

# Welcome to the Summer 2012 Edition of TET

**Welcome to the 2012 summer  
editon of**

***Teaching English Today***

We trust that you will find the articles that follow interesting, challenging and useful.

Please feel free to respond to / add to / challenge any of the views expressed in the articles.

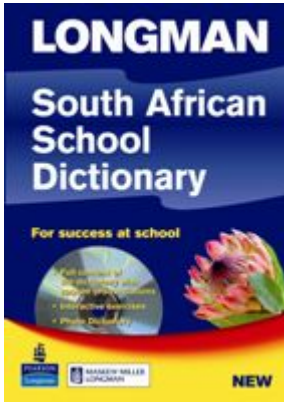
And please do send us your contribution for the next issue (due November 2012). Send these to the Editor at [drv@worldonline.co.za](mailto:drv@worldonline.co.za) – and maybe you could win a copy of *The Longman South Africa School Dictionary*.

Kind regards

(Dr) Malcolm Venter

EDITOR

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# Teaching English punctuation

## Teaching English Punctuation

**Sue McIntosh**

Some of you can identify with the interesting challenge of teaching the intricacies of the English language to a large class of varying home languages. Teaching some of these language concepts piecemeal, as presented in the textbooks, provides our learners with one or two concepts out of a broad area of grammatical skills, which they find difficult to implement in their writing. The new textbooks are no better than the previous ones in this regard. Here we are, looking for help with the basic writing skills.

Because of this, I have developed a series of PowerPoint presentations for use in a classroom with learners speaking up to 10 different home languages (none of them English) or for a largely English-speaking private school classroom or for the small group at tertiary level. They are specifically geared to teaching language in holistic sections. By this I mean explaining all the rules systematically and applying them to the writing of English; not merely the answering of language questions which are found in the final section of Paper 1: USING LANGUAGE CORRECTLY. The presentations make use of visual stimuli, video clips, creative tasks and games.

One of the presentations which would be useful to teachers of

grades 10 to 12 is focused on punctuation. [Click on the link at the end to download the PP presentation.] A major challenge for learners who normally use SMS and BBM language is learning to punctuate their writing correctly. It is possible to teach punctuation in the classroom using short, rule-based slides, followed by a writing activity or a game to facilitate active learning. Where there is no data projector available, a hard copy of six slides per page may be printed and the learner may be encouraged to take notes and answer exercises on the page. Learners with laptops in the classroom can use a soft copy of the PowerPoint on which they can make notes and complete the exercises.

It is recommended that this grammar presentation be used at Grade 10 level, in Term 1. Teaching this at the beginning of the year provides a basis for correcting errors and enables revision at later points during the year. This presentation has also been used successfully at tertiary level for language support in small groups.

Once you have perused the presentation, you may wish to adapt it to make it more applicable to your learners. While learners are completing the exercises, move around and assist them. Many learners have never written a sentence with a colon or semi-colon, and they find Exercises 2 and 3 particularly difficult.

CLICK BELOW FOR POWERPOINT PRESENTATION.

[\*\*Punctuation\*\*](#)



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## The very model of an amateur grammarian



# The very model of an amateur grammarian

*(With apologies to Gilbert and Sullivan)*

I am the very model of an amateur grammarian  
I have a little knowledge and I am authoritarian  
But I make no apology for being doctrinarian  
We must not plummet to the verbal depths of the barbarian

I'd sooner break my heart in two than sunder an infinitive  
And I'd disown my closest family within a minute if  
They dared to place a preposition at a sentence terminus  
Or sully the Queen's English with neologisms verminous

I know that 'soon' and not 'right now' is the true sense of  
'presently'  
I'm happy to correct you and I do it oh so pleasantly  
I'm not a grammar Nazi; I'm just a linguistic Aryan  
I am the very model of an amateur grammarian

I'm sure people appreciate my pointing out their grammar  
gaffes  
And sorting out their sentences and crossing out their  
paragraphs  
When you crusade for good English, it's not all doom and gloom  
you sow  
The secret of success is: it's not who you know; it's whom you  
know

The standards of our language are declining almost every day  
Down from a peak in 18- or 19- I think - well, anyway  
Pop music, TV, blogs and texting are inflicting ravages  
Upon English and unchecked, this will turn us into savages

I fear that sloppy language is a sign of immorality  
For breaking rules of grammar is akin to criminality  
So curse those trendy linguists, lexicographers and anyone  
Who shuns the model English of the amateur grammarian

Conjunctions at the openings of sentences are sickening  
I wish that the decline of the subjunctive were not quickening  
And that more people knew the proper meaning of 'anticipate'  
Of 'fulsome' and 'enormity', 'fortuitous' and 'decimate'

I learned these rules at school and of correctness they're my  
surety

I cling to them for safety despite having reached maturity  
Some say that language changes, but good English is immutable  
And so much common usage now is deeply disreputable

My pedantry's demanding but I try not to feel bitter at  
The fact that everyone I meet is borderline illiterate  
When all around are wrong then I am proud to be contrarian  
I am the very model of an amateur grammarian

**Source:** <http://stroppeyeditor.wordpress.com/>

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## **Ill-disciplined teachers: The training of English teachers**

### **Ill-discipline teachers**

Or

## Where ignorance is *not* bliss

### Malcolm Venter

I have for many years been concerned about the inadequate training of language teachers – or more particularly English language teachers, which is my field of interest. This has struck me again forcefully in the past two or three years for a number of reasons.

*Firstly*, I have been observing student-teachers who have at least English II, mostly English III, and are busy with their post-graduate diplomas or the last year of their BEd. Their inadequate knowledge – either because they have no knowledge or because they have superficial half-knowledge (which is worse) – is patent in the lessons they present. Here are just a few examples from lessons I have recently observed on **figures of speech**:

- They have no idea of what a **figurative comparison** is, as opposed to a literal comparison. Thus they will accept an example such as *He is like Bill Gates* or *He is as rich as Bill Gates* as a simile. The fact that figurative comparisons are based on similarities between different classes of things simply eludes them.
- **Metaphors** are presented as straight alternatives to similes – comparisons without ‘like’ or ‘as’ (e.g. *He is a pig* vs *He is like a pig*). So far so good – but not far enough. What about metaphors that are expressed as verbs (e.g. *He **barked** at me*)? In fact, one student who had just taught the difference between similes and metaphors



without mentioning that metaphors can also be verbs, went on to teach a poem where the only metaphor was a verb – we **iron out** our differences. Not surprising that the pupils did not pick up that it was a metaphor.

- **Tautology** is presented as mere repetition – e.g. *He is a huge, big man*. The fact that tautology always involves using a word later in a text whose meaning is part of the meaning of an earlier word (not repetition as such) is not understood. For example: *He returned back* (where ‘returned’ means ‘went back’).
- An example of an **oxymoron** given by two students was *pretty ugly*. Neither understood that in this context ‘pretty’ has nothing to do with looks but is an informal modifier meaning ‘to a moderate degree; fairly’ (*Concise Oxford*).

The same semi-knowledge phenomenon occurs when students teach **word classes**. Thus, for example, they will define a pronoun as ‘a word which replaces a noun’ – which does not account for a pronoun replacing a noun phrase. For example: *The old man = He*. In terms of their limited definition, one should then say *The old he*.

*Secondly*, I noted the same ignorance when I reviewed the early drafts of the new **CAPS** for English. I could not believe the nonsense which was included – both in terms of blatantly wrong information (e.g. ‘concord’ was defined as a ‘tense’) and the proposed teaching programme – e.g. teaching adverbs before teaching verbs.

