FOSSILIZATION IN ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE MEDIUM

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I'm going to be talking about the dire effects of fossilization in the English of second language learners in black education. My focus is not on errors themselves- particular features of grammar, idiom or pronunciation that become fossilized in the more strongly flavoured dialects of African English. Instead I'll be concerned with the nature of fossilization, how serious it is in black education; what circumstances produce it, and finally how to deal with it. So it's in the final two that my purpose lies, which is to prompt research that will revitalize the fossil English that is responsible for so much of the educational disadvantage that disturbs us all.

Let's first remind ourselves of the extent of this disadvantage. You all know that a normal distribution curve is the spread of results you get if you measure a large group of subjects using a suitable measuring instrument. If you don't get a normal distribution curve there's something wrong – wrong with your subjects or wrong with your test. If you do get one you're entitled to believe that both test and testees are fine.

The National Senior Certificate results for English 2nd language higher grade produce a normal distribution curve: there are a few A's and a few H's, with numbers swelling progressively from both ends towards the largest group around the average for the exam, which was 43%.
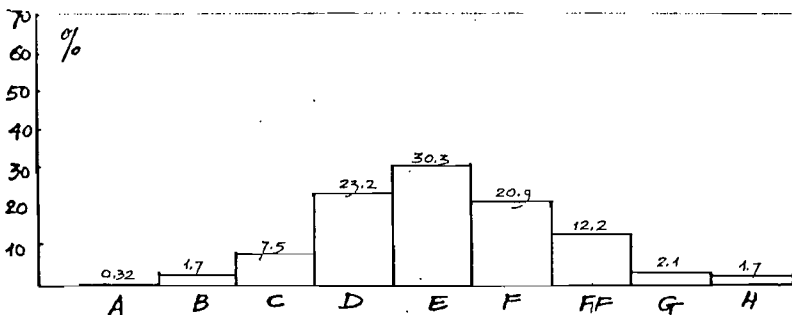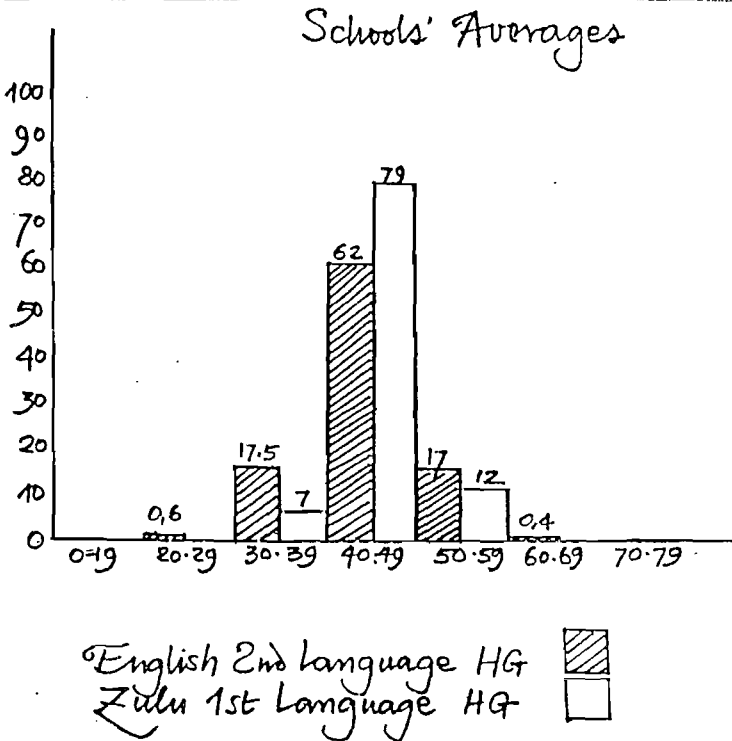

Figure 1: NSC English 2nd Language HG 1991

This average was one of the highest in any subject in the 1991 NSC. We are therefore likely to say that our Std 10 pupils are healthy in English 2nd language and that the examination is a good test of their ability in English. I'll come back to this.

First let's look at another normal distribution curve relating to this very same examination: this time the spread of school averages.

Figure 2:

Schools' Averages

Again it's a good-looking spread - from the low 20 percents through a majority in the 40's, reducing to 0,4% in the 60's - and there are even two schools with 78%.

The only thing wrong with it is that it shouldn't be like that. On the same graph the Zulu school averages span only three symbols, not six. In the Transvaal Education Department a school is doing well in a language if it gets 2 percent above the Tranvaal average; and it needs a new English teacher if its average is 2 percent below the TED average.

The reason is that every school attracts a random sample of pupils whose language ability is very much like that of the total pool of pupils attending all schools in the province. The standard deviation of school averages is less than one percent in the case of provincial language results. It is nearly 8 percent in the DET.

