

# LANGUAGE AND THE LEARNING OF HISTORY – THE WAY FORWARD (AN EXPLORATORY STUDY)

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...the building blocks of this nation are all our languages working together, our unique idiomatic expressions that reveal the inner meanings of our experiences. These are the foundations on which our common dream of nationhood should be built...The nurturing of this reality depends on our willingness to learn the languages of others, so that we in practice accord all our languages the same respect. In sharing one's language with another, one does not lose possession of one's words, but agrees to share these words so as to enrich the lives of others. For it is when the borderline between one language and another is erased, when the social barriers between the speaker of one language and another are broken, that a bridge is built, connecting what were previously two separate sites into one big space for human interaction, and, out of this, a new world emerges and a new nation is born.

President Thabo Mbeki (27 August 1999)

## **Introduction and Context**

History, literacy and teaching learners through a medium of a particular language all conjure up certain ideas and discourse relating to the political, economic and social situation of a country at the given time. It is a given that there exists a relationship between the national curriculum and the political visions of that nation. Here in South Africa, and in many other countries throughout the world, there exist problems and difficulties with regards to the proposed language that educators are intended to use, and these issues can be seen at a larger level throughout the school environment. South Africa has come from a historically disadvantaged past in terms of language in education policies, where a large group of learners were greatly disadvantaged and the ramifications of this are strongly seen throughout the country today. This is clear through crime statistics, poverty and a large proportion of uneducated members of society.

Before our 1994 democratic elections, and the many positive changes that were made in this country, there existed two dominant languages

that were enforced as the medium of instruction throughout schools in South Africa. These were English and Afrikaans – known by many as the languages of the oppressors. This was despite the fact that South Africans approximately spoke over 24 different languages, and that neither Afrikaans nor English was a predominantly spoken language by the population inhabiting South Africa. We can all remember reading, studying or hearing about the *Soweto Uprising* (16 June, 1976) where youth rose up against the Bantu Education Policies. The horrors are reverberated today in learning about this History.<sup>1</sup> Learners were not given equal opportunities or rights due to a difference of race. “If students are not happy, they should stay away from school since attendance is not compulsory for Africans”<sup>2</sup>, as said by an official at the time.

South Africa has come a long way and prejudiced codes and ideas such as the latter are forbidden and have been destroyed. However the question is – are learners today, after 10 years of democracy, being given a fair opportunity in terms of growth within their subjects in schools and an equal means of learning to their peers regardless of who they are, where they come from, and other discourse around identity?

This paper will focus on the difficulties in terms of language and the subject History specifically, that have been encountered through a small group of mature students studying a course at the University of KwaZulu-Natal to aid in re-skilling and re-equipping themselves to teach History at schools. The name of this course is the *Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE)* and is a two-year part-time course where educators pay to attend workshops to better their understanding of History and ways of teaching the underlying core of what History is. This includes method, the understanding of important concepts within History and ways to manage and teach in under resourced, less affluent schools.

The course ultimately aims at empowering these students and for them to feel a sense of worth and achievement alongside gaining practical and useful knowledge, skills and values.

It is important to note that these educators and students are all from disadvantaged backgrounds and have been schooled themselves through

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1 This is not to say that we must not learn about this history but that through learning about these horrors about our country and some of our leaders, we are able to gasp in astonishment at our embarrassing predecessor's behaviors and attitudes.

2 <http://africanhistory.about.com/library/bl/blsaJune16decree.htm>

an apartheid ruled government. Therefore, the issue of inequality and unfair education is already inherent within them. The students in the programme range from ages 30 to 50 years of age and are all currently employed in rural and township schools throughout the province of KwaZulu-Natal. They attend the course during their school holidays, where they travel to the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Edgewood Campus and spend a week or less in workshops from eight in the morning to four in the afternoon. The students are also given numerous assignments to do in their own time and are required to post these off for marking. The course is therefore learning intensive, and it must be noted that these students (educators) are giving up their holidays to do this course. Therefore it is evident that there is an overwhelming attitude of passion and desire to improve and better themselves and their positions in life. The co-coordinator of the course is a 25-year-old white female. This at first site is a rather extraordinary and eye-opening situation. However, the learning that is constructed throughout the contact sessions is overwhelming and highly advantageous for both parties.

The focus is therefore to explore the language difficulties and problems rendered in this particular environment or case study and can thereafter be applied and interpreted in terms of other learning environments where language can be seen as a problem or hindrance to learners. The two key issues here with the ACE students are:

1. that they are all very weak in terms of their English language understanding and capabilities, and
2. that they all have to teach in the medium of English.