*Thirdly*, I recently paged through an **English language textbook** which had been approved by the DBE for the new CAPS. Here are but a few of the errors I noticed in passing:

- An **adverb** is defined as a ‘complement’. Certain adverbs (in particular, adverbs of place) may indeed function as

a complement in a sentence such as *He was **there** when it happened*, but this is not the case with other types of adverbs.

- A **complex sentence** is described as a sentence which 'is made up of a simple sentence and a clause that cannot stand on its own as a sentence'. Once a simple sentence has been combined with another simple sentence, *each* of the original simple sentences is now defined as a 'clause'. By definition, a 'simple sentence' is an independent structure.
- *Employer* and *employee* are given as examples of **antonyms**. Pairs such as these – compare *husband; wife; emigrant; immigrant* – are not opposite in meaning as are pairs such as *good, bad; pretty, ugly*.

Why should this be the case? Why this ignorance? I think there are two main reasons:

- **The tertiary curriculum:** The vast majority of English teachers do a degree in English which consists purely of literature study. They are therefore not qualified to teach the language aspects of English. This is a strange situation – one would not regard a student who had studied Chemistry but not Physics as being adequately trained to teach Physical Science.
- **The school curriculum:** The curriculum has, for many years, sidelined the teaching of grammar; and the new CAPS exacerbates this situation – it practically outlaws dedicated language lessons and in its final draft abolished the language paper (which was reinstated – after a lot of fuss – into the final version). The result is that teachers, already reluctant to teach grammar (and other language aspects) because of their feeling of insecurity in teaching something they are not masters of, do not feel the need to teach this because the curriculum plays it down.

The result of all to this is that most English teachers have

to fly by the seat of their pants when they teach the language aspects of the curriculum, using the inadequate knowledge half-remembered from their school days when they were taught by teachers who, like themselves, were only half-trained and who neglected these aspects; and so the situation perpetuates itself.

So what's the answer? It is clear that the DBE needs to set criteria for teacher qualifications which include the language aspect, thus forcing all universities to extend their English degree courses beyond the literature level if they wish to retain students who are planning to become English teachers.



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***Medal Award for distinguished services to English in 2002. He is currently the editor of Teaching English***

**Today.**

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# Improving writing skills

## Improving writing skills

**Jeffrey Solomon**



I teach English Home Language to Grade 12 learners in a high school in the southern part of KZN. Their mother tongue is either Afrikaans or IsiXhosa, so their knowledge of English is often rudimentary at best. However, they have reached grade 12 and, as such, need to be prepared for the final exam. I have found that I can use certain techniques to improve their writing during this short time in order for them to improve the marks they obtain. These suggestions allow the learners to improve their marks enough that they ought to obtain the required 40% to pass a home language.

**Emphasise the importance of punctuation** by marking primarily the punctuation of a piece of writing. Show the learners the mark before and after correct punctuation is used. It is not necessary to use the mark for a formal task, but it will show the learners that you are serious about punctuation. Concentrate on the full stops, commas, question marks and exclamation marks, as these are usually the ones whose functions are easier to understand and are used more frequently.

**Dictate the length of a paragraph** by telling them that you will accept only paragraphs between 5 and 8 lines. This will force them to adhere to a uniform length. I often find that there are no paragraphs in their essays because they simply do not bother to separate their paragraphs.

**Write a paragraph with them.** Let them choose a topic and the teacher writes the paragraph on the board. This will allow them to see what it means when teachers say 'one idea per paragraph'. You could also choose a topic that appears easy such as 'My Best Friend' and write down whatever they say about their best friend. You will find that they get stumped after two or three sentences. This is because they don't know what to write and it's the reason why so many of their essays are very short. Show them how the physical appearance, history of your friendship, some anecdotes and special qualities can be described in each paragraph.

**Get them to vary the length of their sentences.** Having only long or short sentences in a paragraph makes their writing monotonous and boring. Let them write only one long sentence and short sentences in a paragraph. This can be achieved if they use more punctuation.

**Write an introductory and concluding paragraph** so they can see a sample of these. Learners quite often are told to 'Write an essay on ...' without ever having being taught how to do so. They therefore learn to write by default. Showing them samples of writing will help.

**Do not accept words like 'shock' or 'nice'** which they use to describe virtually every emotion or situation. Let them look for alternatives and in this way improve their vocabulary.

**Do not allow them to count the number of words in their essay.** This is time wasting and usually unnecessary. They should by this stage have an established writing style which will dictate how many words they use per line and should therefore

be aware of how long a 200, 300 or 400 word essay is. Matric markers are also generally not rigid on the length of an essay, provided it is not ridiculously long or short.

These are some of the ideas I have put into practice over my 20 odd years of teaching English Home and FAL to learners in the FET phase. I hope they provide some solutions to your teaching.

*Jeff Solomon hails from KZN. This article was first published in Naptosa INsight, October 2012.*

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## Revisiting feedback to learner writing

## Revisiting feedback to learner writing

**Bulara Monyaki**

*In this article, Bulara provides an outline of different strategies to be found in the literature about providing feedback to learners on their writing. We suggest that teachers / subject departments scan it and extract useful tips for their own practice.*

One of the major points emphasised in the Curriculum, Assessment and Policy Statement is the **process stages** in reading, listening and writing skills. The success and progress of each stage depends on how effective the feedback given is to the 'producer', the learner in this case.

With the national outcry on poor reading and writing, it is worthwhile to dust all the literature available on feedback strategies. The focus in this article is on writing.

The process of writing is defined, by various researchers, as a slow, dynamic and recursive process which is continuous (Gay, 1992; Perl, 1994). The process consists of a cycle of re-seeing, re-creating and re-formulating one's writing task in order to clarify and structure one's thinking. This process requires, thus, a view which defines writing as an ongoing process, a text that may be improved on at every point of contact.

Although researchers do not agree on the value and effect of feedback on learners' writing, teachers and learners alike believe that feedback on learners' writing will help them (learners) to improve their writing. Various feedback strategies are used by teachers with the intention of giving learners guidance and cues on how to improve their writing. This view is also held by a number of researchers who agree that feedback is central to the process of teaching and learning to write (Dheram, 1995; Tchudi, 1997; Hyland, 1990; Muncie, 2000).

Despite the disagreement among researchers, the demands set by

CAPS on English teachers do not make feedback an option, but a must for all teachers. Further attention should be given to how effective the feedback can be.

(1) Providing Feedback in a Technology-Mediated Environment

In this programme, Cleveland State University's William Beasley and Brian Harper outline a two-pronged model for providing feedback. According to Harper, 'feedback has the power to engage or disengage students in the writing process'. They advocate a two-stage approach to feedback.

**Part one** requires adopting a method of communication that pays attention to *what* is being said as well as *how* it's said. For example, the instructor should focus initial comments on what the student does well, and then build from there to develop other writing skills. To make feedback more meaningful, it's also important to chip away at the widely held notion that good writers are born not made.

'In short, the content of the feedback should communicate that you care about the student, that the student is capable of being successful as a writer, and that you are willing to help map a path to that success,' says Harper.

The **second part** of the student feedback model involves using technology to help streamline the feedback process. During the seminar Beasley demonstrated how to use 'track changes' to highlight simple errors such as misspelled words, poor grammar, and punctuation errors that require minimal commentary. For more detailed feedback, Beasley showed how to use the 'insert comment' feature. Finally, on more 'macro-level' content errors, Beasley provided a quick tutorial on how to embed a brief audio clip that gives more detailed guidance to the student on ways to improve the paper.

A word of caution, when using 'track changes' or 'insert comments', Beasley recommends converting the Word document to



a PDF so that students can't simply click 'accept changes' and resubmit the paper without actually doing any of the rewriting themselves.