A spread of nearly 50% in school averages means that the DET English exam is not a test of individual candidates, despite the very persuasive distribution curve of individual scores. It is a test of schools and of teachers. And it means that a black schoolchild's scholastic prowess is determined by the school that fate or his parents' fortune happen to land him in - not on his own aptitude.
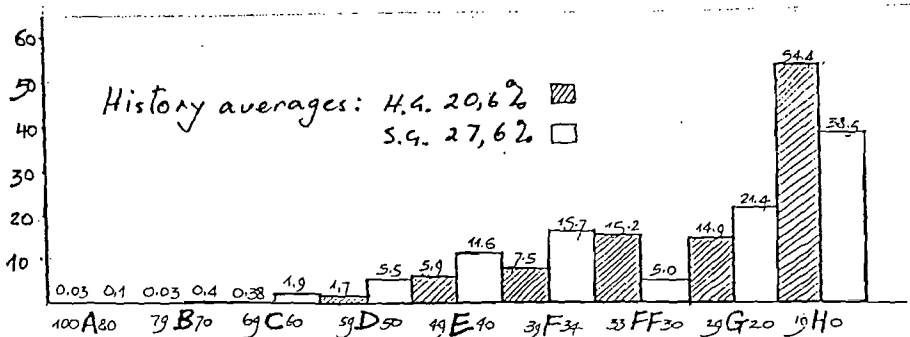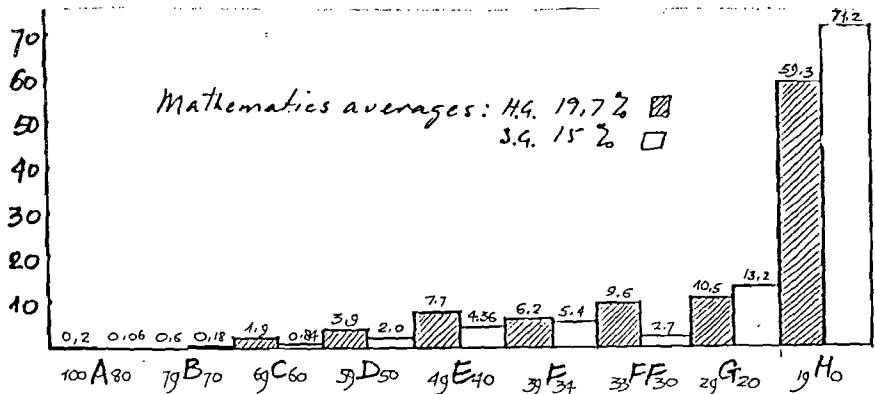
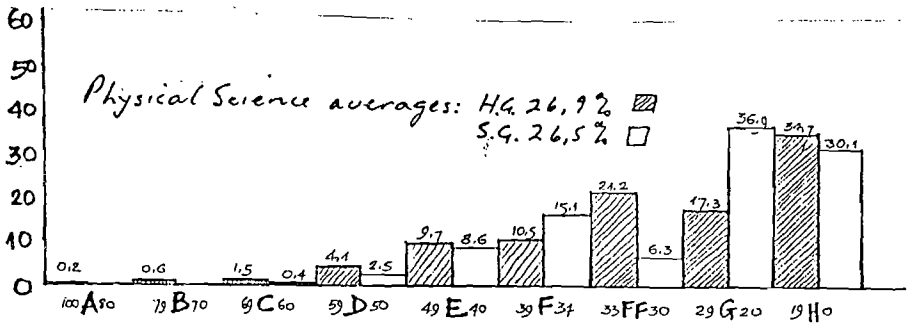The overall English results are misleading in another way too. They say that the English of black pupils is adequate. That's what a 43% average means here.

But - adequate for what?

Perhaps adequate in comparison with second language candidates in provincial schools - Afrikaans speaking pupils learning English as a second language, say.

But not adequate as the medium through which learning should take place across the curriculum.

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To illustrate this let me show you some results in the 1991 NSC which do not produce a normal distribution curve: Physical Science, Mathematics and, in case you doubt the role of language in success in these two subjects, History as well.

Physical Science averages: H.G. 26,9% ▨ S.G. 26,5% ☐

Mathematics averages: H.G. 19,7% ▨ S.G. 15% ☐

History averages: H.G. 20,6% ▨ S.G. 27,6% ☐

In these subjects more than half the candidates are lumped together at the bottom of the scale. 54% of History HG candidates scored less than 20%. The average was only 20% - many of them were worth single figures only - after 12 or more years at school.

