

Critical Reflections on Language Curriculum Design in South Africa

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Introduction

As a field worthy of academic interest and research, English language curriculum development is under-recognised in South African critical literature because of its perceived remedial and 'lower order' status (Wright 1990:8; Lanham 1995:37). It falls comfortably within neither applied linguistics nor education, since it contains elements of both. Language curriculum design, and I am simplifying here, is concerned with developing suitable pedagogic modes and learning programmes which allow for accelerated language learning in institutions where English is the medium of instruction; hardly inspiring stuff.

I hope to demonstrate, however, that language curriculum design can become more interesting if it is properly contextualised to demonstrate some awareness of two critical research areas. Within the limits of this paper I wish, first, to discuss some English language research pertaining to the particular academic and learner needs of an educational institution: the University of Natal, Durban (UND). Second, I intend raising awareness of similar language curriculum research developments in South Africa and abroad which seek to render English a more accessible and useful tool for intercultural communication. Finally, I devote the body of this paper to a description of how the process of critical reflection led to the development and trial of an English language course at UND. Critical reflection in the context of language curriculum development is a necessarily informed *process* which seeks to critique, but also to draw constructively from, a variety of expertise in order to develop capacity and expertise of its own. In my own case, this process took the form of a research project (2000-2001), which had as one of its components the design of an English language course for first-year university students.

This said, establishing the possibilities and perimeters for this paper presents difficulties. For example, an attempt to compare the results/products of one

initiative with others is fruitless, since time lapse, sample selection, student demographics and socio-economic as well as geographical situation would render this kind of study problematic. Though comparison on the basis of examination or assignment results is not possible, it is possible to compare projects in terms of principles used for design, methodology and aims. It is for these reasons that I have decided to use the development of the English Language Course at UND as a fixed standard of comparison against which related projects may be examined, to determine the ways in which they are similar or different in principle and approach. This not only provides the research context necessary to theorise language curriculum development in South Africa, but also enables the reader to obtain insight into the process in which informed theorisation occurs.

Constructing a Context: Language Curriculum Research in South Africa

This section comprises two areas of focus: research at tertiary level which deals with language curriculum and/or language acquisition; and research conducted at secondary level which has the same broad foci. I have chosen both secondary and tertiary settings because these do not exist in isolation from one another, especially in terms of English language curriculum research. Most, though not all, of the work referred to in this section has not yet been published as it comprises mainly MA and PhD research.

It is crucial that language *and* literary curricula research be examined, since both, with respect to English at least, rely on and profess to develop proficiency and increased competence in the language. This is a fact hitherto ignored by many linguists in their research, and omitted by literary critics in discussions on the teaching of literature (see, for example, van Wyk 2000:27). Survey-oriented research, such as that conducted by Doherty in his MA thesis (1989), for example, examines the development of South African English literary syllabuses, tracing the influence of theoretical developments from metropolitan cultures. This research shows that a focus on language in terms of aspects of textual production—genre, register, discourse, and ideology (discussed by Fairclough 1995:83; and demonstrated in Reddy 1995:6)—was not then perceived as relevant¹. Nowadays it is precisely previously neglected concerns which present opportunities for different

¹ Fowler (1987:490) suggests that ideology be defined as society's implicit theory of what types of objects exist in the world (categorisation); of the way in which the world works (causation); and of the values to be assigned to objects and processes (general proposition).

social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds to be valued. Any new language curriculum would thus need to demonstrate a degree of awareness and sensitivity in a multilingual setting.

Sensitivity towards the demands of the multicultural setting motivated my survey study (Balfour 1995) of a tertiary English literary curriculum. Of relevance to any future curriculum development must surely be the realisation that it is no longer possible to teach English as if literature alone were what students needed. With a new 'multicultural' literary curriculum in place, designers at UND found, contrary to their expectations, that students' standard of English did not improve, despite increased exposure to English through communicative activities². Such research shows that language learning requires intervention which is sensitive to learners' language needs as well their cultural-ethnic and social backgrounds³. Other types of study reveal possibilities for language extension sometimes overlooked in curriculum design.

A number of (quasi-)experimental studies are worth noting here because they show what might be gained from research which seeks to make an intervention into conventional pedagogic practices. For example, Court (1988:152f) at the University of Durban-Westville finds that language tests and examinations (at secondary and tertiary level) at that university are not accurate predictors of language ability because South Africa's erstwhile racially divided education system still affects access to quality instruction. Lockett's (1997:19-124) (quasi-)experimental case study of the uses of critical discourse analysis for history students at the University of Natal (Pietermaritzburg) embodies both applied linguistic and pedagogic emphasis. She demonstrates, through her work with history students and historical texts, that a focus on language study (using critical linguistics and discourse analysis) is compatible with discourse strategies used to interpret texts:

Texts realise, that is, give material form to, discourses; and the meanings of texts are always in part the meaning of discourses; texts are never the unique creations of individuals (Lockett 1997:83).

