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LANGUAGE TEACHING PROJECTS FOR THE THIRD WORLD

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FOR
THE THIRD WORLD

Edited by

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EDITOR'S PREFACE

WESTERN governments are increasingly committed to giving aid in the form of specific projects with clearly identified goals and limited objectives. Clearly, there are many advantages in this system, for both parties to the aid agreement then know exactly what is expected in provision of time, finance, personnel and so on. Yet in many spheres, including education, our mutual needs may not be clearly identifiable, our objectives may be too long-term to fit neatly into the project model, and the concentration of expertise into those areas that donor countries possess greatest strength it may distort the needs of the recipients. If we are successfully to evaluate the experience of working with projects, whether to improve subsequent projects or to question or modify the whole concept, we need clear reports of the problems, difficulties and successes in existing activity. This collection of papers, concentrating on project work in Africa, but with general implications for all North–South relations, is designed to contribute to such clarification. Most of the projects reported originate with British Council support, and nearly all the contributions relate their own specific requirements to the state of theory in needs analysis, implementation and evaluation. Sometimes basic questions of the role that English can and should play in the life of particular countries need to be confronted. All of these papers address themselves, in various ways, to the interface between theory and practice.

The order of papers is approximately in ascending level of sophistication of English required, from primary to advanced professional.

C J BRUMFIT

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THE ROLE AND STATUS OF ENGLISH AS A SUBJECT IN THE ZAMBIAN ENGLISH-MEDIUM CONTEXT

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Introduction

In nearly all the former British colonies in Africa, English continues to be used as a medium of instruction at some stage in the school system. Since it is nowhere widely used by the indigenous population as the language of the home, its use as a medium is crucially dependent upon its being taught effectively as a subject in the schools. In no case, however, can it be confidently asserted that English as a subject has succeeded in adequately meeting the demands of English as a medium. The available evidence suggests that all the Anglophone countries of black Africa have experienced severe educational problems directly attributable to the use of an alien language as the medium of instruction. Most of the countries concerned have tried to alleviate the problems by delaying the introduction of English as a medium until the upper grades of the primary school or the lower grades of the secondary school and by providing basic primary education in a local indigenous language. Only three countries—the Gambia, Sierra Leone and Zambia—have remained firmly committed to a universal English-medium policy. The present paper focuses on the situation in Zambia, where, after an intensive public debate on the medium issue, English has been given a renewed mandate to serve as the sole medium of instruction for most subjects throughout the educational system (cf. Zambia Ministry of Education, 1977).

My purpose in reviewing the ELT situation in Zambia is not to reopen the medium issue but rather to direct attention once again towards the role and status of English as a subject and its effectiveness in meeting the demands of English as a medium. In the first part of the paper I shall present a description and evaluation of the English language programmes currently offered at the three educational levels. My main concern at this stage will be 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 able to achieve under the present regime and that which the use of English as a medium presupposes. In the ensuing section I shall report briefly on projects that are planned or already under way for the revision or development of existing courses and then proceed to consider a number of alternative strategies that might more effectively narrow the gap between English as a subject and

English as a medium. Finally, and by way of conclusion, however, I shall want to suggest that if the English-medium policy is to succeed in achieving its primary objective of facilitating learning,[1] the mutual dependency and complementarity of English as a subject and English as a medium needs to be recognized and more systematically exploited than it has been hitherto.

1. The existing ELT programme

As a result of a Cabinet decision taken in 1965 in favour of English-medium,[2] an English Medium Centre under the direction of a British Aid to Commonwealth English officer was set up with the task of producing an English-medium primary course. The original intention was to adapt the *New Peak Course*, which had been developed specifically for use in Kenya. Just as the process of adaptation got under way, however, the results of an evaluation of the *New Peak Course* were released, from which the Centre concluded that the course (though not the policy underlying it) was a failure. It was therefore dropped as a basis for the Zambian course and work was begun on a completely new course, which took the best part of seven years to complete but which was hurriedly introduced into the schools in stages as each set of units was completed. The first units, indeed, were already being introduced into Lusaka schools as early as 1966. The English Medium Centre itself recommended a gradual phasing in of what was intended to be only an experimental version of the course, arguing that the failure of the *New Peak Course* was due primarily to the fact that it had been introduced into the system too rapidly (cf. Higgs, *op. cit.*). Ministry Headquarters, however, anxious for political reasons to show early development on a broad front in education, pressed for the rapid expansion of English medium throughout the system. By 1975 about 75 per cent of primary schools were using what was still considered to be an experimental version of a course that had never been modified in the light of evaluation. The same experimental version is now in use in virtually every class of every school in the country.

