

THE LANGUAGE OF LEARNING AND TEACHING: LOL

Anne Peltason, Head of English, Riebeek College, Uitenhage

Yesterday I had the dubious privilege of viewing a batch of first-year university examination scripts. The subject, I am happy to relate, was not English, but the palpable evidence on the table before me was that these candidates had somehow made it through high school, managed a Bachelor pass, scratched together the necessary points to get into university, and had been afforded a chance to experience the luxury of a year's fun at the tax payers' expense. The following example, taken unedited from an exam script, illustrates the problem: that passing first year was never likely, even with bridging courses. Here is Candidate X towards the end of his essay:

On the television and in the media we always hear about. Learners not attending school, behaviour problems. Failing their main subjects like math and lagues. In highschool we had 4 guys that haven't to be in matric...

The rest of the essay is no better. Risking some non-politically correct irony, I think it is hard to imagine what core knowledge was studied, understood and internalized in order to generate an essay of this quality at first year level. His parents must be proud.

Where does this say about the teaching of English as the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT)? I hold out about as little hope for English teaching, and for all of us out there at the coal face, as I would for any proposed plan to re-float the Titanic. It seems that Heads of schools in the province allocate English teachers based on the assumption that anyone who knows how to teach, and can speak English, is quite sufficiently qualified to teach it.

CAPS is not helping either. Under this new dispensation, good as it may be, Grade 8 and 9 no longer read full texts, and are examined on their ability to form judgements on a novel based on reading excerpts and looking at its dust cover, and being taught that most random piece of esoteric information: what the left hand (verso) and what the right hand (recto) pages are called. Gone are the days when we completed a text per term. We try to promote reading as an essential life skill but under the CAPS regime, the last time a school-going learner reads aloud is Grade 9.

I have been teaching English for the better part of 4 decades and in that time I have seen many changes: greater stress, higher marks (Ironic, is it not, that there was a time when one's best candidates scored a high C?), greater ambition and seemingly unlimited resources. To cap it all, the written English of the average graduate is getting worse, testified to by our billboards and signage: some of the time merely inelegant, at other times plain wrong (Tea and scone's Special R15).

English teaching is in crisis and it is going to take men and women of vision and courage to make any kind of measurable difference.

Recently I have been reading a most interesting book entitled *What the Dog Saw* by Malcolm Gladwell. In it the writer playfully juggles statistical information, sometimes making outlandish comparisons between unlike situations. What caught my attention was his interesting and cheeky little correlation between choosing the best teacher for a job and choosing the most likely Quarterback to succeed in the NFL. His point is that you can never tell whether either the would-be teacher or the would-be football player would succeed at the highest level when your choice is based upon their college or university performance.

The interesting illustration Gladwell makes is that nothing, nothing at all, not smaller classes, better equipment, or even salary incentives can make as much difference to teacher performance in the classroom as finding the right teachers. He explodes the myth of the 'good' school with excellent facilities and enviable

teacher-learner ratios by avowing that a child will be better off in a terrible school with an excellent teacher than in an excellent school with a terrible teacher. And they do exist, those terrible teachers; I know, because I had one myself.

Gladwell's final stance is to advise heads and governing bodies not to spend their budgets on *more* teachers but on *better* teachers. He advises heads to get rid of the bottom ineffectual 6% and replace them with not excellent, nor even good, but simply average teachers, and the school's performance would be likely to improve by 100%. This statistic is based on a study by Eric Hanushek, an economist at Stanford University. Gladwell quotes Hanushek, who claims that a poor teacher will take a full year to teach 50% of the work while an excellent teacher will teach a year and a half's worth of work in a single year.

My point is that only excellence will enable the teaching of the CAPS curriculum *plus* three full texts (Novel and/or Drama) in Grade 8 and 9 English. Only excellence will command the respect of head teachers who in turn will timetable these teachers effectively. In short only excellence will save the day.

English teachers need more free time than they are getting. They need time to do real remedial marking. They need time for feedback with individual learners. The teachers of LOLT have triple the marking load of other content subjects. The rest of the staff forgets this sometimes, particularly when it comes to sharing the administrative load.

The last word comes from Malcolm Gladwell and it is about teachers in general, not English teachers specifically. His speculations suggest that it is impossible to predict what the performance of a quarterback will be based on college performance. The same applies to teachers. The head and governing body make selections based on evidence, but at the end of the day nobody can really tell the measure of a man or woman. The magic happens in the classroom. A selection committee can only wave a wand and hope.