

The story of a narrative: Teaching and assessing English writing in a township school

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The new language curriculum in South Africa recommends that extended writing be taught through a combination of text-based (or genre) and process approaches. This article reports on a study of the teaching and assessment of narrative writing in English as a first additional language (FAL) at a time of curriculum change. The setting is a Cape Flats township school. In focusing on a story written by a Grade 9 learner and assessed by her teacher, the study sought evidence of the use of text-based and process approaches. The theoretical frame is informed by genre theory, which draws on Systemic Functional Linguistics and social constructivist approaches to language learning. A qualitative research paradigm was used. Data obtained for this case study included the learner's writing, interviews with the teacher, and classroom observation. The study finds very little evidence of a scaffolded approach to the teaching and assessment of writing, and explores the constraints on the realisation of the curriculum cycle in English FAL. These relate to the teacher's understanding of writing as well as to material conditions in township schools.

Introduction and problem statement

In a globalising world increasingly networked through multiple modes of literacy, writing is becoming arguably more important than it ever was. For schooling systems, effective engagement with the contemporary world of literacy requires learners to be critical and knowledgeable interpreters as well as producers of a range of socially-useful texts. Increasingly, learners' chances of success in the knowledge economy, as well as their social standing, will depend on their repertoire of skills with literacy, understood as the ability to comprehend, reconstruct, and engage texts in a culturally accepted way (Cope & Kalantzis 1993). In general, what is regarded as culturally accepted is both context-specific and subject to change.

For the schooling system in South Africa, writing has long been a staple form of assessment in language subjects, particularly in English. Two decades into the post-apartheid era, writing continues to present a major educational challenge across the system. Following South Africa's transition to democratic rule in the mid-1990s, the new but somewhat alien outcomes-based education, instantiated by Curriculum 2005, replaced the traditional aims-and-objectives approach. It was a predictable failure (Jansen 1999) also in its subsequent guise as the Revised National Curriculum Statement (RNCS) (DoE 2002). One of the most visible indicators of systemic underachievement in the post-apartheid period has been learner performance in key areas of the curriculum. Overall, South African learners have fared poorly in high-profile international benchmark tests of literacy or language over the past decade. These have been accompanied by low scores on domestic systemic assessments at all levels. Furthermore, persisting societal inequality has led to a 'bimodal distribution of achievement' between an affluent minority and an indigent majority, an inequality of outcomes that mirrors the 'two economies' in the country (Fleisch 2008). These trends resulted in much public hand-wringing and forced government into a second review of the curriculum. Beginning in 2009, this process resulted in the current Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) (DBE 2011).

For purposes of this article, the most pertinent language/literacy results are those at Senior Phase level. The Annual National Assessment (ANA) results paint a bleak picture. The Grade 9 test for first additional language (FAL), in addition to measuring basic reading ability, requires learners to write several short pieces. In 2013 the average Grade 9 score for FAL (in practice English for most learners) was 33% (DBE 2013), indicating that most learners cannot read and write at acceptable levels in English. Given the near-ubiquitous, albeit constrained 'choice' for English as a teaching medium across the system, problems of academic literacy are bound to extend to other areas of the curriculum. The ANA results serve to confirm those from a large-scale Western Cape study

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of Grade 8 literacy performance, which found that most learners across the various language backgrounds (Afrikaans, isiXhosa, English) could hardly read or write, with few prospects of reaching higher education (cited in Heugh 2013). This parlous state of affairs echoes Hendricks' (2008) finding of the paucity of extended writing at Grade 5 level, even in a well-resourced school. Taken together, the results suggest that the teaching of writing in language/literacy is in crisis throughout the phases of compulsory schooling, and that teacher education in literacy teaching methods may be the single most effective intervention (Wright 2012). Amongst the reasons advanced for the systemic underachievement in literacy and language are the lack of fit between home and school languages, the lack of a culture of reading, and the effectiveness (or otherwise) of teaching methods and assessment practices – including the absence of genre pedagogy (Kerfoot & Van Heerden 2015). It is this last factor that is the focus of the present article, which is based on Akinyeye's Master's thesis (2013).

