

## **'Naming' students' problems: An analysis of language-related discourses at a South African University**

**CHRISSIE BOUGHEY**

*Academic Development Centre, Rhodes University, P.O. Box 4, Grahamstown, 6140, South Africa*

### **Introduction**

In South Africa, subject-based academics often ascribe the difficulties experienced by 'underprepared' black students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds as they engage with tertiary study to their status as speakers of English as an additional language. As Bradbury (1993) points out, the labeling of such difficulties as being due to 'language problems' has long been important because of the way in which any link to the apartheid-associated idea that they may be attributable to innate differences in cognition and thought can thus be avoided. More recently, however, exploration of the constructs of *discourse* and *literacy* has meant that it has become possible to understand students' experiences in a way which avoids the ideologies associated with apartheid and, equally importantly, with those identified by Phillipson (1992) and Pennycook (1994) in their critiques of English language teaching as an industry which benefits the 'Centre' (to use Galtung's (1988) terminology) at the expense of those on the 'Periphery'.

In spite of the existence of an alternative construction of students' problems (and the research which supports it (see, for example, Boughey 2000), the inherently common-sense idea that the difficulties experienced by students as they engage with tertiary study are attributable to issues related to 'language' continues to seduce both students and

academics alike. This article is an attempt to 'talk back' to these common-sense experiences. It does this by identifying and examining a number of language-related discourses (where the term 'discourse' is used in the sense explicated below) prevalent at one South African university in order to show how many common-sense assumptions are ideologically based. The article then ends by indicating the way an alternative construction of students' 'problems' can inform the educational practice of subject-based academics. Before turning to an identification of these discourses, however, it is necessary to explore the constructs of *discourse* and *literacy* in more detail.

### **Discourse and Literacy**

Gee (1990:143) defines a *discourse* as

. . . a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or 'social network' or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful 'role'

and *literacy* (*op cit*: 153) as 'mastery or fluent control over a secondary discourse' where the term 'secondary' is intended to refer to a discourse other than the 'home' or 'primary' discourse. An alternative construction thus perceives students' 'problems' as rooted in their status as outsiders to academic discourses (see, for example, Taylor *et al.* 1988) and in their lack of familiarity with the literacy or 'deep rules of [academic] culture' (Ballard & Clanchy, 1988:8). In South Africa, therefore, the attribution of the difficulties experienced

by students to a lack of academic literacy thus not only avoids the innately racist labels of cognitive and cultural differences associated with apartheid, but also challenges the imputation of those difficulties to problems associated with language (where the term is used in a 'narrow' sense). More importantly (and of significance elsewhere in the world), an understanding that students are experiencing difficulties with academic literacy and not with language *per se* calls into question many of the language intervention programmes which have been established on the assumption that what students lack is tuition in the structures and vocabulary of English, the additional language which is the medium of instruction at many tertiary institutions.

In defining *literacy* as 'mastery or control over a secondary discourse' and in acknowledging that one can master any number of discourses, Gee (*ibid*) follows Street (1984, 1993, 1995) in dismissing the idea that literacy is a unitary skill focusing on the decoding and encoding of script. The idea that literacy is essentially a neutral 'technology' involving print encoding and decoding processes is termed, by Street (*ibid*), the 'autonomous' model. In opposition to this 'autonomous' model, Street proposes an 'ideological' model which understands literacy as a set of social practices rather than as a set of skills. This means that the way in which meaning is derived from, or encoded into, print is perceived to be dependent on factors such as the way individuals perceive themselves in relationship to the texts they encounter and on the value they ascribe to those texts in their daily lives. To return to Gee's words, literacy therefore involves playing a social 'role'. Since we can all play many social roles in our lives, it follows that we can all master many literacies. Literacy thus becomes a multiple rather than a unitary phenomenon.