² This assumption was founded on the established principle of language acquisition derived from communicative language theory (CLT Krashen 1989:456; Hymes 1972:281) which suggests that sufficient exposure to the target language encourages better learning.

³ Mgqwashu's (1999) survey of language support classes at UND shows how little account was taken of previous learner experience, or fossilisation, as discussed by Brown (1998:43-45). Nathanson's (1998) survey study in the Western Cape showed how negative attitudes to language learning retards further development.

Sensitivity to language needs and awareness of diversity and the pitfalls of untried assumptions also influence further research conducted in KwaZulu-Natal (Balfour 1999:104-203) with an experimental language curriculum at secondary level. By means of this research, I am able to show how learner errors and attitudes to language learning are often teacher-engendered (1999:269). This finding is substantiated in work conducted by Makalela (1998:60-68) among second-language teachers of English in the Northern Province of South Africa and points to the need for educators to become competent language practitioners themselves. This is a factor that must surely influence the development of a new language curriculum⁴.

Most of the research discussed above indicates that black South African university entrants from so-called English medium schools are not adequately prepared for the language and writing demands of tertiary education. While many of the studies cited examine the nature and development of curriculum, few determine the effects of curriculum on long-term learning development, nor do they make evident the links between theory and practice⁵. Yet little research examines 'whole' approaches to English teaching (language and content; sequencing, pedagogy and assessment) in educational settings generally⁶.

Obviously it has not been possible to cover all language and/or curriculum related research in South Africa; e.g. the work by MacDonald and van Rooyen (1990) in the Threshold Project has been omitted. If my focus has been selective, this has been only in order to provide the reader with a sense of the range addressed, from language testing and the broad issues of curriculum design, to experimentation with linguistic techniques and surveys of teacher/learner attitudes to language learning.

Localising the Context

The purpose of the previous section was to provide a critical context in which to

⁴ For another experimental study, this time comparing a 'grammatical approach' based on sociolinguistics, to a 'communicative approach' to composition writing in black secondary schools in Qwa-Qwa, please consult Setiloane (1998).

⁵ There are other notable exceptions to this trend: for example studies by Dreyer (1999:10-22), Kamwangamalu and Virasamy (1999:60-79), and work of the English Language Educational Trust in KwaZulu-Natal schools.

⁶ The lack has been pointed out before in various reports such as *The Harvard-UCT Literacy and Numeracy Report*, Fuller *et al* (1995); *The School Register of Needs Survey*: NED (1997); *ECC Report* (1998), and in theses by Jiya (1993); Christie (1993); Lickendorff (1990).

locate a language curriculum project (the English Language Course, or ELC). The next suggests ways in which a new language curriculum can draw from related studies. Such a curriculum research process should not be developed in isolation from the international context of language curriculum research as documented by Brumfit (1980), Prabhu (1983), Cummins (1984), Crombie (1985); Gass and Madden (1985), Wong-Fillmore (1985), Arizpe (1994), Aitkenson and Ramanathan (1995)⁷. The work of Cummins (1984) on 'Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency' (CALP), for example, is particularly useful since the ELC is concerned to develop precisely this type of proficiency given its academic context within the University⁸. The aim of the ELC is to demonstrate that certain text types, or genres, deploy and make different demands upon English usage. The primary assumption is that exposure, both implicit (via genres) and explicit (via attention to the features of language use), encourages better understanding among learners of how language works.

In order to link research and development and to revitalise the former and enliven the latter, curriculum development may be transformed into a research initiative. This point is made somewhat differently by Fairclough (1992:6): 'a language education focused on training in language skills, without a critical component, would seem to be failing in its responsibility to learners'. I have taken Fairclough's identification of 'critical responsibility to learners' and extended it, in the case of language pedagogy and curriculum design, to include responsibility to 'practitioners'. With the support of a National Research Foundation (NRF) research grant for the critical and reflexive development of an English Language Course (ELC), the design team began to explore the pedagogic implications of this responsibility in terms of learners' and teachers' language needs.

The ELC, designed in 2000, was trialled in 2001. There were four phases involved in this project: consultation, development, implementation, and assessment. As part of the 'consultation phase', and to draw from other fields, a number of language educationalists and researchers from institutions in KwaZulu-Natal were invited to participate in a seminar series (March-June, 2000). The series focused on problematising notions of 'proficiency and competence', alerting staff to new or alternative approaches to language teaching, presenting local research, and retraining and updating members of the Programme of English Studies at UND.

Crombie (1985:12-13) is associated with 'a notional-functional syllabus'; the 'interactional model' is associated with Widdowson (1979:254) (United Kingdom), and the 'task-based syllabus' with Prabhu (1983:4) (Malaysia).

