is interrogated by the Chief Inspector. The theme of exchanging personal information is again dramatised as the inspector questions her about Bongani. In the last block the woman asks: "Why do you want to know?" The terse reply is: "For my records". Clearly this sequence could form the basis for a conscientizing discussion on the repressive nature of the South African state. The fact that the woman is black and the inspector white would effectively reinforce such a message and direct the reader's sympathies.

But whereas racial stereotyping may serve a purpose here, it is puzzling - even disturbing - when it appears again later in the book. An exercise requiring the learner to fill in the missing words takes the form of a dialogue between "David Sosibo", an applicant for a job, and a nameless official at the employment office. In the illustration accompanying the dialogue, however, the official is depicted as a white man. The pattern is repeated in the exercise that follows. Learners are presented with a scenario for which they must construct an appropriate dialogue. The situation is that "Ms Dlamini" is being interviewed by a bank official. The illustration depicts Ms Dlamini as an apparently working-class black woman, wearing a shapeless dress, doek and flat shoes; the bank official is white and male. In another exercise: "Jabu Bengu is applying for an account at Sale's House. Mr Prinsloo wants Jabu's personal information".

The pattern continues in Book 4 which is entitled What do you do ? Talking about occupations. Here again black people are presented in subservient or powerless positions; white men are presented as unsympathetic, dehumanised figures of authority or repression.

No doubt a case could be made for this kind of racist and sexist stereotyping. On the one hand it might be argued that the impression is countered by other scenes in which Blacks are shown in positions of power. These, however, are clearly the exception rather than the norm. A more persuasive argument might be that racism and sexism are unfortunate but unavoidable features of South African society at present; and that to empower people involves providing them with strategies to deal with the everyday reality that they actually experience. Such a position could most certainly be justified in terms of a functional or communicative approach to language teaching; it does, however, run contrary to the spirit of People's English, which tends to focus on what should be rather than on what is, or at least present strategies for challenging the status quo and so affecting change.

This highlighting of an apparent inconsistency between ERU's professed intentions and the material actually employed to put those aims into practice should not be seen as a form of ideological inquisition; rather it has served to illustrate the dilemma of which workers at ERU have shown themselves only too well aware. How to translate the ideals of People's English into practice in a context largely antipathetic to them, for learners whose needs demand something more practical and immediate than vague generalisations - this is the problem faced by all materials writers.<sup>6</sup>

In the case of the ERU workbooks, a version of this very dilemma could, of course, form the basis of a class discussion. Learners could be invited to deconstruct the pictures and language, and comment on the implications of what they discover. Such an exercise could be empowering, and, in its own way, contribute to the process of People's

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<sup>6</sup> ESL material writers adopting a People's English approach do, however have a valuable guide in Barbara Hutton's A manual for writers of learning materials (No date).

English.

Most of the materials and resources considered so far are not widely available, or were designed with fairly narrow, formal educational purposes in mind. The comic, on the other hand, is a genre that enjoys a wide appeal and has great possibilities for large-scale distribution. Its potential to realise the ideal of People's Education that the "doors of learning and culture shall be opened" has attracted some attention recently. Using comics - a literary form usually denigrated as 'sub-standard' - as a medium for education is, of course, also consistent with the People's English proposals where it was envisaged that content could be drawn from a range of resources, many of which fall into the category of 'popular culture'.

The Storyteller Group is an organisation that has done interesting and exciting work in this area. On a number of levels their materials seem to have captured the spirit of the People's English proposals - whether consciously or not - in an imaginative and intelligent way. This, together with the organisation's on-going research into popular reception of its comics, makes it worth consideration as an expression of People's English.

Peter Esterhuizen explains that the initiative for a publishing venture like the Storyteller Group arose out of a need for post-literacy material in South Africa, "a wide range of stimulating and appropriate texts to motivate learners to read and thus consolidate their reading skills". The comic book, a form of popular literature typically associated with entertainment and which has often been used in the promotion of mass literacy, seemed to be able to provide the answer to the need. It is on this belief that the Storyteller Group's philosophy is based. In Esterhuizen's words:

We believe that dynamic popular visual literature (particularly the comic book) produced on a mass

scale can play a powerful role in the promotion of reading and the consolidation of literacy skills in South Africa. All our comics tell different stories, but have an important quality in common: they set out to entertain. It is so often forgotten that for people to develop a commitment to reading they must, above all, take pleasure in it (Esterhuizen 1990:22).

The Group's initial venture was 99 Sharp Street, a comic which "explores the experiences of young people growing up in urban South Africa today" (Esterhuizen 190:22). It was serialised in a mass circulation magazine distributed by Sales House. Esterhuizen's account of some of the characteristics of the comic show its obvious affiliation with the philosophy of education that informed the People's English proposals.

A noteworthy aspect was that, although entertaining, humorous and attractively presented (According to the People's English proposals, language competence includes the ability "to play, to joke, to rejoice".), 99 Sharp Street also aimed at sharpening its readers' critical faculties (a goal emphasised in more than one of the proposals). The comic, moreover, was not the product of a single author's imagination; the story was workshopped by members of the Group with a young black playwright "who was a particularly useful source for the colloquial language" used by some of the characters. Here again the link with People's English should be obvious: the method is reminiscent of the latter's reiterated stress on collaborative effort, community participation, collective development, as well the desire for everyday authenticity. The last aspect is to be found again in the story's local setting. Esterhuizen explains that the setting received serious attention in the development of the story: its details were not accidental and its creation was informed by a conscious intention:

We wanted to foster a strong sense of place in order to counter lingering strains of cultural chauvinism which dictate - especially when it comes to children's literature - that good stories always



take place elsewhere, in Britain or America, and that South Africa is somehow "unstoried" or inferior story material (Esterhuizen 1990:22-23).

In a similar vein the People's English proposals mention the importance of "written literature of our place and time".

The kind of language used in the comic is based on the same desire to give fictional expression to the typical experiences of its readers. The introductory text blocks are written in standard English; but in the speech bubbles an attempt has been made to capture the rhythms and expressions of 'township English'. The rationale for this technique is not only stylistic authenticity: it also serves a valuable educational function. As Esterhuizen perceptively and succinctly expresses it:

The use of expressions such as "Heyta Ngwenya" and its immediate rejoinder "Sharp Sharp" validates - as only written language can - people's everyday experiences of English as a familiar language of communication rather than a foreign language belonging to the classroom and far removed from their immediate lives. Besides making the comic more authentic and accessible, such expressions are undoubtedly a powerful way of attracting reluctant readers, alienated by more formal written discourses (Esterhuizen 1990:23).

Language usage like this also gives dramatic and imaginative expression to the proposal that People's English be drawn from "the range of languages and dialects of South Africa".

The overwhelmingly positive feed-back and discussion generated by 99 Sharp Street prompted the Storyteller Group to develop a sequel, The river of our dreams. This was produced as a complete, self-contained comic. It is also the focus of a research project, "Story-Net", designed to "look at whether popular visual material along the lines of 99 Sharp Street - and published on the same mass scale - can be adapted to meet

the varying needs of second language learners in South Africa". In this way the group hoped to "contribute to the development of dynamic and appropriate curricula in a post-apartheid educational system" (Esterhuizen 1990:23).

An examination of The river of our dreams shows it to be faithful to the spirit of the first comic. There are also some innovations which have a bearing on its links with People's English.

The first Story-Net newsletter distinguishes three main themes in the story: "the way in which reading can enrich our lives, the importance of caring for our environment, and the need for communities to re-build grassroots structures" (Story-Net 1991a). The first theme is a reflection of the goal of the comic itself: to stimulate interest in reading. But the second two themes are equally relevant to the aims of People's English. The sense of social commitment and communal responsibility suggested in them is reminiscent of the way in which the proponents of People's Education always see curricula matters as inextricably linked to wider social concerns. This was certainly evident in the People's English proposals which aimed at assisting learners to express and consider the issues and questions of their time, transform themselves into full and active members of society, and play a creative role in the achievement of a non-racial democratic South Africa.<sup>7</sup>

There is a similar broadness of vision in the research project's scope of enquiry. Three resource packs have been developed to accompany the comic: a high school pack (lessons

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<sup>7</sup> A subsequent production by the Storyteller Group, a comic on the activities of the Red Cross, demonstrates a commitment to the welfare of the community even more clearly. According to Story-Net the comic "was designed to promote awareness of the humanitarian principles and activities of the Red Cross, and to promote a climate of peace and tolerance in South Africa" (Story-Net 1992b).

in it are linked to school syllabi), an adult literacy pack and a library pack. According to the first newsletter, a variety of organisations have been able to adapt these resources to their own needs. The Umgeni River Trust uses the comic to stimulate discussion on environmental problems, TELIP makes use of it in its upgrade courses for English teachers, USWE teaches literacy to domestic workers with its help (Story-Net 1991a).

The Story-Net project is still in progress. But reports received by its researchers so far seem very positive. Some of the comments below, extracted from the Research Findings in the Interim research report suggest that comics like The river of our dreams have a lot to contribute to the teaching of English along the lines proposed by People's English:

- \* The research has shown that in terms of its potential to attract and motivate teenage and adult ESL readers The River of our Dreams has been extremely successful. Notably, readers' confidence has been boosted from reading and enjoying an English text.
- \* ESL readers participating in the research generally didn't associate reading with having fun. An extension of this perception was that if they were reading and enjoying themselves, they were not really learning. In this context, the comic seems to have contributed towards the development of positive attitudes to reading in English and to learning.
- \* Factors contributing towards the attractiveness and accessibility of the comic include the fact that readers felt that the pictures in the comic made the story easy to follow, and teenage readers, in particular, experienced a strong sense of identification with the characters, the story and the language.
- \* As a cross-cultural bridging tool, The River of our Dreams enabled urban and rural readers to increase their awareness of different life experiences. Also, the racial mix challenged stereotypes and was the source of much fascination. The fictionalised nature of the story enabled readers to feel safe to talk

about controversial issues.

