Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics Plus, Vol. 49, 2016, 331-341
doi: 10.5842/49-0-673

Speaking of, for, and with others: Some methodological considerations

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1. Introduction

> *We know that while intellectuals wear themselves out with sterile rhetoric about how to understand "the other", indigenous people continue to live the most horrendous injustices which have been perpetuated across the centuries.*
>
> (Montejo 1987 in Raditlhalo 2003:1)

This is a brief reflection on two decades of work in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and with trade unions from 1982 to 2001. For most of the time covered by this research note, I worked for an NGO, one of several small, politically-committed literacy organisations that emerged in the aftermath of Soweto 1976 as part of a broader response to increasingly repressive state policies. Our work grew out of the daily struggles of people coming to the city as migrant workers from the impoverished rural areas and living either in backyards, townships or the informal settlements which sprang up around Johannesburg and Cape Town. Some were unionised workers in the formal sector; others, by far the greater number, were unemployed or partially employed, and most often women. Our aims were to offer adults access to literacy, numeracy and other "really useful knowledge" (Johnson 1988) in a first language and/or in English as needed: to be both practical and political and to engage directly with the lived experience of adult learners. By 1992, we were working with a range of organisations including trade unions, community health workers, media workers, church-run night schools, and cooperatives. Our staff included members of the communities we worked with, and most educators came from these communities.

Our work was framed by the principles of People's Education, developed under the slogan "People's Education for People's Power" and formulated at a National Consultative Convention of the National Education Coordinating Committee, a broad-based social movement, on 28 December 1985. A significant feature of People's Education was the notion of "capturing spaces" (Motala and Vally 2002:175) in order to practise alternatives in education and to work towards creating a democratic future. These spaces consisted of grassroots organisations

operating through small groups and projects in the "community"[1] or the workplace, aligned with or affiliated to broader social movements and deeply committed to democratic principles. This commitment, interwoven with Freire's (1970) pedagogy of praxis, became core to the practice of "alternative education" (Alexander 1987). As all forms of political opposition were suppressed, adult education spaces were appropriated for political purposes wherever possible (Aitchison 2003).

2. Negotiating meaning, negotiating position

Given that adult learning groups or "alternative" organisational contexts were likely to be the only spaces for interaction where learners might be considered "legitimate speakers" (Bourdieu 1982) of English, the challenge was to find a second or additional language pedagogy which was consistent with the aims of critical pedagogy.

The National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) had in 1986 developed the concept of 'People's English for People's Power', which redefined the goals of communicative competence in English to include "the ability to say and write what one means; to hear what is said and what is hidden; to defend one's point of view; to argue, to persuade, to negotiate; to create, to reflect, to invent; to explore relationships, personal, structural, political; to speak, read, and write with confidence; to make one's voice heard; to read print and resist it where necessary" (NECC 1987:38-39). Different approaches to language teaching were implicitly held up to this lens, evaluating the extent to which theoretical underpinnings resulted in learning processes and practices which could help learners towards these goals.

The theories of language and communication at the time which came closest to meeting our needs were those associated with "negotiation for meaning", defined as follows:

> The process in which, in an effort to communicate, learners and competent speakers provide and interpret signals of their own and their interlocutor's perceived comprehension, thus provoking adjustments to linguistic form, conversational structure, message content, or all three, until an acceptable level of understanding is achieved.
>
> (Long 1996:418)

Such definitions, of course, raise questions of power: Whose meanings? Under what conditions? These definitions appear to assume unproblematically that speakers *can* negotiate meaning, whereas in politically repressive contexts, the reality is very different. The learning group was therefore usually the only space in which learners could negotiate meaning in English on a more equal basis. In line with the Freirean insistence that the learning context should mirror the kind of society desired, we sought ways to reduce power differences and create more democratic relations between educator and learners. These are discussed and critiqued in Kerfoot (1993, 2009).

What we lacked, though, was a more "socially constituted linguistics" (Hymes 1974:196-197), which sees linguistics at the service of social functions which "give […] form to the ways in which linguistic features are encountered in actual life" (Hymes 1974:196). In our case though, "actual life" contexts were often conflictual or, alternatively, group contexts of envisioning

[1] Gujit and Shah (1998), among others, have pointed out the importance of seeing "community" as a living and contested entity rather than an unproblematic social category.

ways of being and communicating which did not yet exist. Negotiation for meaning needed to be complemented by "negotiation for positions" (Block 2003:74).

Overall then, although our pedagogies and processes started and ended with the social, our understanding of language acquisition had not yet taken the "social turn" identified by Block (2003:4): we needed theories which were more sociolinguistically oriented, took into account the complexity of context, and had a more encompassing view of what acquisition in a multilingual context entails.

