

REPORT ON THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE
TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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The importance of English in many parts of the world today was reinforced at the Fourth International Conference on the Teaching of English. Held at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, May 11-16, 1986, this conference drew participants from five continents (30 countries), including African, Asian and Caribbean countries.

Judiciously, the organisers were able to group the more than 250 presentations under 10 stands: Multicultural, ESL and EFL Strand; Response To Literature; Early Reading and Writing; Computing; Research; Politics and Philosophy; Language; Assessment and Evaluation; and Teacher Education and Curricular Change Strand. Panel discussions, workshops and papers were presented under each strand simultaneously; in most cases there was more than one presentation under each strand at a given time.

Presupposed differences among different countries, and more specifically between teaching English to native speakers of English and teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language, were reflected in the theme of the conference: The Issues That Divide Us. Discussions which emerged during the Conference, however, tended to highlight common aspects of some of the experiences rather than the differences. It would not be possible to report on all the sessions, since the numerous presentations and the absence of plenary sessions where summaries of the different discussions were given limited one's access to only a minority of the discussion. This report will therefore, focus on issues arising from some of the discussions in which I participated. These issues will be discussed

under the following themes: The Use of English as a Medium of Instruction, The Teaching of English as Second Language, Teaching Writing, Reading at the Post-Primary Level, and the Training of Teachers of English.

Use of English As A Medium of Instruction

Two presentations under this theme highlighted the practical problems of using English as an instructional medium in Multi-lingual countries. One presentation, "Experience of Seychelles: Significant Advantages of Using the L₁ (Creole) As An Initial Instructional Medium" (J. Fox, Seychelles), emphasised the need to provide pupils with a firm background in their first language before switching to English as the medium of instruction. Citing the Seychelles experiment, this presentation maintained that it is not the amount of exposure to English that determines pupils' performance in English, but the appropriacy of the English programme.

"The Search For An Additive Relationship Between English and the Mother Tongue: The Nigerian Experience" (R. Omojuwa, Nigeria), the other presentation, reinforced the importance of using the pupils' first language as an instructional medium before switching to English. In the Nigerian experiment the Nigerian languages are being phased out gradually, subject by subject, and replaced by English, rather than abruptly changing from Nigerian languages to English. As both experiments are still continuing, the long term effects of each policy remains to be seen. Tanzania, however, might draw some useful lessons from both experiments by investigating them further. Related to these two discussions is the issue of Second Language Teaching of English.

Teaching Writing Skills

Courses on writing skills for University students are a common feature of most colleges and universities in North America, with the teaching of writing gaining a programmatic or departmental status at many of these colleges and universities. This was reflected in the numerous presentations on teaching writing at the post-secondary school level. It would appear then that writing is as important an issue for teachers of native speakers of English as it is for teachers of English as a Second or Foreign Language. Problems of grammar are not restricted to second and foreign language learners of English, as a number of the presentations cited grammatical correctness as one of the difficulties faced by some of their students. Focus, however, was on writing as a process rather than as a product. Titles of some of these presentations include: "A Reading/Writing Process Workshop", "Writing and Reading Processes in a Workshop", "The Changing Role of The Teacher During the Writing Process", "A Closer Look At Written Fluency: Process and Product", "The Why of Writing: Emotions and the Writing Process".

Encouraging students to write about their own experiences and feelings was suggested as a means of putting students at ease, so they would feel free to express themselves as they wish. This was justified in the presentation "Remedial Writing For Post-Secondary Students: Diagnostics, Instruction and Expectations" (F. Davis, Canada) which also emphasised the importance of indicating to students their errors after their first draft, providing them with remedial work, then requiring them to re-write the essay as a means of helping them to improve their writing ability.

Teaching English As A Second Language

Several issues emerged under this theme. The question of the purpose for teaching English in ESL situations was raised in the presentation "Some Issues In the Study of English As A School Subject and University Level Literary Studies" (C. Awonuga, Nigeria). It was contended that the purpose for Teaching English is not clearly defined in the ESL situation and proposed that the starting point be the Study of Register, i.e. the use of carefully selected graded register samples as the basis for comprehension work.

Another presentation "Received Pronunciation and the Teaching of English in Commonwealth Countries" (P. Nihilani, Singapore) questioned the appropriacy of Received Pronunciation as the model for learners of English in these countries. Focus on supra-segmentals as opposed to segmentals was felt to be more useful and it was thus recommended that a course on Spoken English should be concerned with diction and dramatics rather than exact phonetic quality of sounds.

