The final version of the CAPS for English Home Language in the FET Phase has done away with a separate language paper in the formal examinations. Instead this has been incorporated with the Literature Paper and reduced to a mere 50 marks.

This has serious implications for English teaching. We all know that teachers teach to the final examination. This means effectively that language (comprehension, summary, language structure and usage) will be neglected - and especially language structure and usage, as the summary counts 10 and the comprehension and language usage section together totals to 40 – most probably 30 + 10. Which teacher is going to spend much time on teaching language structure for a mere 10 marks? This means that 10 marks will cover spelling, punctuation, formal grammar, correct grammar, critical awareness, register, direct and indirect speech, abbreviations, acronyms, active and passive mood, etc!

This is a radical deviation from a long-standing tradition – something which should not be done lightly and without consultation, and something which, like the sudden introduction of OBE, will be regretted in time to come.
Add to this the fact that the CAPS advocates that there should be no separate ‘language’ lessons – all should be taught incidentally through reading, writing, speaking and studying literature – and one realises that one has a recipe for disaster on one’s hands. Either these will not be taught because they are not included in the biweekly lesson plan, or they will be taught badly, in an ad hoc manner with no logical progression of knowledge. Furthermore, who wants to stop in the middle of a challenging poem and teach apostrophes or nouns or the subjunctive mood? That would be the best way to get learners to loathe language teaching and would spoil the whole atmosphere of the literature lesson. (This does not preclude referring to terms and concepts that might have been taught in a language lesson.)

It will not help if it is argued that these things will be taught – and maybe examined – lower down. One cannot expect that, by Grade 9, learners will have grasped all that needs to be grasped – and at a deep level of understanding.

If one then considers that those who matriculate under this system and go on to become language teachers will, in most cases, study only literature at a tertiary level, one is faced with the situation where language teachers are meant to teach language concepts with a Grade 9 level of knowledge. (This is already largely the case – and in future it will be even worse.)

The decision is disturbing and should be reconsidered.
Towards textbook selection in South Africa

SCHOOLING 2025 & English:
Towards textbook selection in South Africa

Corwin Luthuli Mhahlo

‘Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.’


‘It is not for nothing that academic subjects are known as disciplines and accept the limitations placed on them. Failure to do so guarantees failure.’ (Rice 6)

Abstract

The recent proposed change in South Africa, from Outcomes Based Education (OBE) to a Schooling 2025 education system is geared towards the provision of quality education for South African learners. Based mainly on participant observations,
this paper argues that an abundance of English Language textbooks has ironically compromised the teaching-learning of English Language in the country. It therefore posits that, if quality is to be achieved in the teaching-learning of English Language, then the compilation/selection of a limited number of appropriate textbooks as national set-books, a factor which until now has apparently been undermined and therefore overlooked, has to be seriously considered. The paper concludes by giving some guidelines as well as recommendations regarding English Language textbooks in the South African school system.

Introduction

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs, amongst other things, seek to achieve quality universal primary education by 2015. Despite this, however, less than four years before this target year, South Africa has changed from OBE to a new national curriculum Schooling 2025. Commenting on the new national curriculum, Minister Motshekga said, ‘….We expect better outcomes from the system…. Things will from now on sail smoothly’. Although she does not elaborate, how can this transition be a successful one for the South African education system in generally and specifically for English Language teaching-learning, given the centrality of a sound knowledge of English Language for success in other subjects? This paper explores how the compilation or selection and prescription of specific textbooks in the teaching-learning of English can help achieve this vision under the new national curriculum.

Quality and the textbooks factor

Various scholars have at different times suggested a myriad of factors as to what influences and constitutes quality education. According to Zvobgo ‘… quality education is possible when all is in order and functions properly and effectively….’ (40) Thus for him, quality education dictates
that all necessities pertaining to teaching-learning and which are likely to influence learners’ performance be available and functioning effectively. For Michael Rice, ‘‘[i]n any education context, the most important variable is the teacher’’ (6) For others, like Postlethwaite and Hussen, such factors as the learners’ backgrounds, their parents’ involvement and support of both the school and the learners, are most likely to determine academic quality and achievement.

There is no disputing that when teachers are ill-disciplined and untrained, resources limited or constrained, infrastructure dilapidated and parents unconcerned about their children’s education, teaching-learning and the quality of education will be adversely affected. In an environment where teaching-learning resources are in adequate quantities, such a well-resourced environment is more likely to motivate effective teaching than not. Consequently, the task of all concerned is made easier as normally adequate resources motivate and deepen learners’ interest and thus translate into positive output. It is therefore without question that educational resources have remarkable influence on the learning environment.

On the other hand, however, in my opinion, an abundantly well-resourced learning environment for the teaching-learning of a subject such as English can have an adverse effect. This is especially because, in my opinion, quality education begins with the effective preparation of teaching-learning aids/resources/media (primarily the textbook) that one is going to use present one’s lesson. In the teaching of English language, more often than not, textbooks provide teachers with content and suggest teaching methods that may enhance pupil comprehension of concepts to be taught. While teachers can teach and try to explain concepts based on their own knowledge of the concepts, an appropriate, authoritative and well-written-textbook used as reference is always helpful. In addition to which, in the absence of equally competent
textbooks for learners to refer to, the teacher’s efforts and effectiveness will largely be curtailed. Such textbooks therefore help consolidate what has been learnt and particularly contribute to academic achievement in that they provide sources of information, knowledge, ideas and means of interaction for both teachers and learners as classroom talk can be directed by ideas found in textbooks. Good textbooks therefore enable teachers to be interested facilitators of learners’ learning and not authoritarian knowledge-givers. In ‘this respect, appropriate, authoritative and well written textbooks are vital to both learners and teachers’ effectiveness.

However, much as this is so, the prioritization of the compilation or identification and prescription of such textbooks for teaching English Language has largely and specifically been overlooked in South Africa. In an online article by SAPA, the Minister highlights that ‘[s]ome of the changes in the system [will] include the reduction of the number of projects for pupils with every subject in each grade having its own concise curriculum, mapping out what teachers must teach and assess’ (np); however, no specific mention is made about textbooks.

It is encouraging, therefore, when the Director General for Basic Education, Bobby Soobrayan mentions in the same article that ‘workbooks will be an important addition to the new curriculum as they would provide support to 6.5 million pupils from Grades 1 to 6 and to 180 000 teachers in nearly 20 000 schools.’[my emphasis](np). More so when the Western Cape education minister Donald Grant adds: ‘We are also especially pleased that the changes will bring back a far greater focus on the use of textbooks and on content knowledge – two aspects we are already focusing on strongly in the Western Cape.’ However, while one is optimistic at this apparent realization of the importance of textbooks, one wonders whether this importance heralds textbook compilation or
identification/selection and prescription based on set criteria of appropriacy, accessibility, coherence, etc, or as with OBE the importance of textbooks once again pertains to variety and abundance.

