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# **Teaching a world language for local contexts: The case of Namibian textbooks for the teaching of English**

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#### **Abstract**

English was chosen as the official language when Namibia gained its independence in 1990. While many other countries use English language textbooks that have been produced for a world market, Namibian authorities set out to develop their own. Five textbooks for grades 8 – 12 were published during the years 1993-1999. These books have been described as unusually successful, not only in the way that they help students learn the language. Equally important is the fact that texts, topics and exercises have been selected in order to support the students' general education and help them develop the knowledge and skills they need as citizens of a new, democratic nation. The process of developing and producing the books has also been referred to as efficient and innovative. This article casts light on some aspects of the books as well as the production process. The aim is to provide documentation and also to present an example that textbook developers as well as teachers elsewhere can learn from and be inspired by.

## **Introduction**

When we enter a profession, we inevitably follow the beaten track. We accept and adopt many of the shared understandings and the customary ways of doing things among our fellow professionals. We can say that we enter the discourse – i.e. that which is seen to constitute reality – of that particular field, to borrow a term from Foucault (e.g. 1972). As a teacher of English in Norway, for example, I look at our textbooks with a nod of recognition: Yes, this is what a textbook should look like. The choices that the authors have made seem quite natural to me, even obvious, since I am used to them. Are there really any other ways in which textbooks can be designed and materials presented?

If we look at textbooks from other parts of the world or other times in history, we see that there are. Thus, by investigating textbooks that differ from our own, our eyes can be opened to new ways of organizing the materials, of selecting topics and activities, of formulating goals and objectives. We can become more aware of the many possibilities that are, in fact, open to us, and also more conscious of the choices that we make for ourselves and for our own students.

The present article deals with a textbook series that was developed shortly after Namibia's independence in 1990. This unique situation may in itself suggest that the books can provide new perspectives to producers and users of textbooks who work under different circumstances. The fact that scholars have found the books unusually successful and view the production process as both efficient and innovative adds to this impression (Tomlinson 2003b).

My curiosity led me to investigate the books further, and the present article is the result of that investigation process. In addition to the textbooks themselves, I rely on other people's discussions of the books, notably Tomlinson (2003a) and, not least, information from one of the members of the authoring team, Elisabeth Reizer (2008).

## **The Namibian textbooks' point of departure**

Before the country's independence in 1990, the teaching of English in Namibia was either based on South African textbooks or on books which were produced for the world market (Reizer 2008). While it seems obvious why Namibian authorities wanted to distance themselves with the former, the reluctance to use the latter may need some explanation.

Since classrooms all over the world are filled with youngsters who have to, need to and want to learn English, many publishing houses have seen the opportunity to produce textbooks that can be used in a whole range of different countries and contexts (Islam 2003). This might seem like a natural thing to do, both from a pedagogical and a market-oriented perspective. After all, it is the same language that needs to be mastered, with the same speech sounds, the same grammar and much the same vocabulary. Young people everywhere have, of course, quite a few concerns and interests in common, and they probably need to develop skills related to many of the same areas of foreign language use. Islam (2003) points out how most of the "global" course books deal with topics such as names, nationalities, food,

family relations and leisure activities. Obviously, materials that are developed for a world market are cost effective and make great profits possible (Mares 2003).

However, such materials have been criticized on the grounds that, in trying to cater for as many English students around the world as possible, they in fact cater for none (Harmer 2001; Thornbury & Meddings 2001). Since the publishers' prime concern is to produce books that sell, the books must not only satisfy the wants and the needs of their users, they must also avoid offending or disturbing anyone (Tomlinson 2003b). As a result, publishers are most often both cautious and conservative, and the books present "a sanitised world that is bland and dull and in which there is very little excitement or disturbance to stimulate the emotions of the learner" (Tomlinson 1998: 20).