Cummins (1984:136) defines CALP as 'the manipulation of language in decontextualised academic situations' and BICS (basic interpersonal communicative skills) as 'the manifestation of language proficiency in everyday communicative contexts'.

It was not possible to present the entire range of research developments in ELT/ESL, but the sample presented did have a marked influence on the subsequent development of the ELC. The seminar series alerted curriculum designers to the problems of fossilisation and learner attitudes as discussed by Makalela (1998:68) for example. (Fossilisation occurs when the linguistic input internalised by learners is grafted onto the rule-system of the speaker's own language and not the target language rule system.) The burden of expectation on such a semester course (the ELC) would thus be great and might be unrealistic.

Nonetheless, the challenge identified by Luckett in 1997, and affirmed by the ELC design team in 2000, was how to teach English as effectively as possible, given the tertiary requirement for students to display a range of sophisticated analytical and interpretative skills in reading and writing⁹. Meeting this challenge involved designing a structure that could simultaneously equip students with a degree of language knowledge which could be consolidated later. After some discussion it was agreed that such a course would not include the decontextualised teaching of grammar or what Ivanic terms the 'grammar grind' (Ivanic 1987:2). It would, however, need to offer grammatical *awareness* in such a way as to assist the learner to use English reflectively and independently.

Given the time constraint of a single semester, and the aims already mentioned, the team proposed that the ELC adopt a 'structural discourse model within a communicative context'¹⁰. The decision to adopt this theoretical approach was informed by the reading and discussion described above. But in order for acquisition to be effective as suggested by Wong-Fillmore (1985:37), for example, it needs monitoring not only by the teacher, but also by the learner. This justifies a specially developed pedagogy understood and used for face-to-face teaching by the ELC tutors, and the use of language structure as a 'meta-language' for the teaching of the conventions of English usage. Theoretical developments were explored in a number of linguistics-related fields such as discourse analysis, communicative

⁹ The design team consists of Illeana Dimitriu (Translation Studies, UND), Elaine Young, Matthew Shum, Emmanuel Mgqwashu (all English, UND), and Robert Balfour (English 2001, Education 2002, UND).

¹⁰ 'Structure' in this sense refers to the analysis of language by its parts (parts of speech). However, it has long been recognised that structure devoid of context, as an approach to learning, is not only ineffective but also potentially harmful, because the learner is unable to apply what s/he has learnt in the independent production of text. The term 'discourse' derives from Discourse Analysis where language usage is seen not only as the sum of the parts, but also as the sum of the relationships, as Yule and Brown (1983:x) and Luckett (1997:70-73) argue.

language theory, genre theory and reader response theory, each of which focuses upon language in the construction of meaning for communicative purposes in texts¹¹.

In designing the ELC, the team assumed that South African students (unlike many foreign language speakers) already possessed some awareness of English as a communicative tool, since English is the medium of instruction in most schools (Sarinjeive 1994:295-305; Balfour 1995:86-89). However, most non-native speakers of English at UND possess a basic communicative competence characterised by the fossilisation of errors, mother tongue interference, and little awareness of how to modify the production of their own texts in English.

The first part of the ELC begins with lexical and morphological development, the aim being to extend learners' vocabularies and their awareness of the parts of speech (nouns and adjectives, verbs and adverbs, tenses and all aspects of local coherence) (Figure 1)¹². This emphasis on vocabulary development and morphology is justified in terms of recent research (Kilfoil 1988:36; McKeown & Omanson 1997:148; Bull & Anstey 1995), which indicates that learners with extended vocabularies are able to write more cogently than are learners with limited lexicons. Understanding aspects of syntax (that is, subject-verb-object relations, the use of connectives and punctuation and all aspects of local/micro coherence), again within relevant texts, forms the second part of the ELC.

Figure 1: Structural Discourse Model (English Language Course)

Critical Reflection	Morphology and Vocabulary	Parts of speech (verbs, nouns, prefixes, suffixes), tenses, vocabulary, spelling, etc.	MICRO COHERENCE
Critical Reflection	Syntax	Subject-verb-object, clausal relations, co-ordination and subordination, cohesion	

¹¹ Yule & Brown (1988) (Discourse Analysis); Krashen (1988) (the Natural approach); Brumfit (1986) (Communicative language theory); Corcoran & Evans (1987) (Reader response theory); Kress (1995); Cope and Kalantzis (1993) (Genre theory); and Christie (1995) (Functional linguistics).

¹² Atwell (1981) defined 'local coherence' as the relationship between the parts of a sentence in relation to the parts of other sentences in the same text. 'Global coherence', according to Atwell (1981), is preoccupied with the relationships between sentences within paragraphs and between paragraphs. In this respect Atwell's definition is akin to Halliday and Hasan's (1976) definition of 'coherence' within a text.

