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OVERCOMING LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM IN EDUCATION:  
THE NEED FOR GOOD 'OLE' CURRICULUM

Paper by  
Dr David Zorc  
Senior Lecturer  
School of Australian Linguistics  
Darwin Institute of Technology  
AUSTRALIA

Singapore

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## OVERCOMING LINGUISTIC IMPERIALISM IN EDUCATION —

### THE NEED FOR GOOD 'OLE' CURRICULUM

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#### O. INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS.

While virtually all Southeast Asian nations have freed themselves from most forms of European political imperialism, vestiges in the economic and academic spheres remain to some extent, even nowadays. Much of this is quite understandable -- even necessary. For example, language use in these proceedings is the result of early British and later American expansionism and influence in world affairs and certainly not my birthright. Had I been born Tagalog or Tamil, I would not be addressing you here in my native language. Conversely, if the shape of world affairs had been different we might now be in the RRLC (Regional Russian Language Centre)...or the RGLC...RCLC...(one can let the imagination run wild!).

Let us note that national language development policies and economic constraints on textbook production have obligated governments to ignore their pluralistic societies and some of the basic educational requirements of linguistic minorities. However, this need not be the case since there are low-cost means which would allow teachers and pupils to carry on with certain essentials of own-language education (OLE).

The School of Australian Linguistics (SAL) was established for the training of Aboriginal and Islander people in a White-dominant, English-speaking country. The School has operated since 1974 on a very limited budget, and thus faces problems similar to those of Southeast Asian academic institutions. Nevertheless, numerous innovations have been made in linguistic and vernacular literacy education (e.g., Programmed Literacy and Breakthrough to Literacy Kits), so much so that teaching units have been requested by schools in Aboriginal communities, and were then received enthusiastically by students. Furthermore, staff of the School<sup>1</sup> have found that training in linguistics has initiated or sharpened the students' appreciation of European scientific principles, practices and thought, such that SAL is to some degree a "finishing school" for Aboriginal educators and leaders as well as the intended bilingual literacy workers it was set up to train.

This paper stresses the importance and value of recognising minority languages in both teacher education and the classroom, especially the teaching of vernacular literacy (and noting its rapid transfer to another language), and summarises some of the methods employed in doing this. There are also numerous benefits of incorporating own-language analysis (or OLE) as a means of introducing a student to scientific thinking [this latter point will be covered in more detail in my workshop on "the Integration of Language Analysis as an Introduction to Science"].

**1. AXIOM 'ALL EDUCATION IS LANGUAGE EDUCATION' -- COROLLARY 'AWARENESS OF LANGUAGE ASSISTS THE EDUCATION PROCESS'**

Almost all education takes place through the medium of language. With the exception of "see and do learning", i.e. demonstration and imitation, teachers give the bulk of their lessons orally, pupils listen (and at advanced stages take notes), complete tests and questionnaires, or respond to questions either verbally or in writing. Books and signs are in the written medium and pervade the classroom atmosphere. Whether one is teaching music in the first grade or lecturing on nuclear physics in graduate school, a good part of each lesson is concerned with language.

If the medium of instruction is not clearly understood, it is no longer an issue that the subject matter may be too difficult -- the lesson will not be learnt because of the linguistic obstacles rather than the intelligence of the student or the complexity of the material.

While certain subjects could theoretically be taught entirely by illustration and example (e.g., physical education, pottery, or cooking), few in practice really are. However, if, as in Aboriginal Australia, all traditional education is of the see and do type, then oral-aural methods run into serious sociological conflict. Students have to be taught how to learn effectively via the "lecture method".

Students cannot be expected to perform at a level higher than their teacher's expectations. If, for whatever reason -- and let us be honest, disillusionment, bigotry, or bitterness are not always left outside the classroom door -- a teacher's expectations of students are low, (s)he will not produce levels of achievement any higher than the standard set. Here another form of imperialism can come into play. However, teachers from within the culture should be sensitive to their pupils' background and worldview and guide them with respect and understanding.