The alternative then, in many educationalists' view, is to produce course materials that are closer to the students' own reality, that link up with their own experiences and that can trigger the students' cognitive as well as their affective engagement (Thornbury & Meddings 2001; Tomlinson 2003b). We all know that foreign language learning requires long-term commitment and hard work, and it seems obvious that the students' motivation for such an effort will increase if they are allowed to work with materials that they find interesting, worthwhile and relevant to their own situation. When most students of English in today's world learn the language for communication purposes, it seems all the more important that they are allowed to practice using the language in connection with topics that they actually feel the need to explore, learn about and talk about.

This was the starting point when Namibian authorities in 1993 set out to produce new textbooks for the teaching of English. After independence, great importance was attached not only to finding the country's own way in the development of a new school system, but also to the development of course materials that would help build the new nation. Since English was to become the new official language, special attention was paid to the development of English language textbooks (Reizer 2008). The result was a series of five books for grades 8-12, which were published during the years 1993 to 1999:

Name of textbook	Grade level	Order of production
<i>Kick Off</i>	8	4
<i>Aim High</i>	9	5
<i>On Target</i>	10	3
<i>Racing Ahead</i>	11	1
<i>Crossing the Line</i>	12	2

## The participants

One main characteristic of the Namibian textbooks concerns the people involved in producing them. First of all, the books were ordered by the Namibian authorities at the same time as the new curriculum was being developed, and the project's steering committee included several Ministry officials. The Minister of Education and Culture

himself, Nahas Angula (who is the present Prime Minister), was a central figure in the process. The team of authors who worked with the first couple of books experienced how Mr. Angula would come by repeatedly, in person, to check up on the work that was being done, thus signalling both his interest and his enthusiasm (Reizer 2008). This, of course, gave legitimacy to the process as well as to the publications.

The three books that were produced first (for grades 10-12) were written by a team of authors which consisted, for a large part, of practicing teachers. (The books for grades eight and nine were written by the project coordinator for the first three books.) One obvious advantage of this joint authorship was that the team could benefit from the teachers' grassroots experience. But work on the team also increased the teachers' competence, and it was part of the plan that the teachers who participated were to share their new insights and experiences with the staff at their respective schools. The so-called "pilot schools" had been selected from the different regions of Namibia, so that new competence could be brought to all parts of the country. The close contact with these schools also made it possible to try out some of the materials in the classroom, before the books were printed (Singapore Wala 2003).

One of the aims of the new nation was to free itself from the South African educational tradition which, in the case of English, was characterized by rote learning and the reading of British classics (Reizer 2008). Thus, the set-up with pilot-schools was probably a central device in carving out a new pedagogy for Namibia and in bringing about educational change as well.

In addition to school teachers, the team consisted of a representative from the publishing company (Gamsberg Macmillan), a project coordinator and several project consultants. For the development of the third book, *On Target*, Brian Tomlinson was hired as a consultant and an inspirer. By demonstrating innovative activity types, he aimed to extend the participants' repertoires and also stimulate thought and discussion of different principles and approaches to foreign language learning (Tomlinson 2003b). Some non-Namibian teachers who had previously been involved in pre-independence project schools were also on the authoring team. Elisabeth Reizer, who has provided much of the background information for the present article, was one of these teachers. Among the project schools, the Loudima school (in the Congo) has been referred to as the most central "laboratory" for the new secondary education for Namibia (<http://english.namibiaforeningen.no>). Namibian actors were used for the recorded materials, and the artwork and photographs included were, as much as possible, based on Namibian artists' work.

The three first books' inner cover present the people who participated in the project under the headings Workshop participants, Pilot schools, Steering committee, Editing team and Assessment team. The total for *On Target* (year 10) is forty people, while the number for *Racing Ahead* (year 11) and *Crossing the Line* (year 12) is somewhat lower. It is difficult to know exactly how many of them were active members of the authoring team, but Tomlinson (2003c) refers to a team of thirty people when he describes the process that led to the book for tenth grade.