It is against the above background that the present study seeks to locate itself. In what follows we present a case study of narrative writing at a time of curriculum change in South Africa. Following a brief outline of the conceptual framework and the research design, the article discusses a piece of narrative writing produced by a Grade 9 learner, and the way in which it was assessed by her teacher. The teacher's own views of the writing process are presented in the form of interview extracts. We end by summing up the constraints on the realisation of a genre approach to writing, as identified in this study.

Conceptual framework

Genre pedagogy has its origins in Hallidayan Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), a theory of language in social context. According to SFL, any act of (oral, written, signed, or multimodal) communication has content, establishes relationships, and is organised in particular ways. That is, linguistic resources are deployed to realise ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings, termed metafunctions, which co-occur in any piece of discourse (text) but are amenable to separate analysis (Martin & White 2005:7–9). SFL has been influential in shaping applied language studies over the past two decades, particularly in Australia and North America, and has been the foundation of genre theory:

Genres have been referred to as social processes because members of a culture interact with each other to achieve them; as goal oriented because they have evolved to get things done; and as staged because it usually takes more than one step for participants to achieve their goals (Martin, Christie & Rothery 1987:59).

The above definition of genre as a staged, goal-oriented, social process indicates that human interaction is based on the use of distinct, recognisable, and accepted patterns of behaviour in a particular social setting for a specific purpose at a particular time. Genre as the general function of text is thus located within a particular culture in relation to other texts circulating in the culture (Eggins 2004:55).

A key theoretical resource for genre theory is Vygotsky's (1978) psycho-socio-cultural theory of development, in terms of which learning is a process of social interaction mediated by a 'more knowledgeable other' such as an adult or a more capable peer. In this mediation model, learning as guided problem-solving occurs in the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky 1978:86). One implication is that learners be enabled to draw on their own sociocultural and linguistic resources when writing, whilst being 'scaffolded' onto the formal registers of schooling genres. In terms of extended writing tasks, the learner would need to receive feedback at the formative or drafting stage of the writing process. In Hyland's (2007) explication, genre pedagogy is characterised by an approach that is explicit, systematic, needs-based, supportive, empowering, critical, and consciousness-raising. In other words, learning to write is a social activity that is needs-oriented, requires explicit outcomes and expectations, and involves learning to use language (2007:150–153).

Curriculum policy and language teaching approaches

The present study was carried out at a time of curriculum change, when schools were caught between the old National Curriculum Statement and the new, with teachers already attending CAPS workshops. Various continuities and discontinuities between the two language curricula have made for an uneasy transition. As pointed out by Hendricks (2008), genre theory found its way into the first post-apartheid language curriculum alongside communicative language teaching and the process approach to writing. Curriculum 2005 (1997) and the RNCS (2002–2003), built around assessable learning outcomes, were marked by theoretical eclecticism (Hendricks 2008:32). There was fuzziness around the meaning of 'genre' and how grammar could be integrated into factual writing. The learning outcome for languages (FAL, Grade 9) used a genre discourse, and required learners to 'be able to write different kinds of factual and imaginative texts for a wide range of purposes'. Yet its realisation as assessment standards emphasised writing as process, and was reminiscent of the earlier personal growth model (Hendricks 2008:32).

In their critique of the CAPS curriculum, Dornbrack and Dixon (2014) note the problems in the continued conflation of the process approach, with its cognitive-individualist bias, and the social-contextual approach of genre theory. In the process approach, learners are expected to follow different steps, namely planning, drafting, editing, proofreading, rewriting, and presentation of the text (DBE 2011). However, this occurs without sufficient attention being given to the social purpose of the text, or to the social-interactive nature of the drafting process. Furthermore, the process approach with its emphasis on cognition and individual skill is somewhat problematic in a second-language context where learners are left to develop their writing skills with little input from the teacher or an awareness of the social context of the text. What L2 learners need is interaction around the drafting

stage, including formative feedback from their teacher. By contrast, a genre approach to writing, although superficially similar, encodes these two aspects – note the focus on *deciding on the purpose and audience of the text* (our italics), brainstorming, consulting relevant sources, producing a draft, reading the draft and *getting feedback from peers and the teacher*, editing and proofreading, and the production of a final draft (DoE n.d.). The mention of both approaches may be somewhat confusing to teachers, however, as few may be theoretically well versed enough to make meaning of them (cf. Kerfoot & Van Heerden 2015).