What rings through our early work is a modernist faith in progress and a belief that literacy and language teaching could "make a difference", along with a fair degree of certainty that we had found a way for this to happen through the integration of language teaching with popular education and adult learning principles. We were convinced that such teaching would bolster the growing mass democratic movement and enable "change from below". As Pennycook (2001:8) has argued, one of the problems with emancipatory modernism is its "assurity about its own rightness, its belief that an adequate critique of social and political inequality can lead to an alternative reality". It is true that I did believe this with a fair degree of naivety, but my memories of those years are of a constant sense of uncertainty and of inadequate knowledge, a wrestling with daily contradictions, yet the need to help create a vision of a different future and to hold firm in the belief that this was possible in order to sustain others − what Freire (1994) might call a "pedagogy of hope".

2.1 Voice and critical pedagogy

Given the focus on the relationships between language, literacy and power, a key concern that underpinned our work was the issue of "voice". As Giroux (1988:199) argues, voice "constitutes the focal point" for a critical theory of education: it represents the chief means through which learners affirm their own class, cultural, racial, and gender identities. Thus, "[u]sing, speaking, learning and teaching language is a form of social and cultural action; it is about producing and not just reflecting realities" (Pennycook 2001:53). The name of the NGO for which I worked − Use, Speak and Write English (USWE)[2] − reflects this orientation to language teaching and an early preoccupation with voice.

Voice within the context of critical pedagogy is tied to a vision of an alternative, more democratic society, but voice is not enough. Just as "[…] we might ask how it is that access to or awareness of powerful forms of language is indeed supposed to change social relations, we might equally ask here how the possibility of using one's voice is supposed to be related to change" (Pennycook 2001:103). At that time, USWE's goals in encouraging learners to write were affirmation; solidarity – a sharing of experiences across cultural and geographical boundaries[3]; a belief in the possibility that a future system might take their needs and wishes into account (housing, health, education, living conditions, livelihoods); and also, implicitly, an appeal to Bakhtin's (1986:126) "superaddressee" – "an invisible third party, the court of social justice, or simple humanity".

[2] This name was conceived in 1982 by the founder, Basia Ledochowska, to emphasise the agentive aspect of language. The organisation later became known as "USWE Adult Basic Education Project" to reflect the broadening nature of our work and the inclusion of languages other than English.

[3] Some of the writings produced by South African learners were published in a Canadian magazine for adult literacy learners which, in turn, was read by literacy learners in South Africa and elsewhere.

2.2 Beyond narrative: Other routes to voice and agency

In addition to autobiographical accounts, learning groups also created texts such as letters, petitions, action plans, posters and placards to address local issues or participate in broader struggles. Without structured access to economic, social, and political resources, such learners had little hope of using their literacy or language skills to bring about long-term changes. The task for those in literacy education was therefore to imagine a democratic future and to anticipate the kinds of practices that could help adults work towards and sustain such a future. The curriculum framework we proposed attempted to take up the challenge of People's Education that future syllabi "must proceed from different principles" (Gardiner 1987:6). This framework later informed national policy work for the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU, the major trade union federation) and the African National Congress' Centre for Education Policy Development in the run-up to the first democratic elections (Kerfoot 2009). Rather than a fixed linear structure, the curriculum framework was intended as a generative model able to accommodate multiple learning needs and contexts.

Overall then, we were groping towards a notion of 'communicative competence' that was not based on a static version of the social order (Norton Peirce 1989) but might contribute towards transforming it. Teaching in contexts of extreme poverty and injustice often led to heightened sensitivity to what might be taught along with the language, later succinctly stated by Luke (n.d.:1) as "patterns and practices of intersubjectivity, and thereby freedom and unfreedom, identity and non-identity, relative constraint and agency […]" and "[a] sense of one's own social worth" (Bourdieu 1991:82), although we did not always know what to do about it. Emphasising appropriacy in a context where learners were not seen as legitimate owners and users of English seemed inappropriate, although of course appropriacy could not be ignored. In seeking a pedagogy that was underpinned by a view of language as productive rather than merely reflective of social relations, the best we could find at that time was a kind of expanded notion of 'strategic competence', where the compensatory aspect, as defined by Canale (1983), was no longer primary[4]. Rather, the emphasis was on the "element of conscious *choice*" (Cohen 1990:5, original emphasis), discussing existing strategies, evaluating these, trying out new ones, and considering the contexts and texts for which each might be useful.

3. Speaking of, for, and with others

As the discussion above has illustrated, my working life has been lived in the "contact zone" (Pratt 1992:4), that is, in "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination". The work I have been able to do has been on the basis of a series of coincidences conditioned by my social position, what Blommaert (2005:107) calls a "structured accident". While it has been a great privilege to have been involved in this way, it has also been a source of continuing disquiet.