As it now stands, the primary English course contains an English language reading component, each consisting of teachers' handbooks supported by course readers and, at the more advanced levels, by supplementary readers. One or two pupils' workbooks were produced early on but these are no longer in use. The teachers' handbooks, which constitute in effect the syllabus, are highly prescriptive and set out in detail the content and methodology of each teaching unit throughout the entire seven-year course. This strictly controlled approach was arguably necessary at a time when the majority of primary school teachers were untrained Form 3 drop-outs, but it is becoming increasingly inappropriate as the proportion of untrained teachers still in the system gets progressively smaller. As it was originally designed, the course did not explicitly identify any objectives. Conscious of a deficiency in this respect, the Curriculum Development Centre (the successor of the English Medium Centre) published in 1978 a detailed set of objectives extrapolated from the handbooks but specified in structural rather than

behavioural terms to match the content of the handbooks. There is still no explicit indication anywhere in the course material, therefore, of what the pupils are expected to be able to do with the language at the end of the programme.

The primary English course as a whole places much greater emphasis upon the development of reading skills than upon the development of writing skills. The course, indeed, is seriously deficient in all types of writing exercises (cf. Chishimba, 1979). Reading comprehension work, moreover, is based almost entirely on multiple-choice exercises reflecting the format of the final Grade 7 examination. Being computer marked, the final examination offers little or no scope for the assessment of creative writing skills, and this deficiency in the examination is inevitably reflected in the teaching in the upper primary grades. The overall result is that by the end of the course, the ability of the pupils to express themselves correctly and creatively in writing is seriously underdeveloped. By comparison, the reading skills of the majority of the pupils seem to be relatively well developed.[3] There are grounds for believing, however, that as a direct result of English medium a significant minority of pupils fail to learn to read at all.

Although the primary English course was considered from the outset to be experimental, it did not have any built-in evaluation procedure. A small-scale evaluation of the course was conducted in Lusaka schools in 1967 but the results were ignored because it was felt that there were no criteria to relate the results to (cf. Higgs, *op. cit.*). Following reports that some Grade 7 leavers were illiterate, the Psychological Services Department of the Ministry of Education conducted a survey in 1973 of the reading skills of over 3000 Grade 3 pupils. The report concluded that 'the course in English as devised by the Curriculum Development Centre is at the moment serving the interests of a very small minority of children in the primary schools' (cf. Sharma, 1973). In the same year the results of the first CDC evaluation were made available as part of a former director's doctoral thesis (cf. McAdam, 1973). McAdam set out to compare the performance in a variety of tests of children who had gone through the newly introduced English-medium programme and those who had followed the conventional vernacular-medium programme. Not surprisingly, it was found that on average the children who had followed the new English-medium programme performed much better in tests of English language proficiency than those who had followed the older programme. It was also found that the English-medium group performed much better in social science tests conducted in English.[4] They were significantly worse, however, in mathematics, and particularly in problem arithmetic.[5] A significantly large minority of the English-medium group, furthermore, were found to be virtually illiterate, which is just what Sharma had found in his earlier study, which focused directly on reading.

Since the secondary schools cream off the top 15 per cent of the primary school leavers,[6] it might be expected that, whatever the general standard, the language skills of this selected group would be sufficiently well developed to

meet the language requirements of the secondary-school curriculum. In fact, however, the written English of the secondary-school intake is considered to be so far below the minimum standard required that a remedial composition course, covering the most basic aspects of written composition, has been built into the junior secondry-school programme. The structural component of the course, furthermore, more or less duplicates the structural component of the primary school course. Despite this initial remedial effort, however, and the continuing attention paid throughout the junior secondary school to writing skills, there remains a significant qualitative gap between the kind of expositional writing skills required by the content subjects and the writing skills that English as a subject is able to develop.