### **In this context the area of language will be explored further as a Field of Exploration.**

Language is a tool for thought and communication. Language constructs and expresses cultural diversity and social interaction. Learning to use language effectively enables learners to think and acquire knowledge, to express their identity, feelings and ideas, to interact with others and to manage their world. Language proficiency is central to learning across the curriculum as learning takes place through language.<sup>3</sup>

The above quotation is a given and we can all acknowledge and agree

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3 Department of Education (2005). National Curriculum Statement Grades 10 – 12. Languages: English Home Language, First Additional Language, Second Additional language. p.7.

with this – however the difficulty lies when the language that is generally employed is a second language to the learners. Therefore “language proficiency” does not come into play for the majority of South African learners, as the language that they are most proficient in, is not the language that is used as the medium to teach in. And as learning takes place through language, the ability of these learners to learn and develop to the utmost fullest is destroyed through this barrier of language.

In South Africa and other African countries like Tanzania and Somalia, indigenous languages are acknowledged as the languages of literacy in schools. Learners are by law allowed to be taught in an indigenous language as is specified by the Department of Education. However the reality of this in South Africa is that most schools insist on English being the choice of medium, and it is financially (and for many other reasons) impossible for schools to employ teachers who can teach learners in that any of their indigenous languages. The schools feel that they need to maintain a sense of uniformity and it is their choice to do so. In addition to this English is seen and acknowledged as the language of commerce, industry and government throughout the world and therefore a thorough understanding of the language is seen as of vital importance and of value to any society in the greater scheme of things. And it is therefore practical for schools to emphasize the importance of learners and therefore society as a whole to form part of a bigger picture – global uniformity, as this will help in terms of further communication, job opportunities and the like. And the need to form part of a global community in terms of communication and language is emphasized even more so in some countries in Africa like Kenya, where the only mode of language employed in schools is English.<sup>4</sup>

“The reluctance to adopt indigenous languages as the medium of school literacy in Kenya must be seen as being based mainly on economic and ideological considerations...”<sup>5</sup> Kenya and other countries in Africa have made it their fundamental decision that English will be used as a linguistic medium and the language to be used throughout education and schooling. As with many African countries, poverty is an impinging element of everyday life for many of its people and therefore, the

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4 It is suggested that Kiswahili – the indigenous language of Kenya is at slight risk of dying out or being “ignored”. Mule, L. *Indigenous Languages in the School Curriculum: What happened to Kiswahili in Kenya?* In, *What is Indigenous Knowledge? Voices from the Academy*. Semali, L and Kincheloe, J (eds). Falmer Press, 1999.p.240.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 240.

government has decided that as a means to strengthen people's position and opportunities in life at a larger scale, the necessity and importance of English is stressed. They have in a sense made the language English an attainable goal for learners who are still young and at an age to pick up and accomplish English to the maximum, in the hope that it will open up opportunities both locally and globally for its people in the long run.

In South Africa we officially acknowledge 11 different languages.<sup>6</sup> These are further divided up into the following three levels: Home Language, First Additional Language and Second Additional Language. There are also 13 non-official languages as mentioned in the National Curriculum Statement Grades ten to twelve – Learning Programme Guideline.<sup>7</sup>

The reason why English is the main medium of instruction throughout schools in South Africa is due to the Language Standardisation Policy (July 2001), which emphasizes the need for uniformity. *The Language in Education Policy* and *The Norms and Standards for Languages* stress that all learners must obtain schooling in at least two official languages to the end of grade 12. However the predominant language here is still English.

The Department of Education's Languages in Education Policy promotes additive multilingualism. This means that learners must learn additional languages while maintaining and developing their home language(s) at a high level. Additive multilingualism makes it possible for learners to transfer skills, such as reading, writing and speaking, from the language in which they are most proficient to their additional languages. Wherever possible, learners' home language(s) should be used for learning and teaching.<sup>8</sup>

Multilingualism is definitely a useful aim for learners and educators to have and it would be a great skill to be able to transfer reading writing and speaking from one language to another – the opportunities that this type of skill opens up are numerous. This paper will not be exploring the issue of multilingualism but it is important to keep this aspect in mind in terms of languages in the school environment. We know that it is generally due to our past and the unfair use of language as a tool of oppression, that most black South Africans were forced to learn English

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6 These languages are officially acknowledged in the NCS and are endorsed by the Pan South African Language Board (PANSALB).

