

Shifting identity: The challenge of second language education at a rural South African University

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Introduction and background

This paper draws on the proposition that in the increasingly interdependent world of knowledge economies, exchange of information are reshaping social, economic and cultural life of societies and because of this, South African universities have to be capable of producing graduates who can steer the country into a competitive global knowledge economy. And because of this, higher education has to facilitate the ownership of a world language that can provide a crucial platform for these accomplishments. This paper explores the nature of teaching and learning in English based on the recently completed research on writing in English in the sociocultural context of rural Limpopo Province. My findings revealed the interface of the apparently progressive strides of educational practice surrounding post-apartheid education and the experience of the conditions and pedagogic context in which lecturers work at the university. I will consider the lived experience of academics at the University of Venda and set this against second language educational discourse that informs transformation in a globalised higher education.

There is a need to point out that reform of the education structure in South Africa serves the purpose of offering education to citizens on a more equitable basis but this is not enough as the sphere of commitment to change should be also include redressing those communicative resources that have been used to maintain subordination. This is because the English language content of global convergence in the country is much more obvious than ever before and as such, the capacity of the University of Venda (Univen) to operate globally depends on its absolute potential to do so but its potential is framed by such elements as the languages; the skills and talents of people; academic culture and the research capacity in the different disciplines. The majority of learners in

the Limpopo Province who gain admission to Univen are linguistically deficient in the English language and they are also extremely limited in background knowledge because of the shaky foundations of both their primary and high school education. Thus the problems created and experienced by these learners as they enter the university environment are quite significant and they certainly deserve attention.

Therefore, at this point in the history of South Africa, institutional capacity in English is essential to global effectiveness in higher education. For English stands at the very centre of the global knowledge system, it is the lingua franca par excellence and it continues to entrench the dominance in a self-reinforcing process (Held et al., 1999; Crystal, 2003). As such, academic knowledge conceived and discussed in English enjoys a privileged status of providing the common knowledge pool as opposed to academic knowledge conceived in other languages.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Thus the paper integrates language, literacy and the human mind as the mind is social, cultural and embedded in the world which implies that meaning is always situated in specific sociocultural practices and experiences. As the human mind is a powerful pattern recognizer (Clark, 1997; Gee 1992) and the world is full of potentially meaningful patterns, something must guide the learner's mind in selecting which patterns to focus on (Gee, 1994). Thus the "guiding something" has to be the site at which the teacher and other expert peers together with curriculum have to be redirected in the reform based pedagogies. Freire (1985) states that literacy is supposed to develop students' critical presence in the real world. This paper shares the major claim in language development that language is learned in context through dealing with problems of one's own society in particular, as well as those of the world in general.

Methodology

Thus the paper incorporates Rodby's (1990) kaleidoscopic notion of self for second language learners. Kaleidoscope involves notions of the definitions of the self, the definition of literacy and the relationship between the two', which is the ideal way of looking at oneself in a globalised knowledge economy. The learner has to continually

reform “old material” and make “something new” and the something new must involve texts as well as the interactions themselves. In this perspective of English language learning/teaching, the subject is a self that does not belong to a single fixed culture, a single language group, but is a self, that acts and reflects within a world language. And to sum it all, Kenway and Modra (1992: 163), see reflective dialogue as the ‘goal of pedagogy and not the condition for it’. For not only is reflexive dialogue geared towards enlarging, but also complicating and/or challenging learners’ experiences and what they believe in, with a possibility for alternative perspectives, rival hypotheses and expanded visions of values and priorities.

Therefore, English needs to be learnt and made use of as a tool for development. This stems from Stiglitz’s (2000) argument on knowledge for development. He rightly asserts that it is through the local selection, assimilation, and adaptation of knowledge that the local experts make knowledge their own. It is also a matter of the “local actors” being open to outside knowledge in a way that reaffirms their autonomy. It is only by remaining on one’s feet from an intellectual point of view that “local actors” may contribute to knowledge while remaining within their own context. This means that the local actors should continuously scan globally, while reinventing locally. The paper embraces the view that education involves change, and this change process ties education to knowledge. Stiglitz (2000: 10) points out that the transformative power of knowledge in education in the light of knowledge being public and also being transformative, it is incumbent upon the knowledge institutions to enhance the abilities of the students to tap into the reservoir of global knowledge. This is because the uniqueness of every society requires the localization of global knowledge. The fact that local knowledge takes account of the specifics of place, people and time, means local actors have to take an active role through its knowledge institutions in the local learning process.