## **(2) One-on-One Writing Conferences with students**

[Source: J.C. Bean, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. Jossey-Bass, 2001]

### **Tips**

- Have an agenda in mind before starting the conference. The agenda and the higher-order and lower order questions (below) can serve as a guide. Finish one step/question before moving to the next.
- Encourage the student to do most of the talking.
- have students rehearse and explain what they want to say (I'll often take dictation and give the student my notes to take home) or have students describe where they are stuck

### **Suggested agenda for the conference**

1. Ask the student to summarize the assignment in their own words, and pose the following questions:

a) What do you expect from the conference?

b) How much work have you put into the draft? How much more time are you willing to put into the paper?

c) Write down your thesis (or purpose, hypothesis) and supporting points; then write down the main problems you see with the draft [Instructor can

read/skim the draft while the student writes].

*Note: Adjust (c) as needed, depending on the assignment.*

*Examples:*

*– If it's a lab report, the student can write the hypothesis, primary result, and summarize the points for the discussion.*

*– If it's a memo, student can write the purpose of the memo, intended effect on the reader, and the main points.*

2. Give the student positive reinforcement: 'I really like \_\_\_\_\_' or 'You do a good job \_\_\_\_\_.'

3. Give the student an honest evaluation of the draft. Be specific.

4. Reassure the student that shortcomings and problems in a draft are a normal part of the writing process.

5. Use your personal experiences whenever possible.

6. Collaborate with the student to develop a list of 2-3 things the student should work on. Start with higher-order concerns first.

7. Jot down the agreed-upon areas so the student has a list to take home. Ask the student to describe to you what he/she plans to do to work on the 2-3 things.

**Questions to guide commenting**

Higher-order concerns

1. Does the draft follow the assignment?

2. Does the draft addresses an appropriate problem or question?

3. What is the quality of the argument (or quality of the ideas presented)?

4. Is the draft organized at the macro level?

5. Is the draft organized at the micro level?

Lower-order concerns

6. Are there stylistic problems that you find particularly annoying?

7. Is the draft free of errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation?

8. Does the draft follow style guide rules for citations (if library or external data sources are used)?

## **(3) Tips for Commenting on Student Writing**

Teachers who require their students to write papers dedicate many hours each semester to reading, commenting on, and grading student writing, and they often wonder if the time they have spent translates into improvements in their students' writing skills. For their part, students want constructive feedback on their writing and often express frustration when they find their instructors' comments on their papers to be mysterious, confusing, or simply too brief.

The following tips can help you improve the effectiveness and efficiency with which you respond to your students' writing. These tips focus on the process of writing comments on students' papers (whether on rough drafts or final drafts), rather than on the process of grading papers. Grading and commenting on papers are certainly interconnected processes. However, while instructors often think of writing comments on papers as simply a means to justify grades, that purpose should be secondary to helping your students improve their

writing skills.

## **A .Course Planning**

Before the writing course / programme begins, think about what kind of writing you will assign, and how you will respond to that writing.

**1) Design each writing assignment so that it has a clear purpose connected to the learning objectives for the course.**

Craft each assignment as an opportunity for students to practice and master writing skills that are central to their success in the course and to academic achievement in your discipline. For example, if you want them to learn how to summarize and respond to primary literature or to present and support an argument, design assignments that explicitly require the skills that are necessary to accomplish these objectives.

**2) Sequence your writing assignments to help students acquire skills incrementally, beginning with shorter, simpler writing assignments to longer, more complex papers.** You might also find it helpful to develop a sequence for writing comments. In other words, decide ahead of time which aspects of the writing you will focus on with each assignment. For example, you may decide to focus your comments on the first assignment on the writing of the thesis statement, then focus comments on later papers on the success with which the students deal with counter-arguments. Sequencing your comments can help make the commenting process more efficient. However, it is essential to communicate to students before they turn in their papers which aspects of the writing you are going to focus on in your feedback at which points in the semester (and why).

**3) Develop and communicate clear grading criteria for each writing assignment.**

These criteria will help you be as consistent and fair as possible when evaluating a group of student papers. Developing

and using criteria is especially important when co-teaching a course or when asking TAs to grade papers for the course. Distribute the grading criteria to students (or post the criteria on the course website) so that they will know how you will evaluate their work.

While there are shared criteria for 'good writing' that apply across academic disciplines, each discipline also has certain standards and conventions that shape writing in the discipline. Do not expect that students will come into your class knowing how to write the kind of paper you will ask them to write. For example, a student who has learned how to write an excellent analytical paper in a literature course may not know how to write the kind of paper that is typically required for a history course. Give students a written list of discipline-specific standards and conventions, and explain these in class. Provide examples of the kind of writing they will need to produce in your course.

**4) Develop a process for writing comments that will give students a clear idea of whether they have or have not achieved the course's learning objectives (and with what degree of success).**

Students should be able to see a clear correlation among 1) written comments on a paper, 2) the grading criteria for the assignment, and 3) the learning objectives for the course. Thus, before you start reading and commenting on a stack of papers, remind yourself of the grading criteria, the learning objectives, and which aspects of the writing you want to focus on in your response.

## **B. Writing comments in the margins**

**1) The first time you read through a paper, try to hold off on writing comments.**

Instead, take the time to read the paper in its entirety. If you need to take some notes, do so on another piece of paper. This strategy will prevent you from making over-hasty

judgments, such as faulting a student for omitting evidence that actually appears later in the paper. (In such cases, it may be appropriate to tell the student that you expected that evidence to be presented earlier – and the reason why.) While you may expect this strategy to take more time, it can actually save you time by allowing you to focus your feedback on the most important strengths and weaknesses you want to bring to the writers' attention (see 'Writing Final Comments,' below).

## **2) Respond as a reader, not as a writer.**

Do not tell students how YOU would write the paper. Instead, tell them how you are responding to each part of the paper as you read it, pointing out gaps in logic or support and noting confusing language where it occurs. For example, if a sentence jumps abruptly to a new topic, do not rewrite the sentence to provide a clear transition or tell the student how to rewrite it. Instead, simply write a note in the margin to indicate the problem, then prompt the student to come up with a solution.

This strategy is especially important to follow when a student asks you to respond to a draft before the final paper is due; in this case, your aim should be to help the student identify weaknesses that he or she should improve and NOT to do the student's thinking and writing for them. Of course, in some instances, it is necessary and appropriate to give the student explicit directions, such as when she or he seems to have missed something important about the assignment, misread a source, left out an essential piece of evidence, or failed to cite a source correctly.

## **3) Ask questions to help students revise and improve.**

One way to ensure that your comments are not overly directive is to write *questions* in the margins, rather than instructions. For the most part, these questions should be 'open' rather than 'closed' (having only one correct answer.) Open questions can be a very effective way to prompt students to think more deeply about the topic, to provide needed

evidence, or to clarify language

#### **4) Resist the temptation to edit.**

Instead, mark a few examples of repeated errors and direct students to attend to those errors. Simply put, if you correct your students' writing at the sentence level, they will not learn how to do so themselves, and you will continue to see the same errors in paper after paper. Moreover, when you mark all mechanical errors, you may overwhelm your students with so many marks that they will have trouble determining what to focus on when writing the next draft or paper.

#### **5) Be specific.**

Comments in the margin such as 'vague,' 'confusing,' and 'good' do not help students improve their writing. In fact, many students find these comments 'vague' and 'confusing'—and sometimes abrupt or harsh. Taking a little more time to write longer, and perhaps fewer, comments in the margin will help you identify for students exactly what they have done well or poorly. Information about both is crucial for helping them improve their writing.