Critical Reflection	Semantics	Context, register, genre, modality etc.	MACRO COHERENCE
Critical Reflection ↓ TEST	Macro expression and argument	Macro coherence, structure, presentation, referencing etc.	

The third part of the ELC focuses upon the semantics within texts (idiomatic expression, metaphors, similes, symbolism, irony). Here the emphasis is on the attainment of internal coherence (an aspect of global/macro coherence) within sentences, with the aim of developing a fluent and relevant paragraph. The fourth part of the ELC explores more explicitly the conventions of expression and main and subordinate clause control in relation to writing genres, drawing in this respect on strategies already demonstrated by Luckett (1997:100-124) in South Africa, and Perera (1984:205) in the UK.

This structure in place, the team began in May 2000 to design the first of a series of worksheets for the ELC, using what came to be termed 'inductive learning' as an approach to exploring the 'conventions of language usage', with the aim of what Ellis (1994:643) terms 'consciousness raising'. 'Inductive' here meant the following: learners were encouraged by way of weekly worksheets to explore the particular language feature being dealt with and the 'convention of usage'. Only once this awareness emerged were learners provided with conventions for usage or, to put it more crudely, the rules governing aspects of grammar. Activities, drawing on a broad range of texts, would have to be designed to guide the learner in writing about texts analytically without mimicking their registers (see Balfour 1999:333-335).

Developing a Pedagogic Approach

The development of language pedagogy is as important as the curriculum itself, because pedagogy mediates aims and outcomes. Pedagogy, as Prabhu (1983:4) argues, is more than personal teaching style; it permeates curriculum design in, for example, the sequencing of knowledge, the choice of content, and the ideas behind structure. An appropriately theorised pedagogy also influences the ways in which knowledge is formally assessed, what counts as knowledge, and what value is accorded to learner-knowledge and institutional knowledge (Kress 1995:62). Within the ELC, this meant that knowledge was to be perceived and conveyed, not as a package of facts about language, but rather as an induction to understanding how conventions of language use operate.

The team agreed that each worksheet for the ELC should embody a similar format, though activities might differ each week in accordance with findings emerging from Wong-Fillmore (1985:21-35), Swain and Lapkin (nd:16-69), Long (1991 discussed in Ellis 1994:639) and Cope and Kalantzis (1993:65-88). The work of genre theorists Cope and Kalantzis (1993:65-88) and Kress (1995:62,64), in developing critical pedagogy for English, was deployed in the form of three pedagogic principles which are listed in the following paragraphs.

Kress notes that 'the acceptance of a need for the development of a new national identity is predicated on a realisation of significant cultural differences' (1995:64). Affirming difference, as the first pedagogic principle, in the multi-cultural classroom implies an explicit awareness of how difference is constructed in terms of social background, dominant literacies and rhetorical structures, as argued by Scollon and Scollon (1983:4,16-19). This principle is recognised in the ELC by ensuring that texts chosen for the curriculum are broadly representative of the cultural and ethnic composition of the classroom, and by ensuring that teachers are vigilant regarding different language needs.

Affirming difference and regulating relations between learners and teacher implies a degree of classroom management that is both explicit and self-reflexive. As a means of creating security for the learner and the teacher, Cope and Kalantzis (and others cited above) suggest as a second principle that 'lesson scaffolds need to be explicit, accessible to students and patterned in predictable ways' (1993:80). Features to be kept in mind when teaching include systematic provision of opportunities for each learner, explicit paralinguistic cues, and the reduction of 'foreigner speak' which could lead to learner error ossification (Wong-Fillmore 1985:34).

The third pedagogic principle for a language syllabus identified by Cope and Kalantzis is 'social access without prejudice'. The aim of the syllabus is to *enable* language learners by encouraging access to the dominant form of English in writing, without under-valuing students' home languages or other varieties of English.

All three principles, derived from critical pedagogy, are congruent with the approach taken to the ELC and influence the language of instruction used in the worksheet, as well as the type of activity designed. The format is provided below; note how late the section on 'conventions of use' occurs (Part III):

Figure 2: The format of each week followed the basic structure provided here

Part I:	Activity 1:	Communicative introduction (drawing on learners' experience)
	Activity 2:	Communicative introduction to the text (context, features content)
Part II:	Activity 3:	Identify the language feature (explicit or inductive approach)
	Activity 4:	Identify features of, and practise using the language
	Activity 5:	Cloze Exercise (drawing also on previous weeks' emphases)
	Activity 6:	Practice language feature (short imaginative or pattern practice)
Part III:	Activity 7:	Conventions of use (explanatory notes with examples)
Part IV:	Activity 8:	Independent writing activity with use of language feature
	Activity 9:	Brief introduction to language feature of next week

(Please consult Appendix 1 for an idea of what the ELC comprises in terms of its language and textual content since it is not possible to provide a more detailed description of the curriculum here.)

