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What – and how – should we teach when we teach English in (South) Africa?

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ABSTRACT

This study proposes changes to the teaching of English (language and literature) in South African institutions of learning in ways that prioritise functionality and communicative competence rather than the current dominant and problematic approach that seeks adherence to received standards. The author draws on his personal experience as a lecturer in a comprehensive South African university in a semi-rural setting as well as on postcolonial and decolonial perspectives on the many problems associated with epistemological access and literacy rates across South African schools and universities. Invoking a decades-old proposition by American writer, James Baldwin (1965) and Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe (1965) that formerly colonised people should use English for their practical purposes rather than try to imitate so-called native speakers, the author argues for a 'world englishes' and descriptive grammar approach to the teaching and learning of English in South Africa. Based on these ideas, a strategy with an action research component for the transformation of language, literature and literary pedagogy is proposed. Finally, the study demonstrated how such a strategy could also contribute to the objective of decolonising English studies in non-nativist ways. Though the discussion is grounded more particularly in South Africa, the issues and proposals are practicable to a significantly wider African context.

Keywords: *South Africa, English Studies, World Englishes, Prescriptive Grammar, Decolonisation*

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INTRODUCTION

The release, on 16 May 2023, of the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) has reignited debates on one of the thorniest concerns in the post-1994 South African higher education sector. It is the problem of low academic literacy levels in English among historically disadvantaged students who make up the vast majority of the country's undergraduate student population.[1] The PIRLS' revelation that a whopping 81% of the country's Grade 4 learners are unable to read for meaning in any language will generate animated conversations in the years to come. The report shows that South African learners performed worst of all the 43 countries that participated in the 2021 study even though the country was assessed one year later than most of the others. More worrying perhaps, is the fact that the 2021 study

[1] N. Cele, "'Equity of Access'' and "Equity of Outcomes'' Challenged by Language Policy, Politics and Practice in South African Higher Education: The Myth of Language Equality in Education,"'" *South African Journal of Higher Education* 18, no. 1 (August 6, 2004), https://doi.org/10.4314/sajhe.v18i1.25427; Norma Nel and Helene Muller, "The Impact of Teachers' Limited English Proficiency on English Second Language Learners in South African Schools," *South African Journal of Education* 30, no. 4 (2010): 635–50; Dorrit Posel, Mark Hunter, and Stephanie Rudwick, "Revisiting the Prevalence of English: Language Use Outside the Home in South Africa," *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 43, no. 8 (2022): 774–86.

marks a downward trend from 78% in the previous study whose result was released in 2016. For context, the global average of the 50 countries studied in the 2016 report was 96% and South Africa was also the worst-performing country then.[2] Though shocking, the verdict of the 2021 PIRLS report was not totally unexpected.[3] In 2020, researchers at the University of Pretoria (2020) reported on a local study that tracked progress in the interval between the last two PIRLS studies. Their 10-year assessment indicated that there had been "little or no progress" among learners.

Apparently, the immediate root of this is the crisis of teaching and learning English at the school level mostly among learners from the country's majority impoverished black and under-resourced schools in socio-economically disadvantaged communities.[4] Despite the glaring deficiencies demonstrated by the learners, some of them not only 'progressed' through the grades but still ended up passing the school-leaving examination and getting admitted into university, no thanks to some controversial policies.[5] Literacy deficiencies become heavily pronounced during university studies, especially so for both academics and students teaching and learning English language and literature modules.[6] The most common issues are poor grammar, sentence construction, essay composition, punctuation, spelling and vocabulary in basic writing tasks. Needless to say, the downward trend revealed by the PIRLS studies reinforces the pressing need for change and innovation in the teaching and learning of English both in the basic and higher education sectors. For obvious reasons, the main thrust of attempts to remedy the situation has been and will continue to be targeted at schools. However, universities have since realised that they can, and should, do more to increase the success chances of the many underprepared students who come to them every year.[7]

Since the 2021 PIRLS report suggests that the literacy levels of university entrants will require significant improvement in the years to come, the need for workable interventions is now more pressing than ever. The question then is: Given the urgency, complexity and seriousness of the problem, what practical and feasible steps can lecturers and universities take that could lead to positive change in the near and distant future? This study proposes changes to the teaching of English (language and literature) in South African institutions of learning in ways that prioritise functionality and communicative competence rather than the current dominant and problematic approach that seeks adherence to received standards.

METHODOLOGY

This conceptual article combines autoethnographic observations with a rigorous analysis of the teaching of English studies (language and literature) in South African higher institutions using a semi-rural comprehensive university as a case study. The outcome is a proposed conceptual strategy that could enhance the teaching and learning of English (language and literature) in South African universities as a means of addressing some of the specific problems that arise from the school years of many students. The proposal represents a significant departure from current dominant practices in three ways. The first is a focus on the mainstream curriculum as against the tendency of outsourcing literacy development to extra-curricular writing centres. Secondly, this research re-emphasises the need to prioritise linguistic functionality and communicative competence rather than the apparent obsession with received standards which are largely prescriptive and have proven to be counterproductive so far. The third prong of this proposal is the privileging and centring of local set texts in teaching and learning literature. In addition to enhancing the basic English literacy proficiencies of students, the second and third prongs of the strategy

[2] TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Centre., " PIRLS 2016 International Results in Reading," 2017, http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2016/international-results/.