Over the years, with the introduction of the erstwhile OBE, many books boldly stamped: ‘NATIONAL CURRICULUM’ or ‘OBE’ were churned out both locally and abroad to cater for South Africa’s OBE curriculum. The result, in my opinion, was the flooding of South African schools with numerous books all purporting to be the most suitable for the new OBE curriculum.

However, given the importance of textbooks to teaching-learning, perceptions about textbooks in the national curriculum have to go beyond mere variety, availability and sufficiency to a set of fewer, authoritative, well-written, appropriately relevant, coherent and prescribed textbooks that will enable schools to achieve set objectives. Only then can such textbooks be meaningfully and intelligently used by both the teachers and learners. From my observation and experience over the last few years of OBE, this has not been the case. This is because all manner of English Language textbook have been put on the market for use by South African schools. The result for most English teachers has been utter confusion as in addition to the administrative requirements OBE required, they were now in a quandary not only as to what to teach, but also which textbooks to best teach from. Consequently, what has prevailed over the last few years is a scenario I would best describe as the ‘chocolate factory syndrome’.

The chocolate factory syndrome

South Africa’s former economic boom positively influenced the education sector and specifically the publishing industry. As such, the July 2010 announcement by the Minister of Basic Education Angie Motshekga that her ministry would be replacing Outcomes Based Education (OBE) for Schooling 2025 undoubtedly had some educationists and publishers rubbing their hands in
glee at this sudden and now recurring windfall. This is as the announcement meant new textbooks to write, publish and make small fortunes from. And yet, as I have already indicated, the availability of English textbooks is, and has never been, the problem in the South African education system. Rather, it is has been abundant variety of English Language textbooks that has ironically been the Achilles’ heel of the South African education system.

Thus far, the stability of the South African economy has equally meant that schools have more than adequate textbook resources for the teaching of English language and other subjects. This, coupled with the variety of English Language textbooks that have been made available on the market; I surmise that the textbook-learner ratio is generally quite high quantitatively in favour of learners, but low qualitatively. As a result, in some urban areas – in Johannesburg, for instance – while there is an abundant variety of English language textbooks in both the schools and on the market, this has in some cases ironically impacted negatively on the teaching of English, which in turn has affected the quality of teaching-learning and results produced in some schools.

What has been problematic, therefore, is that, given the wide range of textbooks to choose from, more time has been spent by classroom practitioners trying to source suitable material and becoming frustrated by their efforts. As a small, informal survey revealed, this is because, though some English language textbooks indicated they were for a particular grade, the content was cognitively too steep or too simple for the learners in question and therefore inappropriate. For example, in some urban – and I am sure other contexts – both trained and untrained teachers have failed to conceptually rise above the textbook. In such cases, experience has also shown that learners tend to resent textbooks if a teacher is failing to interpret the textbook’s concepts intelligibly. In others,
teachers have become conditioned to dogmatically adhering to the work set in textbooks to the extent that textbooks have become, by default, ‘auto-teachers’ which, in the absence of teachers imparting knowledgeable direction as well as vital additional information to learners, has made learning both lonely and nightmarish.

For other teachers, some textbooks’ content has proved too shallow, not adequately covering the topic to be taught, or not directly relating to the previous topic, or too incomprehensively structured for coherent lesson presentation. Thus making teaching English language a challenging and daunting task for some teachers as they are forced to become more researchers than teachers.

Compounding this is the country’s diverse and dynamic cultural environment. The majority of textbooks currently on the market other than targeting the OBE curriculum are exotic in their origins and content. As such, the majority of learners cannot relate to certain texts. On the other hand, despite the abundant variety of textbooks on the market, this has ironically also limited learners’ access to textbooks as teachers are none the wiser when it comes to making recommendations to parents as to which textbooks to purchase for their children’s homework and personal study purposes. In view of this, what then are the English Language textbook implications with the introduction of Schooling 2025?

**SCHOOLING 2025: Textbook implications**

Quality education can only be brought about when available resources are economically and sensibly deployed. It is therefore this paper’s submission that the centralization of textbook selection to be used in schools will facilitate this, motivate teachers and cultivate learners’ desire to learn English as a second language. While the availability and adequacy of a variety of textbooks during teaching-learning can enhance learners’ understanding, it can equally demotivate
and hinder learning. In this respect, the availability of too wide a variety of textbooks can be counterproductive and breed resentment towards the learning of the subject.

In addition, it should be noted that, with the introduction of Schooling 2025, some books which had been tailored towards OBE will become outdated and irrelevant or need to be modified to Schooling 2025 Curriculum demands. The above calls for the selection of specific textbooks that are explicitly relevant to the national curriculum in terms of correct interpretation, adequate coverage of concepts and logical sequencing of topics, amongst others.

While variety in textbooks is desirable, it can at times be overwhelmingly problematic. In the teaching of English language under the new national curriculum, therefore, there should be specified prescribed textbooks that provide the core of what is to be taught and learnt in the teaching of English. Such textbooks should be chosen on the criteria of: adherence to the new curriculum and its assessment objectives; the needs and abilities of the learners; the linguistic and stylistic level of the text; and the amount of local background material that has been included. This will undoubtedly save time and money for schools as well as minimize stress and anxiety for both teachers and students. As noted by Rice writing in a different context: ‘It is not for nothing that academic subjects are known as disciplines and accept the limitations placed on them. Failure to do so guarantees failure.’ (6) Similarly, it is by setting textbook limitations that Schooling 2025 can be better than its predecessor, OBE.

In this regard, while I am all for academic freedom, I propose that government, through the Department of Education, intervene by ensuring that all manner of schools throughout the country use only nationally prescribed textbooks. I further propose that such set-books be kept to a maximum of two textbooks, each catering for the teaching-learning of first and second language learners. Other texts where
necessary can be recommended to reinforce the prescribed texts but not necessarily prioritized. After two years, recommended texts, if useful, can either be upgraded or if only a chapter is useful, then that chapter could be compiled into the new editions of prescribed set-books.

Textbooks’ adequacy in this new context will therefore depend on their appropriacy, availability and sufficiency towards the achievement set objectives. This is because there is a definite relationship between appropriate textbook availability and learner achievement. No meaningful learning can take place if appropriate textbooks are not selected and made available. As we move towards Schooling 2025, therefore, should this textbook selection factor remain unheeded, the apathetic and mediocre teaching-learning and general performance experienced in English during OBE, will most likely continue.

Concluding Recommendations

In light of the above observations, the paper is making the following recommendations:

- The government through the Ministry of Basic Education should commit itself to providing the South African school system with a guided and comprehensive English curriculum.

- The Ministry of Basic Education should, with the help of such bodies as National Research Fund (NRF) Specialist Panel for Language and Literature, the National Language Body for English and, if existent, the South African English Teachers’ Association, set up a task force/unit that will be responsible for the compilation or selection and prescription of a few key textbooks that focus on the knowledge of English rather than skill and attitude. Such textbooks to be used nationally should be appropriately relevant to the new national/ Schooling
The prices of prescribed books should be subsidized and/or controlled by government to ensure availability for all.