Assessment

The final part of this paper concerns data describing students' performance after the first trial semester of the project. Two aspects of performance require elaboration. The first is qualitative, that is, its purpose is discovering how useful learners found the ELC, in terms of how prepared their lecturers and tutorial assistants were, the degree to which weekly homework assignments were useful in developing language awareness, and greater accuracy and fluency of writing. The second aspect of performance is quantitative, as it describes learners' academic achievement in tests. It is to this latter aspect that I wish to devote the last part of the paper. I am not suggesting that the qualitative aspect is unimportant; indeed it is equally important in determining the efficacy of the ELC, but not the focus here. It would be the focus of another paper.

Since UND has no formal language requirement or entrance test other than the Matriculation Certificate for South African students seeking access to study, it fell to the design team to determine what other forms of assessment might be useful. We were aware of entrance tests for literacy in English designed by the University of

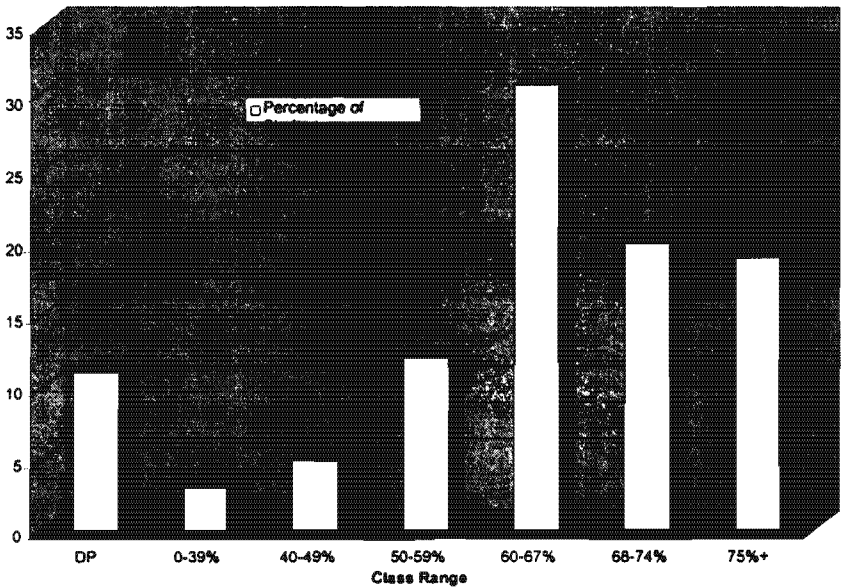
Cape Town (UCT) and used at Natal Technikon (see Starkey Report 1998:1-14). It emerged that the UCT tests were not appropriate for specifically English language assessment purposes. On the other hand, an established international measure of competence in academic English, as developed by the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) might provide a useful comparison with the ELC June examination. Such a comparison might assist the team in its investigations regarding the influence of variables (pedagogy, content, sequencing, etc.) on students' language needs, writing performance, and existing language proficiency in English. Thus the British Council was requested in May 2000 to run tests for all the students who had enrolled for the ELC. At the outset it needs to be made clear that any results attributable to the usefulness of the ELC have to be balanced against the English language exposure which students would have had in their other academic courses and social interaction on the campus. However, the ELC is not only an academic course; it is also an explicit language course, which makes it reasonable to assume that students' linguistic progress would bear some relation to the findings of the IELTS examinations.

The discussion and figures which follow provide a partial account of students' academic achievement in the ELC. The account is partial because one area of focus, language awareness and comprehension, was selected for comparison after a semester of language work in the ELC. We have not yet been able to run 'before' and 'after' tests with the same student sample. Nevertheless, findings from the first phase of the research are worth reporting, since they enable the team to reflect on its curriculum design assumptions and aims, and also provide a useful database for researchers involved in similar initiatives in South Africa.

Figure 3 depicts students' performance within the six bands (excluding 'duly performed' or DP dropouts) used commonly by the University to award students their grades or 'class' of pass.

Figure 3: Students' Performance in the ELC June Examination

Semester Performance of ELC Students in the ELC Examination (June 2001) (n=110)



From these results it is apparent that most students (91%) passed. More students wrote the ELC examination in June than wrote the IELTS tests, which were held on a Saturday (late May 2001). Only 89 of the 110 students wrote the IELTS exams with funding secured through the NRF. The ELC examination was a purely written examination that required students to identify language features and to demonstrate how to use them.

