Language attitudes and language assessment in the classroom – an applied language attitude study on Black South African English (BSAE)

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1. Introduction

Just before the turn of the century a research project was started in South Africa with the aim to investigate BSAE (Black South African English) from various (socio)linguistic aspects. This project is remarkable in two ways: firstly, because it involves a good part of all South African linguists and some international linguists interested in South African English and, secondly, because it is the first research project of this size solely concerned with BSAE, the English used by South Africans whose L1s are Bantu languages (cf. de Klerk 1999: 311). As this group of people makes up about 80% of the South African population, it is high time that a comprehensive linguistic description of their English was made available and placed next to the already existing descriptions of other varieties of English in South Africa (e.g. de Klerk (ed.) 1996, Lanham and Macdonald 1979, Mesthrie 1992). As part of this research project on BSAE we are concerned with how BSAE is evaluated and which consequences this might have for its users.

In the following we will describe our pilot study on language attitudes in the classroom (see 4.) and its implications for the next phase of our study (see 5.). Before we can turn to the pilot study itself, though, we will offer a brief description of the educational language policies in South Africa, focusing specifically on what is now termed historically disadvantaged schools, i.e. the

1 Correspondence address: ute.smit@univie.ac.at
2 This project, entitled "Some phonetic features of BSAE and their social dimensions" and run from Potchefstroom University, South Africa, in part financed the pilot study reported on here. We are very grateful to the project's organisers, in particular Daan Wissing, for supporting us in this way and making this study possible.
schools attended by most BSAE speakers (see 2.). This will be followed by a
description of what forms the ulterior motivation of our study (see 3.), namely
the changing status of BSAE (see 3.1.) and the link between language atti-
tudes and language assessment (see 3.2.).

2. A brief outline of educational language policies

In the wake of South Africa's fundamental political turn-around of the 1990s,
societal institutions have, quite understandably, undergone substantial
changes. With regard to schooling, the first and most urgent step was to abol-
ish the apartheid structure of separate educational systems for the previously
legally entrenched racial groups with their different rights and obligations.
While legislative action could be taken fairly soon after the end of apartheid
(cf. South African Schools Act, 1996) and all South African schools were le-
gally declared open to all pupils in 1996, the reality of school attendance by
racial background has not changed that dramatically from the “old” days. The
formerly black schools are still attended by black pupils and the mixing of the
school-going population has happened in a small percentage of all schools
only, most of which used to be reserved for white pupils in the past. In other
words, the previously advantaged schools have become mixed, while the large
majority of previously disadvantaged schools are in reality still what they
have always been: for disadvantaged black pupils only.

A second, very central area that was identified as needing change were the
curricula and syllabi, which have also seen an impressive amount of devel-
opment. One aspect repeatedly dealt with and particularly relevant to us is the
question of which language(s) should or could function as mediums of in-
struction. This discussion must be seen in connection with, on the one hand,
the multilinguality of the country – the constitution of 1994 recognises 11 of-
official languages and there are, of course, many more spoken in the country –
and, on the other hand, with past developments. In the old system, education
through the mother-tongue was the credo of the first four years, but the re-
maining school years could then only be done in either English or, less fre-
quently, Afrikaans. One of these two then official languages suddenly became
medium of instruction after having been taught as subject from grade 1. The
change-over was abrupt and without any easing-in or bridging measures
whatsoever. That such a system is, to put it mildly, educationally unsound,
has clearly come to the fore in two respects (for a detailed discussion of the
system's negative implications cf. Macdonald and Burroughs 1991): the low
pass rates from grade 5 onwards in the relevant schools and generally shared
highly negative attitudes to L1 education. Clearly, both developments had
more than one reason, but the educational language policy played a big role in them as it, firstly, failed to equip the pupils with the necessary language proficiency in English and, secondly, perpetuated and strengthened the belief that education can only be gained through and in English. This has led to the still extremely wide-spread attitude that the Bantu languages are not good enough for education and should therefore not be used in this function.

The new policy concerning medium of instruction has tried to do away with this misfortunate set-up. Firstly, the top-down regulations have been replaced by bottom-up decisions; this means that schools and parents have a say in the language policy to be followed locally. Secondly, the change-over from one medium to another can now be done more smoothly; and, thirdly, L1s other than English (or Afrikaans) can be used as mediums of instruction as long as the school and parents wish to (cf. Language in Education Policy, 1997). Legislation, thus, has changed fundamentally; but reality – alas – has not: most schools have retained the old system and English is still their medium of instruction (cf. Alexander 2000, paras. 3-4). This means that the great majority of South Africans still receive their education in English; or, to be more precise, even when other languages are used in the classrooms out of sheer practicality, all the tests and exams have to be written in English. Educational success is thus still closely linked to proficiency in English.

For the schools of interest to us here – the historically disadvantaged schools – this means that the pupils, all of whom are L1 speakers of Bantu languages or even, as it is the case in the more rural areas, of one and the same Bantu language, are assessed on how they perform in English, or more precisely, in their respective manifestations of BSAE. In other words, how well they do in school depends very much not only on their own proficiency in English, but also on how the teachers evaluate their Englishes. It is the latter that we wish to investigate in more detail in our study.

