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RECONCEPTUALIZING ACADEMIC LITERACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR EPISTEMOLOGICAL ACCESS

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a case study conducted in a School of Education in KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa. The study sought to investigate students' writing practices and experiences in one academic literacy module. The study employed an interpretive paradigm, qualitative analytical approach, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and documentary evidence. However, the findings presented in this paper are those from the interview-based data. The findings revealed that academic literacy, when taught in an isolated, generic way, fails to enable epistemological access to various disciplinary writing practices. Hence, we argue in this paper that, until academic literacy is reconceptualised to allow for epistemological access within discipline-specific contexts, our efforts to enable epistemological access into disciplinary discourses will remain a paper fantasy with no real practical manifestation.

Keywords: Academic literacy, discipline-specific teachings, epistemological access, first-year students, literacy.

INTRODUCTION

Research, both nationally and internationally, has revealed the existence of challenges among students in the academic literacy skills in HEIs, especially at first-year level (Pineteh, 2012). Paxton (2007) describes first-year students' writing practices as 'interim literacies' in that the "students make meaning by reworking past discourses, appropriating and adapting new discourses to make their own" (47). This, she describes to be manifesting when these students find it difficult to master the new academic discourse, thereby greatly relying on a variety of spoken discourses and oral tradition. This situation is what Gee (1996) describes as the failure to master a particular Discourse. Researchers have referred to this period as the greatest transition (Leibowitz, van der Merwe, Herman & Young, 2009), and if not monitored may endanger the writing practices in the HEIs, as these students will largely depend on the 'interim literacies'. Thus, for an academic literacy module to be efficient and realistic, the focus must be on identifying factors that constitute the academic literacy challenges of the first-year students (as will be discussed below), as well as providing effective ways or approaches in dealing with such factors. Though our paper focuses on the South African context where the research was carried out, its findings have the potential to contribute to the growing body of knowledge in the field of academic literacy, the 'place' of discipline-specific academic

literacies in students' academic achievement, and the centrality of the need for epistemological access for students in higher education the world over.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Unfamiliar Medium of Instruction: A Challenge for First-Year HEI Students in South Africa

The challenge of mastering the Language of Teaching and Learning (LoTL) is pertinent to countries where English is not spoken as a First Language by the majority in the population of the country, and where English is Additional Language (EAL). In the South African context, furthermore, it is reported that many students who enter university are under-prepared to face the academic literacy demands in their modules and disciplines (Mbirimi, 2012). Research reveals that Black South African students are the most affected by this challenge because English, which is the LoLT in most tertiary institutions, is not their First Language (L1) (Maher, 2011; McKenna, 2010). Similarly, Naidoo and Tshivhase (2003) add that lack of proficiency in English language, which is the language of classroom instruction in the majority of the higher education institutions, is the main reason for students' struggle within the academic framework. In addition, Mbirimi (2012) adds that Black students, whose mother tongue is not English, constitute 63% of the enrolment figure, and almost 50% of these students drop out of the university, while only one-third graduate within the specified years of completion.

It is note-worthy from the foregoing that the South African Black students now constitute the larger part of the student population in the HEIs (Mbirimi, 2012; Merisi, 2014). Yet, these students are faced with the challenge of having to learn in an unfamiliar language. Accordingly, the academic literacy challenges in most South African tertiary institutions can be said to have been compounded by the lack of proficiency in the LoLT. Naidoo and Tshivhase (2003) opine that this problem is evident among the students who speak EAL in that they are less fluent (using fewer words), less accurate (making mistakes), and less effective (achieving lower holistic scores). All these manifest in their academic literacy practices within their specific disciplines. As a result, the ability to use appropriate academic language within a particular context and in an academic way becomes difficult for these students (Lea, 2016).

In addition to this, lack of proficiency in the language of instruction in most HEIs in South Africa is the major reason for the increase in the number of dropout rate (Butler 2013; Boughey 2013; Van Dyk and Van de Poel 2013). However, they specifically add that there is not only an increase in the percentage of first-year students' drop out, but that 40% of the historically disadvantaged students drop out. This finding, however, fails to include other factors (financial, emotional, psychological, etc.) that may be responsible for such a high rate in the number of students who drop out. This they describe as the situation in the first-year of studies, but the status quo becomes worse in the ensuing years of study as students are likely to encounter more and critical learning challenges. Maher (2011) argues that the students who speak EAL are not only taught in English, but are also assessed in it, and thus they struggle with learning new and sophisticated subject matters in an unfamiliar non-mother-tongue (language). Arguably, language knowledge, a core element of tertiary or academic literacy, is inevitable for this group of students, and the lack thereof is one of the factors contributing to the low level of academic competence that defines the state of the majority of the first-year students in South African HEIs, including the university under study.