- \* The 'community action' theme in the comic was a very popular one amongst readers. This enthusiasm resulted in the initiation by readers of a number of small-scale community action projects.  
(Bahr and Rifkin 1992:2-3).

The Storyteller Group has not been the first or only venture into using comics as a medium for popular education in South Africa. Even better known, perhaps, are the People's College Comics produced by The SACHED Trust. A brief examination of one of these, based on the novel Down Second Avenue by Es'kia Mphahlele, will illustrate how the philosophy that informs the series is essentially that of People's English.

The publication information on the front inside cover of the comic suggests this very strongly at the outset. The mission statement of The SACHED Trust is an indication of what they hope to achieve through the comic:

The SACHED Trust is an educational organisation which aims to counter the imbalance created by the apartheid education system. The Trust is committed to establishing participatory, non-discriminatory and non-authoritarian learning processes. It seeks to transfer skills and resources in such a way that organisations, communities and individuals are empowered to take charge of their own projects.

That the principle of participation is not merely a rhetorical gesture is indicated immediately after this, where readers are asked to write to SACHED with comments and suggestions:

Did you find this comic interesting and enjoyable?  
Do you think we should produce more comics like this one? Please send us your comments. You may know of other stories which would make exciting comics (Down Second Avenue: The comic 1988:front inside cover).



The first half of the comic is devoted to the story of Down Second Avenue. The second section consists of writing and reading exercises based on the story. These are aimed at a fairly low level of English competence, and begin with an exercise which requires the learner simply to look up and copy out sections of dialogue. (It is, however, surely no coincidence that the passages chosen are all politically significant, depicting the fictional Mphahlele's growth in political awareness.) Subsequent exercises test creativity (for example the reader is invited to write his/her own comic story), comprehension, grammatical structures, vocabulary, sentence construction, etc. Readers are encouraged to work with friends, comparing each other's answers. The comic ends with a graded reading list of books on the lives of children in different parts of the world.

The approach to language is basically communicative within the context of a politically 'relevant' theme (which has been highlighted by the editing necessary to translate the novel into comic form). To some extent the political conscientization seems heavy-handed, even spurious to the language teaching aims. There is, however, an attempt to encourage critical thinking in the last exercise where the reader is asked to consider why Mphahlele's family was forced to move from their home in Marabastad. Leading questions are asked to direct thinking: how could the government have improved Marabastad; why did it rather chose to remove the people; what do you think of people being forced to live in certain areas? Similarly, there is a hint of a critical awareness of the English language itself. Characters in the comic frequently use typically African constructions, and on two occasions the character Mphahlele challenges racist language used by whites. Unfortunately this aspect is not developed in the language exercises in any way.

Read today, Down Second Avenue: The comic does not seem remarkably subversive. But it is an indication of the ability

of a comic like this to reach and influence people on a large scale that it was banned by the South African government when first published in 1988, at the height of a state of emergency.<sup>8</sup> Norton-Peirce suggests an explanation for an action that seems to defy rational explanation, and in doing so points to the still untapped potential of the comic:

Why did the state choose to ban a comic based on a novel that had not only been available to the South African public since 1959 (Down Second Avenue, by Ezekial Mphahlele, Faber and Faber, London, 1959), but had also appeared in the comic section of Upbeat magazine in 1981? It is likely that the state saw the comic book as a threat to its control over what is to be read, by whom, where, and for what purposes. If "thousands of scholars" had access to such a counterdiscourse, the South African state's authority would certainly be challenged (Norton-Peirce 1989:416).

The last example of a text which gives concrete expression to People's English to be analysed here has much in common with the People's College comic just looked at. Learning Nation is a supplement to the New Nation, a weekly newspaper with a predominantly black readership. It is also produced by The SACHED Trust, the material written by SACHED staff as well as by free-lance writers commissioned by the Trust.

In terms of its content Learning Nation is geared towards providing a supplement to the DET matric syllabus; the perspective from which the material is written and the slant to its presentation is, however, entirely in keeping with the spirit of People's Education. According to the co-ordinator, staff at Learning Nation see their publication "as implementing the somewhat broad principles and aims of

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<sup>8</sup> Space does not permit an examination of other similar media in which People's English is given expression. Special mention should, however, be made of magazines such as Upbeat and Learn and Teach which, like the comics considered at here, aim to educate through being accessible and entertaining.

People's Education" (Hills 1991 pers. comm.). The implications of this approach are suggested in a document outlining Learning Nation's Network Project for 1991, in which SACHED's general policy is presented as the context for the project's aim to build a "learning culture":

From its inception SACHED has responded to the changing context of South Africa by developing innovative projects to challenge the educational system imposed by apartheid capitalism. It has also been aware of the fact that alternatives should also provide possible models for the future....In a recent statement the organisation has emphasised its commitment to democratic education. In practice this means that it will work with the constituencies of the broad working class and organisations of these constituencies. SACHED aims to work primarily with educators within the broad working class providing appropriate materials for and with them. Methodologies to develop education for empowerment will be formulated and applied (Learning Nation Network Project in 1991: 13).

Essentially these are the aims and methods of People's Education. This is again evident when the writer of the document goes on to consider the role of Learning Nation specifically. :

It is directed at the broad working class and educational agents working in representative organisations. It is democratic: the newspaper reaches a wide audience at an affordable price; it can be shared and discussed; and it can be read and worked on at a time and pace that suits the readers (Learning Nation Network Project in 1991: 14).

The Network Project is, in fact, an extension of these democratic principles: through it "a dynamic web of educational relationships sparked by the materials appearing in the newspaper supplement, Learning Nation" can be generated (Learning Nation Network Project in 1991: 13). To the same end Learning Nation cultivates an interactive relationship with its readers, inviting feed-back and comment on its

materials. In itself the newspaper supplement is incomplete:

...materials are in themselves not sufficient: structures are needed within which they can be effectively used to support democratic rather than individualistic approaches to education; hence our programme to link individuals to organisations and service organisations (Learning Nation Network Project in 1991: 22).

The analysis here will, nevertheless, be confined to the materials appearing in the weekly supplement.

The material in the Learning Nation supplement is presented in the context of regular topics or areas. These include: International History, Skills for Learning, Resources, Current Issues, Matric Literature, Health Matters, Matric History and a Pupils' Forum to which readers are urged to contribute. Some are closely related to the school curriculum; others, such as Current Issues, aim at developing the reader's general knowledge and social awareness.<sup>9</sup>

The material in the sections on Matric Literature would, most obviously, fall into the category of People's English. English Literature is seen as a subject "where one can offer some alternative perspectives within the confines of a South African syllabus" (Learning Nation Network Project in 1991: 29). A survey of the supplements for the year 1991 shows that topics covered included literary terminology (dead metaphors, slogans, allusion, irony, etc.) and commentaries on setworks (Romeo and Juliet, I heard the owl call my name, The wind at dawn, Close to the sun). However, the Skills for Learning section often contains material that is also relevant to the rather broad field of English studies. In 1991 there

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<sup>9</sup> An indication of readers' expectations of Learning Nation may be deduced from the fact that a survey of readers' needs revealed that the topic on which the largest group (42% of the respondents) requested more information was political issues (Learning Nation Network Project in 1991: 21).



noticeable contrast is the far superior writing style of the latter, which clearly lives up to the standard expected of 'quality material'. But the simple lucidity of its style should not hide the sophistication of the writer's approach: it is the ideological assumptions implicit in this that suggest most clearly Learning Nation's links with People's Education and People's English.

In an introduction to the first of the series of articles on The wind at dawn the writer says that s/he will not follow "a typical D.E.T. style of teaching" (New Nation 14-20/06/91:15) .

The poems analysed in the Learning Nation commentaries are always set in a context. (In the Learning Press they are, as has been seen, completely decontextualised.) Thus the Romantic poets' preoccupation with nature is shown to have been influenced by the rapid industrialisation (and consequent increase in urban poverty and crime) in their society at the time. Poems are also often related to the personalities and preoccupations of their writers, who are, in turn, shown to be firmly embedded in contemporary social conditions. The following comment on Hardy's "Throwing a Tree" is fairly typical:

This matter-of-fact tone in Hardy's poem reflects an attitude which many modern poets have. Wars and the miseries of urban life have caused many modern writers to feel that the world is a cruel place which offers people no protection and no guidance. These writers experience the world as a place which is indifferent to suffering (New Nation 19-25/07/91: 19).

That an idea may be specific to a particular time or place is actually emphasised elsewhere:

Both "The Human Seasons" and "The Schoolboy" express the view that life follows a natural cycle in which maturity (or summer) is the peak or highest point.

The idea that maturity is the peak of life is only one way of viewing life. We could just as easily picture old age or childhood as being the peak of life, or we could say that no one stage of life is 'higher' than another. In the same way, it is only an opinion, and not fact, to say that life consists of four stages (New Nation 12-18/07/91:17).