3. Motivation

The motivation to undertake this study rests on two points of interest: firstly, the changing status of BSAE as the variety of English with the highest number of speakers in South Africa, but the least amount of research so far and, secondly, the relevance of language attitudes in education and, more specifically, the connection between teachers' attitudes and how they evaluate their pupils.
3.1. The changing status of Black South African English

While the label “BSAE” has been in use for quite some time already (cf. e.g. Lanham and Macdonald 1979), it has caused problems and repeatedly kindled debates for various reasons (cf. van Rooy 2000: ii). The most prominent argument against using this label has been that it perpetuates the rigid and racially based discriminatory system of the past. Besides this highly justified socio-political argument, the concept is also questionable for linguistic reasons: there is quite a mismatch between the seemingly homogeneous label and the extremely heterogeneous kind(s) of English it stands for. The defining criterion so far has been that the relevant group of speakers have Bantu language(s) as their first languages and that they use English as one of their second or other languages (cf. de Klerk 1999: 311). This implies that next to the normally found distinguishing within-group factors (e.g. sex, age, education, occupation) BSAE also covers distinctions caused by the two factors ‘various L1 languages’ and ‘cline of language proficiency’.

Put differently, BSAE covers the English(es) of people of various first language backgrounds, of highly differing levels of language proficiency and of highly differing ranges of language functions. This seems to be such an extremely heterogeneous mix that it is debatable whether a single label distorts reality rather than clarifies it. At the same time, the majority of users of English in South Africa are not monolingual English speakers, but highly proficient bilinguals with one or more Bantu languages as their home language(s). The English used by them can be seen as standing for the "unique linguistic melting pot [that] has been developing in this country" (van Rooy 2000: ii).

The resulting dilemma is far from dissolved and, unfortunately, we are also not able to offer a solution. What we want to do instead is to circumvent the whole question by leaving the more general considerations aside and move on to one manifestation of this English by focussing on education in historically disadvantaged schools, or, more precisely, on the ways actual users of English with Bantu languages as L1s – pupils and teachers – use and, more importantly, perceive the English they encounter at school.

With regard to the (changing) status of BSAE, the years before 1990 did not create a lot of scientific interest. While during apartheid times language attitude investigations were undertaken with all population groups, they generally concentrated on the South African language spectrum or on English varieties of white speakers (for an overview cf. Smit 1996: 62-71). The few studies of the ‘70s and ‘80s that included BSAE did so rather in passing, and unanimously attested it a low status. In parallel with the more general socio-political changes, the late 1980s brought a shift insofar as BSAE moved from
the periphery of research interest right to the core, i.e. BSAE speakers were asked to reveal their attitudes towards BSAE and other varieties (cf. Smit 1996: 88-92). These studies confirmed the very positive perceptions of English in general and a clear preference for the white standard varieties of English, either South African or British, over other varieties including BSAE. The studies done in the early 1990s (cf. de Klerk and Bosch 1993, Smit 1994), on the other hand, already foreshadowed a tentative shift in people’s appreciation of this variety of English now used so much more visibly, such as in Parliament or the media (cf. de Klerk 1999) and reported on changing evaluations of BSAE. The recently pronounced appeal that researchers should “establish the BSAE speakers’ own views” (de Klerk 1999: 319) coincided with an investigation which gives clear, and more stratified, evidence of a new (self)perception of BSAE speakers (cf. van Rooy, van Rooyen and van Wyk 2000: 187-190). In a video- and audio-based matched guise study that compared white and black high school pupils’ attitudes to different kinds of White and Black South African English the Sotho-speaking respondents judged what the researchers call acrolectal BSAE as reflecting the highest social status and preferred it to standard White SAE. In other words, the English associated with successful Black professionals seems to have already won over its White counterpart, at least in the eyes of these users of BSAE.

At the same time, the study also throws light on the evaluative distinctions made with regard to acrolectal, mesolectal and basilectal forms of BSAE; that is kinds of BSAE that can be placed on a cline from close to standard to non-standard (cf. van Rooy, van Rooyen and van Wyk 2000: 191). This linguistically determined cline is reflected quite clearly in people’s perceptions: the respondents ranked the three kinds of BSAE accordingly and also associated them with societally staggered jobs: acrolectal BSAE with doctors, mesolectal BSAE with teachers, and basilectal BSAE with farm workers or, maybe, shop assistants (op cit. 204). Even though this language attitude study was undertaken with about 100 pupils of one school only, its results provide clear support for what researchers have speculated on for some time, namely that (a) BSAE is no longer unanimously seen as unprestigious or lacking in social status and (b) evaluative distinctions are emerging with regard to different kinds of BSAE. From the point of view of the many users of BSAE, these two conclusions come close to something like a hot-cold shower: on the one hand, they seem to be allowed to finally lean back and relax about their English, which, on the other hand, is apparently only true for those speaking that kind of BSAE that is closest to standard English; and, by definition, this group makes up a small proportion of BSAE speakers only. Put differently, most
speakers of BSAE still battle with the social recognition of their English, and will most likely have to do so for quite some time to come.