Schools should purchase such relevant texts to the national syllabus, teach from and set school exams from them.

Similarly, school libraries should be equipped with both such textbooks and those recommended by the task force/unit.

In the words of Grant speaking in a similar but different context: ‘[Such] changes [should] go a long way to restoring a reasonable balance in the delivery of the curriculum’ [my emphasis] (SAPA np) and fulfill the desire of the leader of the National Professional Teachers’ Organisation of South Africa, Esrah Ramasehla, of a ‘coherent long-term plan for improving education in the country...a period of stability and greater confidence in the curriculum.’ In my view, both ‘reasonable balance’ and ‘coherence’ in the teaching-learning of English Language can partly be achieved in the new curriculum if time is taken to properly compile, select and prescribe appropriate textbooks to be used in the teaching-learning of the subject in South Africa.

In the light of this, the implementation of Schooling 2025 in 2011, the preparatory challenges that lie ahead are not only curriculum development and teacher training, but also that of textbook selection for use in the teaching-learning process. It is therefore hoped that this article will somewhat assist in this regard by reminding Schooling 2025 Curriculum planners and educators to select and prescribe a limited number of key textbooks that are not only in tandem with the new curriculum, but also most appropriate for both teachers and their innocent learners. Only then, will teaching-learning, monitoring and assessment of syllabus coverage be comprehensive and teaching
relatively uniform across the country.

EDITOR’S NOTE:

The Department of Basic Education is planning to do national selection and to limit the number of approved textbooks to a maximum of eight for the new curriculum.

WHAT DO YOU DO YOU THINK? PLEASE ENTER YOUR VIEWS IN THE COMMENTS SECTION.

Works Cited


Rice, Michael. (July 18, 2010) ‘Review’ Sunday Times, 6


Corwin Luthuli Mhlahlo is a PhD candidate in the English Department at the University of the Witwatersrand and a part-time English teacher-cum-tutor. He has also been an Applied English lecturer and high school teacher at both secondary and tertiary levels for a combined fifteen years. In addition to Applied English Education issues, his other research interests include: Creative Writings; Identity Studies (Language, Literature & Society); Black Studies; Theories of literature; World Literatures & Religions (African, African-American, American, English, Caribbean); Contemporary issues.
WEB-BASED RESOURCES

The following websites contain very useful material for English teachers:

(1) Mrs Claassen:

www.mrs-claassen.co.za

The creator of this website has made her resources for teaching English available to English teachers. It contains some super material. Thanks for your generosity, Sandra Claassen!

(2) MacMillan:

http://www.onestopenglish.com

Contains, inter alia, the following:

*Grammar and Vocab* (grammar reference, teaching, lessons; vocabulary lessons; fun with grammar)

*Magazine*
Teach support

Skills (lesson plans on listening, writing, reading, speaking and pronunciation skills)

Young learners (teaching children, teenagers)

Phonics

Methodology

Flashcards

MacMillan Dictionary online

Blogs

Forum

To get regular update information on this site, you can subscribe to their e-newsletter (onestopenglish.newsletter@macmillan.com).

(3) ENGLISH HOME LANGUAGE (EHLNSC):

www.ehlncs.webs.com

Aimed at English Home Language teachers (EHL) teachers who teach in state schools (but those who teach in IEB schools are also most welcome). Provides the opportunity for teachers to share resources and to access past NSC examination papers.

(4) Knowledge 4 Africa

www.knowledge4africa.com

Dr Keith Tankard and his son operate this website, which features some very good notes and questions on English Home and Additional Language poetry, novels and plays. Thanks to Jacky Steytler for alerting us to this website.
(5) Englishnet:

www.englishnet.co.za

A website where English teachers can share examples of good practice, thus easing their heavy workload of planning, lesson preparation, drawing up worksheets, etc.

Once you have downloaded a site, don’t forget to bookmark it for future use!

PLEASE ALSO LET US KNOW WHAT YOU THINK OF THESE SITES, AND TELL US OF ANY OTHERS WHICH YOU HAVE FOUND USEFUL.

Dr Malcolm Venter

EDITOR : TET

ENGLISH ALIVE

What is English Alive?

English Alive is an annual anthology of writing from high schools and secondary colleges in southern Africa (i.e. Grades 8–12).
The first edition of English Alive was published in 1967, and it has been published every year since then. Approximately 70 pieces of poetry and prose of all sorts and about anything are selected for publication each year. Brief comments on the pieces are offered by the editor. The current editor of English Alive is Robin Malan, assisted by Jerome Damon and Nokuthula Mazibuko. Any high school student is invited to submit one piece or a small number of pieces, either independently or through their
school.
You can submit at any time of the year. The closing date for submissions each year is 1 April (we allow for late-posted entries until 1 May).
The easiest way to submit is to email your piece(s) in Times New Roman 12 pt to englishalive@iafrica.com This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it. (Please don’t use other fonts or sizes, unless it is essential for the piece.) Or you can post them to: English Alive Box 23912 Claremont 7735.
Remember to put your name and school after each piece, i.e. below it. (We don’t need to know your age or Grade.)
Publication is usually around mid-August each year.
We also invite students to submit artwork for consideration for the cover. Send this by email as a high-resolution 300 dpi jpg to englishalive@iafrica.com This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it.

English Alive is not a competition: there are no cups or cheques handed out for ‘the best’ pieces of writing. Publication is the acknowledgement of writing of quality.
A last cautionary note. Plagiarism is theft, theft of someone else’s words and ideas. No one would want to be guilty of that. Original thinking and original writing are so much more worthwhile!

Who has been published in English Alive?
Too many to mention individually!
Many students who submitted to English Alive have since become professional published writers, e.g. the poet Jeremy Cronin, the prose-writer Henrietta Rose-Innes, the dramatist Nadia Davids, the novelist Shaun Johnson, etc.
See pieces by them and other ex-English Alive writers in Leaves to a Tree compiled by Robin Malan, published by David Philip imprint of New Africa Books 99 Garfield Road Claremont 7735 email orders@newafricabooks.co.za This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it.

News of ex-English Alivers 2007

Here’s the news of ex-English Alivers culled from the 2007, 2008 and 2009 editions of the anthology:
Ken Barris (English Alive editor 1993) published a new collection of poems *African Easter* in 2005; and a new novel *What Kind of Child* in 2006, which was shortlisted for both the Commonwealth Writers’ (Africa Region): Best Book Award; and for the Herman Charles Bosman Prize. He won the 2006 Thomas Pringle Award for a short story in a magazine: ‘The quick brown fox’ in *New Contrast*.

Jerome Damon (English Alive assistant editor 1995–2004, 2007–) was the only South African FIFA-accredited referee to officiate in the 2006 Soccer World Cup in Germany, and officiated at the FIFA under-19 World Cup in 2007.