The Learning Press, on the other hand, in an analysis of "The Human Seasons", presents the ideas contained in it as if they are self-evident, universal and eternal. In the Learning Nation the writer often draws attention to the fact that a view or interpretation is his/her own; the readers are also frequently invited to give their own interpretations and urged to talk to "friends, teachers and fellow students" about their work (New Nation 14-20/06/91:15). There is a good deal of cross-referencing to other texts in the matric English literature syllabus which have been examined in Learning Nation. Issues are usually presented as problematic: the writer does not pontificate as an expert.

In at least one case, poems are actually used to illuminate their context, rather than the other way around: "We are now going to see if Bosman's and Paton's poems reveal any interesting views on South Africa which might tell us more about our society in general" (New Nation 14-20/06/91:15). Often an analysis of a poem is allowed to open out into an more general discussion of issues that have been raised in the course of it.

In a different way the poems are also related to their larger context in the following comment by the writer: "We have discovered that many of the modern writers, whose writing has been prescribed to us by the Education Department, compare the past with the present" (New Nation 26/07-01/08/91:19). This reference to the DET has the multiple effect of undercutting its authority, distancing the writer from any complicity in its syllabus, as well as demystifying the way in which particular texts are chosen for study: there is no

suggestion of a 'received' canon of works which constitute 'English Literature'.

It is not difficult to see how the kind of approach to poetry adopted by the Learning Nation (especially when its features are highlighted through comparison with the approach used by Learning Press) are a reflection of its definition of quality material which, in turn, points to the philosophy behind People's English. Independent and critical thinking is clearly encouraged through the emphasis on the relativity of meaning, whether it is the poet's, his/her society's informing the poem, or the reader's. The writer's repeated focus on the various kinds of context in which a poem exists contributes to making this point, as does his/her habit of foregrounding the idiosyncratic nature of many of his/her comments. Creativity is encouraged by making interpretation a communal effort, to be shared by the writer, readers, friends and teachers.

All this will help to develop the readers' skills and confidence in themselves. They are made active partners in the learning process; not merely recipients of 'expert' pronouncements, which would tend to reinforce their sense of helplessness and ignorance.

This, on the other hand, is the effect that the approach used by the Learning Press is likely to have. In its article on The wind at dawn there are questions which encourage readers to think further about aspects of the poem; yet they occur in the context of other seemingly indisputable information. In contrast, Learning Nation constantly appeals to the readers' known experience and knowledge by constant cross-referencing to other works of literature in the syllabus.

Informing Learning Nation's whole approach is a social vision they share with the proponents of People's Education, and their methods are aimed at developing it in their readers.

The syllabus that they follow is inherited from apartheid education: but they have hijacked it to teach the 'alternative' values of egalitarianism and communalism; and to empower their readers by making them creative, critical and confident in their own abilities.

The material examined in this chapter should be seen as no more than a representative sample of what has been produced. And as has already been suggested, the analysis, by being made outside the context of the classroom is, of necessity, incomplete.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### PEOPLE'S ENGLISH:

#### A

### PERSONAL ACCOUNT

In the Preface to this study reference was made to the subjectivity inherent in any research undertaking. In the case of as controversial and politically sensitive a topic as People's English it is inescapable. In view of this, it would perhaps be appropriate at this stage to present an account of a personal teaching experience which has embodied aspects of People's English. This change in focus will be signalled stylistically: passive constructions will be abandoned in favour of a transparently subjective and active mode of narration.

I am a lecturer in the Department of English at the University of Bophuthatswana. In 1992 my teaching load included presenting an English language course to first year students. I decided to invite one of my colleagues, Ms Charl Williams, to team-teach it with me. We both viewed the course as an opportunity to test ideas and materials, and so work towards developing an appropriate introductory language course for English second language university students.<sup>1</sup>

The content and methodology of our course contained many elements reminiscent of People's English. This was probably in part due to the influence of my research in the field at the time. But although we were both fully aware of the ideological implications of what we were doing, we did not set out with the express intention of developing a 'People's

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<sup>1</sup> The first half of our project was presented in the form of a poster display at the annual conference of the South African Applied Linguistics Association (SAALA) in July 1992 at the University of Cape Town. Some details in my account of the course presented here are drawn from the poster.

English course' - Ms Williams was, in fact, rather sceptical of the claims of the movement !

The following description of the course and our assessment of it is, of necessity, largely impressionistic: space does not permit a more detailed account. In any case our own research proved inconclusive, the teaching hampered by the absence of appropriate conditions, and the results distorted by an extended student boycott of classes in the second semester.

A few statistics will help to provide a context for the course. ENGLISH 105 and ENGLISH 155 represent the two semesters of the first year of study in English as a subject within the four year BA(Ed) degree. The first year course is divided equally into two components: literature and language. The timetable gives them equal teaching time (two forty minute periods per week each), and the examination at the end of each semester tests both components equally. Our course was designed to fit into the language component slot.

On average, there are about 120 students registered for the first year course each semester. In 1992 the minimum prerequisite to register for ENGLISH 105 was a matric symbol E on the standard grade; to proceed to ENGLISH 155 the student had to have passed ENGLISH 105. Most students at the University have attended schools in Bophuthatswana; a few have attended private, multiracial schools. Part-time students are usually practising teachers (often of English) upgrading their qualifications. The first language of most students is Setswana.

The University of Bophuthatswana is situated in Bophuthatswana, an 'independent' republic created under the South African government's policy of grand apartheid. In

recent years it has developed into a politically highly repressive state, its government increasingly out of touch with the reform movement in the rest of South Africa. Politically, the conditions are not dissimilar to those under which the People's Education movement first developed in South Africa.

We stated the objectives of our language course as follows:

Our general aims are:

- \* to prepare the way for the more advanced studies in English language and linguistics that students will follow in their second, third and fourth years;
- \* to improve students' general competence in the English language, compensating for the gaps in their school education and at the same time introducing them to new concepts and skills associated with effective communication.

More specifically, our choice of topics and materials are aimed at:

- \* encouraging students to read and write critically and with perception;
- \* teaching students to write coherently and logically, and to consider the context as well as the unseen reader of their writing;
- \* making students aware of the cultural and social dimensions of English, while at the same time developing their competence in standard and academic English usage;
- \* showing that language (in this case, English) plays a vital role in everyday life, influencing and being influenced by people's perceptions and ideologies.

(Butler and Williams 1992)

The objectives listed above could, to a large extent, fit

into a typical CLT framework. This is perhaps most clearly suggested in the reference to "effective communication" as one of our general objectives. Phrases such as "cultural and social dimensions" and "perceptions and ideologies" do, however, indicate our wish to teach our students to do more than simply reproduce the linguistic norms of contemporary society (although we recognise in our aim to develop students' "competence in standard and academic English" that this is, to some extent, necessary).

The assumption that language has a socio-political dimension is one that we shared with the proponents of People's English; and our statement of aims contains more than a few (unconscious) echoes of their discourse.

These were not the only parallels. The paragraph on "Education as process" in the NECC press-release on People's English (reproduced below) perfectly captures the essence of our goals and methods:

The term process here means exploration through language. It involves discussion and revision, and an understanding of how parts are eventually related to the whole.

Process values the contributions of all the learners and makes every member of the group responsible for the learning experience. The teacher's role is to make this possible.

Our exploration through (and of) language involved the examination, in class, of various written and spoken texts. We used the metaphor of a funnel to describe our standard procedure of first considering a text at a broadly discoursal level (looking at such aspects as context, point of view, intention, tone, likely reception, etc), and later moving on to a more detailed examination of syntax, semantics, etc. In all aspects of the process of analysis we adopted (and



encouraged our students to cultivate) a critical attitude to the language of the text.

Our teaching methods were similarly in line with the People's English concept of process. Learning was conceived of as a communal, co-operative effort, involving discussion and negotiation. Answers were rarely presented as clear-cut or indisputable, and the element of subjectivity in interpretation was acknowledged, even emphasised when appropriate. Our role as lecturers were to act as facilitators, rather than as sources of knowledge and authority. To further undercut the latter perception we adopted the strategy of team teaching. Both lecturers attended most lectures, sometimes both taking an active part in the proceedings, sometimes one in the role of a passive observer only. Working together enabled us to assess the effectiveness of a particular lesson, material or even the course as a whole with greater confidence; at the same time we hoped that our students would benefit from an approach that avoided presenting knowledge as uncontestable and the teacher as infallible.

Concomitant with this approach was our attempt to make our teaching student-centred. Although some lectures did involve a transfer of information from lecturer to student, most took the form of lecturer-led class discussion of a text chosen to illustrate a particular aspect of English usage. We emphasised that the acquisition of skills to use the language which this would help develop was more important, at that stage at least, than the accumulation of knowledge about it. We also introduced an extra tutorial period, over and above the two lectures on the timetable. Our efforts were, however, hampered by such practical considerations as large student numbers, lack of suitable venues and the constraints of the university timetable.

In our personal behaviour we also attempted to give expression to the kind of democratic principles that are central to People's English. Somewhat controversially - in the context of a 'black' university, where most of the students come from a fairly traditional, rural background - we encouraged students to call us by our first names. We did not hesitate to contradict or disagree with each other, or to express ignorance, in class. We also tried to practise - and encouraged our students to do the same - an openness about issues usually avoided for reasons of tact or embarrassment. Thus, for example, the fact that the inevitable tension between 'us', as members of staff, and 'them', as students, might be exacerbated by racial and social differences was not ignored or glossed over but, when necessary, explicitly stated and discussed with as much honesty as possible.