While the 'class of pass' system is probably familiar to most readers, the IELTS examinations and bands do require explanation. The IELTS exam covers four parts: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The reading and writing sections are chosen specifically for the audience (either academic or non-academic) and level of difficulty (post-secondary, formal clerical employment, tertiary, etc.). IELTS is used as a language requirement for entry into many tertiary institutions abroad. The IELTS grading system consists of ten bands, from Band 0 at the lowest level to Band 9 at the highest level. The key of bands below displays the value assigned to each band. In order to achieve an approximate comparison between ELC results and those

obtained through IELTS, the British Council was asked to provide a table which gave percentage equivalents for IELTS bands. The ELC team could not have simply taken band scores and interpreted them without the assistance of IELTS in this respect. The correlations of IELTS to ELC are provided in Figure 4 below:

Figure 4: IELTS writing bands correlated to University of Natal percentage scores

<i>Band</i>	<i>Correlated %</i>	<i>Brief description (from IELTS band descriptors)</i>
9	95 – 100%	'Completely satisfactory ... accurate at all times'.
8	84 – 94%	'No significant errors ... wide range of structures, flexibly used ...'.
7	70 – 83%	'Both simple and complex sentences are used, occasional minor flaws'.
6	56 – 69%	'Control achieved by use of a restricted range of structure and vocabulary ... errors frequently occur in complex structures, [but] rarely impeded communication'.
5	42 – 55%	'Sometimes causes strain for the reader ... accuracy achieved in short simple sentences only'.
4	28 – 41%	'Can produce basic sentence forms [but] errors ... cause severe strain for the reader'.
3	14 – 27%	'Errors predominate...except in apparently memorized utterances'.
2	1 – 13%	'No ability to communicate ... no evidence of basic sentence forms'.
1	0%	'No assessable strings of English'.
0	—	'Absent'.

The large range of IELTS bands made it difficult to determine learner's overall competencies in the four examinations. Rather than provide a bar chart as in Figure 3, I have, in consultation with the British Council, divided the IELTS bands into four broad values, reflecting the competency of students who achieved a particular band. Bands 0 to 3 were given the value 'weak', bands 4 to 5 were given the value 'partial', bands 6 and 7 the value 'competent', and bands 8 and 9 the value 'fluent.' Any half grade was downgraded to a whole value (for example, band 5.5 became band 5). In order to make the values easier to compare, the number of students achieving each band value was converted to a percentage. The number of students in each category was then divided by the total number of students who participated (eighty-eight for each of the four exams; one student was recorded as 'incomplete').

This gave us a Percentage Value. The percentages were rounded off to make their reading clearer. The figures below show the distribution of weak and strong students, providing an idea of where further attention might be needed in future versions of the ELC.

Figure 5: ELC students' performance in the writing exam

ELC Students' Performance in Writing Exam (IELTS: June 2001) n=69

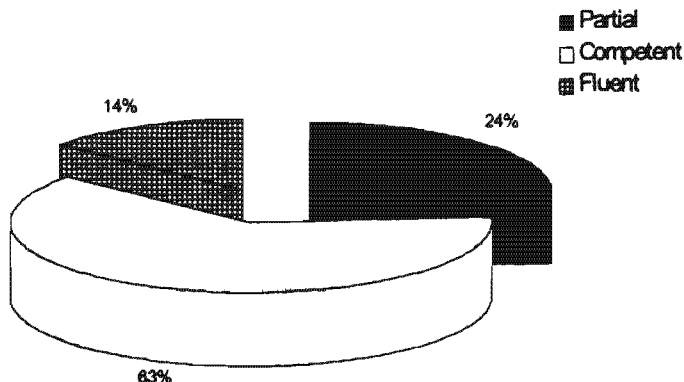


Figure 5.1: Elaboration of students' performance in the writing exam

Band	4	5	6	7	8	Absent
Number of students	3	18	30	25	12	1

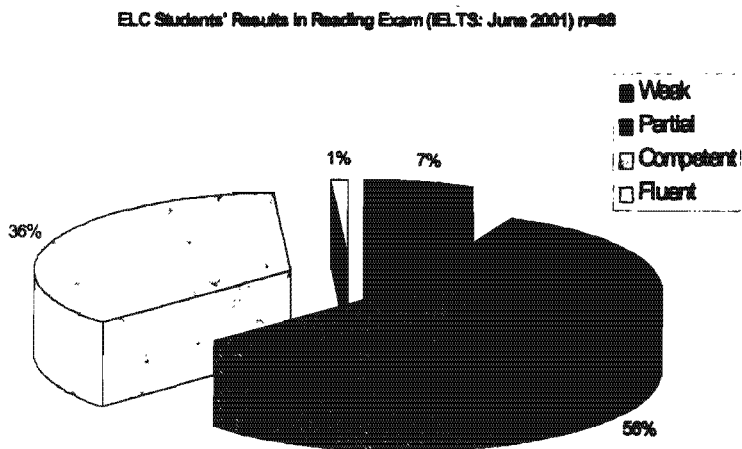
In the IELTS writing exam (Figure 5) most students (55 = 63%) were 'competent', while a relatively high number of students (21 = 24%) were 'partial'. Twelve (12 = 14%) students were 'fluent' and no (0) student was 'weak'. It would be possible to assess the extent to which this result is a reflection of the benefits gained as a result of UND's ELC only if the students had taken a similar exam before entering the ELC. The relatively high number of students who were 'partial' users of written

English indicates that the teaching of writing is a priority for the ELC and that many students require sustained tutoring in writing after the completion of the ELC.