7 DoE (2005). National Curriculum Statement Grades 10 – 12. p. 2.

8 Ibid., p. 8

and yet white South Africans did not have to learn an African language. And ironically enough, despite the unfair nature of this, these victims are still victimized and disadvantaged in a sense today, as even though they are the ones who are multilingual, through this they are placed second in a repeated fashion in terms of their literacy levels of the language – they may be able to understand and speak the language, but when it comes to writing, reading and teaching in the language they are ill-equipped. Is this not a repeated form of oppression?

The last sentence of the quote above is of interest as it aims at learners ‘wherever possible’ to be taught in their home language. This is definitely not the case for many learners and educators in South Africa. Most schools employ English, as the mode for learning and teaching and this is not the predominant home language for most, it is a noble aim and suggestion, but rather impractical.

Therefore this paper aims at providing suggestions and means of improving these learners (educators) literacy levels and their English language competency skills and development. These ideas can then be incorporated and adjusted to fit other History classroom situations with similar language difficulties.

### *Recommendations on how to move forward*

In light of this context, ideas around language and South Africa’s language History, this paper will provide examples of problems encountered with the previously mentioned ACE students and therein will look at some of the solutions that were made to improve their understanding and growth in English as a medium of instruction to teach History based on their experiences.

If we break down the situation into its “rawest” form we are faced with the issue of second language educators (who through the context of the ACE course become learners/students as well), who have to teach the subject History in English. Firstly History is a very demanding subject – it is demanding in terms of concepts, vocabulary, perspectives, varying interpretations and fitting facts into a chronological order to name a few. History requires a great deal of theoretical understanding, which is done through debating issues in one’s head – so to say. However when the issue of now relaying this understanding in a language that you are less

equipped in or have not mastered, it becomes very possible for the gist of an argument, or the crux of an event to become distorted, confused and completely incorrect. This dilemma must also be taken into the ACE students teaching environment: an overcrowded classroom, few facilities, very little resources, and less support structures than most affluent schools, and of course time constraints.

At the same time it is an expected outcome and role of an History educator to provide “Human rights, inclusively, environmental and social justice”<sup>9</sup> within a classroom, and therefore the means of creating a good learning environment that is aimed at building up language inclusively this will aid in the “special educational, social, emotional, spiritual and physical needs of learners [...] through the design and development of appropriate learning programmes”<sup>10</sup>

To avoid the teaching process from becoming something that is “just a demanding job”, something that is stressful and difficult at the best of times – we need to find ways to support these situations that are pertinent to South African schools, to provide structures and methods to aid in the learning of History, where there is still passion and excitement and a will to learn and develop for a better future. How can these educators incorporate English and the learning of language into their teaching regime, without creating a sense of overkill or frustration? How can we create a deeper understanding of English in terms of the study of History, and to get learners to aim a little bit higher?, especially since:

In history we are dependent to quite an exceptional degree on ordinary language as our medium of communication. History, more than any other school subject, depends upon literacy in its pupils as a prerequisite to success, and increased literacy is perhaps its most important by-product.<sup>11</sup>

### *The language of History*

In this context, we need to create teachers of both History and language, and more importantly in this particular context, teachers of the language of History. Yes, History has in a sense a particular language,

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9 Department of Education. National Curriculum Statement (Grades 10-12). Guidelines for Learning Programmes – History, 2002. p. 9.

10 Ibid. p. 9.

11 T. Haydn, J. Arthur and M. Hunt. *Learning to teach History in the secondary school: A Companion to School Experience*. Routledge/Falmer Publishers, 2001. p. 70.

both at a surface level and in a broader sense. An example of this is the use of sources when teaching History. If an educator is using an old historical document to teach, the language present in the document, may be of an older form of English, and therefore may prove to be daunting and unable to understand – this will definitely be the case for second language learners. This language activity becomes problematic by the inclusion of an “old fashioned” or unusual language. A way around this would be to “translate” the document for your learners, in the hope that the true essence of the document is not lost, or to provide a glossary or word list. By supporting and encouraging teachers to become equipped in correcting and aiding language and History together, linguistically huge improvements can be made.

Teachers need to be aware of the role of language development in their History teaching and develop [...] linguistic skills in tandem with their historical skills, so that [learners] are not penalized when the level of their English skills is lower than that of their History skills.<sup>12</sup>

This is important as one must not create a situation where these learners become “doubly abused”, in that they are inefficient in the English language, and through this they should not also be in a situation where they battle with Historical understanding, and historical developmental skills.