Materials used in class came from various sources. Initially we tended to use texts from other language teaching resources which had been specifically designed for teaching purposes. This enabled us to experiment with topics and concepts with confidence. Our preference was, however, for genuinely authentic materials culled from everyday usage, and whenever possible, we made use of them. Bearing in mind our aim of developing critical reading habits, we often deliberately selected texts likely to arouse a controversial response: those involving political or gender bias, for example.

Our choice of materials was thus in line with the kind of content recommended in the NECC press release: examples of popular use of language from everyday experience. The critical reading skills that we aimed at developing are similarly implied in its recommendations on language competence: our approach should, among other things, have helped the students to "hear what is said and what is hidden",

"read print and resist it where necessary", and "understand the relationship between language and power".

To give our critical approach to language more focus, we also used critical language awareness materials developed by Hilary Janks. A series of lessons was devoted to her Language and position, a workbook still in the developmental stage. We were given permission to test the materials on the understanding that we would ask our students to complete the questionnaires accompanying the booklet, and provide feed-back on our own experience of teaching it.

In her Foreword to the workbook Janks explains that her aim in the Language Matters series, of which Language and position is the first workbook, is to demonstrate the relationship between language and power:

Language Matters will try to raise your consciousness about how language helps people to gain power and how it helps to take power away from people. If it succeeds you should become more able to resist language that lessens your power. I am hoping that your growing language awareness will enable you to read critically. What I mean by this is that when you read and listen you will be ready and able to challenge what writers and speakers say and how they say it. You will oppose what you read and hear before deciding to accept it; in other words you will learn to become oppositional readers (Janks 1991:i).

Following her aim to its logical conclusion, Janks goes on to invite the reader to challenge her as well, to question what she says and how she says it. She also deconstructs her own position as the writer, explaining who she is and why she is writing the workbook. Her curriculum vitae highlights the social and racial aspects of her background. She thus foregrounds aspects of South African life which are often taken for granted, or assumed to be the norm, both by those

who occupy the same position and even by those who do not.

In Language and position, Janks concludes, a particular aspect of the relationship between language and power is considered: the position from which the writer writes or the speaker speaks. Knowing the identity of a writer or speaker gives one greater insight into his/her intentions, reasoning and motives. (By telling the reader something about herself, Janks has, of course, invited speculation about her own position and how it affects what she is saying.) In addition, this knowledge helps the reader to resist what is being read or heard:

It [the position of the writer/speaker] also helps us to work out where they want to take our thinking, when we are their readers or their listeners. All speakers/writers do want to take their listeners/readers with them. People when they use language want to be believed. Our job is to develop critical skills that enable us to resist being taken where we do not wish to go. In the language of this workbook we have to resist taking up the positions that speakers and writers construct for us, their listeners and readers (Janks 1991:ii).

Reading what Janks says about language and power, it comes as no surprise when she mentions that she helped write the draft proposals for People's English (Janks 1991:i).

The materials in the workbook provide a step by step explication of the ideas outlined in the foreword. The introductory sections look at the relationship between position and interpretation from a literal point of view. 'Position' is then shown to have a metaphorical meaning as well, in the sense that it can refer to a person's standpoint or point of view (Janks 1991:6). Subsequent exercises consist of various texts which the reader is asked to analyse in terms of the positions implicit in them. The texts are taken from a variety of sources, in keeping with the tendencies in People's



English already referred to.

The workbook materials are designed to promote discussion, comparison of ideas, and critical, creative thinking. In the tradition of People's English the questionnaire also allows for input from the students who have used the book.

It is worth noting that many language practitioners and teachers to whom we spoke about our language course were sceptical about our inclusion of a critical language awareness component in a first year course for ESL students. They felt it would demand too much from people who lack some of the basic communicational skills in the language. Only someone already familiar with the rules and norms of conventional usage could really be in a position to question them.

Our view, however, was that the process of acquiring language skills cannot be reduced to discrete steps in this way. Language is not ideologically neutral: one cannot, as it were, learn it first and be critical about it later. Our stance seems to find support both in Janks's belief that critical language awareness can be taught even to young children (Janks 1991:ii), and in the emphasis on critical skills by the proponents of People's English.

There is little in the literature on People's English (or People's Education generally) on the reaction of the learners themselves to the methods and materials which attempt to give expression to it. A brief summary of the feed-back that we received from our students at the end of the first semester (the student boycott in the second semester prevented us from repeating this exercise) may go some way to filling this gap.

Our request for feed-back from the students was an open-ended invitation for them to comment on anything that they considered relevant. A few themes emerged as common to nearly all responses, however; these also provide a useful commentary on some aspects of People's English. Overall, the reaction ranges from keen appreciation of what we were trying to do, to a bemused bewilderment, to outrage at having one's time wasted on irrelevancies. One comment in the last category does not mince words:

First thing I do not see the importance of coming to class both of you. You have 3 days in a week so on Wednesday Ms C Williams must come to the class, on Thursday Mr Butler must come to the class, on Friday one of you , you will choose. Secondly I do not understand your method of teaching may you please change. Thirdly why do you teach something which we are not going to teach at school Thank you

The issue of team-teaching, in fact, received quite a lot of attention, a great deal of it negative. While some students did find being presented with two points of view stimulating, the majority seemed to regard it as an unnecessary indulgence on our part. While this adverse reaction is probably to a large extent attributable to team-teaching being a new and confusing experience for most of them, it has also made us examine our own belief and practice more carefully - especially in the light of comments such as this:

Commenting on the two of you teaching I would like to say sometime you confused me. In a sense that one would say an incomplete sentence and look to the other to comment in order to complete the sentence. I'm convinced that one lecturer could do better, after having observed it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed account of our findings on team-teaching, see Butler and Williams (1993).

A related aspect, one that has even more relevance to People's English, was the issue of class participation. Here again reaction was mixed, sometimes providing us with surprising, even bewildering, insights into our students' expectations. Many responses condemned the lack of participation by the majority of the class. This accorded with our own feelings.

We felt that there might have been several reasons for the lack of response, such as differing perceptions on the roles of the teacher and student, the size of the class and a reluctance to speak English in 'public'. Recognising that these were factors which might inhibit students, we were, nevertheless, firm in our belief that active class participation was essential for effective learning. What was disturbing, however, was the assumption that participation by and response from the class was the sole responsibility of the teacher, as is suggested in the following extracts:

I enjoy to be taught by both of you but what worries me is that you seem to concentrate only on certain people....could you please try to make us feel all at home, by giving anyone an opportunity to contribute. If two students understand it doesn't meant that all students understand.

I do enjoy to be one of the students in your class. But what bothered me a lot is that we don't all participate in the class. It is as if there are students chosen for participation. But I would be one of the participant and my main problem is that when I think of the answer it is a if I thought it wrongly. So that makes me hesitate from answering thinking of telling the whole class, how will they react to my suggestion. But I think i will be rescued from all this.

Offering the lessons together was good and advantageous though at times I felt left out. Maybe out of sheer jealousy or something. I wonder what do you think of the class participation.

As these comments suggest, part of the problem lay in the students' lack of confidence in themselves: in that we were unable to compensate for this we, as lecturers, must bear some of the responsibility for lessons being, as another student described them, "a one way communication". But the comments also point to the deep passivity that is all too typical of anyone whose previous experience of education has been confined to a DET school. The proponents of People's English are correct in advocating a methodology that encourages active participation from students: it is, however, easy to forget that the students themselves may take some time to adapt to the new approach, more especially when it involves a language in which they are unlikely to feel confident.

Many students also commented on the materials we used. They wanted material to be bound into a book rather than distributed as loose sheets of paper; they also felt that they needed a textbook to help them prepare for lectures and the examination. We had, however, decided against binding our material into a book for several reasons. We felt that students needed to learn to develop an immediate response to texts presented to them: this would not have been possible if they had had the material in advance. Another reason for handing out texts as and when we needed to was that it allowed us to be more flexible; we were experimenting and needed to ensure that the level of texts provided was suitable. Our approach also enabled us to include authentic and current material. Not all texts were dealt with in this way, however: in some cases texts were given to students several days before a lecture for which they had to prepare.

Here again the reaction of students suggests their difficulty in adapting to a less rigid, less prescribed system than that which they had just left. Underlying many of their comments one detects a sense that what we were doing was not



entirely serious, that they were not learning anything substantial enough to write an exam on.<sup>3</sup>

There were markedly different responses to Janks's book: some believed that it had helped them to read more critically while others failed to see the relevance of something which would not be taught at school. We did find it heavy going at times as many of the concepts in the book were foreign to the students and too much time had to be spent on filling in the gaps in background knowledge.

In my overview of students' comments I have tended to concentrate on their negative responses to aspects of the course, especially in those areas that have some bearing on People's English. My aim was to highlight the reality likely to face a teacher attempting to implement the principles of People's English, even a modified version in the relatively sheltered environs of a university, such as my colleague and I have attempted. Deeply engrained perceptions of education, indifference, passivity, lack of confidence on the part of students may prove a greater barrier to truly liberated teaching than even the most reactionary government official.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to compare the students' negative attitudes to some aspects of our teaching methodology with similar reactions by Chinese students and teachers to 'Western' communicative language teaching methods. See: Burnaby and Sun (1989), and O'Neill (1991).