[3] J. Stent, "Children Are Far behind in Learning to Read and It Is Getting Worse," 2023, https://www.groundup.org.za/article/literacy-crisis-in-south-africa-says-new-report/.

[4] R. Mesthrie and M. Rajend, *Language in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[5] J. Jansen, "Personal Reflections on Policy and School Quality in South Africa: When the Politics of Disgust Meets the Politics of Distrust," in *The Search for Quality Education in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Interventions to Improve Learning and Teaching*, ed. Y, Sayed, A. Kanjee, and M. Nkomo (Cape Town: HSRC Press, 2013), 81–89; LINDA CHISHOLM and RUSSELL WILDEMAN, "The Politics of Testing in South Africa," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 45, no. 1 (February 2013): 89–100, https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2012.755710..

[6] P. Maseko, " Multilingualism at Work in South African Higher Education: From Policy to Practice," in *Multilingual Universities in South Africa: Reflecting Society in Higher Education*, ed. L. Hibbert and Christa van der Walt (London: Multilingual Matters, 2014), 28-48.

[7] C Boughey, "What Are We Thinking of? A Critical Overview of Approaches to Developing Academic Literacy in South African Higher Education," *Journal for Language Teaching* 47, no. 2 (February 17, 2014): 25, https://doi.org/10.4314/jlt.v47i2.2.

could serve a double purpose namely, to promote the decolonisation of the curriculum, something which most, if not all, South African universities have claimed to be committed to since the #RhodesMustFall student protests of 2015.

The paper is structured into two main parts which address the past, present and future of English teaching and learning. It begins in media res, using the author's own experiences as an example of the current challenges faced by lecturers of English in South Africa. It then moves to a concise reflection on the past, focusing on the role of English studies in colonial education. This is to foreground the historical and systemic foundations of the current situation and to outline the ideas that underpin my suggestions. Thereafter, the study concludes with a proposed strategy to transform teaching and learning English in South African universities and higher institutions.

Teaching and learning English in South Africa today

Although the problem of poor literacy proficiency manifests most conspicuously in high failure rates in tests, assignments and examinations as well as low throughput rates, it also comes to the fore in class discussions, consultations and tutorials. During these sessions, it is common to observe a palpable lack of engagement and interest among many students. Interactions between lecturers and students in class are often marked by a sense of estrangement between students and lecturers on one hand and between students and the teaching content on the other. There is, furthermore, the vexed issue of epistemological access/impediment for students given that some of the foundational courses and programmes offered by English departments/units are service modules designed to facilitate learning across different faculties and disciplines. This has been the author's personal experience for over 8 years in the Department of English at a university whose students come overwhelmingly from historically disadvantaged rural communities.

However, the problem is not limited to poor results and ineffectual pedagogic engagements. Over the years, poor pass rates and throughput have made the department and most of the modules offered (except one) unpopular among students and some academics from other disciplines. This has earned the department the unenviable unofficial sobriquet of 'killer department,' spoken sneeringly by other academics in corridors and outside faculty meetings. More problematically, the alias expresses the resentment of students who have struggled with our modules and who wonder why they get bad grades in English but do well in other modules. Successive heads of department have reported that they regularly feel blamed and unfairly stigmatised in higher structure meetings when these issues are tabled, and where lecturers in the department are presumed to be responsible for students' struggles. The general impression is that lecturers in the department are perceived to be maliciously withholding pass marks from students possibly as a gatekeeping mechanism to keep our mostly black students down. Also, it appears as though lecturers are not sufficiently competent or creative to resolve the challenges faced by their students. Like the HoDs, the author has personally experienced bouts of low morale and frustration. The same can be said for many lecturers who grapple with the pressure of unrealistic expectations to solve complex historical problems whose genesis and scope extend far beyond their finite job descriptions in the department.

Needless to say, these matters preoccupy members of the department and receive sustained attention in official and unofficial meetings. What has emerged from intense reflection over the years is a loose consensus among colleagues that while they cannot accept blame for the situation, they remain morally and professionally obliged to take steps that can mitigate it. This must be done not only in the interests of students and the university at large but also to enhance their individual and collective practices and reputations. Such an approach has become particularly important with intensified calls for decolonising higher education. Indeed, the author's institution has taken things further by requiring departments to promote African-centred pieces of knowledge as part of decolonisation. This requirement represents a significant complication of the situation as it obliges the department to respond practically to the problematic role of the English medium of instruction in facilitating or impeding epistemic access. The situation is not made easier by the differing positionalities of lecturers in the department which currently comprises black and white South Africans as well as individuals from elsewhere on the continent whose views on the issues under consideration can be quite dissonant.