These points have important and far-reaching implications for the curriculum in the training of teachers as well as the entire educational system. If it is agreed that language is the real core thread throughout the curriculum, what do teachers need to know about it? What kinds of patterns of language or discourse do teachers need to learn in order to master their various curriculum areas and communicate effectively? Certain elements of applied linguistics must be understood by each and every teacher. [See, for example, Allen & Pit Corder 1974 for several practical applications of linguistics to teaching.] Not abstruse and turgid areas of syntactic theory, but everyday concerns of communication (including socio-linguistics), comprehension and meaning (semantics), appropriateness of a lesson and its subject matter (discourse).

The training and subsequent appointment of first-language teachers for OLE is an important first step towards overcoming linguistic imperialism in the academic sphere. Australia is aiming at qualifying at least 1000 Aboriginal teachers for Aboriginal classrooms by 1990. SAL has been co-operating to this end with its neighbour, Batchelor College, which has an Aboriginal teacher training program. OLE requires that each teacher must read and write his/her own vernacular and be able to apply various curriculum areas to the native language. For example, such a teacher must be sensitive to language differences for ESL classes and aware of gross differences between the conceptual world of the native culture and the target of the overall educational system (e.g., whether a butterfly is considered a bird or an insect? a whale an animal or a fish? sickness the result of germs or a spell?, etc.).

It is such teachers that will allow for a cost-effective OLE program at the grass-roots level. While dealing with the required core curricula they can guide the pupils to a better understanding of the educational goals through the medium of an approved (or even ad hoc) bilingual/bicultural program. Besides the various altruistic reasons supplied by some proponents of bilingual education, one stated purpose is that initial training in the native language ultimately leads to better learning of the target language. With teachers capable of translating the curriculum into culturally (if not linguistically) appropriate terms for the pupils to comprehend, there should be greater transfer in the education process for members of linguistic minorities. Two important areas are taken up below.

## 2. AXIOM 'A CHILD LEARNS TO READ ONLY ONCE' - COROLLARY 'IT SHOULD BE IN A LANGUAGE (S)HE ACTUALLY SPEAKS'

Despite the admonition of Gudschinsky (1973:6) that a child learns to read only once and that (s)he can only do it in a language (s)he understands, education in the vernacular has been given precious little support. Can you bring yourself back to your first attempts at reading? Was it in a language you spoke? If so, it was hard enough. If not, your skills are a testament to your perseverance or that of your teacher(s)!

One glaring illustration. Imagine that Hitler had been successful in his plans. All of our children would now be required to learn to read German, even if they could not speak it. If this thought is frightening, then reflect with some sympathy on those of your children who do not speak the national language, yet must make their first faltering steps in literacy within that medium.

It is not my purpose here to detail various literacy methods, but the following points summarising the SAL experience are noteworthy:

(1) No literacy method is equipped to handle all languages. What may work for Tagalog may not work for Anindilyakwa<sup>2</sup> -- what succeeds for English may fail for Indonesian, and/or vice versa. All too often we have seen the baby thrown out with the bathwater as one fad or another has been accommodated in a "new" curriculum.

(2) Motivation, as in all education, is essential to the full success of a reading program. The need and/or desire to read should not be taken for granted. In pre-literate societies, be they urban ghettos or the backwoods, the lack of motivation can be the biggest detriment to what should be a smashingly successful literacy program. If this is the case, motivational material has to be built into the curriculum.

(3) Cultural considerations can be important. If one is dealing with a pre-literate society, there will be no reinforcement of reading (or other academic skills for that matter) outside of the classroom and the generational gap could be exacerbated. In these situations, adult education is as necessary as primary schooling.