Research method and design

The research site, a secondary school in the township of Delft, is situated some 30 km from central Cape Town. Delft is a new working-class suburb (established 1989) with a non-racial profile and a population of 152 030 in 2011 (City of Cape Town 2013). Witbooi High (a pseudonym) was founded in 1995. It is a no-fee (quintile 3) school with 1168 learners, of which 345 were in Grade 9 in 2012. The majority of learners and teachers are Afrikaans mother-tongue speakers, whilst a considerable number speak isiXhosa. The school is a parallel-medium institution, with Afrikaans and English serving as the two languages of learning and teaching for Afrikaans-speakers and Xhosa-speakers, respectively. English as a subject is offered at both home language (HL) and FAL levels, with the majority of learners taking English FAL.

A qualitative research paradigm was used because the study involved an in-depth look at human subjects (Henning, van Rensburg & Smit 2004) and human (inter)action in its natural setting. Qualitative research methods such as participant interviews and classroom observations were used, as these correspond with the interpretive paradigm. The focus was on generating theoretically-informed understanding from patterns, and using fieldwork to discover conceptual complexity (cf. Suter 2012:347).

Research participants were purposively selected, and comprised a bilingual (English or Afrikaans) qualified teacher of English FAL and her Grade 9 learners. Thus samples of learners' written work were collected from two strong, two average, and two weak performers per Grade 9 English FAL class, as identified by the teacher. It was felt that a random selection would have run the risk of obtaining null data.

The research site was visited twice per week over a 4-month period. Data were collected through audio-taped records of classroom observations, unstructured and semi-structured interviews of participants, and relevant documents from the participants' written texts.

Thematic analysis was used, and the interviews together with the lesson observations of the participants were transcribed and coded according to the emerging themes in relation to the research questions. Data analysis was performed whilst data collection was still in progress. Learners' written texts were

analysed in relation to curriculum requirements as well as insights deriving from theory. Care was taken to conduct the research in an ethical manner commensurate with accepted ethical principles and procedures.

Data presentation and analysis

The focus of the study is on essay writing, a key schooling genre and one that requires more lengthy elaboration than text types such as the invitation, the friendly letter, and diary entries. The narrative essay, in particular, lends itself to the analysis of how learners are able to express themselves in writing, and also to gauging the extent to which teachers follow the RNCS guidelines in the teaching of writing. According to the RNCS, narrative requires learners to 'relate a story' in response to a stimulus. The following assessment criteria are specified:

- Introduction catches the interest of the reader
- An appropriate setting is created
- Characterisation is convincing
- Sequence of events is logical
- Pace is maintained throughout the story
- Events build to a climax
- The conclusion brings the story to a satisfying end/opens other possibilities (DoE n.d.:56).

Although this list of seven criteria represents the conventional elements of narrative, it falls short of providing an adequate description of the genre in three respects. Firstly, it does not identify the social purpose of narrative as entertaining and instructing through reflection on experience, in which individuals encounter problematic events that are resolved positively or negatively. Secondly, it omits what genre theory would regard as the key stages of narrative, viz. the orientation, complication of events, evaluation, and resolution (cf. Macken-Horarik 2002:21–23). Thirdly, no guidance is provided on the linguistic features of the genre, including how to achieve cohesion in paragraph structure. The remainder of this section presents and analyses one learner's writing at Witbooi High, and the manner in which it was assessed.