Here are some examples of specific comments:

Rather than 'vague':

- *'Which research finding are you referring to here?'*
- *'I don't understand your use of the underlined phrase. Can you rewrite this sentence?'*
- *'Can you provide specific details to show what you mean here?'*

Instead of 'confusing,' 'what?' or '???':

- *'I lost the thread of your argument. Why is this information important? How is it related to your argument?'*
- *'You imply that this point supports your argument, but it actually contradicts your point in paragraph 3.'*

Rather than 'good':

- *'This excellent example moves your argument forward.'*
- *'Wonderful transition that helped clarify the connection between the two studies you are summarizing.'*
- *'An apt metaphor that helped me understand your argument about this historical metaphor.'*

### **3. Writing Final Comments**

**1) Begin by making positive comments; when pointing out weaknesses, use a descriptive tone, rather than one that conveys disappointment or frustration.**

Give an honest assessment, but do not overwhelm the writer with an overly harsh or negative reaction. For example, do not assume or suggest that if a paper is not well written, the writer did not devote a lot of time to the assignment. The writer may have in fact struggled through several drafts. Keep in mind that confusing language or a lack of organized paragraphs may be evidence not of a lack of effort, but rather of confused thinking. The writer may therefore benefit from a few, targeted questions or comments that help them clarify their thinking.

**2) Limit your comments; do not try to cover everything.**

Focus on the 3-4 most important aspects of the paper. Provide a brief summary of 1) what you understood from the paper and 2) any difficulties you encountered. Make sure that whatever you write addresses the grading criteria for the assignment, but also try to tailor your comments to the specific strengths and weaknesses shown by the individual student.

While you may think that writing lots of comments will convey your interest in helping the student improve, students—like all writers—can be overwhelmed by copious written comments on their work. They may therefore have trouble absorbing all the



comments you have written, let alone trying to use those comments to improve their writing on the next draft or paper.

### **3) Distinguish 'higher-order' from 'lower-order' issues.**

Typically, 'higher-order' concerns include such aspects as the thesis and major supporting points, while 'lower-order' concerns are grammatical or mechanical aspects of the writing. Whatever you see as 'higher' in importance than other aspects should be clear in your grading criteria. Whatever you decide, write your comments in a way that will help students know which aspects of their writing they should focus on FIRST as they revise a paper or write the next paper. For example, if a paper lacks an argument or a main point in an assignment in which either an argument or main point is essential (as is usually the case), address that issue first in your comments before you note any grammatical errors that the student should attend to.

### **4) Refer students back to comments you wrote in the margins.**

For example, you might comment, 'Your argument loses focus in the fourth paragraph (see my questions in margin).' You might also note a frequent pattern of mechanical error, then point them to a specific paragraph that contains that type of error.

### **5) Model clear, concise writing.**

Before you write final comments, take a moment to gather and order your thoughts.

## **Sources and Recommended Reading**

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**Stagefright: Teaching**

# Shakespeare as drama

## Stagefright: Teaching Shakespeare as drama

Hennie van der Mescht

*This article is based on the Shakespeare Society Birth Lecture which Prof van der Mescht delivered in Grahamstown on 20 April 2011.*

Who would have thought that one of the performance criteria for becoming a teacher of English literature was a head for heights? Or high tolerance levels for 100-year-old dust, rat droppings and bat urine? I certainly had no idea – when I took up an English post at Grey High School, and later at Queen's College – that I would spend a lot of time on very high ladders, hanging and adjusting spotlights, or taking down or hanging up stage curtains and flies, or painting and building platforms and other similarly dangerous occupations.

Because that's what you end up doing when you believe that Shakespeare lives on the stage and not the page. And in the early 70s very few schools had 'theatres', though they all had halls designed for virtually everything but theatre. School hall stages were dreadful places – badly lit, badly draped, dark, draughty and dangerous! No catwalks. Great for the opening scene of *Hamlet* and maybe the 'Fair is foul' scene from *Macbeth* – because the special effects were 'built-in' – but not much else. So if you really wanted to put Shakespeare

on stage you had your work cut out for you. You would become an expert in wheeling and dealing, sabotaging school budgets and channeling some money away from rugby to drama, so that you could supplement the two 100-watt lamps that 'light' the stage. You would become knowledgeable about light fittings, tossing out words like 'fresnelles' with ease. You would adopt archeological tendencies, digging down layers of previous generations' attempts at 'theatre' (mostly variety concerts) in the hopes of finding bits of costume that may work, or bits of metal that may become swords, or foils or halberds. Or a lump of something which may become a hump for Richard.

You would become a shameless liar as you kept reassuring the first team prop (Marcellus in your *Hamlet*) that he looks good in tights. And Oh! – you would need a honeyed tongue to persuade the girls' school headmistress that her Ophelias, Juliets, Desdemonas and Cornelias would be perfectly safe rehearsing till 12 every night in the very attentive company of sweaty 17-year-old boys, ardent with desire for culture; and that things really **had changed** since the days when 'being on the stage' inevitably led to dissolution and pregnancy.

Oh, and then of course there are other little things, like cutting the three hours (four in the case of *Hamlet*) down to about 90 minutes, auditioning, casting, directing, getting mothers to make costumes, designing posters, thinking about ticket prices and sales, refreshments (don't sell potato crisps during interval), asking the metalwork teacher to make swords that don't bend too easily but are light enough to wield. (There's nothing more discouraging than a wave of laughter from the audience during a tense sword battle – and you're sitting in the wings wondering why they're laughing but when you look closely it's embarrassingly obvious that one of the swords has bent at the first blow and is not 'unbending' because it's made of the wrong metal.)

**Why the bother?**

And, well, why bother? Why go to all this trouble? Why, when you could more easily read the text in the comparative safety of your classroom, preparing your Grade 12s for the ordeal of the final examination? When you could be going to bed at a reasonable hour instead of figuring out how to give Lear grey hair that does not puff clouds of dust when he, Lear, 'beat[s] at this gate that let thy folly in ...'. (More unwanted laughter)

**Well, it's fun.** That's a good reason. Doing exciting things with groups of enthusiastic teenagers (mostly boys really pleased to be let off prep and allowed to grow their hair 'for the play' and chat to girls every night) is fun. It's better than going to bed at a reasonable hour.

**And you might learn something.** As you struggle to explain why Iago has to say 'Ha I like not that' in a particularly secretive, suggestive yet quiet tone (but not so quiet that Othello and the audience can't hear him), you learn something. And when Hamlet asks if it wouldn't be cool for him to whisper his famous last words – 'the rest is silence' – you both learn something. And when Gertrude asks you to explain what she's actually saying in the line 'This bodiless creation ecstasy/Is very cunning in' you wonder why you've taken on this job when all you can do is stammer and say 'Hmm... good question'; but ultimately you learn – because you remember vaguely that 'ecstasy' meant insanity, and of course the bodiless creation is the Ghost of Hamlet's father, so Gertrude is saying that Hamlet's madness is cunningly/craftily creating hallucinations in which his late father appears to him. So you learn! And Gertrude learns. So that's another reason.

And then – this is difficult to explain – somewhere among the dusty shadows backstage, or two storeys up on wobbly ladders, or in the wings waiting to prompt but losing your place because Ophelia is just so compelling tonight – somewhere there is a sense of joining a long line of performers, getting into step, of linking with what generations have done year

after year, and **you feel yourself part of a history and tradition that puts a bounce in your step and a song in your heart** – even on the night Horatio gets so lost in his lines that Hamlet has to die twice before Fortinbras can enter and wrap things up. So that's a third reason.