Closely related to Street's identification of an 'autonomous' model of literacy, is Olsen's (1977) use of the term 'autonomous' in relation to text. For Olsen, the commonly held idea that meaning is located *in* text and has to be retrieved through reading can be traced to the development of written script. Before script was invented, important cultural information was passed down in the form of poetry and stories in which the language had been poeticized in order to make it more memorable. This process of using oral mnemonic devices such as rhyme and rhythm meant that statements lost some of their explicit nature. However, since the information contained in the stories or poems was not new to those who heard them, the fact that it was not explicit was not important as listeners were able to supply relevant background information to aid the process of comprehension. Where ambiguity remained, wise men, scribes or clerics were available to provide an 'authorized' interpretation. The invention, by the Greeks, of an alphabetic writing system which could represent speech accurately meant that speech could be captured and no longer needed to be remembered. As a result, the ambiguities of oral language resulting from the use of mnemonic devices could be avoided and knowledge which listeners had previously brought to the rendering of the spoken text no longer needed to be relied upon for comprehension and interpretation. Writing thus became explicit, 'containing' meaning, where oral language had been inexplicit and had needed meaning to be 'supplied'.

Over the years, the goal of constructing a text which was 'autonomous' in the sense that it could be understood without the aid of additional background information became a cultural 'norm'. This was particularly the case once the specialized use of written language this

goal entailed came to be adopted by the British essayists such as John Locke. The practices associated with producing and interpreting this sort of 'autonomous' text have, in addition, come to be acknowledged as an ideal for literacy. The construct of the 'autonomous' text is thus related to that of an 'autonomous' model of literacy because of the elevation of the set of practices needed to produce and interpret 'autonomous' prose to the status of a set of technical, a-cultural, a-social 'skills' on which the 'autonomous' model of literacy focuses. Understanding the production and interpretation of texts in this way, however, fails to acknowledge the fact that these literacy practices are more available to certain sections of the population than others (Heath, 1983) with some children being progressively inducted into their use from pre-school years ( Scollon & Scollon, 1981). The construct of the autonomous text also ignores the wealth of research into reading which shows that comprehension is dependent on knowledge which reader bring to the text as well as on sight-sound decoding skills (see, for example, Carrell *et al.* 1988).

### **Autonomous and Ideological Models of Applied Linguistics**

In an article which uses Street's identification of 'autonomous' and 'ideological' models of literacy as a basis, Rampton (1995) goes on to identify 'autonomous' and 'ideological' models of applied linguistics. The idea that literacy is a neutral technology as opposed to a set of practices embedded in social contexts has already been described as a feature of Street's 'autonomous' model. Rampton carries this distinction through to his examination of the discipline of applied linguistics arguing that an 'autonomous' model would hold that applied linguistics and English language teaching are neutral technologies whereas an 'ideological' model would perceive the practice of applied linguistics as well as that of

language teaching as influenced by interests in the socio-cultural environments in which they exist. Phillipson's (1992) and Pennycook's (1994) critiques of the 'discipline' of applied linguistics (where the term 'discipline' is used in the Foucauldian (1980) sense) and the ELT 'industry' would therefore be rooted in an 'ideological' model because of the acknowledgment that neither applied linguistics nor English language teaching are politically, socially, culturally or economically neutral. The influence of the 'autonomous' versus the 'ideological model of literacy and the 'autonomous' versus the 'ideological' model of applied linguistics will be apparent in the analysis of the discourses prevalent at one South African university to which this article now turns.

### **Dominant Language-Related Discourses at a South African University**

The identification of language-related discourses on which this article focuses was arrived at by means of an analysis of Senate and Faculty documentation and extant language teaching material at one historically black South African university. The status of nearly all the students as speakers of English as an additional language made this site particularly suitable for this study. The analysis was then supported by long-term ethnographic engagement with academics and students at the university itself. Although the analysis essentially constitutes a single 'case', it is my contention that the discourses identified would be found at many other institutions across the world.

In order to write about the discourses and underpinning ideologies identified in this article, it has been necessary to describe them as separate entities when, in practice, they overlap and compete with each other in constructing an understanding of students' experiences

which is never stable. This should be borne in mind as the article is read.