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989:298) adopts a more critical perspective in explaining the failure of many similar attempts at critical pedagogy in the classroom. She argues that "key assumptions, goals, and pedagogical practices fundamental to the literature on critical pedagogy - namely 'empowerment', 'student voice', 'dialogue', and even the term 'critical' - are repressive myths that perpetuate relations of domination". She refers to her own experience, pointing out that "when participants in our class attempted to put into practice prescriptions offered in the literature concerning empowerment, student voice, and dialogue, we produced results that were not only unhelpful, but actually exacerbated the very conditions we were trying to work against,

A sober awareness of the difficulties should, however, never blind one to what can be achieved - as the following comment by a student shows:

As a first year student in the university I was generally puzzled by the way in which lessons were presented. It took me almost two months to adapt to the situation. However, English and particularly the language section was rather unique. Firstly in this section, we had no prescribed books. Secondly and amazingly we had two lecturers presenting at the same time. Besides that, the content of the subject was also something different from what I expected. I thought that I was going to be taught grammar, meaning construction of sentences, nouns, verbs etc. Instead I was provided with extracts, and passages which I was asked to analyse and read critically. Meanwhile I only realized later that what I expected has been actually taught but in a different manner. I also learned that language was not only for communication purpose. In fact it can also be used to influence readers to be prejudiced against or in favour of somebody or something. In general I enjoyed the lectures and the way they were presented by the lecturers.<sup>5</sup>

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including Eurocentricism, racism, sexism, classism and 'banking education'."

<sup>5</sup> All the extracts from students' feedback have been reproduced without alteration. We informed the students at the beginning of the course that it was part of an on-going research project, and requested their permission to make use of any of their written work suitable for teaching or research in or outside the classroom. This was granted unanimously. I wish, none the less, to record my indebtedness to the 105/155 class of 1992 for being able to quote their comments on the course in this chapter.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SOME RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

People's English must be seen in the context of People's Education. The point has been stated more than once in the course of this study. Before an attempt is made to draw together the various threads of People's English that have emerged in the previous chapters, it will be necessary to consider some recent developments in People's Education as a whole.

Kruss, on whose examination of the concept of People's Education (first published in 1988) much of the account in Chapter Two is based, concluded her study on an optimistic note. People's Education, she believed, had made a vital contribution to the debate on post-apartheid education, not only for what it could in itself offer, but for the role it had played in stimulating discussion: "Few discussions of a future education system occur without responding to the challenges raised by People's Education. In many ways, the concepts of People's Education have set the terms for debate" (Kruss 1988:41). Its radical questioning of long-held beliefs about education had led educationists to ask similarly fundamental questions as they grappled with options for the future: "Discussion has moved beyond the narrow confines of what exists, to elaborate, conceptualise and question educational principles, theories and systems" (Kruss 1988:42).

Kruss believed that the future of People's Education was assured. The impact that it had already made could only grow. Much had already been achieved in the areas of organisation building, curriculum development, discussion and action by teachers and academics, and in isolated local initiatives. Thus, she concluded, "it is evident that People's Education is to be taken seriously, as a contribution

to the current education crisis and, more importantly, to the future education system of South Africa" (Kruss 1988:43).

In retrospect, Kruss was overly optimistic. At virtually the same time as the publication of her study the NECC was banned, with the consequence that People's Education suffered a severe setback. Activities virtually came to a stop.

Work was resumed in the more relaxed political climate of the 1990s, but with the realisation that little had actually been achieved up to then. Yet despite renewed dedication to the task of providing an alternative to education in South Africa, People's Education was still unable to make any significant impact. Conditions in DET-controlled schools continued to deteriorate.<sup>1</sup>

It was to address this situation that the National Education Conference was held at Broederstroom in March 1992. The conference was convened by the Education Delegation, which had been formed in 1991 by Nelson Mandela, president of the ANC, to look into the very poor black matric results at the end of 1990. Various political and trade union organisations

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<sup>1</sup> The changing conditions at certain black universities in South Africa are the exception here. Institutions such as the University of Venda, the University of Fort Hare and the University of the North, formerly cornerstones of apartheid education, have in recent years undergone dramatic courses of transformation. Politically conservative administrators and academics have been ousted, to be replaced by people more sympathetic to the liberation struggle. At the same time the decision-making processes have been democratised, allowing students, workers, staff associations and the community greater control over the running of the university. Many commentators have hailed these changes as the beginning of a process of turning 'bush colleges' into 'People's Universities', following the lead taken by the University of the Western Cape previously. Reports do, however, suggest that the transformation is not an easy one, and the ideals of People's Education are still far from realisation. (See, for example, "Transforming black universities for the people" in New Nation 7-13/08/92, 9-10.)



active in the liberation movement participated as delegates. The conference was called in the hope that, through it, an 'educational patriotic front' could be established to address the continuing crisis "in education in general and black education in particular" (Back to learning 1992:1-2). It was, according to Devan Pillay, hailed as "the most important gathering on education since the 1986 NECC conference" (Back to learning 1992:37).

A refrain heard throughout the conference was that the education crisis was in part an indication that People's Education had failed to meet the challenges it had set itself, and that its proponents should look to ways of revitalising the movement to meet the new challenges of the present situation.

In his introduction to Back to Learning, the publication which arose out of the debate and discussion at the conference, Ahmed Essop outlines some of the symptoms and consequences of the education crisis, all of which have led to a situation where "a whole generation of black youth has grown up believing that education and learning have no value" (Back to learning: 1992:2). The crisis, he reminds the reader, is not new, having its roots in the introduction of Bantu Education in the 1950s; in its contemporary manifestation, however, it emerged from the events of 1976 and their aftermath, part of which was the demand for People's Education.

People's Education, Essop continues, arose in response to black students' demands for "not only equal access to educational resources, but the radical transformation of the education system, as well as the social, economic and political system on which it is premised"; it offered, in the place of Bantu Education, "the development of an educational

system which, in both structure and curricula, reflected the principles of non-racialism, non-sexism and democracy" (Back to learning: 1992:3).

Yet, in Essop's view, People's Education has failed to deliver what it promised at the outset: the "substantive content of people's education remained undeveloped because of state repression and because student struggles focused on national political issues instead of educational issues" (Back to learning 1992:3-4) - the latter in spite of the NECC's rejection of the philosophy of "Liberation before Education". While student activities did have some impact on broad political developments, the strategies that they chose to pursue did little to alleviate the more immediate crisis in education - an area in which People's Education could have made a contribution.

On the other hand, Essop goes on to say, recent negotiations with the government in the Joint Working Group (consisting of representatives from government and the Education Delegation) had not proved any more successful. An impasse had thus developed, of which the government had taken advantage, in a way that demands a response from the proponents of People's Education:

The state has stepped into this impasse in an attempt to seize political initiative through the development of a new educational dispensation in the form of the Education Renewal Strategy (ERS). The distinguishing feature which sets the ERS apart from previous state educational strategies is that it attempts to co-opt the symbols and concepts that lie at the heart of the liberation movement's educational perspective - non-racialism, non-sexism, and democracy. In the hands of the state, these symbols and concepts take on meanings that differ fundamentally from those intended by the liberation movement. What is crucial, however, is the absence of a clearly defined vision of an alternative education system within the ranks of the liberation

movement. This not only weakens the position of the liberation movement in any negotiating forum but, more importantly, it allows the state to determine and define the parameters of the education debate (Back to learning 1992:5).<sup>2</sup>

It is in this context of crisis and fading initiative that the convening of the National Education Conference should be seen, its resolutions and documents evidence of the liberation movement's attempt to rekindle the spark ignited at the first National Consultative Conference in 1985. A brief examination of some of these will indicate the direction of the conference's thinking.

The conference set itself four particular objectives. These, in Essop's words, were:

- \* the development of a declaration of the broad principles, norms and values that should underpin a future education system;
- \* the development and implementation of a code of conduct with regard to the culture of learning;
- \* the development of joint strategies and campaigns to address the education crisis;
- \* the development of mechanisms for constructing a new education system and for dealing with education in the transition period.

Delegates in addition demonstrated their commitment to the struggle against apartheid and the creation of a non-racial,

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<sup>2</sup> This development should not have been entirely unexpected by the proponents of People's Education. As has already been observed, there are many aspects of People's or popular education which are entirely compatible with ideologically more conservative pedagogies (see, for example, Levin (1991)); there have also been a number of precedents of a reactionary state hijacking (and consequently neutralising) a popular educational movement (see, for example, Lyster 1992:40 on the co-option of the Freirean approach in literacy programmes in Brazil and Mexico).

non-sexist, democratic South Africa. More particularly, they indicated their

- \* acceptance that the root cause for the crisis in education is the racial fragmentation spawned by apartheid in its various forms and structures;
- \* rejection of the authoritarian and undemocratic content and structures of apartheid education;
- \* belief that the real solution lies in the creation of a unified education system which is non-racial, non-sexist and organised along democratic lines.

(Back to learning 1992:6).

The consensus achieved in these statements of intent and belief (all of them reminiscent of the early days of People's Education) was carried over into the resolutions ultimately passed by the conference. Such unity of vision is remarkable in that it marked a departure from the sectarianism which had tended to characterise People's Education in the past. As has already been observed, delegates were drawn from a wide range of groupings, united only in their commitment to the liberation struggle and, after the conference, around "a common set of principles and strategies, reflecting their commitment to resolving the education crisis" (Back to learning 1992:7).

Agreement was reached on three main issues which, as Essop points out, "represent continuity as well as a decisive shift from the past struggles in the education terrain" (Back to learning 1992:7). These were: values and principles; a code of conduct; and strategy and tactics. Each will now be considered briefly in terms of its perpetuation of or departure from previous tendencies in People's Education.