Tomlinson (2003c) argues that, compared to a situation where one or two single authors write a whole book or series of books alone, a large team makes it possible

for more good ideas to be turned into useful materials in a much shorter time. While individual authors tire and run out of ideas, he says, a large group of enthusiastic teachers can inspire and help each other and keep up the group's creative energy. Provided that the process is well organized and coordinated, the materials can then be edited so that everything hangs together and makes up a coherent whole.

One rather crucial participant in the development of the Namibian textbooks, The Namibia Association of Norway (NAMAS), provided funding for the project. NAMAS, which started as a solidarity organisation for the people of Namibia in 1980, paid the project coordinator's salary and covered the production costs. It also provided money for in-service courses for teachers and for resource packs (consisting of dictionaries, reference books and other extra materials) which were distributed to schools in the wake of the publications. In his foreword to the first book, Nahas Angula (the Minister of Education and Culture) states that '[t]his book symbolizes links of solidarity between Namibia and the people of Norway (*Racing Ahead*: v).

It is worth noticing that, prior to the development of these books, NAMAS had made a textbook for the teaching of English which was used in the Nyango refugee camp in Zambia. Work was also being done in Norway to provide Namibian children in exile with more books, but NAMAS was told that such materials were not wanted. I experienced this myself, as I was involved in the development of several workbooks that were intended to accompany the first textbook. The lesson is probably, as Brock-Utne (2005) argues, that funding and support should be without strings attached, and that materials should not be produced elsewhere and imposed on the country in question.

### **The process**

The process started by consulting teachers and students all over the country in order to find out what kinds of material they would want (Tomlinson 2003c). On the basis of the answers, the authoring team came together and decided on suitable topics for the first book. Posters were hung up on the wall for each topic and possible texts, grammar points, listening comprehension materials and activities were listed there. The team then divided into groups, and each group worked only with a few chapters.

The first draft was written in a week's time, during the participants' vacation. All the team members worked very hard, in a spirit of great enthusiasm and optimism, from early morning well into the night (Reizer 2008). Since the team worked in the Ministry's premises, this facilitated close contact with the officials there.

The development of the textbook series was "text-driven", which means that an interesting text that deals with "a potentially engaging topic" (and not a specific language point) was to constitute the starting point for each chapter (Tomlinson 2003b: 167). As the work progressed, the project coordinator would see to it that there was adequate coverage of grammar points and a logical progression in the presentation of vocabulary and structures throughout the chapters.

Once the first draft of the first book was finished, the materials were trialled out in pilot schools all over the country. Based on these schools' feedback, the materials were then revised and prepared for publication by an editing committee (Singapore

Wala 2003). The authoring team that developed the other two books followed the same procedure (Reizer 2008).

The whole process followed a tight time schedule. The first textbook, for example, was initiated after New Year's in 1993, finalized in the fall of the same year, and it was used in Namibian schools by January 1994. The in-service courses that were held in the months after demonstrated great enthusiasm and overwhelming motivation to develop new and fruitful approaches in the English classrooms in Namibia (Reizer 2008).

### **The topics**

Textbooks for the teaching of English have, traditionally, been centered round countries in the English-speaking world. One main concern has been to inform students about issues, first and foremost, in the United Kingdom and the United States (McKay 2002). There is no trace of this tradition in the Namibian series. Although texts are taken from a variety of different countries, most of them are related to an African environment, and the great majority of texts have to do with things Namibian.

The first textbooks that were made signal already on the front cover that a major aim for the teaching of English is to foster national pride and love for the fatherland. *Racing Ahead* (for grade 11) shows Frankie Fredericks, the first Namibian to win an Olympic medal, in action on the running course. *Crossing the Line* (for grade 12), also shows Fredericks as he wins a race.

Throughout the books we understand that the content has been selected in order to contribute to the students' general education and, through this, to help build the new nation. Many texts provide information about Namibia, and the topics range from Namibian industries and labor unions (*Crossing the Line*), climatic conditions (*Racing Ahead*) and Namibian birds and animals (*Kick Off*), to different trees and their use (*Aim High*).