(4) An eclectic program is more likely to succeed than adherence to any single theoretical point of view. There is something of value in every reading method or theory [see Botel & Dawkins 1973, Gudschinsky 1973, Mackay et alii 1978, Stubbs 1980, Zorc 1969, 1976, 1982a]. A sensible approach will probably have to rely on such diverse inputs as:

-programming of high frequency, language-specific elements (e.g. [t] may be an "important" sound to a language since it occurs in pronouns and function words so that many basic/simple sentences are constructed around it)

-sight words (important words that are recognised by shape rather than sound -- these are crucial when a language has long words)

-syllable recognition and drill

-phonetics/phonics (to insure that sound:symbol correspondences have been mastered -- an excellent method for review and re-inforcement wherein a phonetic chart can be drawn and related to the orthography in use:

b	d	j	g
p	t	c	k
m	n	ny	ng)

-error analysis (using the mistakes made to direct future lessons)

-the use of writing as a means of reinforcing reading (although successful in many countries, this tactic is difficult to employ if shyness of students is a cultural norm)

-flashcards [including the audio-visual variety (such as the Bell & Howell Language Master System)]

-reading games (matching word cards with pictures, putting words into sentences as in the Breakthrough to Literacy method, Word Bingo, puzzles)



3. AXIOMS 'LINGUISTICS IS A SCIENCE' and 'EVERYONE HAS A LANGUAGE' -  
COROLLARY 'AN IDEAL INTRODUCTION TO SCIENTIFIC THINKING IS THROUGH OWN  
LANGUAGE ANALYSIS'

Science can best be learned via a thorough understanding of both data and theory - own language data is inbuilt and learned from infancy, and scientific foundations are easily and readily built upon this.

Even if you don't understand a language, certain elements of analysis can stand out quite clearly. For example, listen to/read the following data:

wa:ngalili 'to the house'

wa:ngakurru 'through the house'

wa:ngangura 'in the house'

wa:nganguru 'from the house'

What is going on? Can you hear/see some part recurring? What is happening to that part? Even if you are somewhat mystified by the above data from the Gumatj (Yolngu-Matha) language of northeast Arnhemland (Australia), let me assure you that a native speaker would not be, and could readily identify the stem (wa:nga) and the different suffixes (-lili, -kurru, etc.) with only a small amount of reflection. This is so because the language is known and the data built in. Such analysis would not normally be a part of everyday Aboriginal life, but is indeed a prerequisite for the kind of scientific thinking that White Australian education is trying to teach.

OLE can be dedicated to practically every level of linguistics. The following examples from English which have parallels in OLE are but a few of many possible areas for study and analysis:

-sounds [phonology] minimal pairs (bit::pit, bit::bid, bid::bed)

-sounds [phonetics] similar ways of making sounds (b:p:m, g:k:ng)  
slight differences (p<sup>h</sup>it::sp<sup>h</sup>it)

-word bits [morphology] stems vs affixes (un/friend/li/ness)

- regularities (talk-ed::walk-ed, home-s::farm-s)
- irregularities (good::best, go::went, child::children)
- part of speech isolation of nouns, verbs, adjectives, pronouns
- grammar [syntax] agreement (I::am, John::he, Jill::she)
- meaning [semantics] synonyms (large::huge), antonyms (heavy::light),  
idioms (hit the road), homonyms (well<sub>1</sub>::well<sub>2</sub>)
- context [discourse] (He ran into the house.../with his car/,/when he  
was scared/,/in the middle of the desert/)
- culture Overtones of words in different speech levels  
(intestinal fortitude::guts, toilet::bathroom)

4. CONCLUSIONS AND/OR DIRECTIONS?

All of the above observations are intended to raise some important soul-searching questions amongst Southeast Asian national education bodies. It would be a shame if European imperialism has merely been replaced by a home-spun variety. By incorporating OLE in the curricula the following benefits can be gained:

- demonstrated respect and understanding for national ethnic minorities
- implementation of a bilingually/biculturally sensitive program
- better transfer to the mainstream educational impetus in the areas of literacy and science
- more cost-effective programs under the authority of local teachers and the direction of regionalised school bureaus, viz: most of the OLE teaching materials can be generated as a cooperative effort between students and teachers (and re-used in subsequent years) and need not be of expensive textbook quality.

## NOTES.

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<sup>2</sup> Anindilyakwa is one of many complex (polysynthetic) languages spoken by Australian Aborigines. Most words are built up of several grammatical affixes and are therefore quite long. Needless to say, a primer for these languages could not be based on short, simple words (which practically do not exist) and a literacy method which required pupils to write first what they later would read would be doomed to failure.

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