It is important to note that the thorny issue of positionality extends beyond individual departments of English and manifests as part of the wider post-1994 socio-cultural politics in South Africa. This is

demonstrated in several formal, semi-formal and informal conversations with stakeholders who sometimes tend to describe complex problems in uncritical ways that might suggest socio-cultural bias. A short anecdote might help illustrate this point better. During a research visit to a university in Europe not long ago, the author happened to attend a seminar presentation on South Africa's language problems by a senior South African academic on the verge of retirement before an audience of mostly European students and lecturers. The speaker addressed the relatively slow progress in developing indigenous South African languages to a level comparable to that of Afrikaans. This, he claimed, is simply and entirely the fault of the supposedly 'incompetent' and 'corrupt' authorities who succeeded the apartheid regime. The author felt compelled to remind him and the audience that the political conditions under which English and Afrikaans achieved dominance in South Africa were spectacularly different from those which have prevailed since 1994. Similarly, at a recent seminar on decolonising education, a colleague (again, a senior academic) blamed the country's ruling party, calling it by name, for the apparent colonial orientation of the existing school and university curricula. He was apparently rejecting the fact that some of today's problems stem from the colonial philosophies and ideologies upon which the system was founded. The dissenting colleague went on to claim that the current ruling party is fully responsible for *all* aspects of teacher education in South Africa today.

As noted earlier, the situation is far messier. Nonetheless, without trying to over-simplify things, it is safe to suggest that, at the heart of it all lies the language and epistemic under-preparedness of many students. It is important to emphasise that this claim comes from the author's specific position as a lecturer in a specific institution whose students have a certain socio-cultural profile. The under-preparedness mentioned here and the epistemic gap linked to it is the subject of thriving scholarship which was referred to in the opening parts of this paper. This gap mirrors the language/literacy gap faced by non-native English South African learners who abruptly transition, underprepared, from mother-tongue medium of instruction in the Foundation Phase to English in the Intermediate Phase.[8]

The Colonial Foundations of English Studies

Whatever interventions are proposed today have to take into account the fact that the crises have evolved from specific practices and policies that defined schooling and the entire public educational sector under apartheid and colonial rule. Although a detailed historical account is out of the scope of this paper, it must not be forgotten that the education of South Africa's black majority was deliberately compromised through such landmark legislation as the infamous Bantu Education Act of 1953. The Act and other discriminatory practices and policies by the apartheid state collectively dramatised the notorious claim of the racist authorities that: "There is no place for [the Bantu] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labour .... What is the use of teaching the Bantu child mathematics when it cannot use it in practice?"[9] It needs to be noted that today's literacy crisis did not arise suddenly in the post-1994 era and is not necessarily a product of the apparent policy confusions and political errors that have dogged the new political dispensation as some may want to suggest uncritically.[10] Rather, it should be emphasised that the crisis is one of the stark legacies of the historical denial of adequate resources to black schools, learners and teachers and their systemic exclusion from opportunities for optimal educational and professional development over many decades.[11]

Furthermore, it is important to note that, for all their notoriety, racist apartheid policies were themselves but a sub-set and follow-up to the wider socio-cultural knowledge production architecture of European colonisation which was imposed across the colonised world from the late 18th century

[8] Lufuno Netshipise, Shumani Eric Madima, and Fulufhelo Oscar Makananise, "Intermediate Transition from an African Language to English as a Medium of Instruction at Primary Schools in the Vhembe District, South Africa," *Gender and Behaviour* 20, no. 4 (2022): 20392–405; Peter Plüddemann, "Unlocking the Grid: Language-in-Education Policy Realisation in Post-Apartheid South Africa," in *Language in Epistemic Access* (Routledge, 2018), 10–23; Stephen Taylor and Marisa von Fintel, "Estimating the Impact of Language of Instruction in South African Primary Schools: A Fixed Effects Approach," *Economics of Education Review* 50 (2016): 75–89.

[9] D. Clark, N.L. Clark, and W.H. Worger, *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid* (London: Routledge, 2013),48. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315833361.

[10] See the two anecdotes I relate in the preceding section.

[11] Bekisizwe S. Ndimande, "From Bantu Education to the Fight for Socially Just Education," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 46, no. 1 (January 2013): 20–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2013.750199; B. Fleisch, " State Formation and the Origins of Bantu Education," in *The History of Education under Apartheid 1948–1994: The Doors of Learning and Culture Shall Be Opened*, ed. P. Kallaway (Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman, 2002), 39–52.

onwards.[12] It is a process in which the use of dominant colonial languages such as English was (and has been) instrumental not only as imposed mediums of instruction but also as mandatory courses of study.[13] Hsu makes this clear when she recalls the claim by a 19th-century British colonial administrator in India that: "The first step to be taken toward civilization … toward teaching the Indians the mischief and folly of continuing in their barbarous practices, is to teach them the English language."[14] Hsu goes on to elaborate on "the complex, intertwined relationship between colonialism, English language teaching and … the prevalence of colonial English imposition as a historical technique for establishing global conquest."