The main focus in the books is on the country's present and future, and Namibian history is only mentioned in connection with traditions, folk tales and beliefs. Independence, however, is dealt with in a whole chapter in *Racing Ahead*, where one of the texts starts like this:

#### **Free at Last**

The stroke of midnight, March 21, marked the liberation of Africa's last colony. Namibians, colonized for more than a century and after 23 years of bitter warfare, began a week of celebration. The national stadium was besieged by crowds, who shouted "Down, down!" as the South African flag was lowered for the last time [...] (*Racing Ahead*: 89).

The questions and activities in the chapter focus on the students' own experience of the day and their hopes and aspirations for the future, but they also help students understand the system of different political parties and democratic processes.

One central principle in the textbooks is, clearly, to link up with other subjects on the students' timetable and to contribute to their general education. There is, for example, a chapter on environmental issues in *Crossing the Line* and a chapter on "the world of science" in *Racing Ahead*. The latter covers topics such as chemical energy and hydroelectricity, and among the many activities is a role play where students are asked to discuss different ways of generating power. Other chapters provide topics that range from religions around the world (*Crossing the Line*) to the names of countries in South America (*Racing Ahead*).

The books address the need to educate the students in everyday life skills as well. Some texts provide information about first aid and tropical diseases, and a whole chapter in *Crossing the Line* is devoted to sex education. Other texts deal with practical, everyday affairs such as planting vegetables (*Kick Off*) and starting a bank account (*Racing Ahead*).

As can be expected when nation building is the aim, many positive aspects of Namibian society are dealt with. There are texts about Namibian tourist attractions and traditional Namibian arts and crafts (*Racing Ahead*). There are also many texts that present folk tales, traditions and beliefs, and traditional Namibian names and even Namibian hair styles get due coverage (*Kick Off*; *Aim High*). Quite a few famous Namibians are presented, for example people who were central in the liberation struggle (*Racing Ahead*) and soccer players (*Aim High*).

Problems and challenges in the new nation are, however, by no means shoved under the carpet. Thus, students read about unemployment, aids and "bush justice" (*Crossing the Line*). Problematic customs and beliefs are dealt with on several occasions, and women's position is given particular attention. One chapter describes how customary inheritance laws in Namibia offer little support and protection to women, and deals with gender stereotypes and sexist attitudes as well. Traditional myths and superstitions are also addressed. An excerpt from a novel that deals with teenage pregnancies, for example, is followed by an activity that targets some "dangerous misconceptions" that many people have:

### **Myths and facts**

[...] With a partner decide which of the following statements are true and which are false:

- A If the girl has a steam bath immediately after sex, she won't get pregnant.
- B It is possible to become pregnant as a result of having sexual intercourse for the first time.
- C If the man doesn't have an orgasm inside the girl, she won't become pregnant.
- D If a snake passes between a girl's legs, she will become pregnant.

[...] (*Crossing the Line*: 77)

Another concern in the selection of topics has to do with the students' personal development. We can see this in a chapter on war and peace, where one section asks the students how they deal with anger and how they would resolve conflicts in different everyday situations (*On Target*). Another chapter informs the students about a variety of drugs and asks them to act out a role play between a drug dealer and a

potential buyer (*On Target*). Texts and activities that aim to contribute to the students' character development cover a variety of topics, from their attitude to street children (*Kick Off*) to skin lightening creams (*Racing Ahead*).

