

# It's what you learn!

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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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