Zenobia's story

In the English FAL Grade 9 class of Ms Petersen (a pseudonym), the writing chosen for analysis was that of a particularly hard-working learner, whom we shall call Zenobia, who had a complete set of written texts and who was always punctual in class. One piece was in response to the teacher's instruction: 'Write a story entitled "my dream came true" – meaning, presumably, a narrative essay. Zenobia duly followed the teacher's instructions, using planning (a mind map) before writing a rough draft, followed by a final draft. It is worth pointing out here that at no stage did the teacher refer to any of the structural features of the narrative essay. Instead, the focus was exclusively on process. We shall return to this issue, below. In what follows, each of the stages of Zenobia's essay are briefly presented and discussed.

Zenobia's mind map (Figure 1) was evidently intended to generate thoughts on her proposed topic, with the title at the centre and the main ideas (to be developed into paragraphs) branching out from there. Yet the mind map is clearly under-developed in relation to the RNCS' seven features of narrative, and it is hardly surprising that Zenobia's essay ended up bearing little resemblance to it. One can infer that she had not been oriented in the purpose of a mind map, or in how to make the link between it and her first draft. Tellingly, Zenobia's mind map shows no evidence of written feedback by the teacher.

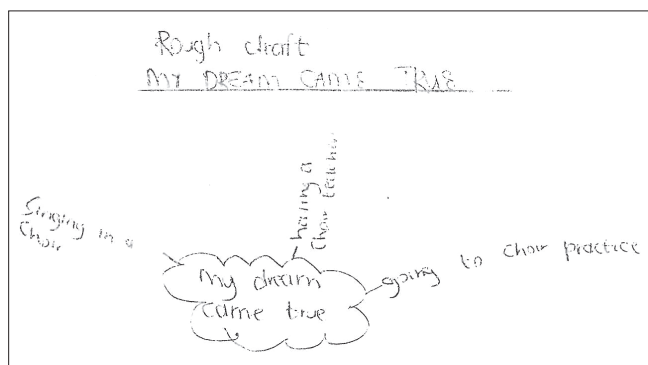
The text is about a topic that is familiar enough: pursuit of a personal ambition, involving obstacles that need to be overcome, resulting in character development. However, the first draft (Figure 2) falls short of the four basic stages of narrative (orientation, complication, evaluation, resolution), and has only some of the structural features specified by the RNCS. At 175 words it is also a little short of the required length of 180–200 words for a Grade 9 narrative essay for FAL. It was not marked or commented on in writing by her teacher.

It is therefore unsurprising that Zenobia's final draft (Figure 2) differs little from the first. The only changes occur in two places in the second paragraph. In the first instance, '...would get me a musical lesson or person who will teach to sing...' has been improved to '...would get me a singing

teacher like a person who will teach me singing...' (s5). The second change involves the elaboration of '... I got more better' to 'I got courage and I sang very well and he was pleased with me'. 'As he was teaching me, I got better and better' (s7–8). The second change provides additional information whilst improving cohesion without, however, adding much by way of ideational content. Taken together the changes do little to lift what is essentially a personal recount to the level of the narrative that was required.

The text lacks several crucial structural elements. Firstly, it is divided into only two paragraphs, of which the first can be said to represent the orientation and the second the complication and resolution, when a minimum of three would have been better. The first paragraph begins with a clear opening statement ('When I was young singing was the only thing I thought about' – s1). However, the paragraph contains no reference to the title and no connection between the dream and singing, leaving the reader to infer the link. There is little information about setting (time, place), and no awareness of reader expectations. The characterisation is sparse. We learn about Zenobia's love of (gospel) singing and the pastor's encouragement, but only superficially. In the second paragraph Zenobia mentions her parents' sacrifices, and we find out about her dream of becoming a singer. The complication is hinted at ('I was struggling at first because it was not easy' – s7) but not expatiated upon as she does not illustrate what was difficult about the task and what she did to emerge victorious. Because there is no real complication the resolution is similarly unsatisfying ('but as he was teaching me I got courage and I sang very well' – s7). Although the sequence of events is logical enough, specificity is lacking and could have been achieved by focusing on a particular incident or event. As a result, the story lacks tension and pace, and the putative climax (leading the worship) is a bit flat – as is the conclusion, in which Zenobia shares her joy at having fulfilled her dream. At best, therefore, the narrative structure is only partly realised (Table 1).