This battling for the right kind of English takes place in all walks of life, but the one setting where it is crucial and central to one’s success is education. It is for this reason that we have chosen pupils’ English and their teachers’ evaluations thereof as our area of investigation.

3.2. Language evaluation

Teachers’ evaluations of pupils’ English can be interpreted in two ways, both of which are relevant to us: firstly, which attitudes teachers hold towards their pupils’ English and, secondly, how they grade it. While the former is something all people do, the second activity is specific to teachers. And it is not really surprising that language attitude research turned to this connection already quite early. In the early 1970s, Frederick Williams and associates undertook the first studies on the potential influence positive or negative language attitudes could have on how teachers assessed pupils. They asked Black, White and Mexican-American US teachers to rate various pupils, or, more precisely, voices differing only in regard to English accent. The outcome was, even if not unexpected, still quite alarming: along the two dimensions of confidence-eagerness and ethnicity-nonstandardness, both Mexican-American and black accents were downgraded considerably, the latter more than the former (Williams 1993, 1994). In other words, this study showed quite clearly that, at least in that specific US setting, there was a clear connection between how teachers evaluated a specific variety of English and how they expected speakers of that variety to perform. Language attitudes were thus shown to stand in interdependence with teachers’ readiness to up- or downgrade.

While this study received academic recognition (e.g. Fasold 1984: 171-6), its potential impact on applied concerns, e.g. student assessment or teacher training, was regrettably much less noticeable. This historical oversight or side-lining had the unfortunate consequence that the study was not followed up on by similar or ensuing research; neither was it, as far as we are aware of, taken up and repeated in other cultural settings.3 As it is, however, exactly the influence teachers’ attitudes have on their assessment that we see as of central

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3 Williams’s research falls clearly into the language attitude research paradigm as shaped by the social psychology of language (cf. e.g. Giles and Coupland 1991: 32-59). As this research interest has never lost attractiveness since its psycho-social inception in the 1930s, it would go beyond the scope of this article to attempt anything like a general
This research question belongs quite evidently to the broader research area of the influence language attitudes have on language behaviour, which was one of the oldest motivations of undertaking language attitude research in the first place (cf. LaPiere’s research in the 1930s, summarised in Baker 1992: 15). For the last 70 years or so, researchers have tried to capture the link between attitudes and resulting behaviour, but have generally failed to do so. Various reasons for this lack of success have been suggested (for an overview cf. Smit 2000: 140-141). What they all boil down to is that language-related behaviour depends on many situation-specific factors, some of which are language attitudes of a similarly situation-specific kind. Classic language attitude studies, on the other hand, usually elicit fairly abstract language attitudes, which are too far removed from the specific situation that requires language-related behaviour. While the strong point of the matched-guise study definitely is that it leads to attitudes in the social psychological understanding, i.e. containing affect, cognition and behavioural intention (cf. e.g. Stahlberg and Frey 1996: 206-209), its weak point remains its limitation to the static, behaviour-unrelated kind of attitude. As Giles and Coupland (1991: 196-198) have conceded, there seem to be two kinds of attitude, namely the more general and situation-independent one, on the one hand, and, on the other, the dynamic, situation-related one. With regard to linking attitudes to behaviour it is obviously the latter that needs to be elicited, which is what we want to do in our investigation of how teachers evaluate pupils' English.

4. Pilot study

As it is the objective of this study to establish links between language attitudes and assessment, we aim at a highly situated research design focusing on specific written and spoken English tests produced by BSAE speaking pupils. This might not allow for far-reaching generalisations, but, so we hope, will give us in-depth insight into, on the one hand, how the teachers assess the texts and why, on the other hand, the attitudes some teachers have towards the English used in these texts.
4.1. Brief description

For our pilot study we narrowed down our topic of research to the written medium only. We therefore looked for various learners' texts and finally decided on a set of 18 assignments, written by grade 7 pupils in January 2001 on the topic of their newly renovated farm school close to Vanderbijlpark in the Vaal Triangle. The next step was to group these texts, which we did along the criteria (a) thematic progression, (b) sentence construction, (c) sentence grammar & choice of vocabulary. This allowed us to divide the texts into three tiers of differing levels of language proficiency. We then chose one text of each group of similar length and content.

Text 1
I think our new school is nice and beautiful I think our new school is nice because they put tiles for every class and in the office. And our school is nice when they put the veranda in front of the school. Because when the veranda is in front of the school we cant have the shelter for the sun or the rain. I think our school is nice because they paint it. I like to think that people who help us for our school to be nice.

Text 2
I think about my new school because it is very nice and clean when they put the Tiles and the veranda and the shelter it is very beautiful it looks likes other schools now we need the shelter to stay the When the was raining outside and When the sun is heat strong and I am very brout about my school at the first time the was a lot of hole in the floor of the class that was not beautiful to as they pain in our new class to make it nise We thank for the people of Netherland.