Justin Fox (English Alive contributor 1984–5, South African College High School) published a new book, *Under the Sway: a photographic journey through Mozambique*; he also edited *Cape Town Calling: from Mandela to Theroux on the Mother City*; h2006 HSBC/SA PEN short story competition and was published in *African Road*; also, an essay on his father appeared in *My Dad*.


Karen Jeynes (English Alive contributor 1995, 1997, Westerford High School) has staged her prize-winning play *Everybody Else (is f**king perfect)* in Johannesburg, Cape Town, at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown and in both English and Afrikaans versions at the KKNK in Oudtshoorn. It was published in the Playscript Series by Junkets Publisher. The play was given a staged reading in Chicago as part of a season by the International Center for Women Playwrights. Her play *Backwards in High Heels* had a season at the Kalk Bay Theatre in Cape Town. *Don’t Mention Sex* played in Johannesburg and at the National Arts Festival, and her adaptation of Helen Brain’s *Here Be Lions* premiered at the National Arts Festival. Her radio drama *You Can’t Make Me* was aired on SAfm.Her novel for teenagers, *Flipside* (co-authored with Eeshaam September), was published in 2007.

Shaun Johnson (English Alive contributor 1976, Hyde Park High School) was the winner of the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize (Africa Region): Best Book for his novel *The Native*
Commissioner, published in 2006; the novel then went on to win the M-Net Literary Award. It was also shortlisted for the Sunday Times Fiction Prize 2007. See www.shaunjohnson.co.za.

· David Lan (English Alive contributor 1967–9, Westerford High School). As Director of the Young Vic theatre in London, David re-opened the theatre after a massively successful makeover and rebuild, with the community opera Tobias and the Angel, for which he wrote the libretto. Also, David featured at No. 15 in the 2006 The Stage 100, the industry newspaper’s breakdown of the most influential people in UK theatre.

· Robin Malan (English Alive founding assistant editor 1967–70, editor 1995–2004, 2007–) gave the 2006 Ernest Pereira Memorial Lecture of the English Academy of Southern Africa; he is the Acting Chairperson of IBBY SA, the South African section of the International Board on Books for Young People; new editions of Worldscapes, New Inscapes, New Outridings and New Beginnings appeared; New Poetry Works was published; Ah Big Yaws? was re-issued; and his play The boy who walked into the world was published in the Playscript Series by Junkets Publisher.

· Nokuthula Mazibuko (English Alive assistant editor 1995–2004, 2007–) published Spring Offensive: youth underground structures in South Africa during the ’80s; she followed that up with the publication of Love Songs for Nheti and other tales; she was awarded a lecturing/writing residency to the George Washington University in Washington DC.

· Helen Moffett (English Alive contributor 1978, Hottentots Holland High School) compiled Lovely beyond Any Singing, a collection of South African travel and descriptive pieces. She is currently completing a fellowship at Emory University in Atlanta, and visited the University of the West Indies as a guest lecturer – which meant being able to attend the Cricket World Cup final in Barbados!


· Henrietta Rose-Innes (English Alive contributor 1985–9, Westerford High School) won the prestigious 2007 HSBC/SA PEN short story competition with her story ‘Poison’, published in the SA PEN collection African Pens. She has also been
shortlisted for the 2007 Caine Prize for African Writing for her short story ‘Bad Places’ which was published in New Contrast. She published Nice Times! a book of South African pleasures and delights; and is currently enjoying an artists’ residency at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart, Germany.


News of ex-English Alivers 2008

· Jerome Damon (English Alive assistant editor 1995–2004, 2007–) was appointed a soccer referee at the Beijing Olympics.

· Nadia Davids (English Alive contributor 1993–4, 1996, St Cyprian’s School) had her new play Cissie staged at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown and at the Sanlam Studio at the Baxter Theatre Centre; Cissie was published in the Playscript Series by Junkets Publisher; her play The Littlest Warrior was published in South African Plays for TV, Radio and Stage.


· Karen Jeynes (English Alive contributor 1995, 1997, Westerford High School) represented the Performing Arts Network of South Africa (PANSA) at a Festivals Conference in Istanbul, Turkey; she was the co-compiler of FAB, a coffee-table book of photographs and recollections of the Mother City Queer Projects, published by Umuzi.

· Shaun Johnson (English Alive contributor 1976, Hyde Park High School) also won the M-Net Prize with his novel The Native Commissioner in addition to the awards mentioned in last year's English Alive.


Henrietta Rose-Innes (English Alive contributor 1985–9, Westerford High School) has won the 2008 Caine Prize for African Writing for her short story ‘Poison’; she was shortlisted both in 2007 and 2008; she attended the Caine Prize fortnight-long workshop and, of course, the award announcement in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Huge congratulations to Henrietta!

Nicholas Spagnoletti (English Alive contributor, 1996, South African College High School) was one of the finalists in the NLDTF/PANSA Festival of Contemporary Theatre Readings 2007 with his play London Road; it won the Runner-up Award and the Audience Favourite Award; it was presented as part of the Play>Ground Readings series at the Baxter Theatre in May 2008.

News of ex-English Alivers 2009

Ken Barris (English Alive editor 1993) had his short story ‘The world of Worm’ published in New Writing from Africa 2009 as one of the finalists in the SA PEN/Studzinski Literary Award.

Jeremy Cronin (English Alive contributor 1967, St Joseph’s College) was appointed Deputy Minister of Transport in May 2009.

Jerome Damon (English Alive assistant editor 1995–2004, 2007–) was selected by Fifa as the referee of the 2008 African Champions League final in Cairo; he is the only Safa referee on Fifa’s list of referees for the World Cup in 2010.

Nadia Davids (English Alive contributor 1993–4, 1996, St Cyprian’s School) was Joint 3rd Prize-winner in the SA PEN/Studzinski Literary Award: her story ‘The visit’ was published in New Writing from Africa 2009.

Jeremy Gordin (English Alive contributor 1967–70) of the Sunday Independent was named South African Journalist of the Year for 2008; his biography Zuma was published.


Shaun Johnson (English Alive contributor 1976, Hyde
Park High School) chaired the Editorial Board of the SA PEN/Studzinski Literary Award, and, together with the ad agency KingJames, formed a new publishing venture, Johnson-KingJames.


How do I submit to English Alive?
You can submit one piece or a small number of pieces. You can submit independently or through your school. Be sure that each piece has your name and school below it. You can submit at any time of the year. The closing date for submissions each year is 1 April (we allow for late-posted entries until 1 May).
The easiest way to submit is to email your piece(s) in Times New Roman 12 pt to englishalive@iafrica.com This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it. (Please don’t use other fonts or sizes, unless it is essential for the piece.)
Or you can post them to: English Alive Box 23912 Claremont 7735.
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The Matthew Effect: Why extensive reading is so important to literacy development

Sarah Murray

Sarah Murray is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Education at Rhodes University, specializing in English as an additional language. Literacy is her main teaching and research interest.