Academic Language Proficiency

The focus on language proficiency as discussed above in this paper should not be seen as an indication that we are reducing students' challenges with disciplinary epistemological access simply to the issue of limited competency in the LoLT. Nor are we suggesting that once the issue of proficiency in the LoLT is solved, epistemological access will be a reality. We argue that such simplistic understandings ignore the literacies students already possess when they arrive as first-year students. Another point we need to make is that academic literacy, as Bourdieu and Passeron (1994) remind us, 'is no one's mother tongue'. Mqquashu (2009) argues that all students, whether they speak the LoLT as the First Language or not, require support in acquiring academic literacies across disciplines. We therefore do not wish to construct students who speak EAL in any deficit terms. Proficiency in L1 does not automatically lead to proficiency in academic literacy (Cummins, 2008). All entrant students (both L1 and L2) have been described as having academic literacy challenges which vary in type and kind.

However, within the South African HE context, African students have been described to have a two-pronged challenge. This comprises challenges in the acquisition of LoLT and the acquisition of Discourse (disciplinary new ways of knowing). These, McKenna (2010) argues, are a result of the political nature of language in South Africa. Hence, ignoring such a concept in the acquisition of academic literacy in South African context is a way of underplaying past political injustice. Therefore, the concept of language proficiency is not only about language issue, but it is cultural, political, and about social justice.

The term language proficiency traditionally means one's knowledge of, competence and ability to use a language accurately and appropriately in its oral or written form (Hulstijn, 2010). In Scholtz and Allen-Ile (2007), communicative competence, communicative language ability, as well as communicative proficiency all refer to language proficiency. However, in their description of communicative ability, these authors argue that communicative ability transcends a mere transfer of information, but must be characterized by a "dynamic interaction between the situation, the language user, and the discourse" (923). In other words, university learning goes beyond the ability to communicate in the language of instruction, whether in the written or oral forms, but it is that which "involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting and organizing knowledge" (Lea & Street 1998:157).

From this perspective, it could be said that tertiary students are said to be academic language competent when they are able to infer, express personal opinion, think critically, form personal arguments and establish own view points. At this level of competence, students are expected to engage with deeper meanings of texts, not just making meanings from a surface level. It is therefore obvious from the foregoing that language proficiency at the tertiary institution of learning emphasizes new ways of knowing and devaluates the old.

The situation of students who speak EAL at the university under study, who at the moment form the larger percentage of the student population, poses a challenge to the teaching and learning process. Apart from the fact that the majority of first-year students learn in EAL, research has also revealed that the L1 speakers of the English language do not possess academic language proficiency since it is embedded in the new ways of knowing (Lea & Street, 1998). Thus, academic language proficiency surpasses a mere communicative competence in one's

mother tongue, but is cognitively demanding (Cummins, 2008). According to Weidman and Van Rens Berg (2002:36), “language proficiency among young South Africans is low”. Stressing on this, Read (2019) also contributes that this is not only the situation among the non-mother tongue speakers of English, but of the native speakers as well. In a nutshell, it can be deduced that one of the problems common to most tertiary institution students, specifically in the South African context, relates to low levels of academic language proficiency. This has consequently been described as being crucial to learning in the university in that there is a nexus between proficiency in the language of instruction and academic performance (Read, 2019).

Archer (2010:496) states that South African universities need to consider certain factors in designing intervention programmes as well as methods of assessments. These factors include:

- The fact that most students need to write in English, a language other than their mother tongue;
- The fact that all students are under-prepared academically, but particularly those from previously disadvantaged communities;
- That all students need to learn the academic discourses of different disciplines and;
- That students come to tertiary institutions with different literacies [sic] and cultural conventions.