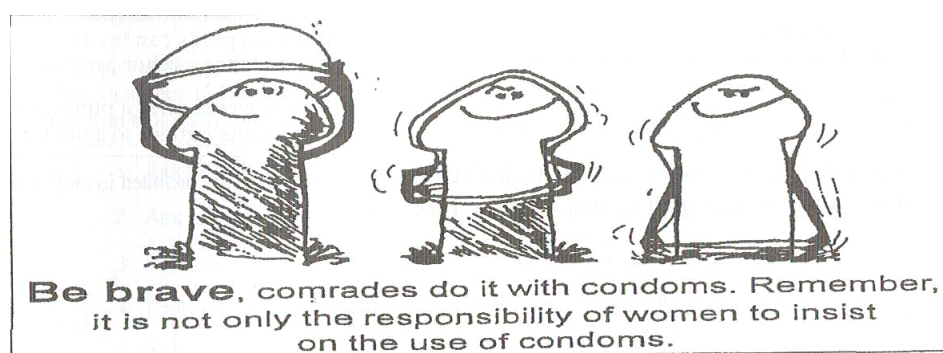
While a large number of texts, topics and activities aim to strengthen the students' cultural identity and pride in their own country, there are constant reminders that they also are global citizens. Thus, most chapters bring in texts that have to do with other countries. The chapter on arts and crafts, for example, goes from detailed descriptions of traditional Namibian techniques such as beadwork and basketry to a comparison between the Namibian artist John Ndevasia Muafangejo and the Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh. The chapter on Namibian independence includes a text about independence in Ghana in 1957, and a chapter on sports includes a text about "Football in Africa" as well as the lyrics for the Liverpool fan club's song "You'll never walk alone" (*Kick Off*).

## Texts

The textbooks indicate that great efforts have been made to find suitable "authentic texts", i.e. texts that are used in the 'real' world outside the classroom (Tomlinson 2003c). Authentic texts can, obviously, be a motivation factor in the way that they show the relevance of the study of English in a number of different contexts. Furthermore, they can also function as an introduction to the types of texts that the students are expected to read and deal with in their everyday lives. Preparing students for real life texts is, clearly, a main objective in the five textbooks.

Excerpts from *the Namibian*, a newspaper written in English, are plentiful. There are news items, articles, photographs, announcements of job openings and advertisements of cars for sale, to mention but a few examples. In addition to excerpts from other newspapers and magazines, we also find many official forms such as the Namibia air and train timetables, a parking ticket (*Crossing the Line*), and even the municipality of Windhoek's "Application for Disconnection of Electricity and Water" (*On Target*).

Many other authentic texts are also represented. In *Racing Ahead*, students learn to read a restaurant menu, *Kick Off* presents texts from an atlas and a phone book, and *Crossing the Line* shows what appears to be a billboard that advocates the use of condoms:

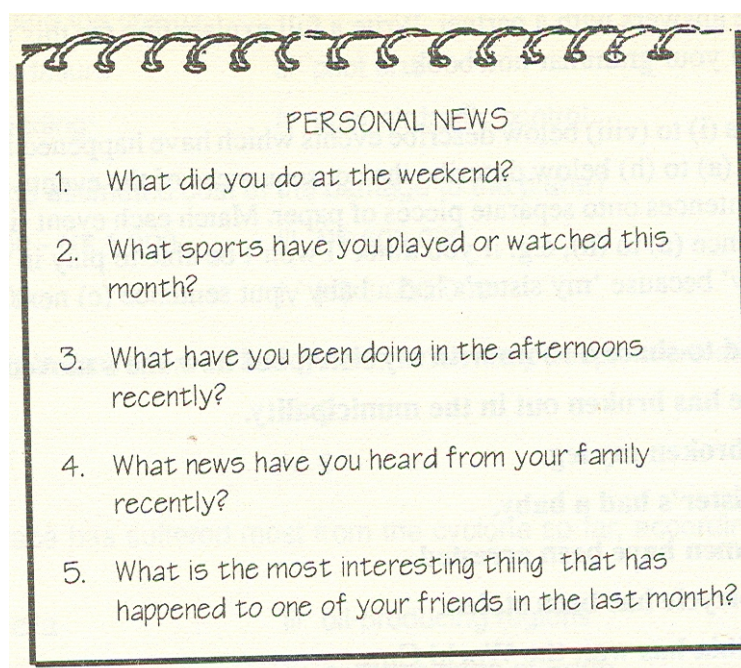


(*Crossing the Line*: 73)



The books contain many excerpts from fictional texts, and the idea is, clearly, to motivate the students for reading outside class. This is done particularly explicitly in a section in *Kick Off* that presents the covers and adverts for seven books for teenagers, accompanied by activities that aim to make the students want to find out how the stories end.