The linguistic features of the composition are partially controlled. A clause analysis reveals that Zenobia uses a fairly high number of subordinate clauses (15/38), resulting in a hypotaxis rate of 39.5%. Of these, the majority (10) are adverb clauses, with 6 temporal clauses ('as I/he...', 'when I...'), 2 causal and 2 conditional subordinates. There are also three noun clauses and two adjective (relative) clauses. Zenobia's use of subordination suggests that her writing has moved beyond beginner level to an intermediate level of proficiency – what Raison, Dewsbury and Rivalland (1997), on their writing developmental continuum, would term conventional writing. Yet this impression is offset by the frequent use of 'speech on paper' (cf. Hendricks 2008), such as in the concatenation of clauses resulting in run-on sentences (cf. repeated conjunctive use of 'and'), the conversational tone, and the limited vocabulary. The heavy use of temporal adverb clauses and the repeated use of 'and' index a linear, chronological rendition that is more characteristic of an (oral) recount than a narrative. In this respect her writing can be described as unsophisticated and basic.



Source: Akinyeye, C., 2013, 'Investigating approaches to the teaching of writing in English as a second language in senior phase classrooms in the Western Cape', MEd dissertation, University of the Western Cape, p. 70

FIGURE 1: Zenobia's mind map prior to writing the first draft.

FINAL DRAFT
MY DREAM CAME TRUE
1] When I was young singing was the only thing I thought about. 2] I loved singing so much when I was in church, even if I am sad if I sing everything turns out perfect. 3] And my pastor enjoyed my singing everytime I sang he would be all smiles and that gave me the courage. 4] As I grew up I got more familiar with people there was no shyness everything was top. 5] My parents saw that singing was my passion they told me that they would get me a singing teacher like a person who will teach me singing and they got me one. 6] We worked well together. 7] He taught me and I was struggling at first because it was not easy but as he was teaching me I got courage and I sang very well and he was pleased with me. 8] As he was teaching me I got better and better. 9] And now I am a worship leading singer in my church. 10] I stand there in front very proud because I know how my dream began and my fellow church mates tell me that they enjoy my singing and I am very proud of my self.

Source: Akinyeye, C., 2013, 'Investigating approaches to the teaching of writing in English as a second language in senior phase classrooms in the Western Cape', MEd dissertation, University of the Western Cape, p. 72

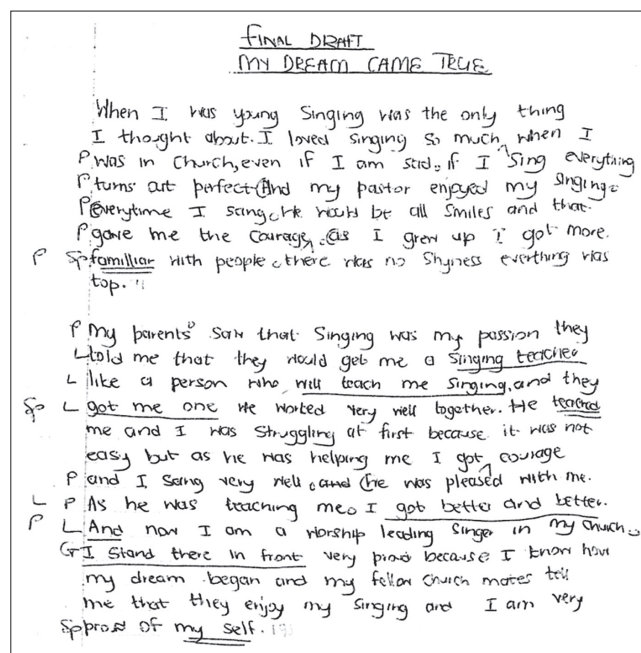
FIGURE 2: Transcript of Zenobia's final draft (with added numbering).

TABLE 1: Theme-rheme analysis of Zenobia's final draft, with added clause numbering.

