

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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