

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 ORIENTATION

Owing to many far-reaching changes that have taken place in South Africa, there is an urgent need for a structured and cohesive approach to language education. Applied Linguistics is concerned with language-related problem areas, especially language teaching. The study of language practice is its special concern. Syllabus design is a central issue in Applied Linguistics and it is the subject of this study.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

English is the generally suggested lingua franca in South Africa (ANC, 1992:30), and it is the second language of an estimated 89,9% of the total South African population (Bull, 1990:3). There is little doubt that the importance of English as a gateway to the global village and an international information pool will increase in the years to come (Jeevanantham, 1993:169-181). However, research suggests that many South African pupils, as well as teachers of English are not proficient in English (Corstanje, 1986:16; Stoltz, 1985:100; Weimann, 1986:17; Ontong, 1988:141 and Domisse, 1990:3). All pupils in South Africa take English as a subject, but the majority of these pupils also have English as medium of instruction (MOI) in all their classes.

Almost 80% of the ex-Department of Education and Training (Department of Education and Training, 1992:247), or traditionally black schools, follow a language policy that brings about a change to English as MOI at the end of the fourth grade. A report of the ex-Department of Education and Training (1986:50) states that pupils who drop out from rural schools prematurely,

may do so partly because of the change to English as the medium of instruction, as they have difficulty in coping with English as medium. Domisse (1990:3) reports that English Second Language (ESL) learners who take English as a subject only also suffer from suspect proficiency in most English language skills.

The reasons for limited pupil proficiency are varied. Le Roux (1994:28) mentions socio-economic deprivation, socio-political instability and the lack of parent involvement. In addition, pupils often lack exposure to English outside the classroom, and they may have negative feelings about the English learning experience. This may partly be due to learning content that is irrelevant or over-used (De Villiers, 1991:162).

Stoltz (1985:100), Weimann (1986:17) and Ontong (1988:141) report that many teachers of English also have limited English proficiency. They ascribe this partly to inadequate teacher training, the inability of teachers to interpret syllabuses and their inability to implement techniques that improve proficiency. Trainee teachers come from school with suspect proficiency - this is proved by the 1993 matriculation results of the ex-Department of Education and Training that show that the highest pass rate in the eight previous regions of this department was 48,7% (Department of Education and Training, 1993). Ellis (1987:82-99) reports that training at post-matriculation level seems inadequate to improve English skills. Teachers who are incompetent in English produce pupils who are in turn, incompetent. Many teachers in South Africa are also poorly qualified. Almost 30% of ex-Department of Education and Training primary school teachers are described as 'unqualified', as they only have a Grade 10 (or lower) qualification and a two years' post-school qualification. A further 48% of ex-Department of Education and Training primary school teachers are considered 'qualified', but they have a Grade 12 (or lower) qualification plus two years' professional training. Thus almost 78% of all ex-Department of Education and Training primary school teachers do not possess a three- or four-year diploma or degree (Department of Education

and Training: 1992).

The Department of Education in South Africa proposed an Outcomes-based approach to education in 1996. This approach entails a process of working backwards from stated outcomes to develop learning programmes that enable learners to achieve these outcomes. The Outcomes-based approach to education necessitates the need for new syllabuses. A syllabus for English that supports the implementation of such an approach may make a contribution to English teaching in South Africa.

The syllabus is one of the most important document the ESL teacher receives, as it directs and supports classroom practice. If the syllabus provides structured and comprehensive support, teachers are likely to implement it with success. In this way, a syllabus can contribute substantially in encouraging second language acquisition (SLA).

There are many proposals for syllabuses that can assist SLA. One of these is a task-based approach to language and learning. Task-based approaches to language learning are meaning-focused and emphasise the interactive involvement of pupils in purposeful tasks that contribute to language learning. Such syllabuses have been implemented in contexts that are similar to the South African context (e.g. Hong Kong). As a task-based language syllabus has the potential of providing extensive support and guidance regarding classroom practice, it may assist teachers in managing teaching and learning effectively.

It is clear that ESL in the primary school in South Africa needs to be investigated in order to address the question of proficiency. In particular, the following problem areas need to be investigated:

- what are the factors that influence ESL in the primary school?
- how can a task-based syllabus be designed?
- what are the realities of the South African context?

Answers to these questions will enable the researcher to address the problem of a new syllabus for South African primary schools.

1.3 THE AIMS OF THE STUDY

The aims of this study are to:

- investigate the teaching and learning of ESL in the primary school;
- investigate current theories regarding syllabus design;
- investigate proposals for task-based syllabuses;
- analyse current language syllabuses;
- assess the present situation in South African primary schools;
- provide a framework for a task-based syllabus, and
- design a task-based syllabus for ESL in South African primary schools.

1.4 METHOD OF RESEARCH

The initial part of this study was carried out by means of a survey of the relevant literature. Recent developments in second language acquisition theory, syllabus design and task-based approaches to language syllabuses were studied. An analysis of various syllabuses from Scotland, the United States of America (Alabama and Alaska), Holland, Botswana, Australia and Hong Kong was undertaken to determine current trends in syllabus design. The unique circumstances in South Africa were then surveyed. A framework for a task-based language syllabus was then proposed, after which a core syllabus for ESL in South African primary schools was drawn up. Examples of how the syllabus can be implemented in a Grade 6 class were then provided.

1.5 PROGRAMME OF STUDY

In Chapter 2 an overview is provided of factors that are involved in the learning and teaching of English in the primary school. This is done in order to provide a sound theoretical basis for

the proposed syllabus.

Models of syllabus design are investigated in Chapter 3 to determine the generally accepted principles of syllabus design.

In Chapter 4 an investigation of various proposals for task-based language syllabuses is undertaken. This is done in order to identify aspects that may suit the South African situation best.

Syllabuses used in Scotland, the United States of America (Alabama and Alaska), Holland, Botswana, Australia and Hong Kong are analysed in Chapter 5. The aim is to ascertain to what extent task-based language syllabuses are used, and what they specify.

The South African situation is described in Chapter 6. Problems regarding learners, teachers and the teaching situation are reviewed.

Chapter 7 contains a synthesis of the preceding chapters and provides a framework for the proposed task-based syllabus.

In Chapter 8 a core task-based syllabus is proposed for the primary school in South Africa, and its implementation is illustrated.

Chapter 9 contains the conclusion, limitations of this study and recommendations for further research.