But the main reason by far is of course the obvious one: **you go to the trouble to put Shakespeare on stage because that's where he belongs**. He did not write 'books'. He wrote living text, full of movement, laughter, tears, joy and pain, and the best place to see and understand this is on stage. This is not a new idea at all. It's been around – in education literature – since well before the turn of the 20th century, but it is rarely acted upon. I think Rex Gibson may have been the first serious academic/teacher/editor who deliberately included what he called 'active' methods in a Shakespeare pedagogy. Gibson, for many years Director of the Shakespeare and Schools Project and editor of Shakespeare texts, was among the first to include dramatic hints and interpretations in annotations to the texts, something the Institute for the Study of English in Africa editions are also very good at. As Gibson puts it, 'Active methods ... recognise that Shakespeare wrote his plays for performance, and his scripts are completed by enactment of some kind' (p. xii). In this country – and this province in particular – we have had our own champion of this approach to teaching literature, Andre Lemmer. Many of you will be familiar with his work. Andre's annual *Viva Shakespeare* workshops – for many years part of the schools festival – were always received with great enthusiasm and usually resulted in several 'conversions'. I was fortunate enough to co-present one or two of these with him and what an experience that was. And how exhausting! These workshops brought home the sheer physicality of theatre and fed into Andre's notion of how to annotate the Shakespeare texts referred to above. And when you came away from one of these workshops you really were convinced that Shakespeare belongs on the stage.

## All the world's a stage

But I must immediately qualify the word 'stage', because I mean any space where people can act, interact, can say lines and move, can enter or leave. Often a space in the classroom or a quad will suffice. For expert or experienced readers of drama a space in the head works. But not for novices: they really do need to experience the play – they need to encounter the drama-ness of the drama. This is one of the most neglected literacies in the teaching of English – a dramatic literacy: finding a way of getting the reader to see 'through' the lines on the page, to 'see' the action behind the lines, and there is no better text than Shakespeare's to teach this. Look at these lines from *Othello*. What's going on here, dramatically? What can we tell – from the dialogue only since there are hardly any stage directions – about how these lines should be delivered, how characters should move, what tone of voice they should use? In short, how can the words on the page become the actions on the stage? Let's look at a few possibilities: I have annotated the text to show possible 'dramatic' interpretations without which the text dies on the page. [Download extract below by clicking on the link and print separately.]

### [Othello extract](#)

We can also look at the many film versions of Shakespeare, where we see a range of different directors' interpretations of what's happening on stage. But of course a movie set is not a stage.

A fascinating article in this context is Peter Thomas' *Shakespeare Page to Stage*, in which he shows how an appreciation of the handkerchief as the central prop in *Othello* can lead to an understanding of the play as a whole. Here's his opening paragraph, sufficiently entertaining to read in full:

*Stuff compulsory written tests on Shakespeare and stick your statutory orders in the bin. No ring-binder can help teachers bring the dramatist to life as much as a Kleenex tissue. Departments with more lavish budgets may go for a cotton hanky or a silk neckscarf, but not even the most favoured CTC is likely to invest in a top-of-the-range strawberry number, woven by hallowed silkworms over twenty moons and dipped in mummified essence. I don't suppose Shakespeare's prop box had one matching Othello's description of his gift to Desdemona. So, a Kleenex it is. This simple prop can give students a grasp of Shakespeare's dramatic method – of writing crafted for an audience rather than a dutiful reader.*

This is where the theatrical experience I'm referring to is different from the kind of thing a professional theatre company may do. For me – as a teacher – the point is not the performance – not really. The truth is you will not easily find 18-year-old Hamlets in your average Matric class. And for an adolescent to play Lear with any conviction is a big ask. So, while the play is indeed the thing, **it is the educational project that interests me**, and it is what those in the play and those able to see it performed will learn from the experience that really counts. **And what do they learn?** Well, the list is endless but here are some ideas.

- Those who are in the production learn how to move 'naturally' – to let the words dictate their movement, and to throw away their preconceived ideas about 'acting'. Every year I auditioned I had to cope with the same phenomenon: that students find it impossible to stand perfectly still while speaking on stage. And so you had the *wandering Hamlet* and the *striding Macbeth*; even when they were speaking to someone they felt they had to move. When you questioned them the answer was usually 'I don't know what to do with myself ... or my hands ...'. And the way through that was to look at the lines again and try to detect 'movement', deliberate



dramatic movement rather than aimless wandering about.

- So they learn how to move and not to move – how to be comfortable in their bodies. They also learn how to interact – how to listen, and respond. How to say lines so that they make sense, even when they are as tortuous as ‘This bodiless creation ecstasy/Is very cunning in’. Of course it helps to have the context. Hamlet is watching his father’s ghost leaving through the portal and Gertrude is staring at Hamlet in amazement because she can’t see the ghost:

*Exit Ghost*

**QUEEN**

This is the very coinage of your brain.

This bodiless creation ecstasy

Is                      very                      cunning                      in.

- They learn about stagecraft, how actors need to be positioned so that the action flows and makes sense. And of course they learn lines and can quote impressively from the text for years afterwards, perhaps forever.
- And those who merely watch learn a great deal too, but mostly they see that the plays are not words on the page. They look through the page, at the stage and through the stage at life itself.

**But there’s more!**

But it would be wrong to promote an ‘active’ approach to Shakespeare at the expense of other interests, or pursuits that the texts offer. This is a point argued by Jane Coles –

who collaborated with Gibson on many projects – in a scathing attack on the testing system in UK entitled *Alas, poor Shakespeare: Teaching and testing at Key Stage 3* (Coles, 2003). I don't want to pick up the testing issue now – I'm coming to that – but I do want to take up her warning that it is possible to neglect the kind of close textual analysis that Shakespeare texts demand in favour of more 'active' approaches. Clearly the best place to engage Shakespeare's poetry is the classroom, not the stage. And central to poetry is metaphor; any engagement with Shakespeare that ignores metaphor is missing something special. How could one not want to talk about these images?

Come, thick night,

And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell,

That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,

Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,

To cry *Hold, hold!*

To take arms against a sea of troubles [even Shakespeare mixes metaphors]

When I have shuffled off this mortal coil

When sorrows come they come not single file but in battalions

My predecessor in the Education Department at Rhodes University – Ken Durham – used to encourage teachers to 'romp through' four or five Shakespeares with their Grade 10s, not struggle painfully through one. I love the spirit of what Ken was getting at – as I loved most of the things he was inclined to enthuse over – but I did wonder how 14-year-olds could absorb anything but the plot if they really did romp through

four or five plays in one year. And the plots are really the least interesting features of the plays. It is what Shakespeare was able to do with such unpromising material that is truly remarkable. I remember at university being warned that the comedies required considerable suspension of disbelief to be enjoyed. But I find the same is true of the tragedies and used to 'tease' my pupils with 7-minute Shakespeares, in which, if the tragic figure were not who he was, the play ends very soon. For example, in response to Horatio's story about seeing the ghost Hamlet replies: 'Really! You believe in that sort of thing? I think it's rubbish. Let's go and have a beer.' You can try this on all the tragedies – works very well, but unfortunately destroys the plays!