This is what Pennycook and Makoni are referring to when they comment on "the complicities between applied linguistics, colonialism, and capitalism."[15] It is a subject that has been taken further mostly by decolonial, postcolonial, anti-colonial, New Historicist and Black Marxist scholars who demonstrate how the degradation of indigenous languages and knowledge systems formed the conditions of possibility for the rise and dominance of European languages such as English.[16] I argue that we must *never* lose sight of this history in present discussions of how to address literacy deficiencies among local students in formerly colonised societies given the profound links between literacies, epistemologies and ontologies. In this regard, Motha has argued that "the effects of empire and racialization are woven throughout the English language, the processes of teaching English, and the project of learning English."[17]

These imperialistic features were not confined to the domain of language teaching and linguistics alone but also extended to literature. Indeed, it can be argued that it is in the area of literature that the colonial urge to devalue and dominate Europe's 'others' found more open and direct expression. As a core part of British colonial education, English literary texts (complementing pseudo-scientific anthropological 'studies' and such outlandish fields as eugenics and biological determinism) led the charge in fabricating and propagating deprecatory stereotypes of non-Europeans. Some of the most damaging of these images seem to have stuck till this day and have assumed the status of truth in the minds of millions. Criticism of these deliberate malicious misrepresentations is found in Said's influential book, *Orientalism.*[18] In this book, Said theorises the cultural and psycho-social instincts and processes by which colonial writers construct the non-European other as an inferior opposite of a presumable superior European self. Before Said, the acclaimed Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe offered one of the most memorable denunciations of the racist underpinnings of colonial literary texts in his famous essay, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.*"[19] Importantly for this present debate, Achebe decried the fact that such evidently racist texts have assumed the status of "permanent literature – read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics."[20] Elsewhere in an interview, he explains how the misrepresentations of Africans in canonical English texts inspired him into a writing career:

> Well, [I] had studied the books that were part of [my] education, [I] had encountered many stories told about [me] by Europeans. At first [I] did not realize that these rather unpleasant characters [I] was reading about were supposed to be [me]. And as [I] grew older and becoming more aware, [I] began to see the vision that was being projected into the world, by some of these stories about the civilized world and about the savage, about the white man and others. And so [I] began to realize that the world was not as straightforward as [I] had assumed as a child. … And when [I] became aware that the stories had been used *to set one people against another* [emphasis added], … [I] then realized that [I] had a task.[21]

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[12] This is theorised as the coloniality of knowledge by most decolonialists. It is a term credited to the Peruvian sociologist, Anibal Quijano - Morgan Ndlovu, "Coloniality of Knowledge and the Challenge of Creating African Futures," *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 40, no. 2 (2018).

[13] Tejaswini Niranjana, "Translation, Colonialism and Rise of English," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 1990, 773–79; Donaldo Macedo, "The Colonialism of the English Only Movement," *Educational Researcher* 29, no. 3 (2000): 15–24.

[14] Funie Hsu, "Resisting the Coloniality of English: A Research Review of Strategies.," *Catesol Journal* 29, no. 1 (2017): 117.

[15] A. Pennycook and S. Makoni, *Innovations and Challenges in Applied Linguistics from the Global South* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[16] Olufemi Taiwo, "Colonialism and Its Aftermath: The Crisis of Knowledge Production," *Callaloo* 16, no. 4 (1993): 891–908; Macedo, "The Colonialism of the English Only Movement"; Ndlovu, "Coloniality of Knowledge and the Challenge of Creating African Futures."

[17] S. Motha, *Race, Empire, and English Language Teaching: Cre-ating Responsible and Ethical Anti-Racist Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2014), 129.

[18] Edward Said, "1995. Orientalism," *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf)*, 1978, 132–49.

[19] Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness," *The Massachusetts Review* 57, no. 1 (2016): 14–27.

[20] Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness," 17.

[21] E. Holger, "'No Condition Is Permanent': An Interview with Chinua Achebe," *Publishing Research Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (2003): 55–70, 61.

This leads to the concluding part of the current section of the paper. Here, the emphasis is on the need to confront the historical baggage of English teaching constantly as attempts are made to chart a path forward for (South) African educators and students. There is a need to remain vigilant in this regard given that the hegemonic cultural and political forces which produced the language and epistemic regimes of the past remain at play. However, they operate in opaque ways, described variously as neo-colonialism and decoloniality in the current dispensation of globalisation. It is within this broad context that scholars and policy-makers need to understand how canonical English can function within the 'hidden curriculum', serving to sustain the hegemonic Eurocentric cognitive empire while controlling access to liberatory knowledge and socio-economic independence.[22] The question then is: what are the practical implications of an awareness of this history and of contemporary realities for our proposed pedagogic and curricular interventions?