Text 3
I think our new school is nice and beautiful because they put the veranda and they paint our classroom’s walls and they also put tiles on the class. The veranda give us shade because when it is raining we sit under it. When we at the school it’s like we are at the town but it is not at the town anymore it is at the farm school we would like to thank all the people who make our school so proud and clear. Thank you!

These three texts were then placed in a questionnaire that was designed to elicit teachers' evaluations. With the help of a pre-pilot study we clarified the questions of our questionnaire. In August 2001, we could then undertake our pilot study with 40 teachers who mainly work as language teachers in various schools in the Vaal Triangle (for the questionnaire, including the three texts, see Appendix).

The first part of the questionnaire asked for some information on the respondents' personal backgrounds. As can be gleaned from Table 1, the 40
teachers involved in this study cover an age range from 20 to 60, with more than half between 30 and 40 years of age. 23 or 58% of them are male and almost 85% have post-matriculation diplomas or higher educational qualifications. As can be expected from the area where they live, 60% have South Sotho as their L1 and a further 23% Zulu. Finally, 50% of the teachers work in primary school and most of the others teach some languages at secondary level.

Table 1. Demographic information about the respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>20-30</th>
<th>30-40</th>
<th>40-50</th>
<th>50-60</th>
<th>sex</th>
<th>m</th>
<th>female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N=40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=38</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educ</td>
<td>matric</td>
<td>und.gr.dipl.</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>postgr.dipl.</td>
<td>B.Ed/Hon.</td>
<td>M.Ed/MA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=38</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L1</td>
<td>Afrikaans</td>
<td>SSO</td>
<td>Zulu</td>
<td>Xhosa</td>
<td>Tsonga</td>
<td>Sepedi</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=40</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subj.</td>
<td>prim.school</td>
<td>English</td>
<td>English+oth</td>
<td>Sepedi+oth</td>
<td>Afr/Eng+oth</td>
<td>no lgs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N=39</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>51.3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The main part of the questionnaire concerned the three learner texts. Having read each of them, the respondents were asked to reply to six questions, two closed and four open ones. In the following section we will present the answers given in a general overview of the closed and open replies. We will then combine the closed and open answers in our attempt to describe general response patterns.

4.2. Main results

4.2.1 General pattern of evaluation of texts
(closed and open responses)

The two closed questions asked the teachers to
(a) award a mark out of 10 for the written passage
(10 being the best) and
(b) evaluate the learner’s grammar and language on a scale of
1 (=poor) to 5 (=excellent).
The responses given revealed that the teachers made a clear distinction between texts 1 and 2 versus text 3 (see Table 2, column “mean”). While the former two were given 5 out of 10 on average, text 3 was seen as between 7 and 8. The learners’ proficiencies were rated similarly different: the writers of texts 1 and 2 were evaluated as having fair English (= 2) while the English of the writer of text 3 was judged as between good (3) and very good (4).

Table 2. Closed responses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>questions</th>
<th>valid N</th>
<th>mean</th>
<th>median</th>
<th>min</th>
<th>max</th>
<th>stddev</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Text 1</td>
<td>out of 10</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gr&amp;lang</td>
<td></td>
<td>40</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text 2</td>
<td>out of 10</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>4.53</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gr&amp;lang</td>
<td></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text 3</td>
<td>out of 10</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gr&amp;lang</td>
<td></td>
<td>39</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When analysing each teacher’s evaluations of the three texts, we could observe one main pattern: the texts were evaluated differentially with the two types of responses (closed and open) supporting each other. This supports our original assumption, namely that the three texts are differently well written and reveal different levels of English proficiency. Respondent 40 exemplifies this pattern very well (for the complete replies see Table 3). The three texts were marked as 6, 5 and 7 out of 10 and the respective learner’s English as 3 (“good”), 2 (“fair”) and 4 (“very good”). This distinction is mirrored in the teacher’s recommendations for the three learners. Learner 1 should attend to word repetition, sentence construction and the use of the tenses. Learner 2 would in general need “more special attention” because of his/her “grammar and language”. Learner 3, then, is judged to have few language problems, except maybe punctuation and “writing skills”.

4 The open responses were given to the following four questions:

qu. 1. How do you see this learner? Please write a very short profile of him/her.

qu. 3. Please motivate the mark (given out of 10 for the written passage) you have awarded, i.e. what are the reasons behind the mark you have given?

qu. 5. Why? (have you evaluated the grammar and language used by this learner between 1=poor and 5=excellent)

qu. 6. In your opinion, what are the main language problems (if any) experienced by this black learner of English? Please explain.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESPONDENT 40</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Text 1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qu. 1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qu. 3.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qu. 5.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qu. 6.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Text 2** | mark awarded: 5(out of 10); learner's English: "fair" (2 out of 5) |
| qu. 1. | The learner does not put full-stop and commas where he/she supposed to. [punctu-ality] |
| qu. 3. | The learner need to be taught how to write full stop and commers; when writting a paragraph. [sentence construction] |
| qu. 5. | Lerner need more special attention, because the gramma and language is avrage. [sentence construction] be tough carefully |
| qu. 6. | The main language proble is because the learner English is not her/his 1\textsuperscript{st} language that is why he/she can’t put |

| **Text 3** | mark awarded: 7(out of 10); learner's English: "very good" (4 out of 5) |
| qu. 1. | Puntuation – but not so bad at least the learner has write ful-stop and the exclama- tion mark in the correct place |
| qu. 3. | At least the learner has put the helping verb fullstop tense in proper way |
| qu. 5. | The language used is it is is very good |
| qu. 6. | The are not so much language problem used by the learner. He need to be tough about writting skills |