Understanding from Archer’s (2010) four-point agenda on rescuing HEIs students from the quagmire of academic literacy challenges are two issues. First, is the recommendation on the necessary language support programmes, particularly for the previously disadvantaged students who are not familiar with the university LoLT. The second issue relates to the challenge with the disciplinary new ways of knowing. Morrow (2009) describes the disciplinary new ways of knowing as epistemological knowledge. According to him, epistemological knowledge is learning “how to become a participant in an academic practice”, and this involves learning the “intrinsic disciplines and constitutive standards of practice” (Morrow, 2009: 77). Although it has been argued over the years that formal access into the university has been given to the formerly disadvantaged South African students, which has consequently led to a large increase in their university participation, these students have been denied epistemological access (Ellery, 2016; Morrow, 2009).

We therefore argue in this paper that, unless this access is given, HEIs students, particularly the Black students, may continue in their quagmire of frustration and dropout rate. For us, the existing academic language development support initiatives, particularly in the university under study, are only equipping these students with skills necessary for them to write essays, such as knowing the structure and components of an academic essay, introductions and conclusions. We argue that this will only make these students to be comfortable or rather cope with writing practices in general courses, and have nothing to contribute to their becoming practicing members of their various disciplinary communities. Hence, such a programme still denies them epistemological access in their disciplines to which they are seeking membership.

Drawing from the social theories of learning, the study reported in this paper was framed by the New Literacy Studies (NLS). This framing draws on the work of theorists like Street (1999) and Gee (1990). In contrast to the traditional view about literacy, the NLS conceptualises literacy as a complex phenomenon that goes beyond a mere acquisition of literacy skills and

the ability to read and write (Clifford, 2017). The NLS scholars therefore posit that literacy is a social process rather than a static set of technical skills residing in human brain. Although they give cognizance to the role of “decoding skills” particularly in the acquisition of writing and other forms of literacy, the NLS proponents however argue that these skills alone are incapable of describing the scope and power of being (academically) literate.

Method

The study employed a qualitative research method. This is because this choice provides researchers with the privilege to have direct contact and interaction with the study participants. Moreover, qualitative research allows for the generation of first hand, rich and in-depth information. Furthermore, for the research design, the study selected a phenomenological case study located within the interpretive paradigm in that interpretive researchers are concerned with understanding the world as it is from subjective experiences (Riyami, 2015). To generate data, the study used semi-structured interviews, and a purposive sampling method was chosen. The study participants who were interviewed comprised two lecturers, two tutors, and four students of the ALUGS module. All the student participants were Black students to whom English is an additional language. The two lecturer participants consisted of one White female lecturer and a Black male lecturer, and both have had long years of experience in teaching the module. The two tutors were postgraduate students at the university where the study was conducted; one of them was a local female tutor while the other was an international male tutor (that is, not from South Africa).

We carefully went through the interview transcripts and an initial list of codes was created. After this, we conducted a qualitative content analysis and highlighted the emerging themes such as under-preparedness, epistemological access, etc. This procedure was repeated across the participants to identify shared themes and patterns. Through this analysis, we were able to highlight the ways the study participants conceptualised academic literacy and their understanding of ALUGS module’s impact on students’ writing practices.

Discussion of Findings

The following are the findings from the study reported in this paper:

Under-preparedness for HE Learning

Under-preparedness was found to be one of the challenges that first-year students were faced with, particularly at the university where this study was conducted. Their under-preparedness was found to be two-pronged. First, they lacked necessary LoLT (English) linguistic skills to write correctly as expected in the essayist literacy that characterises teaching and learning in the university. One of the lecturer participants mentioned that the majority of the students lacked the necessary skills that ought to make them cope with the demands of academic life. She stated that:

“We just found that people did not have those skills in order to do critical thinking, critical reading and critical writing skills in order to cope with the demands of academic life and academic literacy was introduced and became compulsory” (Lecturer 2).

The statement above reveals that students were perceived as being under-prepared for tertiary literacy at the university under study. However, this under-preparedness seems to be associated with the lack of necessary skills such as critical thinking, critical reading and critical writing skills deemed important in coping with academic demands. She further confirmed that this lack concerns the users of EAL. She stated that:

“We were having a lot of second language people coming through the system and the schools were changing, it was a tough change and the nature of schooling in South Africa was changing” (Lecturer 2).