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It is common knowledge that, generally speaking, South African children don’t read and write well. In a recent international study of reading achievement, South African Grade 4 and 5 learners came last out of 40 countries (Howie et al 2008). Eighty-seven percent of South African Grade 4s and 78% of Grade 5s were unable to reach the lowest benchmark of the test demonstrating basic literacy even though the majority of children were tested in their home languages. On average, in the other countries, only 6% of Grade 4 learners failed to achieve basic literacy.

In an assessment of reading achievement in 14 African countries (Moloi & Strauss 2005), South Africa did not fare much better. Our Grade 6 learners were ranked eighth whereas Kenya, a country that spends much less on education than South Africa, came second. In Kenya, 83.6% of Grade 6 learners can read for meaning, whereas in South Africa this can only be said of 49.9% of our learners.

If you are interested in learning more about South Africa’s performance in these evaluations, you can check out the following websites:

http://timss.bc.edu/pirls2006/index.html
www.sacmeq.org

Although this research refers to primary schools, we know that things don’t improve much as learners go up the school. So, if similar tests were carried out in high schools, the results might be just as shocking. [The introduction of Grade 9 tests will reveal this in due course – Ed.] However, the good news is that there is something we can do about this situation! If we could just get learners to read more outside of class time, their levels of literacy would improve dramatically.

It would seem self-evident that the amount of reading done will affect performance. In many other fields of endeavour, we readily accept that practice is important. For example, we know that if you want to run Comrades, you need to practise
every day. However, when it comes to reading this message doesn’t seem to get through to all our learners, and in some cases, even to their parents and teachers.

Perhaps it would help if we could explain how the volume of reading learners do affects their performance. Let’s start by looking at how children learn to read.

In Figure 1 below, taken from an article by Helen Scarborough (2002), you can see that there are two components of skilled reading. The first is decoding. When children start learning to read they identify the individual sounds of the language (or phonemes) and link these sounds to the letters of the alphabet. They have to be able to blend these sounds in order to decode. On its own, of course, this is not reading. To read with understanding, the child has to know the meaning of a word; it has to be in the child’s oral vocabulary.

This leads us to the second component of skilled reading: comprehension. In order to comprehend written text, you need to know well the language in which the text is written; you need a wide vocabulary and a good grasp of its grammar. You also need to be familiar with the subject matter of the text. Comprehension supports decoding; if you know the meaning of a word and you can understand it in a sentence, it is easier to decode it.

**Figure 1: Strands of early literacy development (Scarborough 2002)**

In order to read fluently, decoding must become automatic, which requires practice. Instant word recognition is the mark of fluent reading, and according to Abadzi (2008) this sets up a neural pathway in the brain that enables the reader to increase reading speed. Fast decoding improves comprehension. If children read too slowly, this places too great a demand on their short-term memory and they won’t understand what they are reading. Abadzi (2008) believes that by the end of Grade
6, the average learner should be reading at about 150 words per minute.

Learners who read a lot will get the practice they need to achieve fluency. Moreover, there are other benefits resulting from extensive reading. Vocabulary is one of the keys to reading comprehension. The wider your vocabulary, the better your comprehension will be. However, a wide vocabulary is also a result of extensive reading. Cunningham and Stanovich (1998) have shown that written language contains a much richer vocabulary than spoken language. The amount of reading that children do has a dramatic effect on the number of written words they are exposed to, as shown in Table 1 below, taken from Cunningham and Stanovich (1998). These figures refer to research carried out by Anderson, Wilson and Fielding (1988) into the out-of-school reading done by American Grade 5 learners.

Table 1: Variation in amount of independent reading (adapted slightly from Cunningham & Stanovich 1998)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentile</th>
<th>Independent reading Minutes per day</th>
<th>Words read per year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>98</td>
<td>65.0</td>
<td>4,358,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90</td>
<td>21.1</td>
<td>1,823,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>1,146,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>622,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>432,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>282,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>200,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>106,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>21,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus learners who read a lot get into what Stanovich (1993) calls a positive feedback loop: the more they read, the wider
their vocabulary becomes; the wider their vocabulary, the more they comprehend and the greater their enjoyment of reading; these learners then choose to spend more time reading. Moreover, according to Cunningham and Stanovich (1998), extensive reading also contributes to general knowledge and verbal skills, which in turn result in improved reading comprehension. For learners who are reading in their additional language, extensive reading provides exposure and promotes language acquisition (Krashen 1993). These are what Stanovich (1993) calls the reciprocal effects of extensive reading, and they result in what he calls the ‘Matthew effect’: the rich get richer and the poor get poorer – a gap opens up between learners who have entered this positive feedback loop and those who have not.

These are strong arguments for engaging learners in an extensive reading programme. For such a programme to work, you need a range of interesting books that learners will genuinely want to read for information or pleasure. It is also important that texts are at the right level for individual learners. Waring and Nation (2004) claim that for a text to be adequately comprehended and for reading to be pleasurable, at least 90% of the vocabulary must be known. This suggests that teachers need to grade texts in class and school libraries. They also need to be knowledgeable about the reading levels of learners and match texts to learners.

Pretorius and Currin (2010) report on an extensive reading project at a non-fee-paying primary school in a township near Pretoria. The project team built up library resources – over a three-year period, the number of books in the library increased from 200 to over 5,000. The team also developed teachers’ and parents’ capacity to support learners’ reading. Grade 7 learners were tested in both Sepedi – their home language – and English, before and after the intervention. As shown in Table 2 below, the learners made gains in both comprehension and reading speed. These gains were greater in
English than in Sepedi because learners were exposed to more texts in English: of the 5,000 books in the school library only 170 were in Sepedi.

Table 2: Grade 7 Reading achievement 2005 and 2007 (adapted from Pretorius & Currin 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English</th>
<th></th>
<th>Sepedi</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>2005</td>
<td>2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean comprehension</td>
<td>29.5%</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>38.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>score</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean reading rate</td>
<td>106 wpm</td>
<td>143 wpm</td>
<td>93 wpm</td>
<td>119 wpm</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pretorius and Currin’s study shows that, with effort and enthusiasm, it is possible to improve learners’ reading achievement even in disadvantaged schools. What is needed is to get more books into schools and to set up ‘living and breathing’ libraries. Where there is no room for a school library, language teachers can set up class libraries. Class libraries need a range of books that appeal to readers at that grade level, and the books need to be graded according to reading level. Teachers need to put systems in place so that learners can borrow books on a regular basis and build up confidence and enjoyment in reading. In this way, they may enter a ‘virtuous circle’ in which extensive reading builds speed, vocabulary, comprehension and enjoyment, and this experience creates the desire to read more.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? PLEASE ENTER YOUR VIEWS IN THE COMMENTS SECTION.

