

THE MEDIUM GAP

The inability of students and graduates of our educational institutions to express themselves correctly and creatively in speech and in writing, suggests that their proficiency in English is seriously flawed. This indicates that English as a subject is failing to develop the degree of operational competence in the students that the use of English as a medium of communication requires. One can thus say that a gap has opened up between the standard of proficiency that the teaching of English as a subject is expected to achieve and what the use of English as a medium of communication requires. The Universities and other tertiary institutions cream off the top percentage of pre-university graduates and one would expect that whatever the general standard, the language skills of this selected group would be sufficiently well developed to meet the language requirements of academic work. However, the spoken and written English of these students are considered to be so far below the standard required that a remedial programme in language and study skills packaged in a communication skills course, forms an integral part of all programmes in the first year of study in our tertiary institutions. In spite of the remedial effort, there remains a significant qualitative gap between the kind of expository writing skills required by the content subjects and the writing skills that English as a subject should be able to develop. Students arrive at the Universities and other tertiary institutions with shortcomings because of gaps in language education at levels down the academic ladder. A one year remedial course at the tertiary level may therefore not be maximally effective. The solution ultimately lies in getting to the root cause of the problem.

ENGLISH AS A SUBJECT

English, as a subject at the secondary level, is handicapped because it does not have much content matter in language to exploit. The communicative aspect does not come out because of its concern to teach grammar. Topics chosen in English lessons for free composition tend to be topics relating to the everyday experience of students, which can be dealt with adequately by means of a simple narrative. Much of the compositional work done in class tends to be controlled and guided and the focus is more on grammar format and vocabulary rather than on rhetorical devices and the organisation of discourse.

The compartmentalisation of subjects at the secondary level leaves little room for an integrated curriculum. Each subject is compartmentalised and taught by a specialist teacher who is unlikely to know or have a clear idea of what is taught in other subjects.

**THE STATUS OF ENGLISH AS A SUBJECT IN AN ENGLISH MEDIUM
CONTEXT: THE GHANAIAI SITUATION**

by

Ekua Tekyiwa Amua-Sekyi
Dept. of Arts & Social Sciences Education
University of cape Coast.

Abstract

Whatever the subject, whatever the area of specialisation, we need to acquire proficiency in English to function. When we examine the goals of English language teaching in Ghana, it is clear that English is taught to enable us to use the language to communicate effectively. We need English to pursue studies in other subjects, for further studies, for employment, for social, recreational and administrative purposes. Since English is not our native language, its use as a medium of communication in our schools and society, depends upon it being taught effectively as a subject in our schools.

Introduction

The proficiency in English of graduates from the various levels of our educational system leaves much to be desired. Parents, stakeholders and professionals in the field of Education have all expressed concern about the decline in the spoken and written English standards of our graduates (Abban, 1999; Nana Aba, 2000; Owusu-Ansah, 2000). There have been enormous media coverage on this issue. The lack of adequate performance in the spoken and written English of our graduates points to a lack of competence in the functional/operational use of the English language among our students. The causes of this problem are varied. What this paper seeks to do is to assess the status of English as a subject in our schools, as well as its effectiveness in meeting the demands of English as a medium of communication in its role as a second language in Ghana. In doing this, I will attempt to account for the gap that appears to have opened up between the standard of proficiency that the teaching of English as a subject is purported to achieve and that which the use of English as a medium of communication requires. I will look at strategy options that might be more effectively used to narrow the gap between English as a subject and English as a medium of communication.

THE MEDIUM GAP

The inability of students and graduates of our educational institutions to express themselves correctly and creatively in speech and in writing, suggests that their proficiency in English is seriously flawed. This indicates that English as a subject is failing to develop the degree of operational competence in the students that the use of English as a medium of communication requires. One can thus say that a gap has opened up between the standard of proficiency that the teaching of English as a subject is expected to achieve and what the use of English as a medium of communication requires. The Universities and other tertiary institutions cream off the top percentage of pre-university graduates and one would expect that whatever the general standard, the language skills of this selected group would be sufficiently well developed to meet the language requirements of academic work. However, the spoken and written English of these students are considered to be so far below the standard required that a remedial programme in language and study skills packaged in a communication skills course, forms an integral part of all programmes in the first year of study in our tertiary institutions. In spite of the remedial effort, there remains a significant qualitative gap between the kind of expository writing skills required by the content subjects and the writing skills that English as a subject should be able to develop. Students arrive at the Universities and other tertiary institutions with shortcomings because of gaps in language education at levels down the academic ladder. A one year remedial course at the tertiary level may therefore not be maximally effective. The solution ultimately lies in getting to the root cause of the problem.