Clause	Theme		Rheme
	Textual	Topical	
1.	When	I	was young//
2.		singing	was the only thing//
3.	[that]	I	thought about.//
4.		I	loved singing so much//
5.	when	I	was in church//
6.	even if	I	am sad//
7.	if	I	sing//
8.		everything	turns out perfect.//
9.	And	my pastor	enjoyed my singing//
10.	everytime	I	sang//
11.		he	would be all smiles//
12.	and	that	gave me the courage.//
13.	As	I	grew up//
14.		I	got more familiar with people//
15.		there	was no shyness//
16.		everything	was top.//
17.		My parents	saw//
18.	that	singing	was my passion//
19.		they	told me//
20.	that	they	would get me a singing teacher like a person//
21.		who	will teach me singing//
22.	and	they	got me one.//
23.		We	worked well together.//
24.		He	taught me//
25.	and	I	was struggling at first//
26.	because	it	was not easy//
27.	but as	he	was teaching me//
28.		I	got courage//
29.	and	I	sang very well//
30.	and	he	was pleased with me.//
31.	As	he	was teaching me//
32.		I	got better and better.//
33.	And now	I	am a worship leading singer in my church.//
34.		I	stand there in front very proud//
35.	because	I	know how my dream began//
36.	and	my fellow church mates	tell me//
37.	that	they	enjoy my singing//
38.	and	I	am very proud of my self.//

Source: Akinyeye, C., 2013, 'Investigating approaches to the teaching of writing in English as a second language in senior phase classrooms in the Western Cape', MEd dissertation, University of the Western Cape, p. 72

With one exception ('taught' for 'taught', s7), the use of verb forms is accurate. However, use of tenses is patchy. Although Zenobia largely manages to use the past tense in recounting past events, and the present tense when reflecting on her current feelings (beginning with 'Now I am a worship leading singer' – s9), her writing is less secure in other places. Thus in 'I loved singing so much when I was in church, even if I am sad if I sing everything turns out perfect' (s2), the use of tense is erratic, shifting from past tense ('loved', 'was') to conjunctive/present ('if I am sad'). This is compounded by one of several syntax errors. The paucity of punctuation results in sentences which are confusing, necessitating a rereading (s2, s3); others have several ideas lumped together that should have been subdivided (s4, s5, s7, s10). Two sentences (s3, s9) begin with 'and', suggesting unfamiliarity



Source: Akinyeye, C., 2013, 'Investigating approaches to the teaching of writing in English as a second language in senior phase classrooms in the Western Cape', MEd dissertation, University of the Western Cape, p. 72

FIGURE 3: Zenobia's final draft, marked.

with a conventional prohibition in English composition. The probable influence of the HL (Afrikaans) is suggested at syntactical level (*I stand there in front...* s10) as well as at lexical level, in the repetition of *better* in *better and better* (s8). Although Zenobia's vocabulary is no more than adequate, her spelling is generally good: the two spelling errors ('familiar', 'my self') do not disrupt the flow or impede understanding. Overall, therefore, Zenobia's essay reveals some promise but also several shortcomings in structure as well as at the level of linguistic features. This raises questions about the type and timing of feedback she received.

The impression of a writer caught between early writing and conventional writing is confirmed by an analysis of mode (realised through the textual metafunction) and tenor (interpersonal metafunction) (Figure 3). A theme-rheme analysis reveals a complete absence of interpersonal themes; that is, it signals the writer's lack of awareness of the reader's expectation of emotional engagement in what is after all a highly personal topic. Of the 38 topical themes, by far the largest number (17) consist of the first person 'I', highlighting the subjective experience of Zenobia the writer and her personal 'voice'. And yet the tenor of the text is far from monoglot. A considerable number of topical themes introduce 'significant others' in Zenobia's life: her parents (mentioned four times), her singing teacher (five), her pastor (two) and her church mates (two). A closer look at the distribution of topical themes shows that the teller's 'I' is dominant in the first and last thirds of the story, whereas the voices of these significant others dominate the middle third of the text. Their views emerge in several of the respective rhemes, and are interwoven with Zenobia's own voice; that is, the text uses a noticeable amount of projection, or reported speech. Given the general lack of sophistication in the writing, this structural

arrangement produces an overtly heteroglot text, i.e. one which foregrounds sources of attitude in interlocutors other than the writer.