Possibilities for New Englishes and New English Pedagogies

To answer the above question, it is important to return to Achebe; specifically, a conversation between him and the African-American writer, James Baldwin who states as follows:

> "My quarrel with English language has been that the language reflected none of my experience. But now I began to see the matter in quite another way... Perhaps the language was not my own because I had never attempted to *use* it, had only learned to *imitate* it [emphasis added]."[23]

In writing his acclaimed novels, Achebe had adopted what he calls "a new English" that is "able to carry the weight of [his] African experience" while remaining "in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings."[24] What this means is that, in spite of its problematic history and complicity in contemporary cognitive hegemonies, there is a way that English could, and should, still play a constructive role outside the Anglo-American. Achebe's idea of a new English offers a template that can generate possibilities for teaching and learning domesticated, functional and descriptive forms of the English language on one hand, and, on the other, a focus on set texts written mainly by African writers. These are texts and writers whose content, worldviews, perspectives and frames of reference are significantly relatable to the African socio-cultural realities of the vast majority of our students and lecturers. Baldwin's and Achebe's decades-old template, allows, in my view, a workable alignment of epistemologies, ontologies and axiology. This would minimise the problematic disruptions of the current dominant language teaching system that is borrowed wholesale and that has proven over many decades to be unfit for independent and liberatory education.

This proposed template is consistent with Motha's call for "provincializing" English in certain linguistic and educational contexts.[25] According to Hsu, "the local can become a space of language production and instruction for its own purpose, as articulated by the needs of the community, and not merely in service of dominant foreign cultures."[26] The template also resonates with Joubert and Sibanda's proposal for the deployment of English to facilitate multilingual "differentiated" mediums of instruction in South African higher education institutions which would include "translanguaging, translation and codeswitching."[27] A particularly insightful proposition has been offered by Aicha Rahal's simple but compelling argument for a change in the teaching of English (and by extension, its use) from traditional, prescriptive, top-down ways.[28] She foregrounds how English has changed from being a provincial language with limited communities of users to its current status as a widely dispersed global language and argues that the pedagogy of English should also change. To this end, she invokes McKay's argument that "as an international language, English belongs to its users, and as such it is *the users' cultural content that*

[22] Anna Corradi, "The Linguistic Colonialism of English," *Brown Political Review*, 2017.
[23] Chinua Achebe, "English and the African Writer," *Transition*, no. 75/76 (1997): 349.
[24] Achebe, "English and the African Writer," 349.
[25] Motha, *Race, Empire, and English Language Teaching: Cre-ating Responsible and Ethical Anti-Racist Practice*, 129.
[26] Hsu, "Resisting the Coloniality of English: A Research Review of Strategies," 122. Hsu lists the following as examples of similar proposals by other scholars – the "(Canagarajah, 2005; Flores & Rosa, 2015; Motha, 2014; Pennycook, 2010; Shin, 2006; Veronelli, 2015), highlighting the related significance of the particular context to pedagogical design and assessment" (2017: 122).
[27] M. Joubert and B. Sibanda, "Whose Language Is It Anyway? Students' Sense of Belonging and Role of English for Higher Education in the Multilingual, South African Context," *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 2022,57. https://doi.org/10.20853/36-6-5442.
[28] A. Rahal, " Teaching Pedagogy in the Context of World Englishes: Going beyond the Traditional Paradigm," Africa ELTA Newsletter, 2022, https://drive.google.com/file/d/142yrV39uBlirulXYugjBppU02sLwCRF5/view.

and their sense of the appropriate use [emphasis added] of English that should inform language pedagogy."[29]

Perhaps, the greater value of Rahal's paper for universities in South Africa is her attention to how different varieties of English can be recognised and deployed for practical pedagogical purposes in higher institutions outside the Anglo-American world. For this purpose, she draws on Braj Kachru's influential Three Circles Model.[30] The model theorises varieties of English in terms of a core circle representing the more native varieties and subsequent outer and expanding circles representing drifts away from the core. Another model Rahal relies on is Rose and Galloway's depiction of the differences between what they call monolingual (traditional and prescriptive) versus multilingual (contemporary and descriptive) notions of English language teaching.[31] Based on these, Rahal devises a lesson plan for an EFL class in a Tunisian university in which students are simultaneously introduced to both local and global varieties of English from different parts of the world. Rahal thus approaches English in the more contemporary context of its internal diversities (world englishes), rather than as a category with a hermetic internal congruency. Furthermore, her approach resonates with the concept behind the field of World Literature which focuses on non-English cultural archives. These approaches to English teaching and learning increase its chances of being a positive part of the mission to decolonise the curriculum and pedagogy in African schools and institutions.