There are also many texts that have been produced for the textbooks. An important principle here seems to have been to use local issues as a starting point, and then extend the topic so that the students' curiosity will be triggered for a broader social and political picture. One example of this can be seen in *On Target*, where the chapter "Good news!" asks the students to make a bulletin of class news and also to share their own, personal news:



(*On Target*: 58)

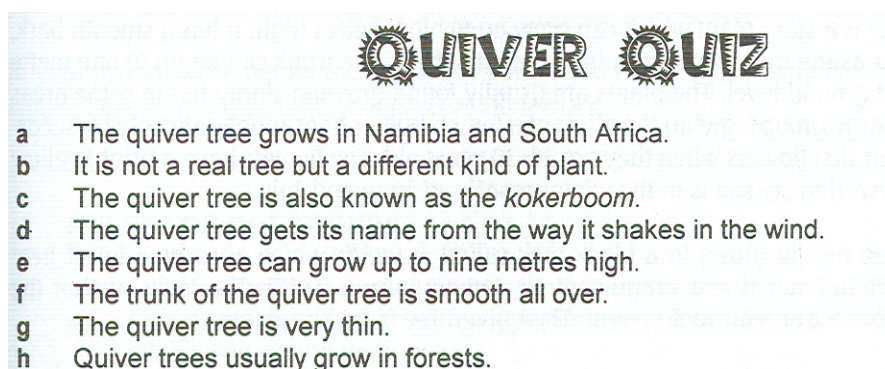
A large part of the chapter, however, consists of headlines and news items, and the students are asked to voice their own reactions to serious as well as light issues from different parts of the world.

## Activities

The activities in the textbooks convey the same impression as the topics and the texts: They have been selected and designed not only to help the students practice and learn English, but also to help them acquire knowledge and develop insight that will be useful – and even necessary – for them as citizens of the new democracy.

One indication of this can be seen in the fact that questions and activities do not only focus on language practice, but follow up and ask the students to deal with the subject matter that the texts take up. In this way, they convey a clear message to the students that it is important for them to understand and to remember the information that is given. True / false questions based on the content of the text, for example, are common. Even more common, however, are activities that expand on the topic in the

initial text, article or illustration. A striking characteristic of the textbooks is how activities are used to provide information, to consolidate information and to appeal to the students' curiosity to find out more about a topic. In the Quiver Quiz below, students are supposed to find out how much they know about these trees by discussing whether each statement is true or false, and then check their answers afterwards in a pamphlet about the Quiver Tree Forest:



(Aim High: 45)

Another typical trait in the textbooks has to do with all the authentic texts and how the activities are designed to help students deal with them. Students get practice looking up words in a dictionary and an encyclopaedia, they learn how to fill in a job application form and set up a letter, and they practice writing a CV. There is an abundance of activities that make students used to reading and understanding texts that they will meet in their everyday lives.


It is obvious that a main objective in the textbooks is to make students confident and active users of all the types of texts that are presented to them. However, development of the students' independent and critical thinking seems to be equally important. A large majority of the questions and activities are open, i.e. there is not one given answer. Rather, students are encouraged to provide their own reactions to texts and issues, to develop their own opinions and to discuss different views and interpretations in groups.

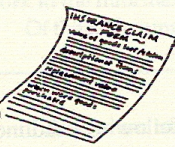
Emphasizing activities that allow students to meet texts and topics on their own terms and that challenge them to take a stand on different issues seems to be a crucial move when it comes to "localizing" a textbook and connecting it to the students' own experience (Tomlinson 2003b). Another important factor is, of course, to include topics that link up with the students' own background experience and their own resources for learning.