ENGLISH AS A SUBJECT

English, as a subject at the secondary level, is handicapped because it does not have much content matter in language to exploit. The communicative aspect does not come out because of its concern to teach grammar. Topics chosen in English lessons for free composition tend to be topics relating to the everyday experience of students, which can be dealt with adequately by means of a simple narrative. Much of the compositional work done in class tends to be controlled and guided and the focus is more on grammar format and vocabulary rather than on rhetorical devices and the organisation of discourse.

The compartmentalisation of subjects at the secondary level leaves little room for an integrated curriculum. Each subject is compartmentalised and taught by a specialist teacher who is unlikely to know or have a clear idea of what is taught in other subjects.

Apart from the coverage of other subject content areas in reading comprehension passages in the English textbooks, teachers of English are not encouraged to draw upon the content of other subjects for the purpose of developing basic expository skills. The teaching of literature in secondary schools could serve as a means of providing English with some content of its own. However, literature as a subject is as compartmentalised as other subjects and can hardly be said to serve as an ancillary subject to English language.

The gap in terms of expository skills, already wide at the senior secondary school, continues to widen at the tertiary level and particularly at the University. At the same time a comprehension gap opens up as students find themselves faced with academic texts in their areas of specialisation. Since, in many cases, the students cannot read their prescribed texts with adequate understanding, those texts do not, arguably, serve the purpose they should as models of expository or argumentative writing.

English, as a subject at the University level, tends to be equated with literature and general linguistics. Overburdened with its own content, it is unable to service its own language needs, much less those of other subjects which continue to need linguistic support [Wingard, 1971]. Many students find themselves struggling to express concepts that are vaguely understood in a language that is inadequate for their needs. The result is logically incoherent discourse that is commonly produced under examination conditions, even at third or fourth year level. The following is an illustration of such logically incoherent discourse.

Previous or background knowledge is the act when a teacher at the beginning of a lesson will dwell on the previous knowledge of the student. Previous knowledge covers a wide range of events. For instance in teaching transitive and intransitive verbs, the teacher can use students' previous knowledge.

(A student's examination script)

This piece of "nonsense" discourse coming from a student approaching the terminal point of the educational system, undoubtedly gives cause for concern. The student's problem, it would seem, is primarily a conceptual problem which can be attributed to an English-medium policy which from the onset of the educational system, has tended to encourage

learning by rote without cognition. In an educational system where the main concern seems to be that of securing the passing of examinations, it is inevitable that preparation for examinations becomes the pre-occupation of both teachers and students.

The examinations today dictate the curriculum instead of following it, prevent any experimentation, hamper the proper treatment of subjects and sound methods of teaching, foster a dull uniformity rather than originality, encourage the average pupil to concentrate too rigidly upon too narrow a field and thus help him to develop wrong values in education. Pupils assess education in terms of success in examinations. Teachers, recognising the importance of the external examination to the individual pupils, are constrained to relate their teaching to an examination which can test only a narrow field of the pupil's interests and capacities and so inevitably neglect qualities which are more important though less tangible. (Bishop, 1985, p.226)

School-learning examinations dominate the choice of subject and the methods of study. What the student does in school may neither satisfy his needs nor prepare him adequately for life outside the school.

THE TEACHER FACTOR

The teacher is, indeed, at the heart of the matter and the success of any educational system depends on the availability of competent teachers. A curriculum is only as good as the quality of its teachers [Bishop, 1985]. It is not surprising then that teachers in general, and English teachers in particular, bear the brunt of accusations for the poor standard of English used by graduates of our educational institutions (Bentil, 1999).

A survey conducted by the researcher on English teachers in Senior Secondary Schools from six regions in Ghana, showed that 63% out of the 70 respondents hold first degrees; 21% and 1% hold diploma or post diploma certificates respectively; 89% of the respondent specialised in English as a subject and the same percentage teach English as

their main subject; 46% have between three and eleven years teaching experience; while 36% have been in the classroom for fifteen years and over; 53% of respondents said they seldom had opportunities for professional development training while 44% indicated that they had never had professional development training. When asked whether they would continue to teach English if given a choice between teaching English and teaching any other subject, 84% of the respondents indicated that they would continue. Only 16% said they would opt to teach another subject.