References


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CLASSROOM OBSERVATION AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Ntombekhaya Fulani

Ntombekhaya Fulani
This article should be of interest to teacher trainers but also to teachers who wish to benefit from reflecting on their lessons and on observing each other’s lessons with the view to development of teaching competence.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses a distinctive feature of the BEd in-service course for English teachers offered at Rhodes University by the Institute for the Study of English in Africa (ISEA), namely, the classroom-based support and school site visits for teachers. At least once a semester, a lecturer or dedicated school support facilitator visits teachers in their classrooms to observe them teaching a lesson. The main purpose of this part of the course is to improve teachers’ classroom
practice through assisting teachers to reflect critically on the lesson observed by attending to important underlying principles of the new curriculum such as pacing, sequencing and curriculum coverage. Pacing refers to how a teacher plans, allocates and manages time during a lesson, while sequencing refers to the various stages and tasks that constitute a lesson and ensure that it meets the stated learning outcome. Curriculum coverage concerns the amount of curriculum content to be covered within a given time; for example, in language education, learning to maintain a balance of speaking, reading, writing and grammar that is appropriate for the grade, according to official curriculum policy needs. A variety of lesson transcripts on different topics were collected for analysis by the researchers during school visits in 2009 and 2010, from Grade 8 through to Grade 12. They focus on various (combinations of) language skills across the range of grades. This paper is based on these transcripts, as well as teachers’ reflections in their journals.

**COURSE CONTENT**

Broadly, the course focuses on developing language teachers’ pedagogical content knowledge. The nexus of content knowledge concerns the what (the core language skills of listening, speaking, reading/viewing, writing, and grammar and related aspects of linguistic theory such as genre and critical language awareness) and the how (pedagogical knowledge: practical and procedural classroom teaching decisions, including sequencing and pacing of lessons and an understanding of learning theory and assessment). There is also a cross-cutting focus on classroom management knowledge related to discipline, record-keeping and assessment, social/ethical issues around the environment and HIV/AIDS, professional conduct, human rights, and understanding the underpinnings of the new curriculum.

The course is interactive. Teachers sit in groups of about six per table, tasks and activities are designed to model the
participatory, learner-centred approach of the new curriculum and to give the teachers a lived experience of these pedagogies. Over the three-year duration of the course, there are eight contact sessions at Rhodes University totalling 40 days that take place during school holidays at the end of each term, as well as a two-day seminar and two workshops per term at a central location near the teachers’ schools.

The purposes of visiting schools and observing lessons are threefold: firstly, to give teachers support in reflecting on and improving their classroom practice; secondly, to monitor the extent to which teachers are able to implement new understandings, strategies and pedagogies introduced in the course; and thirdly, for university-based academics to observe rural Eastern Cape schools and classrooms at first hand in order to better understand the challenges facing teachers (Sayed 2004).

During a school visit the university-based lecturer or school support facilitator observes and makes notes of the lesson to provide a rough running transcript of the lesson, focusing on the teachers’ inputs (talk, instructions and board notes) and learners’ responses and tasks. The lesson is briefly discussed with the teacher in terms of its strengths and weaknesses and a copy of the lesson transcript is given to the teacher as a record and for later more detailed self-reflection in their journals. In addition, many of the lessons are video-taped and a DVD copy of the lesson is given to the teacher to view later.
SAMPLE

In the Queenstown district there are 49 high schools and 135 high school teachers of English, as both first and additional languages, and one Subject Advisor to support those teachers. The BEd programme includes 30 Queenstown English teachers as well as the Subject Advisor. The 30 teachers are in 24 schools, 15 in rural and nine in urban settings.

We purposefully selected four graduate teachers (two men and two women), each with at least five years’ experience at two functional schools to evaluate the impact of the course on the practice of well-qualified teachers at schools that have a sound physical infra-structure and governance (see Table 1). We use pseudonyms for the names of the teachers and schools to protect their anonymity and confidentiality.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of teacher</th>
<th>Teaching experience</th>
<th>Qualifications</th>
<th>Grades taught</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bonisile</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>STD, BEd (Hons)</td>
<td>10, 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pumla</td>
<td>19 years</td>
<td>STD, FDE, BEd</td>
<td>9 – 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thabo</td>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>STD, BTech, BEd (Hons)</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumi</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>STD, ACE, BEd (Hons)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Teachers’ professional details

TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT – A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As is clear from the course description above, the BEd course assumes that there is a direct and positive link between teachers’ reflective practice and their professional development. A substantial literature linking reflective practice and professional development exists, dating from Schon (1983) up to the present. But how do we know this link actually operates in the classroom? What counts as evidence of reflective practice and what are the indicators of
professional development in teachers’ classroom practice?

Taylor, Muller and Vinjevold (2003:88) identify various classroom-level indicators of teachers’ pedagogic practice based on four theoretical constructs: the social organization of the school, use of language, curriculum and pedagogy, and evaluation. Interestingly, none of these indicators includes teachers’ reflecting on their practice.

The indicators of teachers’ professional development we use during classroom observation (which have much in common with Taylor, Muller and Vinjevold’s (2003) indicators) include classroom setting; pacing and time management; sequencing; the nature of learners’ engagement and opportunity to learn; teachers’ questioning and explanations. In addition, teachers reflect on the lesson observed, in conversation with the facilitator, Ntombekhaya (Khaya). Typically, a teacher starts by reflecting on what worked well in the lesson, what could be improved or changed, and sets goals for the next lesson.

When a teacher asks a question such as ‘What have learners learnt in this lesson?’ and supplies cogent answers, we consider this a sign of critical reflection. Further, teachers’ ability to link their reflections to theory is regarded as a measure of their professional development. For our discussion in this paper, however, we focus on only one indicator of teachers’ professional development: post-lesson critical reflection on practice.

**FINDINGS**

*Patterns in post-lesson critical reflection on practice*

We compare the teachers’ post-lesson critical reflections over time as an example of how their reflective capacity developed. At the beginning of the course teachers were taught the importance of reflecting on one’s practice.

Initially all the teachers found reflecting on a lesson
difficult to do. One teacher, Thabo, completely misunderstood the purpose. He tried to reflect on a lesson before it was taught. For the first lesson observation, he wrote his reflections while planning the lesson and presented these ‘reflections’ as part of his lesson plan.

Rather than reflecting critically on what went well and what needed improvement, many teachers simply recounted events in their lessons, as Bonisile’s journal reflection, below, illustrates:

One learner was asked to read the poem for the rest of the class. The teacher explained some of the poetic devices in the poem. Some of the figures of speech dealt with were alliteration, apostrophe, metaphors and simile. The learners were divided into groups of six. Each group was given a stanza to identify figures of speech and to report back.

Many also found it difficult to identify the things they had done well, things which made their lessons a success, and without the prompting of the facilitator they tended to focus on what needed to be changed in their lessons. Tumi, for example, relied on the facilitator (Khaya) to identify the positive aspects of her writing lesson. She wrote in her journal:

Khaya started with the good things that happened

(i) emphasis of learners’ prior knowledge
(ii) interactive – learners participated well
(iii) treatment of some aspects of the curriculum cycle
(iv) the instructions of the classwork were written on the chalkboard
(v) learners were seen as assessors because they were given a rubric to mark each others’ work
time management was spot-on

However, towards the end of 2009 and beginning of 2010 teachers’ ability to reflect on their practice started to show improvement. Tumi’s journal reflection in the second year of the course is evidence that she is beginning to make informed decisions in her classroom.