A proposed action research plan for a new and decolonised approach to English studies

Based on the foregoing, it can be said that the task before departments of English across South African universities,[32] therefore, is to respond strategically to the language/epistemic under-preparedness of our university entrants. Rather than presenting these new students with a curriculum that presumes competence at the point of university entry, lecturers ought to show greater awareness of their historical under-preparedness. This can be done by equipping them with the language and linguistic resources to remedy their under-preparedness and help them bridge existing epistemic gaps while facilitating access to new knowledge. Nevertheless, this should not be outsourced to the Reading and Writing Centre as is the current 'extra-curricular' approach in most if not all, South African universities (see Maseko, 2014). Instead, what is proposed is a smart, carefully planned approach whereby remedial interventions are integrated into the mainstream English studies curriculum across all levels of study. However, this must be done in ways that do not compromise existing module designs and outcomes. This would, it is believed, increase the chances of redressing the historical language and epistemic under-preparedness of students who take English modules. In line with the standard action research cycle, the intervention would consist of (a) a pre-planning stage involving one or two other like-minded departmental colleagues; (b) presentation of the plan to the entire department for deliberation/adoption; (c) implementation; (d) mid-semester monitoring and evaluation; (e) end of semester review.

The overarching strategy is to modify teaching/learning in line with the standard objectives of enhancing students' language and communication skills while also exposing them to a range of literary texts. The overarching goal of the plan is therefore to improve students' *use* of English – grammar, sentence construction, essay writing, capitalisation, punctuation and diction – through a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, grammar approach. By descriptive grammar, I refer to the approach to language studies that recognises how a language is actually used across varieties, whether standard or non-standard.[33] As Leech notes, prescriptive grammar is almost always contrasted, in this sense, with prescriptive grammar,

[29] S. L. McKay, *Teaching English as an International Language: Rethinking Goals and Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 13.

[30] B. B. Kachru, "Standards, Codification and Sociolinguistic Realism: The English Language in the Outer Circle," in *English in the World: Teaching and Learning the Language and Literatures*, ed. Quirk. R. and H. Widdowson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 11–30.

[31] H. Rose and N. Galloway, *Global Englishes for Language Teaching* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).See also Aziz & Hashim (2022), Meighan (2021) and McKay (2002).

[32] While the departmental situation described here obtains in several South African universities, it is important to note that some others have separate departments for English literature and language (as linguistics and/or applied language studies). There are also those where English teaching is done in units within schools of languages and/or communications. The suggestions made here may then be addressed at the relevant teaching unit with necessary or desired adaptations.

[33] Anindita Chatterjee and Santoshi Halder, "Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing: A Critical Review," *Journal of Education* 203, no. 4 (2023): 971–83.

an opposing approach that "reflects attitudes in favor of certain usages and against others, rather than what is found to be evidenced by usage.[34] Some readers might be interested in a precise definition of descriptive grammar suggested by her as well as details on how it would deviate from current approaches. However, such an analysis is outside the scope of this essay not only for reasons of space but also because these notions are contested.[35] Moreover, it would be more practical and productive for individual departments to make determinations on this.

Towards the objectives outlined above, it is proposed that at least 60% of English studies content and contact time be devoted to language teaching in all undergraduate modules and across all levels except honours. To make this possible, departments have to change the practice of course/module/topic allocation whereby some lecturers only teach language while others only teach literature. Although such a system is predicated on differing individual specialisations, it is safe to say that virtually all university lecturers have more than sufficient capacity and experience in teaching elementary, school-level, language topics anyway. This means that it would not be compulsory for any department to recruit extra or external lecturers for this plan to proceed.

Putting more emphasis on language inevitably means alterations to the literature component. The plan therefore includes changes to prescribed literature texts. Firstly, increasing the language content and contact time necessitates a corresponding reduction in the literature component. Secondly, reducing the number of texts will serve to lessen the burden on students with compromised literacy capabilities. Given that poor grades are associated with the failure (and/or inability) of many students to read *all* the prescribed texts, it is suggested that prescribing fewer texts might increase the chances of students doing more of the required readings. While, on the face of it, this might appear to be lowering standards, it is not. There are indications that students tend not to comply when they feel overwhelmed by the length and number of prescribed readings.[36] This means that insisting on more, and lengthier, set texts does not necessarily promote quality and might actually compromise in-depth engagement with the material. What is proposed in this plan can thus be seen as an example of when less is more.

The proposed changes to language teaching necessitate rethinking the objectives and practices of teaching literature which must take into account its historical complicity with colonial misrepresentations and miseducation mentioned earlier. This is partly why the proposed changes in teaching literature involve the careful and methodical inclusion of appropriate African texts into the curriculum. Instead of over-representing canonical English texts (Shakespeare, Chaucer, Conrad, Wordsworth, Austen, etc.), the plan proposes that the curriculum comprises a significant majority of local texts – from South Africa, the rest of the continent and the African diaspora. Furthermore, in teaching the history of the English language, the focus should be on the history of its introduction into (South) Africa rather than the preoccupation with English/British political and socio-cultural history in the name of teaching the English language.