As already mentioned, this is done in the textbooks by bringing in a variety of topics that are central in the country's present situation, and also by bringing in issues that are related to the private domain. Quite a few activities reflect obvious attempts to contribute to the students' personal development, not least to the development of their sense of right and wrong. Below is an example:


**A Money versus morals**


1 Would you do any of the following to get a million dollars?

Rob a bank 

Burn down your house for the insurance money 

Marry a man/woman who is 80 years old 

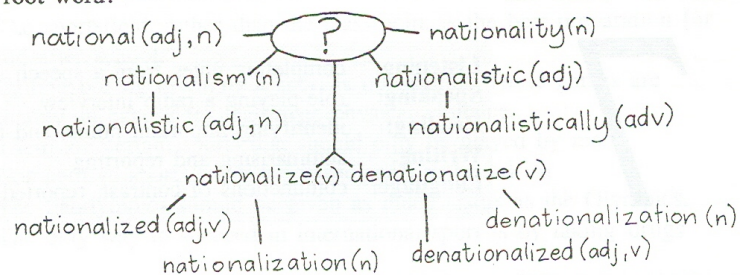
Murder a wealthy relative 

Smuggle diamonds 

(On Target: 91)

Another interesting feature in the Namibian textbooks is that even rather traditional language practice activities have been designed in a way that links up with the overall aim of nation building. Many activities provide or reinforce information and contribute to the development of national pride and awareness as well. Below are two exercises that show this:

- a. Below is a diagram showing a word family (nouns, adjectives, verbs and adverbs which are all related to the same root word). What is the root word?

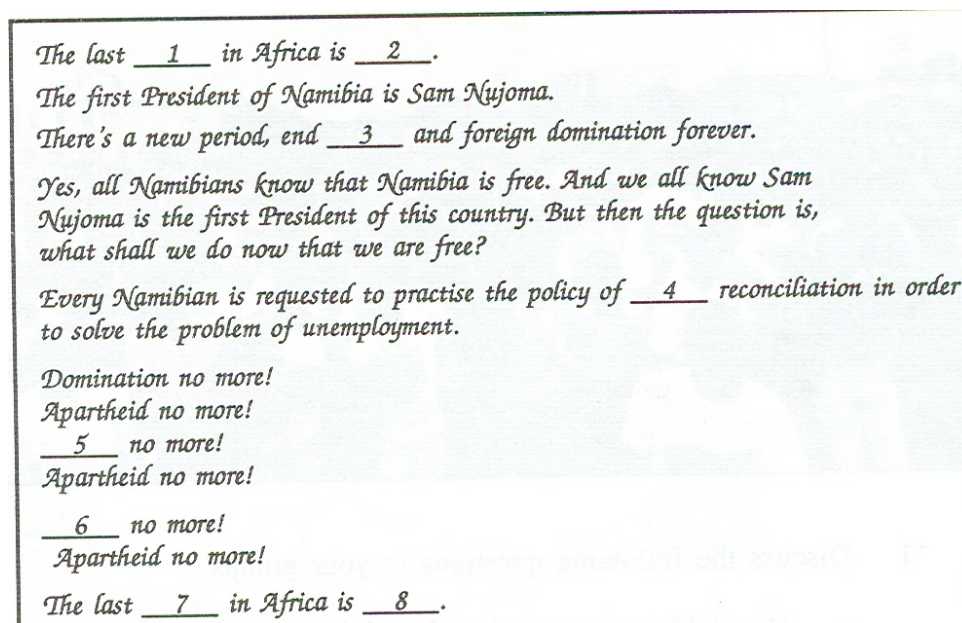


- b. Below are the words in the word family for the root word *colony*. Organise them into a diagram similar to the one above.

colonial      colonised      colonisation  
decolonise      colonialism      decolonised  
colonise      colonialist      decolonisation

(Racing Ahead: 88)





( Racing Ahead: 88)

## Summing up

The textbook series discussed in this article were developed in a rather special situation, to meet the needs of a new nation. Because of this, it could seem that some of the choices that were made have limited relevance to other situations where English language textbooks are being produced. At the same time, one could look at the development of Namibian textbooks as a sort of laboratory situation, a unique opportunity where new approaches could be tried out. While constraints and limitations are prevalent in most textbook development processes, the Namibian story can tell us about new insights that were being made in a situation where one was allowed to start from scratch and to look at earlier traditions and educational practices with new eyes.