Thus we read about her pastor's enjoyment of her singing (clause 9), her parents' supportiveness of her singing (17–22), her teacher's pleasure at the improvement in her singing (30), and her fellow churchmates' appraisal of her singing (36–37). This last instance of heteroglossia is particularly interesting for its use of projection: '...and my fellow churchmates tell me that they enjoy my singing'. Here the projecting clause 'tell me' introduces the projected (noun) clause 'that they enjoy my singing'. Such heteroglossia indicates a degree of emotional maturity in Zenobia the person, who is aware of her socially networked existence. Unfortunately, this maturity is not fully realised in her writing – mainly, we would argue, as a result of a lack of feedback.

Assessing Zenobia's essay

It is worth recalling that the curriculum explicitly links feedback to formative assessment, or 'assessment for learning', in which learners are given 'thought-provoking questions to stimulate learner thinking and discussion' (DoE n.d.:2). In keeping with this developmental approach to writing, the teacher is to give constructive feedback to enable the learner to grow (DoE 2002:114). A key assessment standard for writing in the languages learning area (Grades 7–9) is that the learner 'uses feedback to revise, edit, and rewrite' (DoE 2002:105). Accordingly, the characteristics of continuous assessment are 'appropriate questioning, focusing the teacher's oral and written comments on what was intended to be achieved by an assessment activity, and encouragement to a learner' (DoE 2002:115). The document adds that 'feedback is more effective when combined with comments. There is more likely to be an improvement in achievement when learners are given written feedback rather than marks only' (DoE 2002:118).

In light of the above, what type of feedback did Zenobia receive on her draft, and at what stage did she receive it? The answer, unfortunately, is too little, too late. The only written comments received were on the final draft, and thus had a summative rather than a formative function. In terms of the process approach to writing, the comments and suggestions should have come earlier, at the drafting stage, as there is relatively little formative value in providing comments to the learner after the fact.

An analysis of the teacher's markings on Zenobia's final product (Figure 3) reveals the following:

- P (Punctuation): eight instances identified – mostly missing commas and full stops
- Sp (Spelling): three instances, of which one ('tached' for 'taught') is more a verb form error than a spelling mistake
- G (Grammar): one instance, pointing to an incomplete clause ('I stand there in front')

- L: five instances. Presumably a catch-all 'language' category that subsumes inappropriate use of vocabulary/word form ('a singing teacher'), incorrect tense or aspect ('who will teach me singing'), the wrong register or inappropriate expression ('they got me one'; 'I got better and better'), and inappropriate use of a conjunction ('and') to start a sentence.

Thus the in-text corrections were largely limited to punctuation and grammar. As such they constitute inadequate feedback with regard to structure, cohesion, and context. In terms of the genre approach (or what the CAPS curriculum refers to as a text-based approach), written comments on the draft should have gone beyond punctuation (syntax) and spelling to include other assessment criteria such as those identified on the departmental assessment rubric that was attached to the learner's marked final essay. These include register, tone, audience awareness and purpose; originality; paragraphing and development of topic; vocabulary; planning and coherence; editing; and proofreading. Although the teacher has, in our view, given an appropriate mark of 17/30 to Zenobia's final product, the mark is more a reflection on the process that was (not) followed than on Zenobia's ability as a writer. Had Zenobia received feedback at the planning (mind map) and drafting stages, it could well have become formative and she would have learnt more about writing narratives. It is troubling as well as ironic that Ms Petersen's avowed focus on writing as process, observed at the start of the lesson, was not followed through.

It is evident, therefore, that Zenobia was not given enough guidance on how to write a narrative. In particular, she was denied formative comments and suggestions on her mind map and, crucially, on her first draft – something that serves to disadvantage all but the best-performing learners. Several of the limitations of structure and of linguistic feature could otherwise have been overcome. As we have seen, the assessment standards envisage that learners use feedback to revise and rewrite their text for the final draft (Murray 2009); in Zenobia's case this was not adhered to. It is troubling that the restricted nature of the feedback, and the belated stage at which it was provided, combine to limit opportunities for the learner to develop her critical thinking, structure her ideas, and thus improve her writing.