During the lesson I also used group work to identify what they can see in the two texts because according to Vygotsky, the learners are social beings who learn better through interaction with others. The lesson was conducted in the target language and it was not directly focused on teaching grammar as Krashen mentioned that learners will unconsciously acquire the correct use of language through the learning process.

Tumi’s journal reflection provides evidence that she is beginning to reflect more independently and is less reliant on the debriefing with the facilitator, and also that she uses theory to inform and deepen her reflections. The two photographs below illustrate how, at the beginning of the classroom observations in 2009 Tumi’s learners sat in rows (pic.1), but by 2010, most teachers, including Tumi, were arranging learners in groups (pic.2).

1. 2.

Likewise, Pumla draws on theory to reflect how she groups learners:

On 13 July I was visited by Khaya, my lesson was on debate. I introduced my lesson well and developed my lesson into stages but somehow I noticed that some of the learners were struggling. I have learnt how to deal more effectively with students who have problems in expressing themselves. I then devised a strategy, based on Vygotsky learners learn more when
they are grouped according to their mixed abilities, that the low attainers sit with the middle attainers, middle attainers with high attainers. Then there was improvement. They then had more input into what they did and how they did it. My lesson was a success.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we consider the implications of these findings for three role-players: teachers themselves, in-service teacher educators and district officials such as Subject Advisors.

Firstly, it is evident that teachers need regular, on-going support to improve their practice. It is clearly not easy for teachers to understand and articulate what it is that they do: what is working in their lessons, what the problems are and what they can do about them.

Secondly, the current practice, that only pre-service (not in-service) teacher education courses require systematic lesson observation by an academic, needs to be changed. If one accepts that a central purpose of most in-service teacher education courses is to improve teachers’ classroom practice, then one must also build in some mechanism to monitor the extent to which teachers are able to implement new understandings and pedagogies introduced in the course.

Finally, to create conditions for systemic and sustained improvement in schooling, it is essential that district-level officials such as Curriculum Advisors and Education Development Officers visit schools regularly and observe teachers in their classrooms in a supportive and monitoring role. These officials cannot have as their main concern systemic evaluations only. Also, as Bloch (2009:106) has noted, the great silence in South African educational circles about the role of teacher unions in constraining constructive co-operation between district officials and schools needs to
be addressed openly.

REFERENCES


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WHAT DO YOU THINK? PLEASE ENTER YOUR VIEWS IN THE
GETTING THEM INVOLVED IN LITERATURE

Getting them involved in literature

Morag Venter

This article is based on an article which was originally published in CRUX, October 1986, by André Lemmer. It illustrates effectively how to teach (in this case a short story) in an interactive manner – although the original was written many years before OBE claimed to be the originator of such a style.

The following plan outlines a literature programme based on pupil’s natural sequence of response, from

- personal engagement,
- to perception,
Let’s imagine how this would work with a short story:

**PRE-READING ACTIVITIES**

- What does the illustration/ title suggest the story is about?
- Is there an issue (eg revenge, love, pain) raised by the title?

If so, what do you feel about this issue?

- Can you think of a time when this issue was a major issue in your life?

**FIRST READING**

- Plan the reading: You could plan to read the linking narrative and assign dialogue parts to different learners.

**INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES**

- Choose a place to stop reading so that the learners can predict in their workbooks what will happen next.
- Learners could be asked to jot down the most exciting part of the story, the character they like best, the character they identify with the most, etc. Each time they should be asked to explain why they have made that choice.
- Ask the learners to list the key words which highlight the differences between the characters or events.
- Get them to divide the story into sections, giving each a sub-title. (I suspect these will generally follow the more formal categories of introduction, climax/anti-climax and conclusion.)

**SHARED RESPONSES**
It is often valuable to assign different activities for different pairs or groups to consider. Report-back sessions then become meaningful as the rest of the class will have to decide whether or not they agree. Different group work methods can be used, if you so wish. Some of the types of questions that can be posed:

- What is your impression of character XXX?
- What do you think character XXX is feeling at this point in the story?
- What do you think of character XXX’s behaviour or attitude?
- Retell the story from the point of view of a particular character. (The group must be able to highlight which words hint to them that this is what that character will feel.)

**WRITTEN RESPONSES  (Group or Individual)**

- Write a newspaper article based on some aspect of the story. This could be an interview, a report or a feature article.
- Write three or four diary entries made by a character during the course of the events in the story. (You might have to allow them to include pre-events or probable latter events.)
- Prepare a radio/TV interview with one of the characters.
- If there is a public event in the story, describe this from the point of view of a spectator.
- Recreate the story as a play. Groups could be assigned to write and then to perform these plays. (This would require you to spending time to explain about play dialogue formats, ie character names in capital letters and followed by a colon; stage instructions, etc.)
- Write a paragraph or two explaining what will happen next!
- South-Africanise the dialogue or setting and share these versions with the class (if the story is set outside
All of this is so much more interesting than setting a series of questions on each short story, and the class will probably remember the details and the impact of the story more favourably.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? PLEASE ENTER YOUR VIEWS IN THE COMMENTS SECTION.

Maskew Miller Longman calls for drama entries for its annual literature awards competition

Leading South African educational publisher, Maskew Miller Longman, is calling for entries for its 2012 Literature Awards, which will be for youth dramas.
Each year Maskew Miller Longman runs an award for writing in all South Africa’s official languages. The award aims to stimulate the further development of local literature in all the eleven official South African languages. Now in its fifth year, the annual awards have gone from strength to strength, with several hundred entries received each year. This year the judges are looking forward to reading many interesting and topical dramas that will captivate the hearts and minds of today’s youth.

We are especially proud that all the titles published as a result of the competition are written by South African authors who know how to capture the imaginations of South Africa’s youth. The calibre of the competition is underscored by the fact that several finalists of the Maskew Miller Longman Literature Awards have also gone on to win M-Net Literary Awards.

Authors and playwrights have just over 5 months to enter their dramas for consideration, with entries closing on Sunday, 30 April 2011. The call to entry and entry forms will be sent to all members of the South African Publishers Association, but entry forms are also available online at www.mml.co.za and by contacting Anthea Variend on (021) 532 6000 or antheav@mml.co.za.

The winner and runners-up in each category respectively receive R7 500 and R3 500 each. All winning entries will be published. An entry form must accompany entries.

For more information about the Maskew Miller Longman Literature Awards, visit www.mml.co.za

Sharon Hughes. Marketing Director: SA Schools, Maskew Miller Longman

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In interviews on the creative writing process with four successfully publishing South African authors in 2009, I asked questions angling for advice for young aspiring writers at school and to teachers of writing. What follows is a summary of the advice given by bestselling novelist, journalist and film maker, Margie Orford, using as far as possible her own words.

