

## **Editorial: The challenge of teaching English in diverse contexts**

STEPHEN MAY

*University of Waikato, New Zealand*

HILARY JANKS

*University of Witswatersrand, South Africa*

At the international conference on *Language, Education and Diversity*, held at the University of Waikato in November 2003, 450 delegates from over 30 countries gathered to discuss the challenges and opportunities facing language educators in teaching and learning contexts that are increasingly diverse. The conference was regarded as a major success. It highlighted the importance of bringing together educators from different fields – bilingual education, TESL, literacy education and language planning and policy – to discuss the urgent issue of addressing and accommodating diversity more effectively.

A striking lacuna, however, in perusing the many papers on offer, was any sustained engagement with the implications of teaching the English language in *first* language English teaching contexts (as opposed to TESL) and, relatedly, any attempt at making links between first and second language English language instruction. Language, it seems, is only made explicit, or the need for it to be so, in overtly second language learning contexts. And yet we know that supposedly first language education contexts increasingly comprise students from a wide variety of social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. This relative absence was also evident at the International Federation of Teachers of English (IFTE) Conference in Melbourne in July, 2003, although, to be fair, a stream ably chaired by John Davidson on Global English did try to address seriously the implications and potential interconnections of English language instruction in both first and second language contexts.

The long-standing lack of interest among English teachers, and those who research in the area of subject English, in addressing the role of English as a language of instruction is, however, perhaps not as surprising as it might first appear. After all, many teachers of subject English, particularly in Western countries, are monolingual English speakers, and accordingly may simply not know how to make explicit what they themselves take linguistically for granted – their English (first) language competence. Consequently, the linguistic (English) norms of the teachers frame implicitly, as well as specifically delimit, the instructional context of their classrooms.

Then there is the fact that many teachers of subject English have very little, if any, formal training in linguistics and/or literacy education, given that the majority pursue academic degrees initially in literature. When this is coupled with teacher education programmes that also regularly focus on the literary rather than literacy curriculum, it is little wonder that teachers of subject English, let alone other subject teachers, enter classrooms demonstrably under-prepared to *teach* the English language in contexts of cultural and linguistic diversity.

And this is not an unimportant omission – its consequences for students, particularly for bilingual students, are often highly deleterious. The multiple linguistic resources

such students bring to the classroom are, more often than not, simply ignored, while their English language “competence” is judged unreflectively and uncritically in relation to the teacher’s own. The result is often a highly deficit view of bilingual students within our classrooms, and the subsequent delimiting of their educational opportunities. We are reminded here of the poignant vignette outlined by James Gee (1996) of the English teacher who misinterpreted the language variety used by one of his students (Black Vernacular English, or Ebonics) as linguistically inadequate, when in terms of its own linguistic rules it was used by the student entirely correctly. On the basis of this misinformed, erroneous judgement, the teacher concerned subsequently constructed the student as having limited intellectual and educational ability.

Even one such example is wholly unacceptable – that such judgements are made with alarming regularity, and in relation to a wide variety of bilingual students, *every day* in schools throughout the globe highlights the scale of this problem. So, what to do? For a start, we need to actively *contest* and *change* this all-too-regular pattern of dismissing or pathologising the linguistic practices of our students as “inadequate” in relation to the normative demands of academic English, along with its wider pejorative associations. Rather, we need to *identify* and *value* these students’ customary linguistic practices as social, cultural and educational *resources* in the teaching and learning process. This, in turn, recognises the importance of languages to one’s identity and does not presuppose that it is only the first-language (often monolingual) English speaker who has the unquestioned right to have this affirmed and normalised in the teaching and learning process.

Following from this, we need to *use* the multiple linguistic practices of our students as a bridge to their successfully acquiring English academic literacy. It is only when we begin to identify what these linguistic practices actually are that we can begin to identify the degree of congruence or discontinuity that exists between the varied linguistic practices of our students and those much more specific practices that are usually associated with schools and the acquisition of English academic literacy. It is only when we begin to value and use those linguistic practices – recognising them as alternative forms of linguistic competence, or another form of specialised literacy – that we can provide a more effective bridge to the acquisition of academic English; one that does not, in the process, denigrate, diminish or dismiss the considerable linguistic knowledge that students already bring to the classroom with them. This is no small task, and centrally it is the teacher’s responsibility, not the student’s, to make it work.