From this lecturer’s perspective, the ALUGS module seems to have been designed primarily for the second language students because of their lack of those skills that are deemed indispensable for academic success at the university. This therefore reveals that the focus of the module was on equipping students, particularly those who speak EAL with academic literacy skills. It appears that students who do not have such skills within the ALUGS module are constructed in deficit discourses, thus a conceptualisation of literacy development within the autonomous model. Within this model, emphasis is placed on skill acquisition rather than socialisation into discipline-specific literacies following social interaction with the members of the discipline (Street, 2003). This is the perspective held in initiatives designed to support Black students in most HEIs in South African. Merisi (2013) has argued that language barriers continue to characterise the teaching and learning process in South Africa. Furthermore,

Secondly, as earlier stated in this paper, data in this study reveals that South African students’ under-preparedness for HE is not only defined by the barriers they experience as a result of the LoLT they speak as an additional language. The challenge also includes their inability to gain epistemological access into their various disciplinary discourses. Lack of epistemological access was found in this study as students’ inability to write not just correctly, but writing efficiently in accordance with the dictates, norms, cultures, and practices in their various fields of study. A lecturer participant agrees that these students lacked not only the classroom communicative language, but academic language. In his words:

“...in an environment of academia, one has to know how to operate within the environment and to operate within that environment we need academic language” (Lecturer 2).

Understanding from this operational definition of academic language, it can be argued that academic language is an unavoidable tool for success at the HEIs. Gee (1990) describes academic language as the Discourse with capital ‘D’, while classroom communicative language is the discourse with small ‘d’. Gee proposes that ‘Discourse’ in capital letter ‘D’ is the real Discourse in the university and this Discourse can only be produced, practiced and learned in specific community of practice such as various disciplines at the university.

The foregoing agrees with Gee’s (1990) argument that no one can learn Discourse, but by becoming a member of the Discourse community itself. The question then is who should teach academic language if it is regarded as discipline-embedded discourse? The implication for the module under study then is that its Discourse cannot be learnt as a stand-alone set of technical

skills as it is being practiced, but can only be acquired through immersion into and participation in its social practices.

Conceptualising Academic Literacy as a Linguistic Set of Skills

It was found that all the participants conceptualised academic literacy as a set of skills that are necessary for effective communication in HEIs, particularly, as an attempt to equip students with skills to write correctly. For example, a lecturer participant, talking about the purpose of the (ALUGS) module, said:

“We just found that people (students) do not have those skills in order to do critical thinking, critical reading and critical writing; in order to cope with the demands of academic life, and academic literacy was introduced and became compulsory” (Lecturer 1).

Another lecturer added that:

...my understanding is that when students entered university, especially the first-year students, as much as it is important to know English as a language of learning...everyone is to learn it (Lecturer 2).

These two practitioners were of the opinion that the module was made compulsory for all students in order to equip them with linguistic set of skills that are necessary for successful engagement in the HEIs. This therefore reveals that academic literacy within this module is taught and perceived as a technology of the mind (Street, 2003), an entity that rests solely within an individual’s brain devoid of cultural and social realities in which learning is embedded. In essence, it is what you either have in your brain or you do not have.

One of the tutor participants opined that academic literacy is about formal use of language in essay writing. She said:

“I think, in my opinion, academic literacy means that you are writing in a formal language; you use a formal language when you are writing whatever you are writing. You know you don’t use word that you don’t even know the meaning of. You don’t use words that you normally use when you are socializing with your friends...” (Tutor 1).

From these practitioners’ perspective of the purpose of an academic literacy programme or module, academic literacy should be designed in a way that equips students with linguistic skills that can make them write correctly in general essays, and not in ways approved and supported by the disciplinary communities of the courses they are registered for.

The irony is students themselves praised the module for equipping them with necessary skills to write their essays correctly. Student 1, for example, said that:

“the module is quite interesting because it teaches us how to write academically and the way we use academic language”.

A close examination of what makes the module interesting to this student is her claim that she learnt how to write academically and the use of academic language in the module. Arguably,

this statement is an eye-opener to the fact that students feel fulfilled when they are able to manipulate academic language, a discourse which Bourdieu and Passeron (1994) describe to be no one's mother tongue. Thus, it seems that the student finds the module interesting because it is within the ALUGS module that issues about the use of academic language and the acquisition of academic discourse are discussed or mentioned. The student may have enjoyed this module given that it was the only module that addressed academic literacy. She confirmed this by saying that:

"...I find this very effective because it helps us because we are always writing in this university".