The results of the survey show that the teachers in our secondary school classrooms are qualified teachers who are devoted to their job but lack the necessary professional development training. Academic qualification is a necessary but not sufficient factor in teacher performance. The limitations of the mediocre teacher will stifle the most brilliant methods of delivery.

A curriculum is only as good as the quality of its teachers. Positively, a curriculum is enriched by the creativity and imagination of the best teachers; negatively it is vitiated by the limitations of poor teachers and poor teacher training (Bishop, 1985,190).

TOWARDS A REMEDY: WHAT ARE THE STRATEGY OPTIONS?

The performance of graduates of our educational institutions is evidence that as a subject, English has failed to develop the degree of operational competence that its use as a medium of communication requires. The effectiveness of the existing English language curricula in the primary and secondary schools in developing the kind of language skills needed in various categories of employment and for further study in tertiary institutions needs to be assessed. It is important that the classroom teacher can effectively interpret and communicate the syllabus. There is the need to improve the existing syllabi by inclusion of a further study skills component, an oral component with a communicative bias that would encourage more practical work in the schools and greater attention to spoken English and to more effective methods of teaching the language. Perhaps, what is needed now is a thorough review of the implementation of the English-medium policy, based not only on an evaluation of the existing courses from an internal perspective, but also upon a consideration of alternative English language strategies compatible with the new educational reform.

THE PRIMARY OPTION

The abolition of the Common Entrance Examination, formerly used as an examination to select pupils at the age of 11+ for entry into secondary or technical schools, removes the constraining effects/influence that examination had on the primary school teacher. The teacher now has more control over what happens in his/her class and more room to manoeuvre. The problem of effective communication seems to have its root at the primary level where the syllabus gives little encouragement to the development of creative language skills. Since the communication skills of most pupils at this level are underdeveloped, very little communicative interaction takes place between teacher and pupils in the classroom. Pupils do not have sufficient control over the medium of learning to contribute to their own conceptual growth. The teacher, as well as the children, requires stimulating instruction. Motivation, stimulation, creativity, enriched environments, effective lesson plans and effective teaching techniques are factors which should be visible in the primary classroom environment. Stimulating activities add sparkle to the environment and enrich children's learning experiences. The teacher in this environment understands the need to read stories to children everyday, inspire a love of literature, as well as stimulate appreciative listening skills. The teacher needs to provide opportunity for children to read and listen to a variety of stories, motivate oral and written expression and lead stimulating discussions before assigning tasks. Providing for the individual needs of a whole class, however, requires considerable instructional, organisational and management ability.

While formal teaching of grammar and vocabulary is necessary, a more powerful, helpful and effective tool to aid development of competence in English is reading. The onus on the classroom teacher is mammoth in a country with little or no culture of reading. The spin off from reading is abundant – vocabulary development, ideas, competence and grammar. Unfortunately, the majority of pupils neither have the opportunity nor the inclination to subject themselves to the task of reading. There is therefore the need to ensure that reading books are available and students are encouraged to see reading as an important activity that helps them to acquire knowledge about the language and knowledge in general.

THE REMEDIAL OPTION

The remedial approach is an appropriate strategy for English as a subject in an English-medium context. A remedial approach can be defended under the present circumstances, on grounds of practical necessity and should begin much earlier in the educational

system. Beyond the primary level, any further development of the pupils' competence in English is more likely to take place in the content subject lessons than in the English lesson. There is no doubt a good deal of vocabulary building does take place in the content subject lessons. It is also true that in practice, many of the speech patterns in the primary and junior secondary school language syllabi are introduced and used in the content subject lessons before they are taught in the English lessons. A remedial strategy that recognises and accepts this will assign to English as a subject the role of monitoring the linguistic development of the pupils to ensure that deviant features in their interlanguage are not allowed to consolidate and fossilize. Content subject teachers would then need to make a more systematic contribution to the teaching of English than they do now.

THE INTEGRATION OPTION

If English is to be effectively taught as an aspect of other subjects, then it should be fully integrated with those subjects. All teachers should become effective teachers of English through the teaching of subjects other than English. However, not all subjects have the same potential for exploitation for language teaching purposes, and therefore the nature of the contribution a subject might be expected to make would depend, to some extent, on the nature of its content matter and on its methodology. Teachers in all subject areas would need to adopt a more communicative approach to teaching their subject and this would have to involve more interaction and creative dialogue between teacher and students.