Constraints on feedback

Two main reasons for the lack of feedback when assessing writing suggest themselves. The first has to do with an unwinnable numbers game involving teacher–pupil (learner) ratios in relation to the quantity of assessment tasks. When asked about class size in relation to learner performance, Ms Petersen states matter-of-factly:

"Because I have such a lot of learners, I have about 60 in each class, so for me to take in the rough draft and mark it, it is going to be hard for me to mark'.

Ms Petersen's point is simply that excessively large classes undermine the possibility of providing formative feedback.

The absence of essential scaffolding at the drafting stage renders the process approach to writing inoperable. What is implied, rather than stated explicitly is that the number of assessment tasks is unrealistic under conditions of overcrowding¹. The teacher has to rush through her marking to keep pace with the curriculum demands.

A second constraint, we would argue, is the teacher's own (partial) understanding of approaches to writing outlined in the curriculum. This is hardly surprising, given that the policy is incomplete, patchy, with insufficient explanation of the social purpose, organisational structure, and linguistic features of the different genres (cf. Hendricks 2008). Small wonder, therefore, that Ms Petersen tends to emphasise the time-honoured but limited concepts of introduction, body, and conclusion:

'okay before you give them a whole lot of writing let them first practice and do introduction and conclusion before they start on the body before they start to do the main part of the essay and obviously then you are done with the text'.

These views suggest that the genre-based approach is unfamiliar. Ms Petersen's tried-and-tested approach to writing was borne out by lesson observations. At no stage was the schematic structure of narrative explicitly taught, nor was the modelling stage of the curriculum cycle used (cf. Derewianka 1990). For example, in her teaching of 'story' the terms orientation, complication, evaluation, and resolution were not used, nor was the concept of narrative formally introduced. It is our contention that the overt teaching of the schematic structures of the different genres and their social purpose, through the metalanguage, is a precondition for meaningful writing (see also Kerfoot & Van Heerden 2015).

There is thus a glaring disparity between the curriculum requirements with regard to process and genre (or what are termed text-based) approaches to writing, on the one hand, and the teacher's understanding of these and her classroom practice, on the other. In view of the problems involved in the interpretation and implementation of the curriculum, as outlined above, teachers cannot be held solely responsible for the poor performance of their learners in English additional-language writing.

Conclusion

In this article we have provided evidence of the potential of as well as the constraints on language teaching at a time of curriculum change, with particular reference to the teaching and assessment of narrative writing at Grade 9 level. As Cross, Mungadi and Rouhani (2002) have pointed out, one of the flaws of the curriculum change in the post-apartheid era was its indifference over the issue of overcrowded learning spaces, which created limited possibilities for learning in the classroom. This failure of educational provision undoubtedly contributes to the mediocrity of learners' writing. The required pace of curriculum coverage, combined with virtually

1. For the Grade 9 year, the current curriculum for First Additional Language stipulates 10 assessment tasks, 2 tests, a mid-year exam and a final exam.

unmanageable learner-teacher ratios in some schools constrain teachers from giving sufficient individual attention to struggling learners. It is easy to see Ms Petersen's point that learner performance is negatively affected by the lack of individualised attention the teacher is able to provide during writing lessons. However, a better-trained teacher may well have been able to overcome some of these constraints. It is our contention that as a result of having only a superficial understanding of the theories that underpin the teaching of writing, the teacher in this study is unable to realise the required combination of genre-based and process approaches to writing advocated in the language curriculum. This has self-evident implications for in-service as well as pre-service teacher development, for which government and the universities have respective responsibility.

In this article we have argued that several converging factors are responsible for Zenobia's under-developed essay. The pivotal ones appear to be a less-than-coherent language curriculum and inadequately trained teachers, exacerbated by unmanageable learner-teacher ratios and the consequent lack of time available for individualised attention during the writing process. Until all three issues are addressed, the undoubted potential of writers such as Zenobia and the generation she represents is unlikely to be realised.

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Competing interests

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Authors' contributions

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