**4.2.2 Interplay of assessment (closed responses) and criteria given (open responses)**

When taking the individual text as point of comparison, one can witness an extremely broad range of assessments given (see Table 2, “min” and “max”). Texts 1 and 2 have been awarded marks between 1 and 9 out of 10 and their writers' English assessed as ranging from “poor” to “good” (1 to 3). The evaluation of text 3 spans from 5 to 10 out of 10 and that of its writer from “fair” to “excellent” (2 to 5). These differences are noteworthy in themselves, but should not be overrated, as the respondents were not given any criteria for

\footnote{The open responses included in this and the following tables are direct quotations from the questionnaires. Although the differences from standard English are quite apparent and definitely interesting in themselves, they will not be analysed here, as this would go beyond the scope of this paper which focuses on the teachers' evaluations only.}
their assessments. While it is possible that the wide range of evaluation is partly influenced by the teachers' varying expectations and experience, an interpretation along such lines cannot be done here as it would go beyond the scope of this pilot project.

What we want to do instead is to stay within the limits of our pilot study and focus on the connections between the marks awarded and the corresponding comments. For this purpose we have chosen three typical examples which cover the range from negative to positive evaluations for each text (see Table 4). The open arguments included here vary quite considerably in relation with the teacher's overall assessment of the texts. Text 1, for instance, is marked as 2 out of 10 because it reveals “poor grammar and language usage”, but it is worth 6 out of 10 as “the idea of what that learner is talking about is there”. And for the teacher who thinks that “though the learner cannot spell [...] the message is clear [...]” the text is even as good as 8 out of 10. Similar differences are observable for the other two texts: When text 2 is evaluated as having “spelling problem[s]” and “no logic”, it gets 3 out of 10 only. When the “grammatical errors” are still mentioned but connected with “you can understand what the learner has written”, then its evaluation is more positive – 5 out of 10. This improves to 8 when the teacher feels that “the logic of sentences is there [though] there are some mistakes”. Text 3 gets 5 out of 10 as its lowest mark because, although the learner's “imagination tries to put us [in] the picture”, s/he “must be taught to understand English”. When the learner is seen as “express[ing] herself correctly”, but still “encounter[ing] language problems”, the text is awarded 8 out of 10, which improves to the maximum of 10 for the respondent who stresses that “the paragraph is clear” and that there are “no mistakes”.

To sum up, this comparison shows that, while the assessments given vary widely, there are generally good reasons for the discrepancy. Put differently, the marks are not given haphazardly, but reflect the degree of relevance the individual teacher ascribed to certain language aspects.

Table 4. Examples of evaluations of learner texts 1, 2 and 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEXT 1</th>
<th>mark awarded : 2 (out of 10); learner's English: &quot;poor&quot; (1 out of 5); respondent 13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>qu. 1</td>
<td>He has a problem of spelling, does not use correct descriptive words i.e. over-uses “nice”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qu. 3</td>
<td>Poor grammar and language usage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qu. 5</td>
<td>Poor grammar and language usage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qu. 6</td>
<td>He thinks first in his mother tongue and then translates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mark awarded : 5 (out of 10); learner's English: &quot;fair&quot; (2 out of 5); respondent 20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qu. 1</td>
<td>Only sees the physical being of the school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>qu. 3</td>
<td>(no answer given)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
qu. 5  Sentence construction, spelling aren't that bad but the idea of what that learner is talking about is there.

qu. 6  Most came from black disadvantaged schools where not enough time is given about the language, others are afraid to speak-sly being laughed at.

mark awarded : 8 (out of 10); learner's English: "fair" (2 out of 5); respondent 25

qu. 1  She is not a dull learner. She has ideas but she can’t write them correctly because of language problems.

qu. 3  Though the learner cannot spell some words but the message is clear in his/her passage.

qu. 5  Because sentence construction is not good.

qu. 6  To be expose to English only at school.

TEXT 2

mark awarded : 3 (out of 10); learner's English: "fair" (2 out of 5); respondent 12

qu. 1  She has spelling problem, punctuation marks capital letters and construction of sentences.

qu. 3  The is no logic in her paragraph and she has a problem in all things that I mentioned on 2.2.1.

qu. 5  She wrote most of her paragraph without understanding.

qu. 6  Spelling, punctuation; capital letter construction of sentences.

mark awarded : 5 (out of 10); learner's English: "fair" (2 out of 5); respondent 9

qu. 1  Grammatical errors. The learner writes as if she writes Zulu / Sotho etc.

qu. 3  Wrong tense. You can understand what the learner has written.

qu. 5  She has the vocabulary. Pronouncing problem tenses.

qu. 6  A problem of pronouncing e.g. brout instead of proud. Using preposition wrongly, or using them where is not necessary.

mark awarded : 8 (out of 10); learner's English: "good" (3 out of 5); respondent 27

qu. 1  Vission in mind. Improvement of the school. Showing concern on Netherland people.

qu. 3  Same as in 1.9

qu. 5  As a second language, the logic of sentences is there. Through there are some mistakes.

qu. 6  Spelling. Construction of sentence.