Figure 5.1 indicates in more detail that 75% of students passed the IELTS writing examination; this percentage is significantly lower than the 91% who passed the ELC examination as recorded in Figure 3. This suggests that the ELC examination was less difficult and therefore not an accurate reflection either of the complexity of the ELC, or a realistic measure of students' ability. In this respect it is useful to recall that the IELTS examination is often used as a pre-tertiary examination and one would thus expect a tertiary examination of English proficiency to be more rigorous. Since reading affects writing development, and because the ELC written exam depended to a large degree on students' reading comprehension as well as language awareness, I have included the scores taken from the IELTS reading exam.

In the IELTS reading examination (Figure 6) most students (49 = 56%) were 'partial', while 36% (32= 36%) were 'competent'. Only one (1) was 'fluent', while 7% (6 students) were 'weak.'

Figure 6: ELC students' performance in the IELTS reading exam



Since the majority of students (55 = 63%) are 'weak' or 'partial' readers of English, this area must be considered a general area of concern, even more so than the 'listening' section (where 'weak' or 'partial' students represented only 38 % of the student results). This is why a special focus on reading skills will be necessary in a future version of ELC. The results here show that students have a serious problem with comprehension of written material in English. Such a problem is serious because this skill is vital for processing information at university level. It is for this reason that a greater focus on reading skills should be included in future English language courses at the University.

Figure 7: ELC students' performance in the IELTS speaking exam

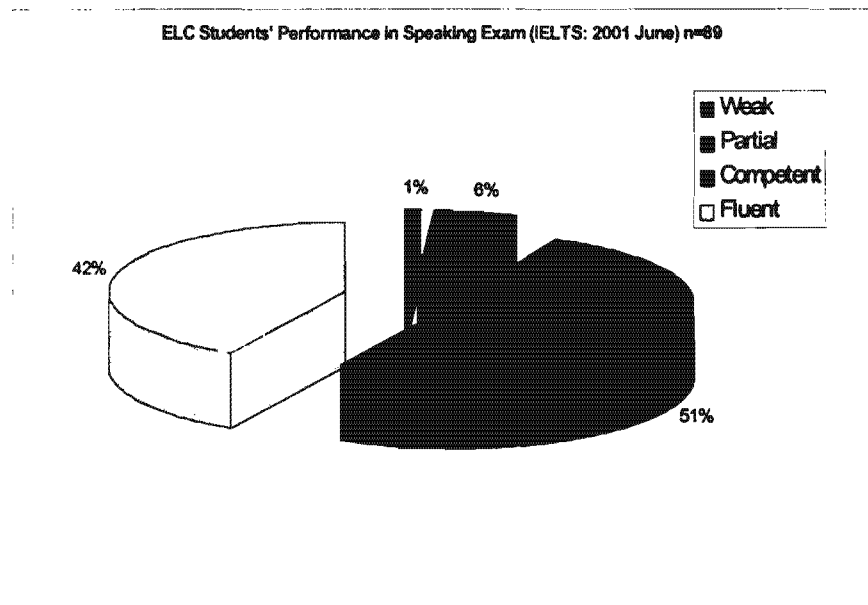
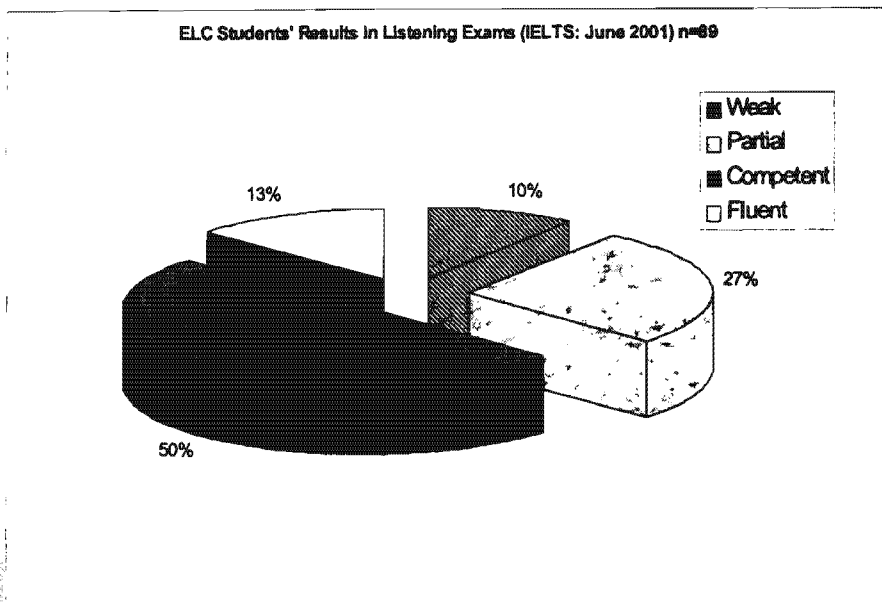