"Problems of Literature Teaching in India" (S.K.Das, India) raised a different type of problem. Concern was expressed that some students tend to use a lot of cliches and inappropriate **idioms** in their writing. Because these students are exposed to a lot of English Literature and encouraged to memorise sections of the works, they tend to adopt many of the cliches they encounter into their writing.

All three of the above discussions pivot around the question 'why do we teach English?' This question is profound in that it relates to specific uses to which students are expected to put English. Failure to clearly define these uses, as can be seen in the case of countries like Tanzania (more specifically at the primary and secondary school levels) can result in focusing on aspects of language which are not particularly useful in the socio-linguistic context of the society, while neglecting other more useful areas. The latter issue relates to writing skills, which will be discussed in the next section.

A slightly different approach was suggested in the workshop "Writing Across The Curriculum: One Shot Workshops" (C. Schryer, Canada). This presentation suggested that it is inappropriate for teachers to assume the role of 'Gatekeeper of language', and that there should be a clear distinction between process and product. The technique of going into the subject classroom, e.g. History, Biology, etc., to deal with problems students encounter in writing for that subject, and promotion of dialogue between lecturer and students were discussed. Emphasis was placed on the aspect of having students read and judge each others work.

Useful lessons to be drawn from the discussions on writing include the importance of taking students through the process of writing, from brainstorming to generate ideas, to re-writing the first draft after receiving comments from the tutor. One problem which may mitigate against this process is the lack of time to go through this procedure with large numbers of students. However, since close monitoring of students' work is an important component of helping students improve their writing skills, ways of dealing with this must be sought. Linked to the discussion of writing is the question of reading skills, since much of the information students write about will be gained through reading.

Reading At The Post-Primary School Level

Presentations on Reading skills fell under several different strands, Response To Literature being the most common one. It would appear from the presentations that Reading is coterminous with Literature (i.e. Literary writings). A useful workshop presented under the Response To Literature Strand, "Response To Literature: An Active Process" (J. Thompson, Australia), was concerned with helping students to view reading which they do as experiences in which they are participating as observers. Focus was on helping students to

become familiar with the topic, unfolding the story in parts so that they can predict what will follow, then discussing their impressions and feelings about what actually followed, as a useful technique for enabling students to become sharper and more efficient readers.

A different approach was suggested in the workshop "Designing And Implementing A Theme-Based College Reading Course" (B. Pacheo, U.S.A.). As the only presentation under the Response To Literature Strand which did not relate to literary works, this presentation focused on Reading Across Disciplines. Illustrating ways of presenting a vast range of activities on a given text and using different types of text on the same theme, the presenter maintained that the more things the students do with the text, the better able they are to handle texts independently.

The pedagogic implications of both presentations for the Tanzanian context must be stressed. Active reading is an important strategy for gaining maximum understanding from texts and thus should be introduced at the secondary school level and extended in post-secondary education. Implicit in all the above discussions are issues which should be considered in the preparation of teachers of English. There was, however, one strand devoted specifically to this issue, and this will be the topic of the next section.

Training Teachers of English

Teaching writing was also discussed within the context of Teacher Training and Curricular Change in a panel discussion - "National Writing As An Agent For Change". Emphasis was placed on teachers being the source of information about teaching, i.e. teachers teach each other. It was also suggested that teachers who teach writing must be writers themselves, as they will become more sensitive to the process through which their students go when attempting to write.

Another issue which emerged related to the preparation of teachers. In the presentation "Do English Studies Courses Prepare Students To Teach English?" (E. Wright, England), the appropriacy of a conventional degree in English from a British University or College for prospective teachers of English was questioned. Since a degree in English Studies is simply the study of Literature, it has been suggested that as teachers, these graduates lack, among other things, systematic knowledge on which to base their students' use of the language. It would appear, from the above observation, that universities in the Third World, like the University of Dar es Salaam, which provide courses about the language for prospective teachers of English, are in fact miles ahead of Britain in this regard.

Moreover, arguments against expecting students of Literature in English (without English) to teach English in the schools are strengthened, for if native speakers of English as Literature graduates are deemed to be ill-prepared for teaching English, what can be said about their counterparts for whom English is a second or foreign language?

Concluding Remarks

International dialogues in the world of English Teaching are important as they not only awaken awareness to the commonality of problems faced by teachers of English in different environments, but also provide a range of ideas from varied experiences which can be adapted to one's own situation in order to improve the teaching and learning of English. These type of dialogues can be seen as complementary to TESOL Conferences and other fora which bring together teachers of English as a Second or Foreign Language. The pedagogic usefulness of dialogues among language teachers cannot be ignored. What is clear from this conference is that teachers of English as a Second or Foreign Language can make important contributions to the world of English teaching.