### *Language as an instrument of communication*

By far the most dominant set of discourses at the University are those related to autonomous models of literacy and text and which construct language as an 'instrument of communication' (Christie, 1985). For Christie, a model of language as an instrument of communication centres on the understanding that information, thoughts, ideas, beliefs and attitudes are constructed independently of language which is then used as a 'vehicle ' or 'tool' to communicate these to others. Christie goes on to point out that, although the model of language as an instrument of communication is commonplace, it is superficial because of the way language is used to order and make sense of experience. This understanding that language shapes experience is termed, by Christie, a model of language 'as a resource'.

The need for students to understand the way language is used to structure experience within the university is critical since this is different to the way experience is typically organised by other, non-academic, discourses (see, for example, Bock, 1988). One example of this difference is the way the university uses language to explore and construct claims. Outside the university, a claim can be based on 'common-sense' understandings of the world and evidence for the claim need not be provided. Within the university, however, language is used to construct a claim which is often more tentative (or 'hedged'), more precise and which is rooted in research. These differences are related to the way in which 'reality' is perceived inside and outside the university. In spite of the need for students to be

inducted into understandings of ways in which language is used to organise experience at tertiary, as well as at other, levels, language tuition often focuses on the teaching of language as an 'instrument of communication' (Christie, 1985; Taylor, 1988).

Taylor (1988:53) provides an excellent example of the inadequacy of a model of language as an instrument of communication in his demonstration of the way in which modification of the instrument (through the correction of grammatical errors in a piece of student writing) does not facilitate the communication of meaning. After errors have been corrected, the writing is still confused and the reader struggles to construct meaning.

At the university at which this research was conducted, the influence of an understanding of language as an instrument of communication is discerned in the traditional, adjunct structure of language development initiatives. Over the years, the task of providing language development activities has fallen to the Academic Support Programme<sup>1</sup> or to the Department of English and its *Practical English* course. Development of the language necessary to succeed at university is therefore understood to be possible outside mainstream learning and is perceived to be divorced from understandings of the way mainstream disciplines experience the world.

The influence of an understanding of language as an instrument of communication is not only evident in the adjunct manner in which language development is addressed, however, but also in the materials used in courses designed to develop language. Consider, for example, the following introduction to a set of in-house materials entitled 'Improve your Writing Skills':



Like many other students struggling to write correctly and effectively, you may have been accused of not knowing what a sentence is. Of course you 'know' - you have been speaking in sentences most of your life. But you may not know enough about the possibilities and limitations of written sentences to be able to communicate your ideas as effectively in writing as in speaking . .

The materials then embark on an exposition of the component parts of the sentence and an analysis of sentence types. In doing so, they assume that the communication of meaning is dependent on getting the medium 'right'. If the tool of communication is used 'correctly', the 'pre-formed' meanings will be sent and received. This sort of instruction to students takes no account of research which shows that writing is a process of discovering meaning (i.e. that it is a resource for constructing thoughts) and that writers only succeed in writing coherent sentences as thoughts themselves become coherent (see, for example, Emig, 1977; Zamel, 1982; Taylor, 1988). The materials, like so many others at the university, focus on sentence correctness suggesting that the thoughts already exist and have only to be encoded into a grammatically correct form to be conveyed to others.

Another locally produced set of course materials produced specifically for the *Practical English* course (Louw, 1995:3) announces the importance of 'listening' skills in academic study and its intention of teaching them in a section which begins:

Many people do not know that listening is a language skill. Most people think that

learning language is about PRODUCING it oneself, so they concentrate on getting their grammar right. While it is important to try to improve your grammar, it is also very important for communication in English that you develop your listening skills. If you do not correctly RECEIVE what someone is saying to you your own speaking skills are useless.

In this extract, the predominant metaphor is that of language as a conduit to receive information, thoughts and ideas constructed independently of it. At the same time, the idea that one produces language (by 'getting grammar right') takes no account of the way in which our experiences shape the grammatical/syntactical choices we make (see, for example, Halliday, 1973, 1978).