Other than the stagecraft, the plot and the poetry, what else is worth looking at? The issues, of course; and Shakespeare is full of issues. It is in these – usually regarded as universal in applicability and moral values – that teachers who subscribe to the notion that teaching English is about encouraging personal growth find the material for their lessons. So *Macbeth* is about ambition; it's about power corrupting absolutely; and *Lear* is about the arrogance of old age and authority; it's about filial ingratitude. *Hamlet* is about indecision; thinking too much. And so on. I don't mean to be scornful of these notions – because they are valid and worth pursuing in the sense that they can get learners to talk about the plays – but there is a danger in assuming that these 'messages' from the plays are somehow timeless and universal and that we can learn so much about ourselves from them. I don't know what there is to be learned from the story and the motivation of a powerful thane who kills the king to usurp his throne; or from a silly old man who throws out the only child who truly loves him because of vanity; and so on. It is also possible to take this notion of relevance (real life stuff) too far, as one sees in examination papers (thankfully not in this country – not yet anyway) where candidates are encouraged

to 'apply' the issues to their own experience. An example – cited by Coles – is a question inviting candidates to describe a person they truly admire (this after reading *Henry V*). Coles notes examples of journalists having fun with this approach producing questions such as *Doesn't King Lear make you appreciate your grandpa more?* It is quite possible to answer these questions without any reference to the play whatsoever!

More importantly, the underlying assumption that everyone obviously admires Henry V, or really sympathises with Lear is highly questionable. Surely other readings are possible? This is what happens when these texts are read unproblematically, as though they contained 'messages' that would be true for all time. It leads to what McEvoy (2008) has called a 'reverential acquaintanceship' or 'blank reverence'. It is what happens when teachers fail to present the plays as cultural products, growing from specific historical, political contexts. This approach to teaching English – a 'cultural analysis' model – is no less valid than a personal response approach – in fact arguably even more valid as our learners grow up in increasingly text-saturated environments.

## **Testing Times**

So now I have arrived at the examination and this is the last point I want to make. These thoughts spring from a quarter of a century of teaching and testing literature. My over-riding impression of examinations is that it was very difficult – if not impossible – to test 'active' approaches to Shakespeare. I know because I tried many times and made some bad mistakes along the way. In my anxiety to get the candidates to think of the stage (rather than the page) I completely overestimated them and their teachers, and it soon became apparent that very few teachers were looking at Shakespeare as anything but a rather unusual novel or a long poem. My first attempt – I remember it well – was a scene from *Antony and Cleopatra*, one of those scenes where Antony greets Cleopatra exuberantly after an absence of some kind. I printed the scene and asked

the candidates how they would put in on stage – I asked about grouping, costume, set, even music. O my goodness, what a lot of rubbish we got to mark. Everyone of course answered this question because it seemed that you did not have to know anything to answer it. So we got the full treatment of leather sandals, purple silk wraps, diamond necklaces, Antony's brown curls, lots of gold of course, and soft romantic music – one huge Hollywood cliché. It was very difficult to award any marks at all. Credit went to candidates who showed understanding of the tensions and themes in the play, the characters, but mostly what was actually happening on stage and why.

My next attempt was one that is easily demonstrated in a classroom. It is the scene, near the end of *Lear*, in which Edgar, Kent and Albany are clustered in discussion about what to do with the country, while Lear is bent over the dead Cordelia, some distance away. At a point in their conversation Albany exclaims 'O see, see!' and the next dialogue is Lear saying 'And my poor fool is hanged ...' in that unforgettable soliloquy which drives towards 'Never, never, never, never, never.' The question I asked was 'What do you think makes Albany exclaim 'O see, see!''? Obvious isn't it? No. Very, very few candidates had a *picture* of the stage in their heads, and so looked in vain at the text, the written text, for clues, and came up with rubbish – things like 'He's trying to emphasise what he means ...' whereas if one saw that there were two groups (Albany's group and Lear and Cordelia) and that Lear must have made some noise or movement to draw Albany's attention making him look at Lear bending over Cordelia, the answer is obvious. But this requires a dramatic reading.

Staying with examinations for a few more minutes, most of you will identify with the excessive and sometimes insane laughter that erupts in examination venues when one encounters howlers, especially when one has marked about 200 scripts and one is

facing another 100. The following gems are part of a huge anthology collected over a period of twenty years of examining the former Cape Province literature exams. In the process of selecting these I wondered what it was that made them so funny, and realized with surprise that they were funny because one could see what the writers meant – they have a grain of truth in them, however minute. To keep things simple I select a few from *Macbeth*.

So here goes:

*Macbeth undergoes several periods when his mind controls his body.*

*Just thinking about murdering makes Macbeth's ribs knock together.*

*Lady Macbeth has many redeeming features. She is essentially ignorant.*

*Lady Macbeth's milk went sour.*

*Before the killing Lady Macbeth even dances with Duncan mercilessly.*

*Although Macbeth has killed many people you could still describe him as a fairly normal person.*

*Macbeth carefully kills people at random.*

*She pushed his manhood in his face.*

*She played with his manhood.*

*Lady Macbeth commits suicide shortly before her death.*

*Macbeth weakly says 'If we should fail' and Lady Macbeth says 'Screw your courage!'*

*Macbeth dabbled in the blood.*

And finally this stroke of post-modern genius:

*Lady Macbeth is driven mad by all the imagery in the play.*

It took me many years as a teacher to realize that what you took into the classroom didn't matter terribly – that whether you were looking at Cummings or Keats, or Shakespeare or Shaw didn't matter much. What you were teaching was poetry, not poems, drama, not plays, and any vehicle you could find to do this was acceptable. I know this sounds a little un-academic, but I believe it is educationally sound. Seen in this light, materials you take into the classroom are just an excuse

really, a reason to talk and write and argue and discuss. This is one of the few notions that OBE actually got right, the idea that content was sometimes arbitrary and that it was the skills and attitudes that were learned that mattered. I have to say though, that Shakespeare is a pretty good excuse for teaching, definitely the best I ever encountered.

It is because of this conviction that I was a little startled to learn – a few years ago – that schools no longer need to ‘do’ Shakespeare. Schools can now choose a modern drama over Shakespeare. I must confess to wondering at the time whether this was not somehow illegal and I had to ask myself some serious questions. Was I disappointed because Shakespeare is so central to the canon; in other words, did I feel that one ‘ought to’ teach Shakespeare, and who was the DoE to think otherwise? Maybe a bit. But I think what I felt was sadness rather than injury, because I could not understand how a body of work that is without question **the** high point in English literature, and that provided me and (most of) my students with so much pleasure and just plain fun could be declared ‘optional’. The debate rages in other countries too, even the UK, where there is loud lamentation when there are suggestions that Shakespeare need no longer be part of the testing and examining regime. Lighthill (2011), in an article entitled ‘Shakespeare – an endangered species’ is afraid that ‘teachers might opt for a pedagogy of least resistance and thus expose poor Will to the slings and arrows of revisionists who for a long time have felt that Shakespeare was far too elitist and of little relevance to the young today’ (p. 38).

I’ve never thought Shakespeare to be elitist, or of little relevance. And if one has to work a little harder to ‘get it’, the rewards are all the greater.

But maybe I really am ready to retire!



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# 'On the move' – a discussion of Thom Gunn's poem

## 'On the move' – a discussion of Thom Gunn's poem



### Quentin Hogge

The Sexual Revolution, Flower Power, long hair, Zapata moustaches, flared jeans, Led Zepellin, LSD – terms evocative of a by-gone era. For one who was a teenager during the heady excitement of the 60s, with the atmosphere of personal liberation and the celebration of youth, it comes as a continual and depressing shock to have to teach kids who were not born until after John Lennon's death and have never heard of The Beatles. The virility, subtlety and energy of the Rock-and-Roll culture is alien to them. Theirs is the endless sterility of the vide-games arcade and the cocooning coma of the walkman CD perpetually circumscribing their contact with the world. [Editor's note: Substitute i-pad, smartphone, etc for today's generation.]

Properly handled, Thom Gunn's poem 'On the Move' can go some way to providing an insight into those halcyon days without descending into romanticism. For, while there was innocence

and creativity, there was an ugly underside too. Particularly for second-language pupils, a fairly detailed explanation of the Beat Generation and its origins is useful. This information is readily available, so I merely mention a few salient points before looking at the poem stanza by stanza. Some general comments and a few exercises follow.