One insight has to do with the authoring process, and the Namibian example of joint authorship can probably be an inspiration in many different contexts where teaching and learning materials are being developed. When a rather large number of authors - under the supervision of competent coordinators - are involved, this can make the process very effective and also open for a variety of perspectives (Tomlinson 2003c). Internet based resources, for example, which seem to be more and more commonly used to supplement the traditional textbook, can be a case in point here. If the many teachers and students who use such materials can be involved in the continuous process of improving and updating them, this would open for an enormous source of input - as well as effort. Provided that the materials are flexible and easy to adapt to different contexts and situations, an internet based pool of materials could also open for unique opportunities to "localize" the texts and activities, i.e. to link them up with the needs and the experiences of each specific group of learners.

Another important aspect of the Namibian process was the fact that many of the authors were practicing teachers. This facilitated not only the inclusion of materials that were asked for and, to some extent, already tried out in classrooms. It also made possible a comprehensive system of in-service training in the authors' respective

schools when the books were finished and ready to be used. Moreover, research indicates that teacher participation in the development of teaching and learning materials can be a decisive factor when it comes to bringing about new and innovative classroom practices (Braga Garcia 2009).

Many of the principles that guided the selection of topics in the Namibian books can, of course, be used in the development of textbooks elsewhere as well. One principle that can be equally valid in any situation is the one that English language teaching should not only be concerned with language proficiency, but also with the development of the students' general knowledge and everyday skills. Since foreign language instruction must, necessarily, be linked to topics and issues, it seems only natural to try to "kill two birds with one stone".

However, since students' needs for knowledge and skills are different in different parts of the world, this means that foreign language textbooks need to be developed locally, not globally. It also means that the selection of topics needs to be considered carefully: what will students benefit from learning? Research has shown that even "local" textbooks fail to present contents that are relevant and worthwhile (Risager 1991). My own investigation of Norwegian English language textbooks concludes that greater efforts have been made to appeal to the students' alleged interests than to provide them with valuable information and insights (Lund 2007).

Work that addresses ethical questions and moral values is crucial in any educational context, and the Namibian textbooks show how this can be brought into the foreign language classroom. Young people are eager to carve out their own identities and to find their own foothold in the world, and the fundamental questions and dilemmas that most people struggle with seem to constitute a highly relevant content for foreign language learning. Moreover, since mastery of a foreign language inevitably brings one into contact with people from different cultural backgrounds, texts and activities that can help students find their own place, yet be respectful and open towards others in a world of great cultural diversity, seem particularly important (e.g. Byram 1997).

The high percentage of "authentic" texts in the Namibian textbooks is yet another trait that producers of teaching and learning materials may do well to copy. While most textbooks, naturally, will contain texts that have been designed specially in order to meet the students' level of language proficiency, it seems a good idea to also include a variety of texts that students will meet in the world outside the classroom. We now know that "text competence" is needed in order to be able to deal with the many different text types and genres that life in modern society exposes us to (e.g. Hasan & Williams 1996). Activities that help students learn how to deal with different texts are therefore also important.

In sum, the Namibian textbooks from the 1990s remind us that foreign language instruction can contribute to a broader educational undertaking than just the development of practical language skills. Young people need to learn more than language. The world needs youngsters with a sound understanding of their own identity and their own values, young people who are also well informed about and open towards a variety of issues in the world around them.

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