In the years leading up to the change of government in 1994, social movements and NGOs were often the only channels for the voices of non-unionised citizens to reach beyond the hegemony

[4] Canale (1983:10) defined "strategic competence" as an element of communicative competence involving both verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be used to compensate for breakdowns in communication often due to "insufficient competence in one or more areas of communicative competence, for example, paraphrasing, ways of addressing strangers when unsure of their social status, and ways of achieving coherence in texts when unsure of cohesive devices".

of the apartheid state through mass meetings, conferences, or applications to international donors. Although I always had a specific mandate to "speak for" others in different contexts, in a highly racialised society it was nevertheless extremely problematic. In the negotiations among education and training "stakeholders" leading up to the transition, lack of capacity made these dilemmas more acute – in my case, as mentioned earlier, within the same period I could be called on to represent COSATU, the National Literacy Coalition, or the African National Congress through its Centre for Education Policy Development.

Depending on the context, I have at different times been perceived as representing the interests of the South or the North, the Third or the First World, the rich or the poor, white or black, middle class or working class, organised labour or the unemployed, donors or NGOs, state or civil society, researched or researcher. I have been called Communist, Stalinist, Trotskyite, and liberal, all while I was working for, or seconded from, the same NGO and articulating the same broad agenda. Through these various positionings, I became acutely conscious of imposed identities, the relative degrees of power ascribed along with them, and the central importance of discourses and symbolic power in renegotiating them.

Looking back, I can see that poststructural and feminist analysts would analyse this as an example of multiple, fragmented or hybrid identities, which indeed would seem to be the case. However, my subjectivity in each context was strongly filtered through the consciousness that I was white and wholly under-prepared with, in Bourdieu's terms, an inadequate "feel for the game" (Bourdieu 1990b:66), especially as "the game" in the last years of apartheid changed almost daily.

For Frankenberg (1993:1), "whiteness" is at once a location of structural advantage, a standpoint, and a reference to a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed. Where (charles) (1992) and others have called for "colouring in the white", in most of these contexts, my whiteness has felt highly coloured, a marker of difference which made sure that my presence was visible at times when I would have preferred otherwise. It has, however, also been a useful standpoint from which to examine the terrain of whiteness during and after apartheid, a landscape starkly illuminating and often soul-destroying. It has, of course, afforded substantial advantages which intersected in various ways with other axes of language, class, gender, age, institutional affiliation, and geopolitical location. The difficulty of reflecting on the structural advantages accorded by race is that the ability to be reflexive is in itself, as Skeggs (2002:361) notes, "a privilege, a position of mobility and power, a mobilisation of cultural resources" which runs the risk of leaving others fixed in place. Some sort of symbolic violence is intrinsic in the structure of the situation (Rabinow 1977): without a "double turn" back towards others, "the transformation of whiteness into a colour can work to conceal the power and privilege of whiteness" (Ahmed 2004:10). However, not mentioning it at all has the same effect.

This power through positioning has been reflected in great caution in terms of representation in research papers, policy fora, learning materials, and advocacy or social struggles. Postcolonial theorists, as discussed by Skeggs (2002:362), have pointed out the ethical problems associated with speaking of or for others, among them, ventriloquism (Visweswaran 1994), producing the "native" as authentic and as truth (Spivak 1990; Narayan 1993), an inauthentic giving of voice, and issues of accountability and responsibility. In such situations of uneven exchange, how the research is done and how it is written up become closely interrogated.

3.1 Methodology: Voice and representation

Issues of voice and ownership in relation to the development of a curriculum for Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET) are discussed in depth in Kerfoot (1993), and I will not revisit them here. This study also details the processes through which the proposed curriculum was developed – this would have qualified as a form of participatory action research, although at the time we had no formal research training. As Frazer (1992:97) notes, the purpose of action research is multi-faceted: it aims, among other things, to involve people in diagnosing and working to address their own needs and problems, to avoid treating persons as objects, and to recognise the "transformability of social reality". It is thus consistent with Freirean goals of seeking to promote change through dialogue and participation, bringing together knowing and doing, and recognising those without formal education as producers of knowledge.

Disadvantages of action research may include a lack of generalisability or a reduction in analytical clarity. However, if work over several years and with a variety of groups yields similar findings, then one can argue for a degree of generalisability. At the same time, some loss of clarity is inevitable in a negotiated and evolving process. Yet if such a process can make even small beginnings in shifting power relationships or working towards alternatives, then it is a small price to pay. The processes of action research undertaken here did result in a solid proposal which, despite its limitations, informed policy work on a future ABET system.