Figure 7 shows that most students (45 = 51%) were 'competent' in speaking, while a large number of students (37 = 42%) were 'fluent'. Only 5 students (6%) were 'partial' and one (1) student was 'weak'. These results indicate that speaking skills do not require great emphasis in future versions of the ELC. Nevertheless, students may not feel competent in speaking in professional situations like a job interview, for example. It may be informative to investigate whether they require instruction and practice in specific, context-based speaking situations.

Figure 7: ELC students' performance in the IELTS listening exam



With regard to the IELTS listening examination (Figure 8), most students (44 = 50%) were 'competent', while a relatively high percentage of students (24 = 27%) were 'partial'. 11 students (13%) were 'fluent', while 10% (9 students) were 'weak'. This examination revealed that the range of students' listening competencies (from 'weak' to 'fluent') is wide. While not all students require instruction in listening skills, over one third of all students do require it. Some provision should be made within future versions of the ELC for these students. It might be possible to combine listening exercises with other skills (grammatical competence and/or writing skills), so that some students could concentrate on 'listening' while more competent students focus on other skills as part of the same exercise.

The data that emerged from the process of IELTS and ELC testing highlighted several areas of concern which might otherwise have been overlooked in our envisioned re-planning of the ELC. First, reading skills were found to be weakest in most students taking the IELTS tests, and this suggested the need for more attention to developing such skills within the already implicit focus of a range of text genres, and within the broader framework of other language work. It was consequently decided that the mode and form of ELC assessment should be

rethought, to move from language-feature recognition and explication, to an even more explicit and meaningful link between pedagogy and content.

Second, listening skills were weaker than writing skills, a fact not anticipated from our own 'common sense' knowledge of students' needs, and suggesting the need for audio skills' development. Audio skills might be developed by means of listening exercises along the lines developed by IELTS (video and cassette recordings of conversations, reports, etc.).

Conclusion

This article began by examining a portion of the literature on language curriculum development in South Africa with the intention of contextualising and critiquing a new initiative called the English Language Course at the University of Natal.

Two related processes were involved in this critical reflection. The first of these is the process of contextualisation. New language curriculum development ought ordinarily to be located explicitly within a broader national and international framework of other related research. Consequently, the process of designing an English language course ought to make reference to research emerging from language pedagogy, linguistics, and curriculum studies. While I have not been able to contrast findings emerging from students' academic achievement in the ELC with similar initiatives elsewhere, I have been able to demonstrate how research from such initiatives might be strategically employed in the design and formulation of a language curriculum.

The second is the process of comparative testing by reporting on students' IELTS and ELC test results. The team hopes to have established an informative data base which, in addition to the qualitative data on students' writing and perceptions of the ELC, can be accessed by other institutions. This data base will be informative in the sense that critical reflection is an enabling process which arises out of a need for knowledge of how to respond better to all students' language needs in English.

School of Education
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Appendix 1: Contents for ELC (2000-2001)

Week 1	Introduction to <i>Our Family</i> by Hettie Adams (1988) Time: Simple Present/Past
Week 2	Introduction to <i>The Transmission of Sound</i> by E.H. Glendinning (1980) Time: Present Perfect/Future Perfect
Week 3	Introduction to <i>English in Education</i> by Róbert J. Balfour (1998) Time: Continuous Aspect and Verbs
Week 4	Introduction to <i>Horoscopes and Travel</i> by Matthew Shum (2000) Modals and Register
Week 5	Introduction to <i>Violence</i> by Ahmed Essop (1990) Modals and the Future Aspect
Week 6	Introduction to <i>The Bill of Rights</i> in <i>The Constitution</i> (1995) Modals and Active and Passive
Week 7	Introduction to <i>The Institutional and</i> in <i>Financial Report: University of Natal</i> (1996- 1997) Complex and Compound Sentences
Week 8	Introduction to <i>Chickenpox</i> by Don R. Powell (1999) Nominal Groups and Clauses
Week 9	Introduction to <i>The Advertisement</i> in <i>The South African Auto Trader</i> (2000) Clauses and Conjunctions
Week 10	Introduction to <i>The Sisters</i> by Pauline Smith (1990) Clauses and Conjunctions
Week 11	Introduction to <i>An Interview with Breytenbach</i> by Illeana Dimitriu (1997) Direct and Indirect Speech
Week 12	Introduction to <i>Africa's Urban Past</i> by Anderson & Rathbone (2000) Articles/Prepositions

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