Selecting texts in the ways set out above allows us to intervene in the crucial domain of linguistic accessibility and its affective ramifications. As noted earlier in this paper, one of the manifestations of the crises of poor literacy in English is the sense of alienation from content and between students and lecturers that lecturers often experience in the classroom.[37] This is due to the difficulty that students face in relating to teaching materials and/or frames of reference. Personally, the author encounters this much more when teaching literature texts set in faraway places and times than those whose contents are more relatable to the immediate socio-cultural setting notwithstanding that the teaching is done in English.

It is therefore argued that greater focus be paid to texts that strongly reflect the life experiences and local histories of students as a means of increasing the chances that the students would be more interested in, and make greater effort towards, reading and understanding prescribed texts. A counterargument has been made that universities should not limit students to texts from within students'

[34] G. Leech, "Descriptive Grammar," in *The Cambridge Handbook of English Corpus Linguistics*, ed. D. Biber and R. Reppen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 146.
[35] Chatterjee and Halder, "Teaching Grammar in the Context of Writing: A Critical Review"; Debra Myhill, "Grammar Re-Imagined: Foregrounding Understanding of Language Choice in Writing," *English in Education* 55, no. 3 (2021): 265–78; L. Andrews, *Language Exploration and Awareness: A Resource Book for Teachers* (New York: Routledge, 2006).
[36] Brian Brost and Karen Bradley, "Student Compliance with Assigned Reading: A Case Study," *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 2006, 101–11.
[37] Joubert and Sibanda, "Whose Language Is It Anyway? Students' Sense of Belonging and Role of English for Higher Education in the Multilingual, South African Context."

immediate cultural contexts; and that they need to be exposed to all available *knowledge* and texts. The strategy proposed here does not undermine such exposure. It actually facilitates it in the sense that it is only those students who have been equipped with the requisite literacy skills at the undergraduate level will be able to access more knowledge from distant historical and geographical domains as Vygotsky notes in his influential theorisation of the zone of proximal development.[38]

For this reason, an increased focus on African texts can strongly complement the overarching goal of enhancing the basic literacy competencies of our students. Furthermore, such a move affords departments and universities a golden opportunity to contribute to decolonisation in ways that are non-nativist. It might be argued that such a move is meant merely to offend European sensibilities and would amount to nativist oppositional knowledge with little or no contribution to the intellectual development of students. Far from it: a significant increase or almost total focus on local texts at the undergraduate level offers massive opportunities for students and academics to engage wholistically with the indigenous cultural archive in sustained formal academic ways that are unprecedented. For example, Megbewon and Uwah argue that a textual study of proverbial language use in Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is "a valid tool" for advancing decolonisation using indigenous African stories.[39] Increased teaching of African texts (involving both canonical and more recent ones) is therefore an entirely worthwhile way of expanding positive propositional cultural knowledge.

It is important to note a possible limitation or counter view on the suggestion that the literature component be reduced in favour of increased language teaching. One of the anonymous reviewers of the original draft of this article argues that the reading and extended writing involved in studying literature enhances students' language skills and considers the idea of reducing literature teaching to be potentially counterproductive. S/he also notes that the use of more recent set texts written in contemporary English makes literature even more helpful. This view, which has great merit, has also been expressed by some lecturers of English and needs to be considered when individual departments decide on how to proceed with possible changes.

It is indeed highly beneficial for school and undergraduate English literature studies to focus exclusively on non-canonical English texts such as Shakespeare which students may choose to pursue at higher levels of study. This is an idea that will surely draw the ire of some, especially those whose entire socialisation into English was predicated on the hallowed status of writers like Shakespeare. This is why teachers and lecturers of English, need honest self-reflection and interrogate some of the practices they have always taken for granted. If the pedagogic intentions are actually to enhance the literacies and functional linguistic skills of the contemporary English language among specific learner populations, teachers and lecturers need to ask themselves the following questions: "Why do we still teach Shakespeare today? What exactly do we teach when we teach Shakespeare? Or is it possible that we have unwittingly been co-opted into the project of preserving a certain cultural heritage with its loaded religious and ideological worldviews?"

The last part of the proposed plan is for departments/units of English to work on brand new modules such as English for Academic Purposes [EAP] and oral African literature translated into English. This should be in addition to other courses or programmes orientated around contemporary English language usage in socio-culturally relevant contexts. Such new modules can be offered as alternatives to or replacements of, some of the current core modules which may no longer be fit for purpose. Perhaps, the best part of the proposed changes is that all the proposed changes can be done within individual departments/units since they do not amount to overhauling module or programme designs and objectives. This means the changes would not necessitate approval from the university's quality assurance office or government structures outside the university such as the Council for Higher Education (CHE) in the case of South Africa.