Mathematics is worse. Seventy one percent of SG candidates and nearly 60% of HG candidates got less than 20%. And this group - the Mathematics candidates - are the lucky 25% of DET pupils who take Maths in the first place - the other 75% do not.
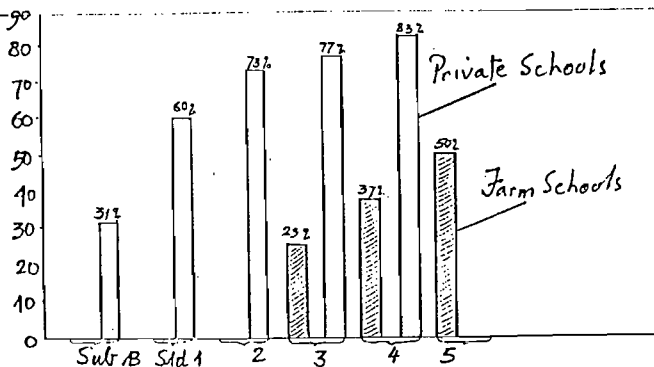
It's no good trying to blame the examination here. The exam is a given, a fact of life, based four-square on the syllabus and standardised by JMB moderators. Where the first language is the medium of instruction - as it is in white schools - this exam produces a normal distribution curve. But it lumps 50 or 60 or 70 percent of all black pupils together at the bottom.

And there's nothing wrong with black pupils as such. They're just as strong and clever and beautiful and ambitious - as a group - as their white counterparts.

Socio-economic factors aside, the difference is in the medium of instruction: teachers teaching in a second language; pupils interpreting this inferior message in terms of their own even more restricted English competence.

A measure of the difference between L1 and L2 medium learners in their command of English is provided by testing I did on over a thousand pupils in rural DET schools and on first language speakers in a private school in Pretoria.

Figure 6

It takes rural children until Std 5 to reach a level that is passed by the first language children in Std 1. Yet both groups must draw their educational sustenance across the curriculum through the medium of English.

Now - how does this tie in with the notion of fossilization?

I first came across the term fossilization in 1986 when I read Selinker's 1972 definition of it as 'the process of <u>stabilization</u> in second language acquisition whereby non-native forms become a permanent feature of a learner's performance.

Fossilization gets a paragraph or two in most chapters on interlanguage, but the preoccupation is usually with the linguistic origins of the non-standard forms. Research seems to be preoccupied with describing and accounting for these non-standard forms. That certain of these forms will fossilize is taken as inevitable and irreversible.

I don't find much on what causes fossilization to occur - why do the 'successive transitional dialects that a learner constructs on his way to mastery of a target language' suddenly stop developing?

Now I believe that the learner takes a decision - more or less subconsciously- that his competence in the second language is adequate to the demands he feels are placed on it. A kind of conspiracy takes place between the mirror he holds up to his performance and the circumstances he find himself in - a conspiracy that beguiles him into striving no more.

Mastering a language is not easy, and I think the little voice that whispers 'fossilize, baby - don't be so hard on yourself, you speak O.K.' is the same little voice that reconciles us to whatever we don't have the push - from within us or from outside - to overcome: smoking, being overweight, getting to the finishing line after the winner, having too little money. It's easier to tell ourselves that we don't really want any greater achievement. In other words fossilization is a linguistic entity that is not uniquely linguistic.

To get back to the term itself, then. The persistent errors that prompted
the term <u>fossilization</u> are only the the most observable and obvious
symptoms of the fossilizing process. This process is in fact pervasive of
the entire interlanguage – not just of elements in the linguistic
sub-systems in structural terms but of performance in all the skills and of
skill in all communicative competencies. In Chomskyan terms fossilization
reflects a complete bypassing of the language acquisition device or faculty
– the L.S. system. So it is misleading to treat the learner's non-native
forms as 'fossilized'. It is the learner who has fossilized, and he's done
it because he's decided to.

In all of these matters of settling-for-less-than-excellence, much depends,
on the company you keep, and it is this that bedevils the learning of
English in black education. In many schools everyone else's English is
just as 'approximate' as your own. A false sense of adequacy sets in
because there isn't a relevant model of standard English for pupils to
aspire to.

I think we need hard evidence of this premature acceptance of a learning
plateau, if only to confirm what we have observed in a variety of ways.
I've heard junior primary teachers complain that the English of Std 5
pupils they'd taught in Std 2 had not improved one bit in the three
intervening years. At the high school where I taught there seemed to be
little difference in the quality of writing of Std 7's, Std 8's and Std
9's. At Eshowe College of Education first year students came in with a
reading age on English first language tests of about $8\frac{1}{2}$ years. A control
group improved to 10yrs reading age by the end of the year whereas an
experimental group got to 10 years within six months. But both groups made
no further advance in their three years there. Tests at Soweto College
also showed zero growth in general English competence over the last 18
months of the course.

This is not to argue that the English competence of DET pupils doesn't
improve at all between Std 3 and their 3rd year at college.