Tips for aspiring writers

Orford does not see writing as something you can simply ‘fall into’ because you have the desire to write. Her conception of becoming a writer is that it takes time, training and strategy and that if you wish to become a writer, you are in for the long haul as much as a lawyer or doctor might be: ‘it’s like
if you want to be a judge you don’t just become [one]. You study law and become an articled clerk and then become a lawyer and you work towards your goal’. This perception no doubt rests on her own experiences, where she studied journalism and English Literature, read voraciously, wrote for all kinds of publications and for different media before only much later in life penning her first novel. Her advice for young aspiring writers is that they should work out a strategy, studying what they need to and practicing by, for example, publishing for free newspapers so that they can build up a portfolio.

A portfolio of published work, even if it is work published in a classroom newspaper, can help when you approach a publisher with a proposal to write a novel. As she explains it, many people want to publish, but if you can show the publisher that you have already completed several projects and have had them accepted for some kind of publication, this shows you produce work of a reasonable standard and that you have what it takes to complete a written piece, not simply good ideas.

She admonishes aspiring writers to ‘read lots and try to work out why they read the things that they do and why they like them and why they don’t like the other things’ going as far as to say ‘you’re not going to get anywhere without reading.’ In addition, she emphasises that it is essential to ‘find out what you don’t know.’ She says journalistic writing is also good practice for the research needed to produce good fiction, encouraging writers to interview people to find out their stories or investigate a particular topic they feel they might like to write about, such as a particular kind of crime or a period in history. She says writing up these stories and information provides valuable practice, ‘like doing scales for piano,’ and if you want to become a writer you need to write every day, for example, by keeping a journal or jotting down notes.
Tips for teachers

Orford feels quite strongly that one should ‘never make people colour in between the lines’ and she claims to ‘hate’ teachers who did this, actually mentioning this pet hate in one of her novels, Like Clockwork (2006: 30) where she describes one of the main character’s thoughts on his young daughter: ‘Yasmin used to draw him pictures like the one before him now, but the drawings she sent from her new country were less exuberant. She had told him proudly that she could colour inside the lines now. Shaiza would like that: getting Yasmin to stay within the lines. Riedwaan unlocked Clare’s front door. That’s what he liked about Clare, her disregard for limits’.

Part of this ‘disregard for limits’ involves being able to tell an ‘emotional truth’ and not simply report facts or accepted wisdom. Orford says that ‘to write, you have to get youngsters to access some kind of authenticity and truth within themselves. I mean teenagers particularly are dreadful – sentimental – write rubbish. So you need to get them through that and reading other people’s writing helps’ to access a ‘genuine feeling’ rather than trite sentimentality.

‘Genuine observation’ is also important: ‘teaching children how to observe to go into a street and to watch people at a table and describe the interaction, so you make them go and observe other things [such as] how closely are they sitting, how they drink their tea, what they talked about, maybe so you get them to move to the imaginary from the concrete.’

She also feels that teachers need to teach their learners about the different phases of the writing process, and ‘give them the space to free write and to do all of that unedited stuff.’ This can help them write out their personal feelings and then decide what belongs in the piece and what should not go out in public. Editing spelling and grammar are important, but this has to happen at the very end of the writing process or it will inhibit the generation of ideas and the shaping of
those ideas into an interesting form. She maintains ‘the better the child’s language that they’re writing in, the easier it is to write’ but says that teachers are too often ‘inclined to jump on things that are wrong instead of the parts that are effective in terms of creating a response.’

The discipline of form and pattern, building from a feeling or an idea to a story with a plot that works, or describing a sensation so that the reader can also experience it – these are things that need to be taught as they do not come naturally. What can help in terms of teaching form, apart from reading widely, is to give the students a particular form such as a poetic structure where there are certain repeats that must happen every second verse, or a particular rhyme structure, or a story which begins at the end. The learners have to fill in the content but learn to use this particular pattern or adapt it to their own needs.

This is also where the observation and investigation she mentions in her advice to aspiring writers enters the picture. Orford believes teachers need to teach learners about point of view and what she describes in an example as ‘drawing that space that exists between a boy and a girl, where you can feel you are between them so that you can smell the chap is chewing gum and her deodorant or you’re watching them from further away.’ A technique she suggests for teaching this is to require that your learners write the same scene from many different places to experience the different effects of various points of view.

**Conclusion**

In my research, I found that the four authors I interviewed did not have exactly the same advice on how a young aspiring writer should go about learning more about writing, nor were their tips for teachers identical. However, common threads from Orford’s interview do run through the other interviews and her comments on reading, observation, authenticity and
practice, in particular, ring true for the other professional writers as well. There is much that can be learnt from professional writers on the writing process which can be passed on to benefit learners still at school. Hopefully some of Orford’s ideas will inspire teachers to try some new methods of teaching writing and to avoid getting learners to trot out practiced essays that ‘colour in between the lines.’ A variety of approaches is probably best, rather than taking any one author’s opinion as ‘gospel’ on the subject of how to write, as my research has shown that in the details of the process authors are as different from one another as people generally are on other questions of working styles.

About the author: Marguerite MacRobert

Marguerite MacRobert lectures English didactics, literature and creative writing pedagogy at the Faculty of Education, University of Stellenbosch. She has published poems and short stories in various journals and the occasional popular magazine article, in addition to her research papers on creative writing in academic journals. In 2009 she interviewed John van de Ruit, Margie Orford, Lesley Beake and Imraan Coovadia in order to obtain a South African perspective on the creative writing process.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? PLEASE ENTER YOUR VIEWS IN THE COMMENTS SECTION.

COACHING OF TEACHERS FOUND TO
An innovative study of 17 schools along the East Coast of the US suggests that putting literacy coaches in schools can help boost students’ reading skills by as much as 32 percent over three years.

The study focused on the Literacy Collaborative, a program developed by researchers at Ohio State University in Columbus. Used in more than 700 schools nationwide, the program trains teachers to become literacy coaches, who then work one-on-one with their colleagues on a half-time basis to spread a set of teaching routines drawn from principles of cognitive science.

Teachers in Literacy Collaborative classrooms might, for example, help walk students through decoding processes as they read aloud or lead children in groups as they read progressively more-difficult texts.

The researchers tracked the implementation of the program in K-2 classroom in 17 schools. The total number of 8,520 students included in the study represented a mix of social and economic characteristics.

To calculate the program’s learning impact, the researchers used value-added techniques to compare students’ progress on
various reading-related tests and tasks with how much students would have been expected to gain on those measures with more-typical instruction.

They found that students’ reading skills grew 16 percent beyond predicted levels the first year, 28 percent more than expected by the second year, and 32 percent more than predicted by the third year.

(Based on an article in Education Week, published online on 4 May 2010)

**WHAT DO YOU THINK? PLEASE ENTER YOUR VIEWS IN THE COMMENTS SECTION.**