#### *Autonomous models of literacy and text*

At the university at which the research was conducted, evidence of dominance of the 'autonomous' model of literacy and understandings of text as autonomous also is not hard to find. Apart from the teaching and testing of reading 'skills' and grammar in the *Practical English* course, class tasks and examinations are also indicative of these views. A *Language Skills Workbook* produced in 1996, for example, requires students to read the following text and answer the questions which follow:

There has been a severe earthquake in the country of Lexicon, and 24,00 Kg of medical supplies have to be moved in as soon as possible. You have been given the task of arranging the movement of these supplies from Alpha to Omega. All of them

are urgently needed but 1,500Kg of emergency equipment is needed within 24 hours if lives are to be saved. As a result of the earthquake, all railway lines are out of action and no date can be given for their restoration. There is no serviceable landing ground at Omega or Delta and no helicopters can be made available for at least a week. You will therefore have to rely on the transport available at your base, Alpha, consisting of trucks, details of which are given below . . .

In about 400 words, explain clearly how you would:

- i) move the emergency supplies immediately,
- ii) complete the whole operation as quickly as possible.

The expectation that students will be able to complete this task using only the linguistic clues contained in the text is testimony to an understanding that meaning resides there and takes no account of interactive reading theory (see, for example, Carrell *et al.*, 1988) which posits the use of contextual knowledge as essential to textual processing. In practice, students found the text extremely difficult and staff members found themselves providing background knowledge to students who had little understanding of what a relief operation was and who, in many cases, had never seen television news reports of one.

### *Critical thinking*

Related to the construct of the 'autonomous' text is a discourse which focuses on the need to teach 'critical' thinking, which is usually taken to be synonymous with teaching the skills of 'argument'. This discourse holds that the ability to analyse and construct an argument is

key to academic reading and writing and that, if students are taught to analyse and construct arguments, they will then be able to process academic texts. At the university at which the research was conducted, the teaching of the skills of argument was seen to be the province of the department of Philosophy which had been mandated by the University Senate to run a first year course in *Critical and Creative Thinking*. In practice, this course focuses on teaching students to identify premises, to decide whether these premises are acceptable and thus judge whether grounds exist for the conclusion which is advanced.

The idea that 'critical' thinking can be taught in this way is highly questionable however. In the article referred to earlier, Olsen (1977:268) identifies essayist prose as an attempt to construct explicit, unambiguous text which can withstand the application of logical reasoning. Logical reasoning is then defined as the drawing of conclusions from sentence meanings without recourse to prior knowledge or other contextual factors. However, much language use defies the use of logical reasoning, as its inexplicit nature requires the use of prior or contextual knowledge in order for premises to be interpreted or conclusions evaluated. As a tool for constructing and evaluating argument, logical reasoning by itself is therefore only of use in relation to the *goals* of essayist prose. That academic text itself does not succeed in meeting its criterion of explicitness is seen in the teaching of strategies intended to instantiate prior knowledge as a reading 'skill'. While the need to teach skills of argument might make perfect sense, therefore, it is perhaps ironic that there is a perceived need to teach them in conjunction with study skills when skills of argument are dependent on a text being autonomous of context and reading skills assume that texts are context dependent.

The language in the following examples taken from the text used in the *Critical and Creative Thinking* course at the university (Michell, 1996) is itself inexplicit and requires the use of contextual knowledge if the exercises are to be completed. The first example calls for students to draw a conclusion from the following premises:

Mr Ntuli does not drink alcohol. He has always done regular exercise. Given that he does not suffer from any stress at work, . . .

The second requires students to supply premises for the following conclusion:

. . . , so Sam will not be able to go to University next year.

In the first example, students need knowledge of the effects of alcohol, regular exercise and stress on health in order to provide a conclusion to the argument. In the second, the type of prior knowledge needed to write premises for the conclusion is relatively open but nonetheless crucial. It would seem, therefore, that the provision of a course in 'critical' thinking as a means of alleviating the problems experienced by students as they engage with tertiary study once again is a solution based on common-sense rather than sound research and theory.

### *English as an additional language*

Linked to the understanding of language as an instrument of communication which is used

to 'pass on' thoughts and ideas developed elsewhere with the result that texts are autonomous of the context in which they exist, is another discourse which constructs students' problems as being predominantly related to their status as speakers of English as an additional language. According to this understanding, problems arise not because of students' lack of familiarity with using language to construct thought in new and unfamiliar ways (i.e. in ways which are specific to the university) but because they cannot manipulate the forms of the additional language in a way which will allow them to receive and pass on the thoughts developed in the disciplines.