Where action research is not possible, and where "subaltern groups have no access to the mechanisms for telling and distribution of their knowledge" (Skeggs 2002:362), other ways have to be found. These were explored in a research project conducted for the UK's Department for International Development in Southern Africa (DFIDSA) in the Northern Cape in 2000-2001. Under investigation were the impacts of a tertiary level training programme[5] in equipping participants to act as literacy educators in the Public Adult Learning Centres and as agents of development more broadly. Street (2001:9) has pointed out that the concept of 'impact' is "not just a neutral developmental index, to be measured, but is already part of a power relationship". The research was designed as a limited critical ethnography, and incorporated three main elements to try and minimise this power relationship (see Kerfoot et al. 2001). The first was individual[6] and focus-group interviews in three interlinked series of extended visits to allow for the incorporation of participants' agendas, and for feedback and discussion of emerging findings. The second was a highly diverse, multilingual research team consisting of five academics and seven past Centre for Adult and Continuing Education (CACE) students; this was intended to promote interaction with participants in a way that took account of power relations resulting from various intersections of language, race, ethnicity, class, gender and location, and so to facilitate the co-construction of knowledge (and build research capacity). Finally, multiple coders were used for interview data to try to guard against potential bias.

The research team met twice to analyse emerging findings and plan the next stage; vast distances in the Northern Cape made more meetings impractical. After data collection was complete, the findings were presented at a stakeholder symposium in February 2001 to seek alternative interpretations. Later in the year, a dissemination conference was held in Kimberley

[5] A partnership between the Department of Education in the Northern Cape province and the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education (CACE) at the University of the Western Cape from 1996-1999.

[6] For the semi-structured interviews, purposive sampling was used to identify groups of students according to geographical location, course, gender, language, and whether or not they completed the courses.

to present the report, note responses, and discuss how to take the findings of the report further. This conference was attended by research participants and representatives from ABET role players in the Northern Cape, and resulted in a set of recommendations to the provincial government and Department of Education (ABET Unit). The report was written in such a way that it could be used as a tool for advocacy by educators and communities around the kind of ABET programmes that would suit their needs. It was also intended to assist in decision-making and planning within the Education Department. Overall, it was an attempt to do "empowering research", that is, research not only "on" subjects but also "for" and "with" them (Cameron et al. 1992).

Among the many issues that could be raised with regard to this research process is the question of the final authorial voice. The outcomes of a dialogical research process would logically include different interpretations leading to different, situated knowledges (Haraway 1990). Yet, as the person commissioned to do the research, I had the responsibility of weaving these different knowledges into one coherent, linear text. As Frazer (1992) has indicated, research teams usually contain a "hierarchy of knowers"; in this case, the fact that I was the only one who had worked through all the data and attended all the meetings and focus group discussions meant that I was in a position "to produce a recognisable voice, a voice that reduce[d] complexity" (Blommaert 2008:89). I could see similarities or contradictions, gaps and connections, and select whose voices to include and how. In other words, I had "archontic power" (Derrida 1996). As Blommaert (2008:86) points out, this power to construct an archive and to decide what belongs to it and what does not raises epistemological issues. Located as I am in a set of discourses on race, culture, and society that spans apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa as well the broader sweep of colonialism, to what extent can my representations be considered trustworthy? For Blommaert (2008:89), the way through this dilemma is to make one's own interpretive procedures explicit (like Fabian 1974), and to show one's own subjectivity in these interpretive procedures (like Bourdieu 1990a).

Bourdieu (1989, 2000) emphasises the importance of revisiting the object of study over and over. Wacquant (2004:387-388) points out that Bourdieu pioneered multi-sited ethnography as a means of controlling the construction of the object and acknowledging the "social embeddedness and split subjectivity of the inquirer". However, his conception of "multi-sitedness" differs from the contemporary trend of following people and signs across spaces and scales (see for example Marcus 1995): the "principle of selection is not the connection *between the sites* inscribed in the object itself but the connection of *each site to the investigator*" (Wacquant 2004:397, original emphasis). In this way, the second or further site becomes a methodological necessity and a means of "epistemological vigilance". The work that is discussed here falls somewhere between the two positions. It can be seen as a multi-sited ethnography, but in a historical rather than contemporaneous sense. Over two decades, I have repeatedly revisited the question of which principles, practices and pedagogies might offer the greatest potential as tools for change. In the trajectory from grassroots practice to national policy development and back, the connection between sites was determined by the demands of the political and educational tasks required rather than by methodological considerations. Nevertheless, the necessity of working in and at a variety of sites and scales provided a constantly shifting perspective on the object of study and on my own positioning in relation to it. It is this slowly expanding reflexive awareness along with the benefit of hindsight that has brought both greater epistemic caution and greater confidence in my assertions.

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