TEXT 3

mark awarded : 5 (out of 10); learner's English: "fair" (2 out of 5); respondent 24

qu. 1  Sentences were long. Word order Usage of combine words.

qu. 3  The learner is not used to this kind of thing but her imagination tries to put us on the picture let alone the grammatical errors.

qu. 5  Remediation, lot of pictures and participation in the lesson can help her get though.

qu. 6  The learner must be taught to understand English. Too much usage of translation. (African to English)

mark awarded : 8 (out of 10); learner's English: "good" (3 out of 5); respondent 36

qu. 1  She has understanding but here ant there she encountered the language problem.

qu. 3  She wrote clear English and her grammar is correct. Though she has spelling mistakes.

qu. 5  She expresses herself correctly though she still experience spelling problem.

qu. 6  Spelling errors and sentence construction.
mark awarded: 10 (out of 10); learner's English: "excellent" (5 out of 5); respondent 27

qu. 1 Good in second language no mistakes. Paragraph is clear.
qu. 3 No mistakes committed and the paragraph is clear.
qu. 5 Did well as compared to A & B.
qu. 6 None

The open questions asked for verbal evaluations and reasons for the closed responses put forth (see Appendix). The resulting list covers a wide range of reasons (see Table 5), which were given in support of either a negative or positive evaluation of the text and/or the learner's English. When looked at from the point of view of content, these 13 reasons belong to five criteria (reasons given in brackets):

a) SENTENCE GRAMMAR, i.e. points of correction below the level of the sentence (spelling & punctuation, tenses, vocabulary, word repetition, sentence construction)
b) TEXTUAL GRAMMAR, i.e. points of correction above the level of the sentence (editing, planning writing)
c) MESSAGE, i.e. content and thematic progression (content, logic)
d) LANGUAGE BACKGROUND, i.e. L1 / L2 factors (English as L2/L1 interference, language learning background)
e) PEDAGOGICAL ADVICE (exposure to English books, marks as pedagogic device)
As the presentation of the data so far has focussed on how the teachers evaluated the three texts similarly or differently, we have treated the open responses as explanations of the closed ones. We will now shift our focus to the open responses themselves in order to show that the 13 different categories of argument included in them (cp. Table 4) were not simply used accidentally, but in a clearly discernible pattern. Of the five groups of reasons used, i.e. SENTENCE GRAMMAR, TEXTUAL GRAMMAR, MESSAGE, LANGUAGE BACKGROUND, PEDAGOGICAL ADVICE, the two most prominently employed are MESSAGE and SENTENCE GRAMMAR. As the examples listed in Tables 5 and 6 illustrate, the replies generally include comments on the respective learners'
abilities to get across what they actually want to say, on the one hand, and, on the other, on, for instance, spelling, punctuation, word repetition or sentence construction. In other words, the responses indicate that the teachers have mainly evaluated the texts by considering content and what can be called classic grammar mistakes.

These two categories did not only serve as the most important arguments; they also appear to have been the decisive ones when it came to grading the learner texts. In other words, the weighting of the two criteria was apparently relevant to the overall evaluations of the texts, which becomes apparent when comparing the marks given to the texts with the positive or negative use of MESSAGE and SENTENCE GRAMMAR. The data yield two different types of weighting: either MESSAGE is regarded as less or as more important than SENTENCE GRAMMAR (for examples see Table 6).

Respondent 23, for example, evaluates all three texts as understandable and as lacking in grammatical correctness. While he uses MESSAGE fairly indiscriminately for all three texts, his comments regarding SENTENCE GRAMMAR clearly distinguish between the texts: text 2 is seen as most lacking (see e.g. reply to qu. 6), followed by text 1 (see e.g. reply to qu. 6) and text 3 as most successful (see e.g. reply to qu. 5). The cline of grammatical (in)correctness is also reflected in the overall marks given in the closed responses. The reverse kind of weighting comes to the fore in the evaluations given by respondent 38 (see Table 6), who foregrounds MESSAGE by mentioning it, firstly, much more often than SENTENCE GRAMMAR and, secondly, in a differentiated way: negatively for text 2 and positively for the other two. This could also be the reason why he grades texts and learners 1 and 3, but not text and learner 2, clearly better than respondent 23.