As a subject, English is severely handicapped at the secondary level by the fact that it does not have any content matter of its own to exploit. Topics chosen in the English lessons for free composition tend to be topics relating to the everyday experience of the pupils which can be dealt with quite adequately by means of a simple narrative. Much of the compositional work done in class, furthermore, continues to be controlled and guided and focuses upon grammatical form and vocabulary rather than upon rhetorical devices and the organization of discourse. In practice, therefore, the compositional component of the course is little more than an extension or application of the structural component.

At the secondary level there is no commitment, even in principle, to an intergrated curriculum. Each subject is rigidly compartmentalized and taught by a specialist teacher who is unlikely to have any clear idea of what is being taught in more than one other subject. The system, therefore, does not encourage teachers of English to draw upon the content of other subjects for the purpose of developing basic expositional skills. There remains the possibility of extending the teaching of literature in the secondary schools as a means of providing English with some content of its own. As it is currently taught at the senior secondary level, however, literature tends to be just as rigidly compartmentalized as other subjects and can hardly be said to serve as an ancillary subject to English language.[7]

The gap as measured in terms of expositional skills, already wide at the senior secondary level, continues to widen at the tertiary level, and particularly at the university. At the same time a serious comprehension gap opens up as students find themselves abruptly faced with authentic academic texts in their area of specialization (cf. Wingard, 1971). Since in many cases the students cannot read their prescribed texts with adequate understanding, the texts do not serve the purpose they should as models of expositional or argumentational writing.

As a subject at university level, English has shown an increasing tendency in recent years to become equated with either English literature or general linguistics. In danger now of being 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 (cf. Wingard, *op. cit.*). Many students find themselves struggling to express concepts that are only dimly understood in a language which is quite inadequate for their needs. The result, all too often, is garbled and incoherent discourse devoid of any discernible sense. The following fragment of an essay on a linguistics topic is offered merely as an illustration of the kind of logically incoherent discourse that is commonly produced under examination conditions, even at third- or fourth-year level:

> Syntactic structure looks at the word order of language. It determines the use of words in correct and grammatical syntactic structure. In order for a sentence to be meaningful there has to be correct syntactic structure of words. Syntactic structure is greatly influenced by grammatical and lexical words which determine how they are placed in correct word order.

As a manifestation of the linguistic competence of a student approaching the terminal point of the educational system, this piece of nonsense discourse undoubtedly gives cause for concern. A careful examination of the language of the extract, however, reveals that the syntax is on the whole fairly sound. The student's problem, it would seem, is primarily a conceptual problem, which is arguably attributable to an English-medium policy which from the very beginning of the educational system has tended to encourage rote learning without cognition. Whatever the cause, deep-rooted conceptual problems cannot be solved overnight by intensive EAP courses of the kind currently offered in many other universities. The solutions, if they can be found, lie much further back in the educational system.

To sum up briefly at this point, all the available evidence points to the fact that as a subject English is failing to develop the degree of operational competence in the language that its use as a medium requires. The communication problem, it would appear, has its roots at the primary level, where the rigid structural syllabus gives little encouragement to the development of creative language skills. Since the pupils' communicative skills are underdeveloped, very little communicative interaction between teacher and pupils takes place inside the classroom. Children dutifully mime adult concepts but do not have sufficient control over the medium of learning to contribute, as they should, to their own conceptual growth.

2. Towards a new ELT strategy for Zambia

Now that the medium issue has been settled, at least for the foreseeable future, the Curriculum Development Centre is at last able to turn its attention to the long-standing need for an overall review of the existing English language programmes. The long-awaited official CDC evaluation of the primary course is already under way and preliminary findings indicate, predictably, that the course is failing to teach children to write correctly and coherently. Since the junior secondary-school course is now believed to be

about right, no major evaluation exercise is planned for this level, but steps are being taken to develop the existing syllabus by the introduction of a further study skills component and an oral component with a communicative bias. The effectiveness of the senior secondary-school course in developing the kind of language skills needed in various categories of employment and for further study in tertiary institutions is, however, being assessed with a view to producing a common senior secondary-school syllabus.