At the university which was the focus of this study, influential in this discourse were perceptions that universities in other parts of the world are generally very successful in equipping speakers of other languages to study through the medium of English. Such perceptions can be linked to dominant English language teaching discourses critiqued by Phillipson (1992) and Pennycook (1994) not least because of the way dominant models of language teaching have influenced the production of in-house materials. Although few members of staff at the University had specialist qualifications in the teaching of English as a foreign or additional language, many of those charged with the task of developing students' language competence were familiar with approaches to teaching English language and used these, often in a very uninformed way, in their teaching. A series of workbooks produced in the 1995 academic year for the *Practical English* course, for example, shows individual workbook authors focusing on issues such as the reading of scientific texts using skills such as skimming and scanning, the ability to gather and structure information and the teaching of 'communication' skills. Of particular significance is

not the way individuals choose to interpret the need to teach English as an additional language, but the fact that students within one course are subject to as many personal theories and differing approaches as there are staff members producing course materials and teaching them.

### *The 'Received Tradition' of English teaching*

Yet another particularly powerful discourse centres on what Christie (1993) terms the 'Received Tradition' of English teaching. This discourse is especially significant in that the teaching it advocates, like that of the discourse which understands students' problems as stemming from their status as speakers of English as an additional language, is often perceived as a means of remedying the problems constructed by other discourses.

In tracing the development of the teaching of grammar from work of people such as Samuel Johnson (1755), Christie shows how:

. . . a number of time-consuming exercises came to absorb the energies of teachers and students alike: exercises in parsing and analysis, in correcting 'faulty sentences', in rehearsing the creation of simple sentences, in copying improving tales, in writing paraphrases of the writing of others B particularly excerpts from literature (p.77).

These exercises displaced an earlier tradition which focused on the teaching of rhetoric (or the use of language for the 'construction of meaning') and which dates from the work of the orators in ancient times. Much of this shift from rhetoric to grammar is ascribed to the

spread of literacy and the availability of a 'fixed' form of the language (i.e. written language) which could be studied and analysed. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this then resulted in the identification of a set of rules of grammar and spelling. At the same time as language was being studied in this way, the development of the new genre of 'argumentative composition' (or what Olsen, 1977:268) terms the 'essayist technique') meant that the use of language to persuade, move and inform audiences became the province of written, rather than oral, language. According to Christie, since this written language could be analysed, the use of language to construct meanings came to be construed as requiring mastery of the rules of grammar and spelling which could then be applied in practice (cf. Olsen, 1977, discussed earlier).

Christie follows other writers such as Graff (1987) and Ball *et al.* (1990) in identifying other reasons for the study of grammar, however. In nineteenth century Britain, the growth of urban society began to threaten the established social order which was dominated by the landed ruling gentry and an emerging middle class. Cities were perceived as sources of political unrest and social disorder and other problems for which two discourses proffered solutions. The first discourse saw a solution in building churches and missions, the second held that the solution lay in educating the working classes (Ball *et al.* 1990). The resulting growth in the provision of elementary education for the working classes meant that large numbers of children began to attend school for the first time. The need to discipline the behaviour of large classes required activities which would keep children quiet and occupied. The rehearsing and drilling of grammar, parsing of sentences and copying and correcting 'faulty' work filled this role. Although Christie does not specifically make the link with



Foucault (1979), she goes on to expand this definition into a Foucauldian understanding of the meaning of 'discipline' arguing that, in nineteenth century schools,

. . . the preoccupation with the trivial and the largely meaningless in the name of language studies too often served to keep those who came to school ignorant and unskilled, unable on the whole to challenge their political masters (p.87).

The teaching of rhetoric which focused on the use of language to construct meaning and compose persuasive arguments had no place in a system which aimed to produce labourers for the factories of the industrial revolution since:

. . . where a school prepares for poverty, it cannot tolerate a pedagogical theory which seeks to develop the capacity to argue, challenge or change (p.87),

an observation which has been made of the Bantu Education System in South Africa (see, for example, Morrow, 1989).