In a few cases, the second weighting – MESSAGE more relevant than SENTENCE GRAMMAR – is taken even further insofar as MESSAGE seems to be used as the only relevant criterion for the evaluations of the texts. Respondent 31, for instance, clearly downgrades learner and text 2 because it is "poor in paragraphing [...] construction and thinking [...]". This he places into clear contrast with the other two texts, both of which he evaluates as reflecting "good reasoning skills" (text 1) and "good [...] content presentation (text 3). The closed evaluations, which mirror the contrast of text 2 vs. texts 1+3, add another piece of supporting evidence for the overriding relevance of MESSAGE and the complete unimportance of SENTENCE GRAMMAR: Texts 1 and 3 are both marked equally well (8 out of 10), although their learners' grammatical proficiencies are regarded differently: learner 1 is judged as "need[ing] a lot of guidance in proper language and grammatical skills" and learner 3 as "[h]e is generally good, and his language use is satisfactory". It is thus quite obvi-
ous that this teacher ignored the different levels of grammatical proficiency and took MESSAGE as only relevant criterion for evaluating the learner texts.

Table 6. Examples of weighting of criteria MESSAGE and SENTENCE GRAMMAR for overall evaluation of learner texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TEXT</th>
<th>EVALUATION</th>
<th>LEARNER'S ENGLISH</th>
<th>MESSAGE</th>
<th>SENTENCE GRAMMAR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>MESSAGE is less/evenly important than/ as SENTENCE GRAMMAR, respondent 23</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text 1; mark awarded : 4 (out of 10); learner's English: &quot;fair&quot; (2 out of 5)</td>
<td>qu. 1</td>
<td>Too much repetition. He has problem with spelling. He has a problem with the writing of correct language. Problem of punctuation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>qu. 3</td>
<td>The language seams to be not the home language but he/she tries express him or herself. I can understand what he is trying to say.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>qu. 5</td>
<td>There are some words like beautiful which can be written correctly. He/she need extra remedial for writing correct language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>qu. 6</td>
<td>Spelling, punctuation, repetition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text 2; mark awarded : 3 (out of 10); learner's English: &quot;fair&quot; (2 out of 5)</td>
<td>qu. 1</td>
<td>He writes long sentences, no punctuation marks, spelling problem e.g. nise. There are many spelling mistakes. Cannot use correct preposition.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>qu. 3</td>
<td>There are too many spelling mistakes but take consideration of the home language and the environment.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>qu. 5</td>
<td>What he wrote can be understand and the effort he/she to trying to express him/herself and considering the environment.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>qu. 6</td>
<td>Spelling mistake, long sentences without punctuation marks and incorrect use of prepositions and language structure.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text 3; mark awarded : 6 (out of 10); learner's English: &quot;good&quot; (3 out of 5)</td>
<td>qu. 1</td>
<td>No problem with spelling. Can not use conjunctions and prepositions correctly. Too long sentences.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>qu. 3</td>
<td>The sequence of facts is correct but he/she still has problem with long sentence, use of conjunction and preposition.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>qu. 5</td>
<td>The spelling is correct, the facts are put chronological. Grammar is correct but is not correctly punctuated.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>qu. 6</td>
<td>Too long sentences. The sentences can be made brief and concise.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MESSAGE more relevant than SENTENCE GRAMMAR; respondent 38</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text 1; mark awarded : 6 (out of 10); learner's English: &quot;good&quot; (3 out of 5)</td>
<td>qu. 1</td>
<td>Very proud of his new school and would like the people outside to love and respect his school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>qu. 3</td>
<td>Speaking mostly about the nice things his school is involved</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>qu. 5</td>
<td>Here and there some mistakes are committed concerning the grammar and spelling mistakes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>qu. 6</td>
<td>Sentence construction as well as spelling mistakes</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text 2; mark awarded : 4 (out of 10); learner's English: &quot;fair&quot; (2 out of 5)</td>
<td>qu. 1</td>
<td>Quite a number of spelling mistakes and construction of sentence not up to standard.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>qu. 3</td>
<td>Cannot express himself in an acceptable way.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>qu. 5</td>
<td>Needs to put more attention on his mistakes.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>qu. 6</td>
<td>Spelling, punctuation, and logic.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text 3; mark awarded : 8 (out of 10); learner's English: &quot;excellent&quot; (5 out of 5)</td>
<td>qu. 1</td>
<td>Very constructive and know how to arrange his facts.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In sum, the teachers' evaluations have yielded the following results: Firstly, the third learner text was clearly judged to be the best of the three texts included in the study. Secondly, the open evaluations, which have added highly useful reasons and arguments for the closed assessments of the texts, include 13 different arguments belonging to five criteria of argumentation, i.e. SENTENCE GRAMMAR, TEXTUAL GRAMMAR, MESSAGE, LANGUAGE BACKGROUND, and PEDAGOGICAL ADVICE. Thirdly, as can be expected from such an open assessment task, the three texts have triggered highly diverse evaluations as apparent in closed and open answers. Fourthly, the reconstructable interplay of closed and open answers points to the relevance of the two criteria MESSAGE and SENTENCE GRAMMAR as regards the general evaluation expressed: whichever one of the two criteria is seen as more important is granted more space in the open responses and seems to constitute the main reason for the overall mark awarded. In other words, this pilot study has
shown that the teachers who acted as respondents have evaluated the three learner texts highly diversely, but consistently in regard of the two main criteria of assessment: getting the message across and adherence to sentential grammar.

