

'Capitalising on the dullness of the data': A linguistic analysis of a Grade 7 learner's writing

Monica Hendricks

*Institute for the Study of English in Africa Rhodes University, PO Box 94,
Grahamstown 6140, South Africa
e-mail: m.hendricks@ru.ac.za*

Abstract: The paper discusses the conceptions of language and literacy underpinning writing in current curriculum policy and analyses how the policy is instantiated in the writing of a Grade 7 learner across Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa at a well-resourced school with diverse multilingual learners and well-qualified teachers. This setting was selected in order to examine how language curriculum policy is realised in favourable circumstances. One finding was that literacy practices at the school, in all three languages, privilege grammar exercises and personal, expressive writing. In terms of Cummins's (1984) constructs of Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skill (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), learners' written competencies in all three languages (most strongly in isiXhosa) are conversational (BICS). The personal expressive texts which predominate in learners' writing have done little to develop a formal, impersonal academic register (CALP). Yet learners need to become familiar with the more abstract impersonal factual genres associated with disciplinary-based knowledge, as Grade 7 is the start of the senior phase of schooling. It is vital that learners achieve grade-level competence in national learning outcome five which states that 'the learner will be able to use language to think and reason, as well as access, process and use information for learning' (DoE 2002).

Introduction

Given the persistence of profound social inequalities in post-apartheid South Africa, a major concern of educational research is that access to quality education has become the preserve of a middle class which includes increasing numbers of people of colour (Soudien, 2004). Added to this, learner achievement studies conducted within the last eight years in South Africa find that learners' scores 'are far below what is expected at all levels of the schooling system, both in relation to other countries including other developing countries and to the expectations of the new South African curriculum' (Taylor *et al.*, 2003: 41). So, what is the quality of education at a well-resourced school with diverse multilingual learners and well-qualified teachers?

This paper discusses theories of language and literacy underpinning current curriculum policy in order to examine how the policy is instantiated in the writing of a Grade 7 learner across three languages (Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa) and, from this learners' writing, to deduce language teachers' conceptions of writing. A well resourced school with diverse multilingual learners and well qualified teachers was selected as the site of study in order to examine how language curriculum policy is realised in favourable circumstances. Research into the problematic implementation of the new curriculum and language policy has pointed to both the poverty of school resources and of teacher content knowledge (Taylor & Vinjevold, 1999). However, what this paper raises is that implementation difficulties may also arise when curriculum policy is theoretically incoherent and therefore ambiguous and open to contradictory interpretations.

For purposes of anonymity and confidentiality, the names of the school (St Katherine's), the learner (Palesa) and teachers (Afrikaans: Ms Relly, English: Ms Ames, isiXhosa: Ms Burt) are all