At several points along this path there are growth spurts, each followed by a fossilized spell on a learning plateau. I'll suggest a reason for this a little later.

Let's return to the idea of a premature acceptance that a transitional dialect is good enough.

I measured the sense of adequacy of 16 Farm school teachers in the Warmbaths area last year during one-on-one interviews with them to determine the viability of distance teaching for upgrading courses for them. On a five-point scale they rated their own adequacy in English medium at an average of 4,1 (5 would mean very high; 3 adequate).

Just how adequate is their English competence? Well, I had the teachers write the same set of tests that their pupils had written a few months earlier (figure 7). Their average is overtaken by first language pupils during their Std 3 year.

Now while one is happy for them in their positive feelings of self-worth, this very complacency may be one of the reasons for the poor quality of rural education. They don't realise that what they are achieving falls far short of the mark. So they, like the college students and the school pupils, have allowed their English to fossilize. No further improvement in their English will take place even though they use it as the medium of instruction every day and will do so for years to come.

Unless fossilization is reversible. I wouldn't be speaking about it if I didn't think it was. And there are two basic stategies for softening up the rigidified language competence of a fossilized speaker: the one is to jolt him into a sense of demands. The other is to trick his language learning faculty back to life by steeping it in great quantities of pleasurable meaningful input.

I also believe that fossilization is not inevitable. At the high schools which averaged 78% it did not occur – they all use standard English, flawlessly, powerfully.

The EL2 of certain black pupils therefore never fossilizes – they develop smoothly – passing through a series of ever closer approximations of the target language – until they have mastered standard English; and then they grow more and more competent in turning the language to increasingly sophisticated educational purposes.

Let me therefore suggest seven topics which I believe are in need of researching.

1. Attitudes

    Does a learner's sense of adequacy in the target language signal a state of fossilization? Is the target language of those who don't have this sense still growing?

2. Demands

    What role does the perception of fresh demands play in thawing the frozen corpse?
    – How can a perception of demands be stimulated countrywide? What changes to Std 10 examining or feedback would contribute here? What kinds of tests could provide a yardstick of demands at each level and at the same time a programme for reaching them?

3. De facto medium. We've all heard the rumours the English is not really the medium of instruction in Black education.

    In 1986 I asked all my third year students on teaching practice to estimate the percentage of class time in which they observed Zulu being used in English medium lessons across the curriculum. There were scores of 80% and higher in some subjects in some schools and the average was over 50%.

I got lower scores in a more recent survey of teachers in a circuit in Natal where they estimated their own use of Zulu and recorded it in an anonymous questionnaire. Teachers claim they do it on the insistence of the pupils who have developed a dependence on mother tongue explanation that derives from the inadequacy in English at the point of change-over to English medium in Std 3.

What is interesting at this time is whether this dependence will continue to be established now that an amendment to the language medium act makes the earlier use of English possible and likely.

The questions to research, then:

- To what extent does the use of the <u>mother tongue as de facto medium</u> correlate with early fossilization in English?
- Who is responsible for M T discourse -- teacher or pupils?
- How does M T dependence affect attitudes to learning English and learning through English?
- How possible and successful are rigorously direct methods in the medium from an early stage (SSA/SSB)?

4. Rote learning

Does a dependence on <u>rote learning</u> as the basic strategy for success in tests and examinations correlate with language medium fossilization? Which causes the other?

The problem of rote memorization remains the most difficult to deal with and yet nothing rivals it as an agent for fossilization. I'm convinced that language competence grows to meet perceived demands on it. Using a second language as the medium of instruction should therefore guarantee a high level of competence. It doesn't do this because the challenge of understanding can be avoided by learning strings of meaningless words off by heart instead.

Are the successful schools forcing their pupils to re-process
information in their own words? Are the failing schools collaboratng
in the rote learning cop-out?

5. Reading

What effect does sustained silent reading have on a fossilized
interlanguage?
- How does this effect differ at different levels of development?
- What is the optimal dosage?
- What reading material works best?

6. Does the transfer of competence in cognitive academic language
profiency (CALP) move in both directions between the mother tongue and
English L2 medium?

7. What are successful teachers in successful schools doing that their
less successful counterparts are not doing?

There are two things which should make research into these questions
attractive. The first is the extent and the stability of the laboratory.
Even in these times of an impending new deal for education the majority of
schools at present under departments like the DET will for years to come
have the same teachers and draw pupils from the same communities as they do
now. What DET schools with 70% and 30% English averages have in common is
that all the pupils are EL2 and AL Ll. There is also a remarkable
uniformity of exposure to English throughout any particular school. Other
variables are easy to identify and control.

The other attraction is the potential to bring about an improvement. When
the average in a subject is 20% then it is surely both necessary and
possible to double it. If the bright children in some black schools can
get A's and B's then the bright children in the others can too. We only
need to work out how.