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Sociocultural Argument Writing in English from South Africa

A Case Study of students' Writing from the
Vhembe District, Limpopo Province

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PREFACE

As there is a paucity of information on the sphere of influence on second language education in the Limpopo Province of South Africa, this research project is an attempt to contribute to knowledge on writing in the area. I applied theories of social context and formal learning to explore parameters involved in student writing. In this regard, I am able to connect classroom interactions to the wider social practices. When second language writing is evaluated and interpreted within the broader social communicative context, linguistics is synthesized with scholarly insights from other disciplines and these insights have highlighted the importance of viewing second language learners as social beings. When alluding to people being social, we mean that students and teachers alike embody both formal and informal institutional influences. Hutchins (1995: 353) states that human cognition is 'in a very fundamental sense a cultural and social process' and it is mediated by the tools and the resources that are made available and used in the social milieu. This is the reason for the significance of socioculture influencing which structures, styles and strategies are employed, and how written and verbal interactions are effected.

Therefore, for me to understand the writing of students in an academic setting, it was useful to have a broader unit of analysis as a point of reference than just the students' texts as discourse. In this regard, discourses are not viewed merely as texts that share some formal surface features, instead they are viewed as shared expectations, which include both perceptions and predispositions among a group of people on how certain tools (speaking and writing) are used together in accomplishing shared purposes. This is the reason for Bazerman (1994:1) stating that genres should not be described as textual forms only, but as 'forms of life, ways of being, and as frames for social action. In a goal-directed action, such as argument essay writing, students choose from a range of lexical and syntactic items and adopt a typified stance, because in their acquisition systems, this action has been operationalised and stabilised in typified ways. The typified ways are psychologically an informed response for action with others.

Thus students' texts were examined within the ambit of discourse analysis, and their texts became a window to their knowledge of how representations of the natural and social worlds they inhabit are expressed as a socially cohesive group. In matters of language, communities act as norm enforcers, and this explains the reasons for students' adopting similar ways of argument writing. In addition, the many strong ties that characterize rural life in Limpopo Province, especially, is not conducive to individual promotion of innovation in the choice of both lexical and syntactic items, and in the adoption of different styles in argument writing.

The data that informed this project came from the English essays written by students admitted to the undergraduate and honours programmes of the University of Venda, Limpopo Province. The students' essays were examined for paragraph development and the use of rhetorical objectivity devices and syntactic and referential markers in order to establish commonalities in students' stance for objective and credible writing to tie to the sociocultural milieu. The group of rhetorical devices and constructs for navigating the analysis of the essays were identified as: direct personal appeals; contradictions (and juxtapositions); generalizations; clauses and phrases; amplifiers/emphatics; personal pronouns and modal verbs. It is through treating data as situated in the sociocultural milieu that the patterning is discerned. The findings indicate that students' learning has been mediated through no effective appropriation of various rhetorical concepts and tools at various levels of learning. That is, the students are aware of some or most of the features but are not able to fit them into a conceptual framework for use. What is most fundamental to the discussion is the fact that discourse is the primary tool through which mediation takes place because it occurs through the concepts and tools people use to construct meaning and to perceive the world around them.

I conclude that the interaction that takes place between the formal and informal settings affects classroom behaviour and outcomes of formal learning. The

students' limited capacity in adopting a credible and objective stance in essay argument writing in English can be attributed to a collectivist and restricted code background, a weak uncertainty avoidance stance, a pervasive narrative writing mode and a lack of discursive interaction in first language learning/teaching. Therefore, there is need to understand and explain the collective nature of writing to facilitate informed university collaboration with schools.

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KEY TERMS

Agency in the communication process; Argument writing in English; Collaboration; Discourse analysis; English as a second/foreign language; Literacy in English at FET level; Scaffolding in second language learning; The Vhembe sociocultural milieu; Verbal and written communication; Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this research was to illuminate and articulate a perspective on argument writing in the Limpopo Province using argument essays in English as a springboard for the project. Specifically, the focus is on the interdependence of social, historical political and cultural factors within the learning milieu of the Vhembe District. When dealing with second language (English) writing, the facilitator's role in promoting and enhancing second language learning is backgrounded by the sociocultural nature of the learning environment; and this has to be given cognizance in understanding the learning/teaching of second language in the area.

The role of language in writing in an educational setting is of vital importance and interest to everyone who is concerned with school and university education (Swales, 1990)); and this is particularly so when that language is a second, third or foreign language. The level of mastery of discourse types (such as argument/persuasive writing) by learners and how such norms can be or have been taught to second language learners is the principal focus of this project. In order to assess and investigate the performance of learners in argument writing in English, a theoretical frame that could form the bedrock for defining the scope and nature of influence was sought. The search led to the application of the sociocultural theory as amplified by Shore (1996); Hinkel 1999; Bartlett and Holland (2002); Gee (2005) and earlier Vygotsky (1987) because of the underlying concepts and frame of reference that are useful for application in the study of teaching, learning, and development in an educational context. This is for the understanding of factors which influence the learning of a second language, in general, and circular argument, in particular.

1. 2 The setting and sociocultural background

The Vhembe District (see Figure 1.1 below) is located in the north east of the Limpopo Province of South Africa. Limpopo is one of the most rural and one of the poorest provinces in the country and the University of Venda (Univen) is situated in Thohoyandou (the main town) of the Vhembe District and it was the capital of the former Venda Homeland. This Homeland was the most isolated in the years before 1994. This isolation was deliberate due to its strategic position to the other African countries in the North, which necessitated a much firmer grip from the then government in order to prevent any influence from the other African countries across the Limpopo River.

Figure 1.1: Geographic Location of the Study Area



Source: SA Explorer. 2002

Figure 1.1 Geographic Location of the Study Area

Macdonald (1990: 102) has noted in the course of observations in the former Homelands' Department of Education and Training [DET] schools in Bophuthatswana, Venda and Lebowa. He says:

We have witnessed many English lessons that are full of teacher errors. By this we are referring to variance in the language that could not be accommodated under the rubric of a non-standard dialect. The poor English proficiency of many of the teachers has often been advanced as a reason for maintaining the status quo of the language policy. However, it is imperative that the cycle of poor English models, poor learning and poor teaching should be short-circuited, but this process will require genuine creative thinking.

It is noted that the legacy of the past is still a part of the education landscape of South Africa, especially in terms of urban versus rural areas. According to Emerging Voices (2005: 16):

Rural education has not been a priority of a post-apartheid government for three main reasons, notes the report: urban constituencies are better organised and more vocal; the framework used in policy documents is "insufficiently sensitive to the specific conditions and needs of the rural poor"; and "poverty and inequality" need to be addressed before rural education will change.

What is also of particular significance to the project context, is the issue of the effectively world wide pattern of reduced achievement shown by students in the rural areas, which is of relevance to the Vhembe District. Facilitators do not often possess adequate proficiency in the English language for effective teaching and learning to take place. Odendaal (1985: ii) observes that

... in many cases, pupils enter secondary school with very little English. Because pupils cannot communicate in English, teachers who, in many cases have an inadequate grasp of English themselves, frequently resort to Mother Tongue, particularly in subjects other than English.

Odendaal (1985) amplifies the problem by stating that it is not so much the degree of difficulty of the content of the subjects taught but the lack of the English Language proficiency of facilitators and students. Teachers who are not proficient in the language that they instruct in, feel inadequate and unequipped for the task. Consequently, they tend to use either very little of English, use it incorrectly, or resort to Mother Tongue. Although 1985 might seem dated, the problems are still relevant to date. For instance, Craig Clarke in the Higher Education Review of