Lucy Mule in her study of Kiswahili in Kenya, as a “dying” language in terms of a medium of instruction not used within schools emphasizes what she sees as a need to focus on creating a situation where learners understand the crux of the History being taught, and not to dwell too much on grammar.

More emphasis needs to be laid on students’ understanding of content rather than on flawless mastery of the language. As curriculum designers, implementers and examiners, teachers should emphasize the content and methodology that would speak to the learner’s environment. For instance, a teacher of English should move away from obsessing over the technical aspects of grammar to an emphasis on the creativity of ideas expressed in student created texts.<sup>13</sup>

This is of course debatable in that some people feel that it is imperative

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12 S. Alston. *History and Language*. In *Teaching History* 81, October 1995. The Historical Association, 1995. p. 10.

13 L. Mule. *Indigenous languages in the School Curriculum: What happened to Kiswahili in Kenya? In What is indigenous Knowledge? Voices from the Academy*. Ladislaus Semali and Joe Kincheloe (eds). Falmer Press, 1999.p. 239.



to concentrate on grammar just as much as the content involved, and that to ignore this issue can be seen as complacency. Many History educators find this situation frustrating and feel that it is not their job to be correcting grammar, that that is the job of the English teacher. What this paper is proposing is to create a balance and to be reminded that over and above what specialization you are involved in, or what subject you teach you are ultimately an educator and that you should be aiding and helping learners in any way that you deem possible under your circumstances. So it is understandable that due to time constraints and other disabling commitments – the act of correcting spelling, grammar and sentence structure can become a hindrance and therefore can lead to teachers ignoring this issue altogether. And this is a situation that should be avoided at all costs as it is detrimental to the learners. Teachers are in a position of power in the sense that they can still decide how to teach and what to teach to a degree, and if they are irritated and frustrated by their learners a hazardous environment will be created which will in effect be negative and damaging for many parties.

As mentioned earlier, an easy and effective way of increasing learner's vocabulary, especially with regards to terminology and the language of History is to provide glossaries for the learners. This can be done on a weekly basis, where your learners receive word lists relating to the section they are learning about, or can be done on approaching a new section, where a simple word list is provided before starting the section. A project can be set up in the class, whereby as a section unfolds learners are to jot down on a list (this can be a piece of cardboard or paper stuck up at the front of the classroom) words that they don't understand or don't have a meaning for, and these words can then be taught and learnt. As can be seen this is not a huge process, and will be a part of the whole learning process of that particular topic. The benefits are enormous and very little time is wasted. It provides a good understanding and springboard for a new section/topic as well.

Building up a good strong vocabulary is very important both in terms of the subject History and as an element of becoming literate. This perseverance will reap bigger rewards as a whole and is not specific to the subject History only. The ACE students provide a case study emblematic of this. On discussion with these students they have remarked how much this strategy has helped them overall, and how they can see an

improvement within themselves and their learners and moreover how other educators in their environments now come to them for help and advice. This is the type of learning environment that we as educators should all be aiming to create, where knowledge and skills and values can be passed on and taught to others.

...historical understanding is not possible without a command of historical vocabulary. Others argue that history poses no specialist language since it is a subject closely related to human experience; the language register of history is simply ‘intellectual lumber,’ which the students pick up along the way since the language is always encountered in specific historic contexts, which support the generation of meanings.<sup>14</sup>

Another example of improving language is to do word studies with “readings” and “texts” given to learners – so that not only is the historical content being taught, discussed and learnt, but contextual study is being carried out as well. Learners can once again do word studies, where they can write on the page in the column words that they don’t understand, another way of doing this is to underline words and to persuade learners to get into the routine of doing this. Also a good idea is to invest in a classroom dictionary, so that when learners approach words that they don’t understand they have the opportunity to look the word/s up, and therefore will form part of the learning process.

Another useful suggestion is to provide and develop translation lists for and with your second language learners, this can be built on and a simple dictionary can be created. See Appendix A for examples of words that would be beneficial to have translated into African languages suitable for your learners. This will be especially useful with regards to difficult historical terminology. It will also save time, as in some cases it is simply a matter of translating a word than that of describing or explaining the meaning in English. This forms part of an educator’s role of “Managing diversity”.

Within each History class there will be variations in the ways that learners learn, the speed of their learning and the levels of attainment they achieve. This also includes barriers to learning that some of them might be experiencing. Because of this, there is a need for differentiated teaching and learning strategies in all classrooms, to match learning opportunities to learning needs of learners.<sup>15</sup>

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14 Husbands, Chris. *What is History teaching? Language, ideas and meaning in learning about the past.* Open University Press, 1996.p. 30.