Although there will no doubt be some modification and development of existing English language programmes as a result of the current spate of evaluation exercises, it seems unlikely that there will be any radical reappraisal of objectives and strategies. It seems to me, however, that the formidable case that has been built up over a number of years against the English-medium scheme (cf. Kapwepwe, 1970; Mphahlele, 1970; Kashoki, 1973; Serpell, 1978; Chishimba, 1979; Chishimba, 1980; Ngalube, 1981) cannot be countered by a mere cosmetic operation. What is needed now is nothing less than a thoroughgoing review of the implementation of the English-medium policy, and such a review, I would suggest, should be based not only on an evaluation of the existing courses from an internal perspective but also upon a consideration of alternative ELT strategies compatible with the Education Reform proposals (cf. Zambia Ministry of Education, 1977).

In this section I propose to identify and discuss a number of strategy options that seem to me to be potentially viable in the Zambian context. Although the options will be considered separately and independently of each other, they need not be viewed as global options nor as being mutually incompatible. Conditions in Zambia do not favour global solutions: language backgrounds, language needs and language-teaching resources vary too much from one part of the country to another and, indeed, within the same part of the country from one school to another. By isolating each of the options, however, it will be possible to reveal more clearly their merits and limitations.

2.1 The remedial option

I consider this option first because the junior secondary-school course, which from many points of view is the most satisfactory part of the present ELT programme in Zambia, is already to a large extent implicitly remedial. A remedial approach can be defended under the present circumstances, of course, on the grounds of practical necessity; it can also be defended in principle, however, as being an appropriate strategy for English as a subject in an English-medium context, although arguably the remedial process should begin much earlier in the system than it does in Zambia.

The case for a remedial strategy for English as a subject would rest on the claim that beyond the initial threshold 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 lessons, where, so the argument would

run, much of the teaching is redundant. There is no doubt that 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 syllabuses are introduced and used in the content subject lessons before they are taught in the English lessons, rather than the other way round as was originally intended. A principled remedial strategy would recognize and accept this state of affairs as being unavoidable and, indeed, desirable and assign to English as a subject the role of monitoring the linguistic development of the pupils with a view to ensuring that deviant features in their interlanguage are not allowed to consolidate and fossilize. It must be emphasized, however, that for such a strategy to be viable, content subject teachers would need to make a more systematic contribution to the teaching of English than they do at the present time in Zambia.

2.2 The communicative option

The current trend towards a more communicative approach in foreign-language teaching is beginning to influence ELT thinking in Zambia. In view of what was said earlier about the lack of classroom interaction between teacher and pupils, there would seem to be a strong case for a communicative bias in the English-language syllabuses, particularly at the primary level. I would like to suggest, however, that an out-and-out communicative approach to the teaching of English as a subject in the Zambian English-medium context may not only be unncessary but may also have undesirable and largely irremediable long-term consequences.

Although at the present time English is taught throughout most of the school system essentially as a foreign language in accordance with a conventional structural syllabus, it would be wrong to assume that at any given stage in the primary or junior secondary-school programme pupils have at their disposal only a partial and fragmentary linguistic system incapable of serving any real communicative needs. Because English is used to some extent as a medium of communication outside the classroom and as the medium of instruction inside the classroom, Zambian children, particularly those living in urban areas, activate and make use of what fragmentary knowledge of the language they have from a very early stage, and as they begin to use the language they develop it in accordance with hypotheses they themselves form on the basis of the data they are exposed to (cf. Nemser, 1971). What eventually emerges is a functional interlanguage (cf. Selinker, 1972 and Simukoko, 1979), which gradually approximates to the more mature, though in many cases far from fully developed, language of the teacher. In such a situation, and indeed in ESL situations generally, there is less need to adopt a communicative approach to the teaching of English as a subject than there would be in a typical EFL situation in which English is not normally used as a means of communication in the everyday environment of the learner.

A danger inherent in a situation which encourages the premature use of an

interlanguage for real communicative purposes, however, is that the interlanguage will stabilize and gradually fossilize at the point where it minimally meets the communicative demands placed upon it. If fossilization takes place on a wide scale, there may be an irreversible drift towards creolization.[8] Indeed, some observers believe that a hybrid variety of English ('Zamblish') is already beginning to emerge in Zambia (cf. Haynes, 1981). I shall have a little more to say about creolization as a possible strategy option presently. At this juncture, I wish merely to draw attention to the fact that an out-and-out communicative approach in the teaching of English in the schools, by encouraging use at the expense of correct usage, may have the effect of accelerating the process of creolization.