That said, the success of the plan requires the support of all lecturers especially where lecturers teach in groups and teams rather than as individuals. This is where the lecturers' diverse identities (both literal and ideological) come into play. Also important is the history of specific institutions and/or departments and units especially those where traditional attitudes towards the curriculum and pedagogy

[38] L.S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, MA, 1978).
[39] Funmilola Kemi Megbowon and Chijioke Uwah, "Decolonisation Through Indigenisation in African Literature: An Exploration of Proverbial Language in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart," *Gender and Behaviour* 20, no. 4 (2022): 20363.

of English prevail. The author's impression is that there are strong residues of these attitudes among colleagues in most universities and that while support for transformation and obligation to decolonisation project might be present, commitment from the majority is not necessarily assured. It can therefore be expected that some colleagues would resist the proposed changes, especially with regard to a switch to a descriptive language pedagogy and the drastic reduction of canonical set texts in favour of more African texts.[40]

Before concluding, it is important to make some proposals for monitoring and evaluating such an ambitious plan. As stated at the beginning of the preceding section, the last two stages of the intervention could be mid-semester and end-of-semester reviews. However, effective monitoring of progress begins at the initial departmental/unit deliberations which precede the adoption and implementation of the plan. During implementation, monitoring and evaluation can happen at different levels, firstly between the lecturers who may co-teach specific groups of students. It is at this level that prescribed texts and topics could be split. This division of labour enables the colleagues to choose texts and topics they may individually feel more comfortable with and expert at. More significantly, rotating teaching has an implicit quality assurance and monitoring dimension as it obliges the team members to exchange information regularly about when it is time to hand over the class.

The second level of monitoring and evaluation could be at the departmental and unit level with several lecturers who teach the same module to different groups as the case may be. These interactions should be largely informal but also to incorporate a semi-formal and structured reporting mechanism that would ensure the required ambience of teamwork. These meetings would enable assessment of progress across the different groups and colleagues and at the module level and will involve the taking of minutes by an appointed rapporteur who could be an admin person or senior students engaged as tutors. Including students in such a way has the potential to enhance student-centeredness in the teaching of these modules. A possible third level of monitoring and evaluation would be mid-session and end-of-session reviews where the records of teaching, class engagements and student assessment performance at the various levels are collated and consolidated. The outcome of these reviews could be voluntarily transmitted to the relevant teaching and learning structure within the school or college or faculty as the case may be via a periodical departmental teaching and learning report. Such a monitoring instrument could also seamlessly serve the internal purposes of the department/unit with respect to curricula and pedagogical interventions. The end-of-session reviews can also factor in semester marks and examination results to reach a comprehensive understanding of the impacts and outcomes of the intervention and for the consideration of possible revisions.

Given the complex and multifaceted nature of this kind of project, the key indicators of progress cannot be easily determined or measured. The rubrics for progress reports from the different levels of monitoring will include the frequency and quality of students' verbal responses during classes, tutorial sessions and consultations. Lecturers need to be encouraged to keep weekly records of these observations with the assistance of their tutors, where they have tutors. In addition, there could be bi-semester surveys of students' experiences and perceptions regarding how course contents respond to their language/literacy needs on the one hand, and the extent to which they can relate to the set literary texts. It would be helpful for each department/unit to provide administrative support (such as a dedicated tutor) and also appoint a committed lecturer to project-manage the study on behalf of the department. That project manager could be tasked to present mid-semester work-in-progress seminars to the department, unit, or school. After the end-of-session reviews, a full conference paper might be submitted to an appropriate journal afterwards. One final evaluation mechanism could also involve benchmarking and/or peer-review arrangements with departments, units, or schools from other universities with similar or even different profiles.[41]

[40] Naidoo (2012) relates examples of similar resistance in other contexts while Vandeyar (2017) goes so far as to predict that decolonisng the curriculum is doomed to fail in South Africa because of she argues to be the fossilised belief systems and attitudes of many teachers and lecturers.

[41] To determine the similarity of profiles, one may use the current, though problematical typology of traditional, comprehensive and universities of technology.

CONCLUSION

The changes proposed above have the potential to enable the intentional (re)orientation of the teaching of English towards enhancing what ought to be taken for granted as the main purpose of language teaching namely, proficient, functional literacy and communicative competence. The current dominant approach that seems to prioritise adherence to received standards prescribed from the so-called 'homes' of the language does a massive disservice to its vast learners in countries where it is a non-native language, and this has been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt by a range of indicators. As Hsu has noted, relying on local needs and cultural settings to 'provincialise' English is not a new proposition.[42] Given the outrage generated by the dismal showing of South Africa in the recent PIRLS report, along with the perennial frustrations faced by students and lecturers alike across universities, it is perhaps time for lecturers of English to overcome their apparent inertia and give change a chance.

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[42] Hsu, "Resisting the Coloniality of English: A Research Review of Strategies."

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