For a variety of reasons, and broadly speaking, the end of the Second World War saw the rise of a Western society geared to materialism: a sort of aristocracy of avarice was created which was elitist and exclusive. Gaining entry to this materialistic society was difficult and not without problems of morality. Therefore many young people rejected it or 'dropped out'. The next problem was: what was to be substituted for the society that was being rejected?

The Calvinistic work ethic and the Middle Class syndrome were to be replaced by a mixture of Zen Buddhism, Indian Peyote rituals and visionary mysticism. This philosophical goulash found its driving force in sex, hallucinatory drugs and unreal rhetoric.

Perhaps Marlon Brando's film *The Wild Ones*, about a motorcycle subculture, is the best way to sum up the alternative society that began to develop. A cult emerged, depicting the 50s bikers as heroes who had cast off the shackles of a society they could not come to terms with. In fact the motorcycle and rider became symbolic of a rebellion against a system that the young rejected. It culminated in the film *Easy Rider* in the 60s. The alternative community that developed around the motorcycle gangs (and the communes of Haight Ashbury, etc) soon proved to be far short of ideal. Poverty, drugs, violence and venereal disease plagued them as much as the 'normal' society they spurned.

Conformity to any of the 'normal' society's norms was scorned and considered traitorous. One of the slogans of the era was, 'Don't trust anyone over thirty.' Perhaps the majority irony

in the rejection of society's norms by the Flower Power mob was that they produced a rigid conformity of their own, a conformity often enforced by peer pressure or muscle or both, often far harsher and definitely cruder than that which they rejected (see Thom Gunn's poem 'Black Jackets').

Through the reversed telescope of hindsight, it does, however, appear to have been a genuine effort to find a better way. Gunn's poem, I think, captures the essence of the underlying confusion that prompted the sociological upheavals of the 50s and 60s. Many of society's mores deserved to be rejected, but it was difficult if not impossible to find worthwhile replacements.

The title and subtitle of the poem suggest action and movement. Implied too is the underlying unsettled state of the bikers. The subtitle indicates an inexplicable urge to be in motion for motion's sake, rather than for some articulate reason – such as a destination. 'Man, you gotta Go' was a slogan of the times, on a par with, 'Groovy' and 'Like wow, Man', along with the Woodstock classics: 'Three days, Man' and 'We're scarred shitless' – not meaningful statements so much as components of an esoteric slang that expressed rumblings of ineffable dissatisfaction.

### **Stanza 1**

In stanza one the first four lines describe a natural scene. Birds dart around in an energetic way doing what is instinctive (natural) for them to do. The birds, while undisturbed by humanity, are in harmony with their environment. In line 6 the pronoun 'One' is ambiguous and operates on more than one level. It refers to the poet, or people (mankind) or by extension to the bikers. This is usually difficult to explain to a class. I generally leave it at the level of the poet and if a brighter pupil spots the possible alternatives, I let discussion develop as far as they can take it. The point becomes clearer further on in the poem

when the poet identifies with the basic feeling of indecision within mankind. In the final lines of the stanza mankind (or the bikers, or the poet) also acts with vigour, like the birds, but it does not know exactly what it is doing nor can mankind express its ideas clearly. In the attempt at articulation, a disturbance is caused – ‘an uncertain violence’. Humans are out of tune with themselves and their surroundings. (See stanza four – humans lack the instinct to direct their actions.) Note the words ‘dust’ and ‘thunder’ foreshadow the appearance of ‘the Boys’ in stanza two. Even the word ‘baffled’ operates on different levels, referring to frustration or an exhaust silencer.

## **Stanza 2**

Stanza two opens with the view of the motorcycle gang in the distance as small and insect-like. They grow larger as they approach and the roar of their engines increases in volume. Soon the riders are seen astride their powerful machines. In their leather uniforms they all look the same (‘donned impersonality’). The distasteful images in line two suggest disapproval and even something alien. The gang’s physical (sexual?) mastery of the machines is suggested by ‘... held by calf and thigh...’. Lines 7 – 8 deal with the uniformity of clothing and behaviour – two aspects of the gang which are purposeful. The uniforms, their collective way of life and their constant movement almost give them a sense of purpose in life which may overcome their doubts about themselves.

## **Stanza 3**

In Stanza three, the Boys’ are trying to prove their manhood, but are uncertain about how tough they really are. They know their origin, but they are not certain of their destination. The bikers disturb the birds and the poet sees this as typical of modern life: nature has now to submit to the will-power and control of man. This control is often unplanned and uncoordinated. Modern man makes ‘both machine and soul’ – he

consciously shapes his beliefs and his characters – and he uses both these elements (although he cannot completely control either) to take great risks in unusual or novel enterprises. Men do not move (or are not motivated) by instinct only, as the birds do, but by their own acts of will – men have a measure of free will in their actions.

#### **Stanza 4**

Stanza four suggests that attempts by man (or the poet) to shape his future should not be condemned. Because man is only half animal he cannot act by pure instinct only, as the birds do. Man has to make decisions. These decisions are difficult and it helps him if he joins a gang or groundswell of human change ('movement': line 5) which will give him moral support and some values with which he can identify, while in that group. The actions of the gang make 'the Boys' feel that at least they are getting somewhere, but there is no concept of how or where the journey will end (death being an accepted absolute).

#### **Stanza 5**

In the final stanza, 'the Boys' do not stop for long. Soon these self-assured(?) young men mount their man-made machines and roar away. Their way of life (the route they travel) has no final goal or resting-place, and does not achieve a natural wholeness, as the lives of birds or saints do. Although they do not gain a feeling of satisfaction or completeness from life, they do at least feel that they are moving somewhere – which is better than sitting doing nothing at all. George McBeth in his book *Poetry 1900 to 1975* (Longmans 1985) has this to say concerning the ending of the poem:

'The last three lines of the poem have immense authority and might stand of Gunn's central philosophy of life.'

Generally, the attitudes expressed in the poem are similar to the philosophy of existentialism: men have no God-given

purpose, but must define themselves (line 34), manufacture their own souls (line 22) and choose their own destinations (line 31), thus creating some sort of value system where none existed before (line 30). (Elsewhere in his book McBeth states that Gunn has a

'... clearly articulated group of attitudes. These seem to be that man is a creature possessing free will whose identity lies in his power to choose and pick his future by his own actions. This philosophy derives from the existentialism of Jean-Paul Satre and Albert Camus.')

Furthermore, men still have a measure of free will: life is a journey with an uncertain, if not unattainable, destination. Moving fast may give man the illusion of reacting vigorously to the difficulties of life. Man is not sure, however, that what is being moved forward is good or not so good.

It is worthwhile to note the ambivalence of the poet to of clear goals in life. Yet he seems to sympathize with them and to understand them, and he does not wish them to be condemned. He even seems to admire their powerful machines, their group feelings and their attitude that it is better to be doing something active rather than to sit inert.

## **EXERCISES**

### **Title and subtitle**

1) Give a possible reason for the capital 'G' in the word 'Go' in the subtitle.

### **Stanza 1**

2) Quote three words that vividly describe the energetic movement of the birds.

3) What, in your own opinion, is the 'hidden purpose' that motivates the birds?

4) Quote three words (do NOT use 'uncertain') that suggest the uncertainty of man's actions within the context of the stanza.

5) Why does man act with uncertainty?

6) Supply a synonym for 'dull' within the context of the poem.

### **Stanza 2**

7) What figure of speech is '... as flies hanging in the heat, ...'? What is its effect?