15 Department of Education. *National Curriculum Statement (Grades 10-12). Guidelines for Learning*

### *Reading, Writing and Talking*

How can educators empower learners to read Historical texts? From conversations with teachers it is agreed that students/learners have an overwhelming fear of long “readings” and historical texts, they become a huge barrier and obstruction to climb. This fear is created before even entering into the text and interacting with it. A simple way of creating an environment that welcomes texts and historical reading must be formed. By creating a structure or a process that can be created for learners to follow. A good manageable way is to stress annotation, and to get learners into a habit of annotating texts. Use the margins to scribble notes and questions about the text. Relate information to previously learnt work and draw parallels. Provide a way for students/learners to approach long texts.

This also takes in account the importance of developing summarizing skills with learners/students. This is a life skill and can be used in many other fields. History learners must be taught by a means of reading historical texts and then summarizing what has been read or learnt. Three simple steps could be:

1. Read through text, and underline any confusing words or words that you can associate no meaning to.
2. “Guesstimate” underlined words and use a dictionary to look up words.
3. Read through text once more, and annotate the text and lastly
4. Summarize what you have learnt or can remember

If this becomes a process that is taken seriously and is applied persistently throughout the History classroom, it can greatly improve, not only historical understanding, language and literacy, but is also providing the learners with valuable skills that can be used in relation to other subjects and fields. This is a strategy that can be monitored by the teacher for a while and then as the learners become more comfortable with the process, it can become an exercise that the learners employ on their own, with possible weekly or monthly check ups.

These are a few suggestions towards closing the divide on literacy and historical understanding. As simplistic or base as they may seem, the positive effects can be large. Hopefully this has created a spring-board

for other educators to “take off” from, and adapt.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**HISTORY VOCABULARLY – examples**

**A**

Abolitionist  
Absolute power  
Amnesty  
Anthropology  
Archeology  
Aristocracy  
Assembly  
Autocracy  
Affluent

**B**

Bourgeois  
Bureaucracy  
Boycott

**C**

Capitalism  
Charter  
Capital  
Colonialism  
Communism  
Cabinet  
Civil rights  
Commerce  
Conquer

**D**

Discrimination  
Dictator  
Demographer

**E**

Emancipate

**F**

Feudal  
Free world  
Fascism  
Feminist

**H**

Hypothesis

**I**

Impeach  
Imperialism

Indentured

**L**

Labor union  
Laissez faire  
League of Nations

**M**

Mandate  
Mercantilism  
Magistrate  
Migratory farming

Merchant

Minority

**N**

Neutrality  
Nationalism

**O**

Oligarchy  
Orient

**P**

Propaganda  
Pacifists  
Patriotism

**R**

Radical  
Refugee  
Radicals  
Revolution

**S**

Sanction  
Serf  
Socialist  
Sovereignty  
Segregate

**T**

Totalitarian  
Treason  
Tyrant  
Tenement

**U**

Unanimous  
Unconstitutional

**V**

Viceroy

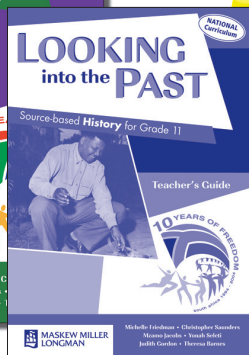
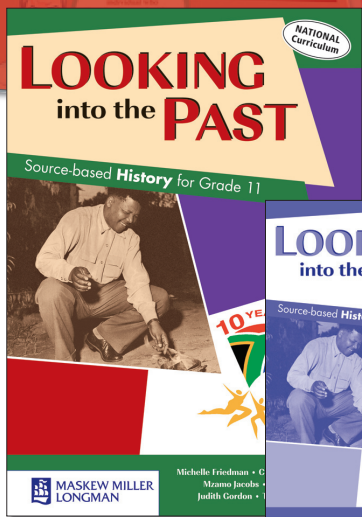
**W**

Watershed

# Looking into the Past

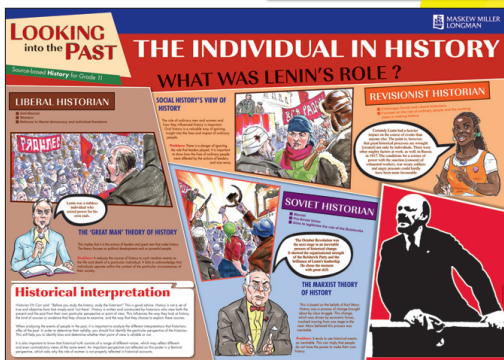
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