4.3. Implications for our study

As we have reported on a pilot study here, we need to see in how far its results have provided information with regard to the original research questions (cp. 4.). Concerning the first one - how the teachers assess the texts and why - the study has led to some clear findings, as summarised above, but has also left a few points open: while most of the teachers have ranked the third text best, not all have done so. Reasons for this variation in assessment patterns will have to wait for more data, which we hope to gather during the next phase of our study. Similarly, the categories of open responses established here need more supporting material, but not merely more of the same. The open responses given here seem to fall quite neatly into a few categories, but we cannot be sure whether this categorisation actually still reflects the teachers' intentions. Written responses are simply too short to gain such confirmation. We will therefore enlarge our research design and include structured interviews with some of the teachers who will act as respondents in the next phase of the study. These interviews, we hope, will also give us more information on the main outcome of this pilot, namely that the teachers' assessment has mainly rested on intelligibility and accuracy, and on the relationship between the two criteria.

With regard to the second research question - the attitudes some teachers have to the English used in these texts - the pilot study has not yielded any direct insights. As required by the questionnaire, the teachers did not evaluate the English as such or the pupils in general, but they offered arguments for their grading only. While these can clearly be used to infer some general perceptions the teachers might have of the English (see below), more detailed language attitudes will have to wait for more and more refined information as we want to gather it in the interviews.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion we want to shift our focus back to the more theoretical concerns discussed here: the variety so reluctantly called "BSAE" and the link between language attitudes and assessment. We have to concede that, with regard to
the latter, the pilot study cannot offer a new solution. While, as intended, the results gained are highly situated, they are so embedded in the context that attitudes and assessment cannot be taken apart. It is therefore not possible to establish the relationship between the teachers' language attitudes and their assessment of the texts at the moment, but we do hope that the interview data will allow for the discursive approach to language attitudes as advocated by social psychologists (e.g. Potter and Wetherell 1987).

Concerning BSAE, the response patterns reported on here show that the learner texts were clearly evaluated in the framework of a learner language that still needs improvement. At the same time, though, some respondents judged specifically learner text 3 as reflecting "full understanding" of the language, despite some problems of spelling or sentence construction. In other words, the English used here was in part seen as acceptable the way it is. This has its implications on how the learners' English – "BSAE" – is experienced. While it is quite obviously evaluated as reflecting different stages of interlanguage on its way towards higher levels of language proficiency, its status of an independent variety apparently also meets with acknowledgement. This, we would like to argue, implies that the respondents of the pilot study have experienced the learners' English as heterogeneously as we had anticipated, but that there is also a maybe diffuse but still shared understanding of a variety of its own which requires recognition as such, whether it gets the label BSAE or another one.

References


Appendix

Questionnaire (abridged version)

Thank you for taking the time to complete this anonymous questionnaire. Please answer the questions as honestly as possible. (Remember your answers cannot be wrong!) The aim with this questionnaire is to get an idea of what you think of English as used by South Africans in general.

I) Biographical information

What is your age     Male / Female     What is you highest post-matric qualification?
Where do you live?    What is your home language?
Are you involved in primary or secondary teaching?
What subjects do you teach? (please name all)
How would you regard you own proficiency in English?
   (tick one of: poor; fair; good; very good; excellent)     Why?
What language do you use in your teaching?
   (tick one of: teach only in English; use mainly English; code-switching between English and African language; use mainly African language; Use only African language)
II) Assessment of English as used by learners

Please read the following texts, which were written by grade 7 learners, and answer the questions according to your personal assessment. Please remember: There are no "wrong" answers because we are interested in your personal evaluations and opinions.

Text 1
I think our new school is nice and beautiful I think our new school is nice because they put tiles for every class and in the office. And our school is nice when they put the veranda in front of the school. Because when the veranda is not in front of the school we can't have the shelter for the sun or the rain. I think our school is nice because they paint it. I like to think that people who help us for our school to be nice.

Text 2
I think about my new school because it is very nice and clean when they put the Tiles and the veranda and the shelter it is very beautiful it looks like other schools now we need the shelter to stay the when the raining outside and when the sun is heat strong and I am very brout about my school at the first time the was a lot of hole in the floor of the class that was not beautiful to as they pain in our new class to make it nice We thank for the people of Netherland.

Text 3
I think our new school is nice and beautiful because they put the veranda and they paint our classroom’s walls and they also put tiles on the class. The veranda give us shade because when it is raining we sit under it. When we at the school it’s like we are at the town but it is not at the town anymore it is at the farm school we would like to thank all the people who make our school so proud and clear. Thank you!
Questions (after each text):

1. How do you see this learner? Please write a very short profile of him/her.
2. Please award a mark out of 10 for the written passage.
3. Please motivate the mark you have awarded, i.e. what are the reasons behind the mark you have given?
4. How do you evaluate the grammar and language used by this learner?
   (tick one of: poor/1; fair/2; good/3; very good/4; excellent/5)
5. Why?
6. In your opinion, what are the main language problems (if any) experienced by this black learner of English? Please explain.