2.3 The simplification option

The rationale underlying the simplification option is that it would narrow the linguistic gap between the interlanguage of the pupils and the medium of instruction by approximating the medium to the interlanguage without encouraging grammatical deviation. Although some degree of simplification is now an accepted feature of foreign-language teaching, however, it seems doubtful that simplification can be upheld as a viable overriding strategy in an ESL situation.

As it was originally conceived, the Zambian primary course was intended to be a linguistically integrated course in which the readability not only of the supplementary readers but also that of the course books in other subjects would be adjusted so as to conform with the grade levels specified in the English syllabus. The integration project failed primarily because writers of course books in other subjects refused to accept the linguistic constraints imposed by the English Medium Centre. The Permanent Secretary for Education at the time, Mr Mulikita, warned against the danger of English-language specialists at the Centre setting themselves up as adjudicators of course material written for subjects other than English (cf. Higgs, *op. cit.*). He quite sensibly upheld the view that competent writers will endeavour to make the subject matter they are presenting as accessible as possible to their intended readership and that linguistic censorship may impede rather than facilitate learning in the long run.[9]

Although it is by no means certain that it would facilitate learning, some degree of linguistic simplification of the textbooks and course material in use in Zambian schools would no doubt be feasible enough. Much less feasible, and probably even less desirable, would be the simplification of the oral exposition of the teacher in the classroom. Chishimba (1980) has given us an interesting illustration of the kind of problems a primary-school teacher faces when trying to present an introductory lesson on the life cycle of a butterfly in controlled English. The teacher, he points out, has to be worried about every item of vocabulary and structure, about sentence length and complexity, and about pronunciation and spelling, as well as about the content and organization of the lesson. The result is likely to be incoherent

and fragmented discourse which may well be less intelligible to the pupils than a linguistically uncontrolled exposition would be. To achieve simplification in English without loss of coherence and without distortion of the content requires a degree of proficiency and articulateness in the language far higher than that possessed by the average Zambian primary-school teacher. As a teaching strategy, therefore, simplification is not only questionable in principle but extremely difficult to implement in practice.

It may be argued, furthermore, that by deliberately simplifying the medium so that it approximates more closely to the interlanguage of the pupils, teachers would deprive their pupils of a satisfactory model of English in use and thereby encourage the drift towards creolization that I spoke of earlier. Some educationalists in Zambia view this drift with equanimity, regarding it as a natural process that should not be interfered with (cf. Haynes, *op. cit.*). As an educational policy option, however, creolization has little to recommend it. It would encourage not only the simplification but also the grammatical distortion of the medium and conceivably impoverish it to such an extent that it would no longer satisfactorily serve as a medium for the exposition of basic concepts and arguments in the essential core subjects (cf. Herriott, 1971: 42–43, for further discussion on this matter).

2.4 The ESP option

Although English is used to a limited extent in the urban areas as a lingua franca, it is primarily needed for educational and occupational purposes. A prima facie case could be made out, therefore, for an English programme which, beyond the elementary stages, gradually acquires a strong ESP bias. If such a programme were developed, English as a subject, far from laying claim to a position of primacy within the curriculum, would assume a more supportive role as a service subject for the English-medium content subjects. As such, it would in effect cease to exist as an independent subject and would be taught, somewhat in the manner suggested by Allen and Widdowson (1974), as an aspect of other subjects.

Although this option has much to recommend it, however, it would be difficult to implement satisfactorily in the Zambian context. At the primary level, teachers of English are also teachers of most if not all other subjects in the curriculum. When they teach English they know just what is being taught at the corresponding grade levels in the other subjects and may be expected, therefore, to have some idea of what the linguistic requirements of the other subjects are. The situation at the secondary level, however, where an ESP bias would be more appropriate, is entirely different. The teaching is more narrowly specialized and teachers of English are unlikely to have much familiarity with the content of other subjects being taught. Any *ad hoc* ESP teaching at the secondary level, therefore, would have to involve a degree of co-operation between the English teacher and the content subject teachers that would be difficult to promote in practice.