The conference adopted a number of values and principles



that it believed should underpin a democratic education system. Although fairly extensive, they are worth reproducing here in full for the interesting comparison with the resolutions on People's Education that they offer.

The conference defined "human dignity, liberty and justice; democracy; equality; and national development" as core values. It also resolved that:

education is a basic human right, and education and training should be:

- \* provided to all on a democratic and unitary basis, opposing any discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, class and age;
- \* extended to all disadvantaged groups including women, adults, students [sic], youth and rural communities, in order to redress historical imbalances;
- \* integrated within a coherent and comprehensive national development policy.

On the basis of these fundamental values, the conference was then able to draw up a set of key principles:

- \* The state has the central responsibility in the provision of education and training.
- \* A nationally determined framework should ensure that employers observe their fundamental obligation for the provision of educational resources.
- \* Education training and policy and practices shall be governed by the principle of democracy, ensuring the active participation of various interest groups, in particular teachers, parents, workers and students.
- \* All people (children, youth and adults) shall have access to education.
- \* There shall be special emphasis on the redress

of educational inequalities among historically disadvantaged groups such as youth, the disabled, adults, women, the unemployed and rural communities.

- \* There shall be mechanisms to ensure horizontal and vertical mobility and flexibility of access between general formative, technical, industrial and adult education and training in the formal and non-formal sectors.
- \* There shall be nationally determined standards for accreditation and certification for formal and non-formal education and training, with due recognition of prior learning and experience.
- \* Education shall aim at the development of a national democratic culture with an accommodation of diversity which does not conflict with other key principles.
- \* The provision of education and training shall be linked to the development of human resources within national development aimed at the restructuring of the economy, redistribution and the democratisation of society.
- \* The education process will encourage national peace, justice and stability.
- \* Education shall be based upon the principles of co-operation, critical thinking and civic responsibility, and shall equip individuals for participation in all aspects of society.

(Back to learning 1992:7-9).

Essop believes that this framework of values and principles was a major advance: "...it succeeds in precisely the area where the People's Education Movement failed, that is, in developing a vision and giving content, albeit broadly, to a democratic education system" (Back to learning 1992:7).

This is clearly the case. Although many of the values and principles are quite vague, open to a wide range of interpretation, they are, on the whole, more substantial, more readily translatable into practice, than were the resolutions

that formed the basis for People's Education. The delegates were more intent on formulating policy capable of detailed articulation at a later stage, than on making an ideological statement. The oppositional rhetoric that characterised People's Education in the past is still present, if only implicitly (as in the negatively conceived values of "non-racialism" and "non-sexism"); but it is balanced by a creative, immediately practical element. That this is so is, of course, indicative of the political changes that had taken place in the interim. The delegates at the Broederstroom conference, while faced with an education crisis as serious as that of 1986, were clearly more confident of the impact that their recommendations were likely to have. The possibility of actually being in a position to implement an alternative system of education was now very real.

At the same time differences in emphasis should not hide the similarities. Continuity with People's Education is found in such principles as "co-operation, critical thinking and civic responsibility". The general spirit of the earlier movement is still very much in evidence.

The Code of Conduct adopted by the conference, on the other hand, is one area where the observer is more likely to be struck by a departure from earlier tendencies. The Code sets out norms of behaviour for students, teachers and parents which are likely to assist in the re-establishment of a culture of learning. But it is the means rather than the goal that is noteworthy here. Implicit in the code is, as Essop puts it, an acknowledgement that "although the prime responsibility for the destruction of the culture of learning must be laid at the door of the state, the liberation movement must also accept that it has a responsibility to ensure the renewal of the culture of learning" (Back to learning 1992:9).

One might, in fact, go further than this and see in the Code a tacit admission of the failure of many of the earlier strategies of People's Education, such as boycotts and the disruption of schooling. What had originally been conceived of as acts of liberatory defiance had degenerated into counterproductive lawlessness, anarchy or, at best, inactivity. The Code itself repeatedly stresses the importance of self-discipline, responsible action and that "the primary responsibility of students is to learn" (Back to learning 1992:76). It also attempts to clarify some of the principles so glibly assumed and asserted previously. In most cases these refinements involve a more conservative (some might say, more realistic) reassessment, a tempering of the original principle. For example, the notion of mutual respect in the classroom is explained as follows:

In the case of the student-teacher relationship mutual respect refers to equality as human beings and not equality in terms of power within the classroom. Equality as human beings refers to the development of mutual respect between students and teachers on the basis that they learn from each other and that both parties contribute, albeit differently, to the learning process (Back to learning 1992:77).<sup>3</sup>

In his commentary on the Code, Meintjies mentions the debate that preceded the acceptance of this clause:

The authority of the teacher came up for scrutiny. That authority was not disputed; if anything, it was reaffirmed. Delegates agreed to excise a reference to 'equality' between teachers and students in the Code guidelines and to substitute 'mutual respect'. Conference was warned that easy talk of equality was 'troublesome' and 'fraught with all sorts of dangers' (Back to learning 1992:59).

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<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately constraints of space do not allow the entire Code of Conduct to be reproduced here. The interested reader is referred to Appendix 1 in Back to learning (1992), 74-81.



Elsewhere Meintjies sums up very succinctly the sense of incongruence that initially strikes the reader when faced with the Code of Conduct:

The term discipline ... does not sit comfortably with the concept of people's education. Discipline and order smack of obedience, docility and subjugation, conflicting sharply with a people's drive for discussion, a questioning approach and a scepticism which encourages bucking the values of the status quo (Back to learning 1992:53-54).

He emphasises, however, that the work of the Code of Conduct commission should be seen in relation to the findings of the parallel commission on values and principles:

The two commissions taken together paint a picture of democracy that balances the need for maximum free expression with structure and parameters. The democracy being sought is one that stamps out authoritarianism and simultaneously protects people from anarchy and mayhem (Back to learning 1992:54).

The Code, he believes, fulfils a need for "stability, structure and agreed participation in education" (Back to learning 1992:54).\*

The third area of agreement was that strategies should be developed to involve the state and capital in addressing the immediate crisis in education. This would be a continuation of the work begun by the Education Delegation; however, in future any negotiating forum would be held accountable to the public.

This emphasis on accountability to grassroots level is obviously in the tradition of People's Education: the decision

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\* Meintjies provides evidence of this need in the black community by quoting a number of leading figures. See: 'Community Response', Back to learning (1992), 67-71.

to negotiate with the government and business points to a new mood of pragmatic compromise.

The keynote address at the National Education Conference was given by Jakes Gerwel, rector of the University of the Western Cape. His paper, "Constructing a new education system", offers some further insights into the ways in which the proponents of People's Education have had to reconsider their positions in the light of recent political developments.

It is, says Gerwel, "no accident that the National Education Conference has taken place at a time when the struggle for people's education is in question and when the imperatives of negotiations and the prospect of a post-apartheid South Africa impel us to find a new direction and a new mode of struggle in our quest for the transformation of education" (Back to learning 1992:11).

In the past, he goes on to say, attempts had been made via People's Education to establish an alternative system alongside the apartheid institutions. This was to involve two elements: democratic organisation and new curricula. Neither goal was achieved, however: the liberation movement lacked the capacity to put the structures in place, and there was not enough time to develop new curricula, particularly under the repressive conditions then prevailing. People's Education, in consequence, lost "its distinctive positive and creative content", and was "reduced to an opposition movement based on the rejection of apartheid education", linked with school boycotts and street demonstrations (Back to learning 1992:12).

Gerwel's account presents a picture of an ironic reversal: the very conditions that came to characterise and ultimately discredit People's Education were those that its proponents had originally sought to eliminate. But the

dilemma that he goes on to sketch has the potential for even greater irony.

The liberation movement rejected an oppositional approach to education after it was drawn into the process of negotiated political reform. This was not, however, "accompanied by a recovery and development of either the substantive, democratic and critical content of people's education or of its self-conscious attempt to link education to the broad goal of social transformation. In fact, the engagement in negotiations has served, in general, to further subdue the radical and transformatory content of people's education" (Back to learning 1992:13). Gerwel ascribes this reactionary tendency to two causes:

Firstly, the imperatives of the negotiation process have had the effect of channelling the struggle to dismantle the apartheid system into the very institutions which constitute that system. The goal of a rapid and total displacement of the existing institutions by a new, radically different social order has, of necessity, given way to a negotiated reform of the separate institutions from within. The inevitable consequence is that the process of reform tends to be gradual, uneven, partial and piecemeal and the horizons of change become narrowly focused.

Secondly, that narrowing is conditioned by the fact that the liberation movement is obliged, in the new conditions, to turn its attention to immediate issues of social and human resource development (Back to learning 1992:13).

Gerwel concedes that compromise is necessary under the changed political conditions so as not to miss the opportunities afforded in areas of consensus between the government and the liberation movement. But his fear is that the ideal of an alternative education system will be sacrificed to the more immediate needs of education, an area where some degree of agreement has been reached. For this

reason he urges delegates not to be diverted "from the necessity of recalling and restoring to the centre of [their] concerns the broader aims of [their] struggle for a democratic South Africa and an education system appropriate to it" ((Back to learning 1992:17-18)).

The National Education Conference at Broederstroom is not the only forum in which the changing face of People's Education has been reflected, however.