8) Fully discuss the poet's choice of the participle 'hanging'.

9) Rewrite in your own words, 'their hum/bugles to thunder held by calf and leg'.

10) What does the poet mean when he describes the riders' jackets as '... trophied with the dust ...'?

11) Discuss the significance of the adverb 'almost' in line 8.

### **Stanza 3**

12) What does the 'direction where the tyres press' suggest about the destination of the riders?

13) What does this stanza reveal about the poet's belief in an omnipotent God?

### **Stanza 4**

14) How does the punctuation in lines 3 and 4 reinforce what the poet is saying?

15) Explain the repetition of the word 'toward'.

### **Stanza 5**



- 16) What image is the poet trying to create in line 1?
- 17) What is the effect of the verb 'burst' in line 3?
- 18) What figure of speech is 'towns they travel through'?

Quotes from *Poetry 1900 to 1975* edited by George McBeth and published by Longmans in 1985. Both quotes from page 264.

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**It's what you learn!**

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## **AghoghoAkpome**

One of the reasons why some learners in South Africa struggle to achieve sufficient proficiency in English today may have nothing to do with the commonly debated issues invariably connected to historical disadvantage. I want to suggest here that the low proficiency in English (and academic literacy in general) of some students may very well be associated with, among other things, a growing perception that they *just cannot*

**be good enough in English mainly because it is not their first language.**

In trying to explain the difficulties faced by students and learners with an indigenous African language, too much is often made of the disadvantages of being an English second- or third-language speaker. Conversely, the perceived advantages of being a first-language speaker become exaggerated and presented as a myth. The suggestion is thus made that those who are born of English parents automatically become masters in the language and have the *natural* ability expected to excel academically. Presumably, therefore, those with a different first language at birth are unlikely to become proficient in English and in academics beyond a basic level. In this way, mastery of language is represented, more or less, as an integral part of human ontology. It therefore assumes, in the mind of some, the shape of part of an individual's racial and cultural make-up.

### **A great fallacy**

This is, of course, a great fallacy, and one that can not only constitute a major psychological block to students but may also frustrate the best pedagogical efforts of teachers and institutions. I therefore strive, as much as I can, to convince challenged students that mastery of English – and *any* language for that matter – comes not by birth, but by learning. To illustrate the point, I often recall a joke by a Rwandan friend that his father can hardly read or write Kinyarwanda even though that is *his* first language. This reminds me also of my own elder brother whose command of English far surpasses his proficiency in our home language, Urhobo, in which he can hardly carry out an articulate conversation.

I do not wish to offer a simplistic explanation for what is a complex situation. Neither do I want to discount the undeniable fact that being a first-language speaker of any

language affords the individual vital benefits, especially with regard to being educated in that language. What I aim to communicate is another fact that is not often emphasized (to struggling students at least): that the native speaker of English acquires mastery in the language by constant learning, rather than by the mere biological fact of being born to English-speaking parents. I hope, thereby, to assure students and learners, that regardless of what their mother tongues are, they too can become masters in *any* language if they apply themselves to rigorous, sustained and diligent learning.

I came upon this rather banal realisation as a primary school pupil when I read George Bernard Shaw's play, *Pygmalion*, from the bookcase of my father (who was a literature teacher). The revelation that there could be English people who could not speak *proper* English hit me with the force of a speed train gone out of control.

### **Advantages of multilingualism**

In the many debates on multilingualism worldwide, one consensus is that knowledge of more than one language can serve as an asset in the classroom. Research has shown that multilingual learners and educators have the benefit of various levels of meta-awareness of how languages work, and that this can particularly enhance the learning of a new language. Yet in my personal experience (which I must admit is quite limited), it is hard to find students and educators who articulate this awareness. What is often revealed, rather, is the tendency to expect, and accept, poor and mediocre performance from students because they are not first-language speakers. I find this disturbing and unacceptable.

Since I began studying in South Africa in 2010, I have been receiving commendations on the quality of my English. Initially I took this as a compliment. But I have long since understood that some of these 'commendations' are actually based on the low expectations some people have of me, as I am

not English, and have never lived in England. With this realisation, I now treat some of these praises as less than flattering. In a similar way, I feel that it is patronizing to demand, expect and accept mediocre performance from students, especially those with African home languages, just because they are not first-language speakers of English. It is, in a sense, rather Verwoerdian.

### **Change of mindset**

And it is a mind set that needs to be changed if today's generation of previously disadvantaged learners are to overcome the challenges of low English language and academic literacy skills. Many serious and practical challenges remain to be overcome before the multilingual skills of South African students and educators can be optimally harnessed. But in the meantime, the least that can be done is to affirm these skills, and to encourage learners and educators alike to place an uncompromising demand on their latent potentials.



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# South Africa's Education Crisis: A review

*South Africa's Education Crisis: Views from the Eastern Cape, NISC, 2012*

**Edited by Laurence Wright**

*Reviewed by Peter Titlestad*

This is a book for all interested in teaching English and for all those more generally interested in education in South Africa. The sub-title indicates focus on the Eastern Cape, but there is nothing that does not have a wider relevance. Much has to do with rural education but this should concern us all, in any case, and what is said generally has wider application. The work is based on research done by the Institute for the Study of English in Africa of Rhodes University which, among other things, has been deeply involved in the teaching and research into the teaching of English for a very long time.

There is one chapter, by the editor himself, about the relation between teaching English and national language policy. It unflinchingly challenges the orthodoxy of equal use

of all languages and of multilingualism, and the deploring of the power of English, that has been prominent for the last quarter of a century. This essay marks a welcome freedom and change in the terms of this debate hitherto and answers the well-meaning though misguided coterie of language planners of the 1990s.

Laurence Wright makes clear the friction between the National Language Policy (NLP) and the Language in Education Policy (LIEP), seeing hope in the latter if properly put into practice, though undermined by the NLP.

What we need is natural language planning, which takes into account the real situation, as opposed to interventionist language planning which refuses to accept the prevailing economic and sociological situation. What was thought "radical" in 1990 is now outmoded and has been overtaken by events. The bogey of colonialism is laid to rest, nettles are firmly grasped, and the absolute necessity for English as a national priority and the need for adequate teaching of English from the earliest stages bluntly stated. This does not imply that the African Languages are consigned to language death. In the debate about language policy that has, it could be said, "ragged" since 1990, this article has a most significant place and, we hope, marks a new phase of discussion.

Other chapters in the book deal most interestingly with the various things that have gone wrong and try to find reasons for these and solutions. The problems range from administrative and political to classroom practice and the need for in-service training for many teachers. There is a chapter on science teaching that stresses the importance of language in science teaching. Science makes specific demands on linguistic competence. In passing, it could be remarked that official utterances on the need for better science teaching as a national necessity usually fail to say that science needs adequate general language control and also makes

certain specific demands. An attempt is made to explain the apparent sense of hopelessness and the lack of will to pull things together. Among other things, there are some pertinent remarks about the malign influence of the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU), which has caused a dual control to function in education. Departmental control has to deal with a second centre of political power, a divided rule of educators and politicians. Outcomes Based Education was, of course, a catastrophe that wasted years and enormous resources, and undermined the morale of the teaching corps.

The volume concludes with a chapter on 'The Teacher as Hero', a looking forward to what could be and, indeed, has to be.

*South Africa's Crisis in Education* is published by NISC, and is available in most good bookshops, or from Blue Weaver (the distributor), or direct from the ISEA, Rhodes University (contact [n.kelemi@ru.ac.za](mailto:n.kelemi@ru.ac.za)). **The selling price from Rhodes is R150 (VAT inclusive).**