Making the process of language learning more explicit and more situated, in turn, opens up the possibilities for critical literacy – exploring the differential status and power among, and associated attitudes towards, particular language registers and language varieties. The hegemonic role of English, particularly of standard and/or academic English, clearly looms large here, as does the hierarchising/pathologising of other languages and language varieties that so often attends it (Janks, 2000; May, 2001). A critical literacy approach also allows one to *situate* or *contextualise* academic English more explicitly, allowing for a critical analysis of it as a specific language register. Such a register is often highly abstracted, grammatically oblique, and comprises demanding, less frequent vocabulary. It is also invariably taught within highly decontextualised and cognitively demanding pedagogical contexts (see Corson 1995, 2000; Cummins, 2000; May, 2002). In combination, it presents many first

language English-speaking students, and certainly the majority of second language English learners, with particularly demanding language-related learning and teaching challenges.

It is these various, related concerns that frame the articles and personal narratives in this special issue of ETPC.

Suzanne Burley's article focuses on one teacher trainee's first person account of a Language Teacher Education programme in the UK, which makes explicit the role of the English language in subject English via interaction with students from Modern Languages. The teacher trainee's growing awareness of how his own diverse linguistic repertoire allows him to make linguistic connections with his students, as well as providing a bridge in the teaching of academic English, is a key feature of the article.

The narrative of Dewi Candraningrum Soekirno provides a fascinating personal account of how a Javanese educator is situated in relation to a range of linguistic and cultural influences, including English, as well as exploring how language and literature can be effectively combined in the teaching of subject English and in one's own personal history.

Terry Locke and Stephen May also explore the link between language and literature in their article by proposing a comparative literature approach to subject English in the Aotearoa/New Zealand context. Locke and May argue that such an approach better recognises the diverse linguistic repertoires of students, as well as linking literacy and literature more effectively in subject English.

Warwick Elley's article examines the assessment of literacy in international surveys such as IEA and the most recent PIRLS. Using Aotearoa/New Zealand as an example, he effectively highlights the considerable challenges attendant upon analysing such literacy data meaningfully, as well as highlighting what such data also conceal. Issues specific to first and second language learners of English in Aotearoa/New Zealand are also addressed specifically in the article.

The challenges of learning English for second language learners in Hong Kong, particularly for those who may have other learning challenges, are explored in Arthur Firkin's personal narrative. The conflation of English language learning difficulties with wider learning difficulties in the Hong Kong education system, as well as the deficit notions associated with both, are a key point of interest in this reflection.

Finally, Margaret Moumou provides a fascinating account of language policy development in her native Seychelles, drawing on critical literacy to explore how a critical, situated and multilingual approach to the English Curriculum in the Seychelles might be effectively pursued. Questions of (differential) power and status in relation to language varieties, and related attitudes, are central to her discussion.

All of the contributions in this special issue of EPTC, in one way or another, address directly the interconnectedness of language, diversity and subject English – and not before time. While acknowledging that this is just a start, it is hoped that the issue will contribute to a wider, more extensive, critical academic engagement with these

questions in the future. Given just what is at stake for both teachers and students, the palpable lack of such engagement hitherto needs urgent addressing.

## REFERENCES

- Corson, D. (1995). *Using English words*. Dordrecht: Kluwer.
- Corson, D. (2000). *Language diversity and education*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Gee, J. (1996). *Social linguistics and literacies*. Basingstoke: Falmer Press.
- Janks, H. (2000). Domination, access, diversity and design: A synthesis for critical literacy education. *Educational Review*, 52(2), 175-186.
- May, S. (2001). *Language and minority rights: Ethnicity, nationalism and the politics of language*. London: Longman.
- May, S. (2002). The problem with literacy. *English in Aotearoa*, 48, 4-14.