In 1991, for example, Witthaus, writing about adult literacy programmes, remarked that "[c]hanges in the social and political climate in South Africa since February 1990 have led to some self-evaluation by practitioners in the field" (Witthaus 1991:60). Concepts such as learner-centredness and the dialogical communicative approach, central to 'alternative' education methodologies, were consequently being subjected to closer critical scrutiny, no longer accepted as axiomatic. She warned that past policies and principles, in addition to any inherent weaknesses, might not necessarily be appropriate for the formalised, state supported, large scale literacy campaigns anticipated in the future. In view of this she advocated a compromise with more traditional methodologies, without losing sight of the ideals that motivated the original approach:

Although the De Klerk reforms have ushered in a new era South Africa, literacy and illiteracy still remain ideological issues, and need to continue to be addressed as such. I have argued in this paper that the ideals and values of learner-centredness should continue to guide alternative literacy organizations in their work, even though circumstances now require a more prescriptive approach.... The challenge facing alternative literacy organizations at the moment is to find a balance between a prescribed, centralized approach that stifles creativity and enjoyment of learning, and one that still incorporates the values of the



learner-centred, communicative and dialogical way (Witthaus 1991:64).

It was pointed out in the foregoing chapter that the English language course at the University of Bophuthatswana was not designed to be a 'People's English course'; rather it was found, on retrospective reflection, that it embodied, to varying degrees, many of the principles and tendencies typical of the movement.

That my colleague and I had, as it were, stumbled into People's English, seems to confirm the belief, expressed on more than one occasion in this study, that People's English (and People's Education, to which it is inextricably tied) is not easily described in terms of a theory of education or even as a set of principles. It is rather a particular way of thinking, an area of discourse, subject to the shifting tides of socio-political forces.

This 'fuzziness' is what has made discussion of People's English so difficult, and an adequate definition of it elusive. The same vagueness has been simultaneously its strength and its weakness. On the one hand, the flexibility has allowed for its application in a wide variety of situations and circumstances. But it has also encouraged intellectual sloppiness: People's English can mean whatever you want it to mean provided you say it loudly enough.

Such an assessment of any movement in its formative stage is not uncommon. Unfortunately People's Education does not seem to have moved much beyond that stage, as comments at the Broederstroom conference have already suggested. For a variety of reasons its principles have not been adequately tested; there has not been enough real discussion or debate

which could have refined or clarified the broad outlines. While these objections might be answered by reference to the idea of process, so important in most conceptions of People's Education, the problem remains: there has been little progress to the process. The recurrence of the word 'towards' in so many of the titles referred to in this study is indicative of this.

This stagnation may also go some way in explaining the frequent discrepancy between the promise and the actual performance of People's English. The analysis of materials in Chapter 3 revealed some innovative work, such as the booklets produced by the English Resource Unit (see pp. 63-67, above) and The Storyteller Group's comics (see pp. 67-72, above), both radical in more than a tritely political sense. All too often, however, the 'alternativeness' of the materials is no more than superficial: at best seeming to follow the crude formula of 'Communication + Politics = People's English', a tendency clearly exemplified in some of the worksheets in Some ideas for English teachers and More ideas for English teachers (see p. 55, above). There is not much evidence of the truly radical critical questioning and scrutiny of language suggested by writers such as Norton Peirce and Ndebele, referred to in the first chapter of this study.

The failure to realise the full implications of People's English is not confined to materials writers, however. Its most ardent proponents have, more than once, been hoist by their own petards. In Chapter 2 Sebidi's speech was quoted at some length to demonstrate how poorly it would stand up to the scrutiny of the very approach it was ostensibly advocating. But whereas Sebidi was something of a paper tiger, set up only so that he could be shot down, quoted only so that he could damn himself, his was not an isolated case of inconsistency.

Kruss, for example, refers to a programme "for the training of headmasters, administrators and teachers within a People's Education approach" (Kruss 1988:23; emphasis mine), without drawing attention to the sexist assumptions in the phrase, perhaps not even aware of them. Even more damning is the reference to the "correct values of democracy, non-racialism, collective work, and active participation" in the resolutions on People's Education at the First National Consultative Conference - an inconsistency all the more noticeable for following immediately after a resolution in which the importance of "critical and creative thinking and working methods" was stressed.

The fact of the matter is that the proponents of People's Education have set for themselves very high standards, expectations that will not be easy to meet, especially in South Africa where education has suffered years of neglect and abuse. As Gardiner observes:

The difficulties faced by teachers... - many of whom are likely to be daunted by the requirements of People's Education, given that their education, training, experience and organisation have not provided them with the confidence or resources to adapt to significant change - must also be addressed.... (Gardiner 1990a:161).

The educational situation is such that CLT - the inadequacies of which provided the point of departure for Norton Peirce's argument in favour of a "pedagogy of possibility" such as People's English - would, one suspects, present a radical alternative for most teachers. Certainly, most of the factors identified by the delegates to the People's English workshop in 1987 as "contributing to an oppressive educational system" (the lack of autonomy of English teachers; the irrelevant and unstimulating literature syllabus; teacher-centred, textbook orientated methodology;

rigid processes of assessment and examination) (People's Education for teachers 1987:36) could be addressed with nothing more subversive than a communicative approach to language teaching.

But for some, as many of the resources examined in Chapter 3 seem to imply, a communicative approach is synonymous with People's English. Lyster's comment that "many who claim to be using a Freirean approach are in fact using participatory, learner-centred methods that have been in existence since early this century and even before" (Lyster 1992:40) would seem to hold true for many who believe themselves to be implementing People's English.

But perhaps the foregoing criticism (although it need not be construed as such) is unnecessarily harsh. It is all too easy to forget the context in which People's Education and People's English first arose. Conditions, especially in black schools, in South Africa are such that any initiative that attempts to inject meaning and relevance into education is likely to be hailed in the somewhat extravagant terms typical of the rhetoric of People's Education.

Janks has pointed out that although the syllabuses of the (white) Transvaal Education Department and the (black) Department of Education and Training show a surprising similarity, both reflecting "the growing understanding of the relationship between language and learning and the current influence of communicative approaches" (Janks 1990b:253), in classroom practice and in the type of questions set in the examinations, there is a vast difference. Examinations and classroom practice in DET schools, she suggests, provide a conservative mutual reinforcement of each other, undercutting the claims made by the syllabus. Thus the DET examinations continue to focus on content in literature, while grammar



questions involve decontextualised manipulation of structures. While the "TED papers require some analysis, the DET papers rely fairly heavily on recall of information" (Janks 1990b:253).<sup>5</sup>

Janks goes on to describe the material conditions which prevent teachers from translating the CLT-inspired syllabus into "meaningful classroom activity":

Teaching in black schools, for example, has traditionally been based on a transmission model where pupils are passive recipients of information provided by the teacher. Language has been taught using chorus drills, rote repetition and gap-filling exercises. Literature is seen as content. Culturally, teachers are seen as authorities who possess knowledge which they impart to learners. The switch to an interactive, communicative methodology is difficult under any circumstances. Where the teachers are poorly qualified and insecure in relation to their subject matter, allowing pupils to ask questions and make their own meanings can be very threatening. In overcrowded classrooms group-work is difficult and it is difficult to mark and monitor pupils' production when every class you teach has up to fifty pupils in it. (Pupil-teacher ratios do not reflect the fact that English classes are always larger because it is a compulsory component of the curriculum.) Moreover, pupils schooled in passivity often do not adapt to participatory, communicative learning with any more ease than their teachers (Janks 1990b:253-254).

In such a context, CLT, denigrated by Norton Peirce as reactionary, would actually seem to be a radical alternative, seeming to offer much greater opportunities for democratic participation, critical and creative thinking and authentic use of the language.

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<sup>5</sup> The approach followed by the Learning Press (discussed above, in Chapter 3) is therefore obviously a clear reflection of the reality of the DET classroom practice and examinations.

Certainly, any approach - even a watered-down, ideologically inconsistent version of People's English, no more than CLT in another guise - that allows a teacher to feel that he or she has gained some control over the situation, can break free of the DET stranglehold (at least mentally) and is capable of producing his or her own material for use in the classroom, is psychologically an enormous step forward in a context such as the one described by Janks. Academics trained in Applied Linguistics, and even teachers working under happier circumstances, are perhaps apt to forget this; and all too often fall into the trap of dismissing much of People's English as banal, empty rhetoric.\*

It should not be forgotten that People's Education has always been conceived of as a process, sensitive to the changing needs of those whom it serves. Such a conception would allow for its future development to a position beyond the limitations of CLT.

What People's English has achieved should not be forgotten either. SACHED's Down Second Avenue comic was banned by a government which - quite rightly - regarded it as subversive and dangerous. The same organisation's Turret Correspondence College course incurred the suspicion of Eastern Cape prison authorities.<sup>7</sup> Even if the repressive reaction was motivated by superficial paranoia, and executed by people with little understanding of the full implications of the 'subversive material', the effect was the same:

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\* For this insight I am indebted to a private conversation with Jane Jackson, University of Fort Hare, November 1990.

<sup>7</sup> Workers from EWE (Each Working in Education) found that prison authorities were not willing to allow political detainees to complete their school education using the Turret course: "People wanted to do Turret Correspondence College courses from SACHED. But the Eastern Cape prisons don't like SACHED and refused Turret material" (Education is ours 1990:18).

People's English had successfully questioned and challenged the hegemony of the status quo.

## APPENDIX

### CORRESPONDENCE ON PEOPLE'S EDUCATION AND PEOPLE'S ENGLISH

The following pages are copies of correspondence between myself and representatives of Learning Press, Learning Nation, Use Speak Write English and the English Resource Unit. The letters that I received from these organisations in reply to my queries about the theory and practice of their work have all been quoted in the text of this study.