THE COMMUNICATIVE OPTION

In view of what was said earlier about the lack of classroom interaction between teachers and pupils, there would seem to be a strong case for a communicative bias in the English language syllabi, especially at the primary level. With the abolition of the Common Entrance Examination, the primary school teacher has six years of examination-free period to develop the competence of his/her pupils. The teacher can enrich the curriculum by being creative and imaginative. Activities such as discussions, story telling, questioning to elicit information and brainstorming should be an integral part of daily lessons. Teacher skills and attitudes count for a great deal in the curriculum. It will be wrong to assume that pupils have at their disposal only a partial and fragmentary linguistic system incapable of serving any real communicative needs. English is used to some extent as a medium of communication outside the classroom and as a medium of instruction in the classroom. Pupils who live in the urban areas, make use of what

knowledge of the English language they have from a very early stage, and as they begin to use the language, they develop it in accordance with the hypotheses they themselves form on the basis of the information they are exposed to. What eventually emerges is a functional interlanguage (Selinker, 1972). This develops gradually to a more mature, though in many cases, far from fully developed language of the teacher. The danger inherent in encouraging the premature use of an interlanguage for real communicative purposes however, is that the interlanguage may fossilize at a point where it minimally meets the communicative demands placed upon it. An all-out communicative approach to the teaching of English may not be viable. It is important for the teacher to strike a balance between language use and correct grammar.

ENGLISH FOR SPECIAL PURPOSES (ESP) OPTION

Far from laying claim to a position of primacy within the curriculum, English as a subject could assume a more supportive role as a service subject for the English medium content subjects beyond the primary level. The problem is, while teachers of English in the primary school are also teachers of most of the other subjects in the curriculum and therefore know just what is being taught in the other subjects and have some idea of what the linguistic requirements of the other subjects are, the situation in the secondary school and beyond, where an ESP bias would be more appropriate, is entirely different. The teaching is more specialised and teachers of English are unlikely to be familiar with the contents of other subjects being taught. Any ESP teaching at the secondary level and beyond would therefore have to involve co-operation between the English teacher and the content subject teachers that would be difficult to promote in practice. Under the present circumstances, a more realistic expectation might be that the content subject teachers themselves could be encouraged to accept more responsibility for the teaching of English for their own special purposes. They know better what the language needs of their students are in their respective subject areas.

CONCLUSION

Although a case can be made for each of the strategy options outlined above, none of them can be considered as the universal strategy for all the ills induced by the English-medium policy. What is called for is a more flexible and a less prescriptive approach which permits teachers to diverge existing courses in any one of the directions suggested by the different strategy options we have considered, in a way that would make the courses more relevant to the need of students.

The task of upgrading English language teaching in our schools depends on the teacher training institutions. Teacher trainers at all levels need to cultivate in their students an awareness and understanding of the importance of language skills in the learning process and the complementary roles that English as a subject and English as a medium have to play in developing those skills. Unless the issue is addressed in the teacher training institutions, it seems unlikely that the level of competence in English needed to facilitate early concept formation will ever be achieved.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abban, P. (1999, April 22). *Poor Performance at BECE. English Language was the Problem.* Ghanaian Times p. 1.
- Amua-Sekyi, E.T. [1998]. *A Survey of English Teachers In The Junior Secondary Schools and Senior Secondary Schools In Ghana.* Unpublished.
- Bentil, B. (1999, April 24). *A Burden Too Much For Teachers.* Weekly Spectator p. 5
- Bishop, G. [1985]. *Curriculum Development: A Textbook for Students.* London and Basingstoke. Macmillan Publishers Ltd.
- Harris, J. and Wilkinson, J. [1990]. *A Guide to English Language in the National Curriculum.* Cheltenham, England. Stanley Thornes [Publishers] Ltd.
- Mireku, K. (1999, April 16). *Further Education of Certificate 'A' Teachers: UCEW's Role.* Daily Graphic p. 7.
- Nana Aba (2000, June 3). *Let's Improve Our English Language.* Daily Graphic p. 9.
- Omani Collison, G. (1975). *Concept Formation in a Second Language.* In Harvard Educational Review, Vol. XLIV.
- Owusu-Ansah, A. (2000, May 30). *"Poor Show" at Exams: English Language to the Rescue.* Daily Graphic p.7.
- Sackeyfio, N.A. [1996]. *The English Language Malaise in Ghana.* The Educator [Chass Journal] I.(2), 32-35.
- Selinker, L. [1972]. *Interlanguage.* In IRAL, Vol. X.
- Wells, G. [1990]. *The Meaning Makers: Children Learning Language and Using Language to Learn.* Kent, Great Britain. T J Press (Padstow) Ltd..