At the university at which the research on which this article is based was conducted, effects of the development of grammar teaching, or what Christie calls the 'Received Tradition, prevail even today. The majority of the academics teaching there had themselves been schooled in the tradition with the result that they found it difficult to conceive of any other form of language development, shied away from attempts to develop language within the mainstream curriculum and insisted on the existence of adjunct service courses such as

*Practical English.*

Possibly even more problematic, however, is the legacy of the 'Received Tradition' on adjunct courses where people employed on the basis of their expertise in researching and teaching literature are called upon to teach language and can envisage no other way of doing so than repeating the experiences of their childhood. Unfortunately, the effect of that teaching is to discipline, rather than empower, those taught.

Manifestations of the 'Received Tradition' are also evident in language teaching materials and examinations at the university. Consider, for example, the following extract from the set of teaching materials mentioned earlier in this article entitled *Improve your Writing Skills*:

We have looked at one example of a complex sentence with a subordinate adverbial clause: 'Although I sat at my desk for hours, I could not think of anything to write.' Here, 'although' signals a relationship of contrast - specifically of concession. Other subordinate conjunctions may be used to indicate a relationship of *time, place, manner, purpose, reason, or condition*.

Similarly, an examination for the *Practical English* course set at the end of the 1996 academic year requires students to correct a number of 'faulty' sentences which include the following:

1. When an animal moult, it lose its hair.

2. Rabies are dangerous.
3. Gymnastics are difficult.
4. The criteria for this decision is dubious
5. What were they discussing about?
6. He doesn't know what is he doing.
7. I am very much grateful.
8. He is a generous somebody.

Many of the sentences cited above reflect local African usage and, as such, are not 'faulty' *per se*, an issue which makes simple correction without any exploration of different varieties of the language highly problematic.

### *Pathologising the individual*

In a book which has been highly influential in South Africa, Tollefson (1991) makes a distinction between what are termed *neoclassical* and *historical structural* approaches to language planning research. In a nutshell, *neoclassical* approaches view language acquisition as being individually determinable and dependent on factors inherent to the individual such as motivation and aptitude. *Historical structural* factors, on the other hand, examine the socio-cultural contexts in which individuals seek to learn language and in which language is used as a means of explaining individual success or failure.

Senate documentation at the historically black university which was is the focus of this article points overwhelmingly to a *neoclassical* understanding of the acquisition of language

and literacy. Reports from student orientation programmes from the early 1980s onwards, for example, write of students being encouraged to make use of services provided by the Academic Support Programme and of departments being asked to recommend these facilities to students who have been identified as in need of support.

The overall effect of this discourse, which attributes success in language acquisition to attendance in remedial programmes and which focuses on students' motivation to improve, is to pathologise students rather than to examine the context in which language needs to be used and learning has to take place.

## **Conclusion**

Over the past ten years, the change in political dispensation in South Africa has provided formal access to university to many thousands of students who were previously denied it. As Morrow (1993) points out, however, if South Africa is to create a more equal society, the crucial issue is not of granting *formal* access to the institution but rather of granting *epistemological* access to the processes of knowledge construction which sustain it. As this article has attempted to show, however, in South Africa at least, the 'naming' of students language-related experiences, and the initiatives intended to remediate the problems which result from that 'naming', require further interrogation if epistemological access is to be granted. Such interrogation would examine the allegedly 'neutral' versus the ideological and would focus on the development of teaching practices which would focus on understanding the difficulties students experience as being related to a lack of access to covert rules of academic discourse. Resulting approaches to teaching would then focus on

making the rules and conventions of academic ways of thinking, valuing, acting, speaking, reading and writing overt to students *using the mainstream curriculum*. The development of approaches based on this sort of understanding would not be easy since they would depend on collaboration between staff developers, so-called language specialists and subject specialists. Given the questionable assumptions on which many of the practices described in this article are based, however, what might be termed 'literacy across the curriculum' approaches, promise to provide epistemological access which more traditional approaches have failed to deliver.

## Notes

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1. In South Africa, Academic Support Programmes were developed to assist black students with a history of 'disadvantage' with the problems they experienced at tertiary level. Such programmes usually existed in addition to mainstream study.

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