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P.O. Box 7113  
MMABATHO  
BOPHUTHATSWANA  
8681  
12 May 1991

The Editor  
Learning Press  
City Press  
Media Centre  
2 Herb Street  
New Doornfontein  
JOHANNESBURG  
2001

Dear Sir / Madam

RESEARCH INTO POPULAR EDUCATION

I am currently doing research into popular education in South Africa, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an M Ed (English Second Language) degree at Rhodes University. The focus of my interest is, of course, the area of English language and literature. Part of my research involves the description and analysis of specific materials and books which are widely available and which aim at either supplementing and reinforcing the formal education structures, or providing an alternative to them.

I would be very grateful for any information that you can give me as far as Learning Press's involvement with popular education is concerned. What are its aims and objectives? Do you, as editor, work according to any specific philosophy of education? Do you see Learning Press as providing an alternative to formal education, or merely supplementing it? How do you see your work in relation to "People's Education" - a concept that has received a great deal of attention in educational circles lately?

I realise that these questions are all rather vague, and I am sorry to bombard you with so many at once! But I do hope that you will be able to find the time to write to me and share any thoughts that you might have on the subject.

I would, of course, also appreciate any other information that you can give me, or the names and addresses of any other people or organizations that you think might be able to help me in my research.

Yours faithfully

Ian Butler

---

P O Box 7113  
MMABATHO  
BOPHUTHATSWANA  
8681

11 May 1991

English Resource Unit  
14 St Andrews Centre  
21 St Andrews Street  
DURBAN  
4001

Dear Sir / Madam

RESEARCH INTO "PEOPLE'S ENGLISH"

I am currently doing research into People's Education, with special reference to "People's English", in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an M Ed (English Second Language) degree at Rhodes University.

The goals of my research (as set out in my research proposal) are:

- \* To produce a critical analysis of the current debate and discussion surrounding "People's English" in South Africa, which will include an examination of similar and related concepts internationally;
- \* To provide a review and analysis of syllabuses and teaching materials which seek to implement "People's English";
- \* In the light of the above, to strive towards a definition of "People's English".

I would be very grateful for any comments that you or your co-workers in the English Resource Unit could make in response to these three areas of enquiry. Do you see your work as implementing the principles and aims of People's Education? If so, in what way (in terms of materials, approach, goals, etc)? What exactly do you understand by the concept "People's Education" (or, more specifically, "People's English") anyway?

I realise that these questions are all rather vague, but I hope that you will be able to find the time to write to me and share any thoughts you might have on the subject.

I would, of course, also appreciate any other information that you can give me, or the names and addresses of any other people or organisations that you think might be able to help me in my research.

Finally, considerations of People's English apart, I would be most interested in seeing the materials and resources that you are using in your work. Are these commercially available ?

I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you.

Yours faithfully

Ian Butler

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COPIES OF THE ABOVE LETTER WERE ALSO SENT TO LEARNING NATION  
AND USWE

# Learning Press

20.06.91

Mr Ian Butler  
P.O.Box 7113  
Mmabatho  
Bophuthatswana  
8681.

Dear Mr Butler,

I'm sorry that it has taken me so long to reply to your letter. Somehow, during term time I work to such a tight schedule, that I have not had the time to respond.

The involvement of Learning Press with popular education is basically nil, if you consider curriculum-related material 'unpopular' education. Our philosophy has been that black kids have to pass matric in a totally inadequate formal school environment, and our aim must therefore be to supplement that in order to help them pass. We do not provide an alternative in any way at this point. We are providing material that they should get in the classroom but don't, and hope that this does give them a slightly better chance than kids who don't read our publication.

When talking to a black headmaster last week about people's education, he said to us, when someone can provide him with a syllabus and a curriculum, he will perhaps be in a position to evaluate it. No-one has been able to do that. Perhaps you will be able to when you have completed your thesis. It seems to be such a woolly concept and I don't think it has been adequately conceptualised by its proponents. Once the education system has been reformed, we will re-examine our aims.

I'm sorry that our publication does not meet your criteria - ~~if~~ I can help you in any other way, I will be more than willing. Perhaps telephone me and we can discuss it more informally.

Yours faithfully

*Michelle Leon*

Michelle Leon  
Editor





# English Resource Unit

Office 7 & 14, St Andrews Centre, 21 St Andrews St,  
Durban, 4001. Phone (031) 3059866/7

23 July 1991

Ian Butler  
P.O.Box 7113  
Mmabatho  
Bophutatswana  
8681

Dear Ian

## Research into People's English

Thank you for your letter and sorry about the late reply. Your research sounds very interesting, and we are interested in commenting on what you are doing. The difficulty comes in the broadness of the topic, which makes it difficult for us to comment without entering the debate extensively.

The English Resource Unit is an adult basic education organisation focussing on the training of community-selected teachers of English as a Second Language. In 1992, we will also be including First Language literacy teacher training. Hence, what we are involved in is not formal education.

Our approach to the provision of adult basic education, as well as our aims and principles would be that of People's Education broadly. We seek to empower people, yet at the same time we are very aware of the ambiguities and vagueness of talking about a concept like empowerment. We feel that empowerment means delivering something concrete in terms of useful skills, abilities and understandings. Further, the concept needs to be developed beyond the current rhetoric of People's Education.

The underlying principles for our methodology for both training and teaching, ~~draws on~~ the work of Paulo Freire. We attempt through our training to give people a concrete experience of participatory teaching techniques, and then an opportunity to reflect on such learning processes. This approach is however tempered by theories of second language learning and the tensions that exist between the two approaches. For example, with beginner English learners it is very difficult for learners to discuss anything because they do not know much English. What then do participatory teaching techniques mean in such a context?



What all this means for People's English is difficult to say. Most of the work that has been done in this area has focussed on the formal education system. It also seems to be closely tied in with the question of language policy. The ERU is a member of the National Literacy Co-operation, and there is work going on within the NLC around devising an Adult Basic Education curriculum and syllabus with clearly defined levels, and entry and exit points. A lot of work is also been conducted by COSATU in this regard. Such a curriculum would include English, and could be viewed as a contribution towards People's English.

A further comment I would make pertaining to People's Education more generally pertains to its historical context. People's Education came out of struggle, and is an oppositional dialogue. The challenge of People's Education in the current context is to translate that dialogue into something far more concrete - People's Education has to start delivering this alternative education that it has been sloganeering about for so many years. Apartheid education has been rejected but we need something to put in its place. Clearly this is no easy task, especially when one considers the range of different understandings that exist about what this education is. Participation is a key factor and how this participation of "the people" will happen is a difficult question.

I'm not sure if any of this is useful. I am including an information package on literacy which the ERU developed for International Literacy Year (1990). It was designed for organisations in the democratic movement as a resource which could be used to discuss the question of literacy. It is argued in the package that the educational needs of illiterate people need to be included in demands for People's Education.

We would be interested in entering into further discussions with you, especially if you could provide clearer guidelines for areas of comment that pertain specifically to our area of work. We would also be interested in a copy of your thesis when it is completed.

We look forward to hearing from you, and wish you all the best in your research.

Yours in the struggle for a literate South Africa

MBrowne

ANN BROWNE

# LEARNING NATION

## SACHED TRUST

Allied Building, 236 Bree Street,  
Johannesburg, 2001.

P O Box 11350, Johannesburg,  
2000

Tel. (011) 23-9746, Fax 23-2297

REGISTRATION NUMBER  
69/18447/07

Dear Ian

We do see our publication as implementing the somewhat broad principles and aims of People's Education. Unfortunately, we are presently working frantically to deadline so at this stage all I can offer is our document outlining what we plan to do this year. It is based on our understanding of democratic education - oriented towards the working class and might be useful.

Yours

Heather Hills

Learning Nation Coordinator.



# U se S peak W rite E nglish

Literacy for Freedom

1 Strubens Rd, Mowbray 7700, RSA.  
Tel: Cape Town 689-4026/5014

29 July 1991

Mr Ian Butler  
P.O. Box 7113  
MMABATHO  
Bophuthatswana  
8681

Dear Ian

## RESEARCH INTO "PEOPLE'S ENGLISH"

I apologise for answering your letter with a 3 month delay. It was not for lack of interest, simply there were immediate tasks to be dealt with.

Further, I am not sure how we could contribute, however I shall try.

### 1. People's Education

I surmise that you mean here "People's Education" this is so. "People's Education" (Arnold, 1985) is part of our endeavour as material writers and trainers of teachers. An excellent definition of popular education has been recently given by Marian Clifford and Caroline Kerfoot of USWE in an article: "English, Language of Hope or Broken Dream" to be published by UCT. I am enclosing a copy of the relevant pages. (Should you use the text in your thesis, please acknowledge it in the customary way.)

### 2. People's English

You do not quote any sources which will be used in your research, and you do not in any way define what do you mean by "People's English", so it is very difficult to comment on your proposal.

If .... /2

~~the new [redacted] with English and [redacted]~~  
~~our syllabus [redacted]~~  
~~[redacted]~~  
[redacted]. We can send you sample units of this if you  
are interested.

I hope the enclosed will be of use to you. Please contact  
us if you have any queries.

I do not think, with the exception of the article mentioned  
above, we have published anything of interest to you.

Yours sincerely



BASIA LEDOCHOWSKI

Encl.: Draft chapter for Oxford University Press.



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