This therefore agrees with Bengesai's (2012) assertion that knowledge in HE is cast in written language. In essence, this student perceived writing, particularly academic literacy, to be the heart of the teaching-learning activities at the HEIs. Arguably, the reason for this student's perception of the module as being effective is the fact that every student is required to write at HE, no matter the discipline they belong to. Thus, this student created a link between the module under study and her writing. However, it should be noted that the type of writing being discussed here is general essay writings in general courses, and not discipline-specific literacies on the basis of which students pass or fail in their studies.

The second student participant agrees with the assumption that the module was interesting in that it taught her:

"a lot on how to write academic text. It depends on how you see it. To me, it's not that difficult".

Following these two responses, it seems that these two students found the module interesting and effective because it taught them *"a lot on how to write academic texts"* (student 2). However, these students' perception of an academic text is the ability to write essays correctly. This view contradicts research findings in Mgqwashu's (2002), in which findings suggest that academic literacy is the ability to write efficiently in the way prescribed by members of one's discourse community, and it is contextual and a social practice, rather than the acquisition of a set of skills detached from one's community of practice.

Reconceptualising Academic Literacy for Epistemological Access

Data sets discussed in the previous sections reveal that academic literacy within the context of the module under consideration is conceptualised as a set of technical skills seen as necessary for writing effectively in generic modules, and not within specific disciplines. The question is whether this kind of writing knowledge/practice really enables epistemological access to specific disciplines for which students are enrolled. Some of the study participants, furthermore, were calling for a reconceptualization of the module with an intention to give access to discipline-specific knowledge of the students. For example, a lecturer participant, while clamouring for the reconceptualization of academic literacy, said:

"...I would basically say that I do feel that academic literacy should be housed in every discipline and I do feel that the lecture-tut model does not work within our context... if we are serious about academic literacy" (Lecturer 1).

An explanation to the above position is revealed in one of the student participants' view about the module. This student stated that though the module taught her how to write essays, it was

not useful for gaining access into her disciplinary discourse (epistemological access). As a student of Educational Technology, she said: “*it (technology) talks about machines... and not about writing (essays)*”. In some very important respects, these data allude to the notion that generic teaching of writing approaches are always decontextualized literacy practices and students’ own disciplinary discourses never receive focussed attention, thus incorrectly rendering the development literacies as asocial. In the case of this student, the module has nothing to do with her disciplinary discourse. Such modules cannot boast of any discipline or discourse to call their own, but can only create pseudo discourses of their own (Gee, 1990; Jacobs, 2005). It is noteworthy that it is the acquisition of the real discourse that brings out epistemological access in the HEIs. The implication then is that the pseudo-discourses embedded in such a generic programme such as the ALUGS module may have been responsible for this student’s conclusion that the ALUGS module was difficult and irrelevant.

Admittedly, Lea and Street (2006) have also stated that when an academic literacy module is being taught in a generic manner, it is likely to view literacy as an entity and a technology of the mind, where learning is perceived to be uniform, discrete, homogeneous and stable. Hence, it was found that the kind of learning that takes place within the ALUGS tutorials and lectures is divorced from students’ disciplinary discourses. One can then describe the ALUGS module as a module that creates pseudo discourses of its own. Such a practice obliges students to learn within a social space that is unfamiliar to their affinity group (disciplines) (Jacobs, 2005; Merisi, 2014). Following this argument, a lecturer participant suggested that academic literacy goals will not be attainable until the university devises a new way of apprenticing students into their disciplinary Discourses. She was of the opinion that the ALUGS module does not benefit the students. She said:

No, I don’t (think it is improving students’ writing) I don’t think we should have (generic) lectures. We must have only the tutorials with very very small (discipline-specific) groups and I think then it will be a worthwhile programme... We are forced to do this model (generic), it is not beneficial to students (Lecturer 2).

This lecturer was of the opinion that the module was not beneficial to students. She opined that discipline-specific teaching of writing is of more benefit to students. It is clear therefore that both the student and lecturer participants were calling for a discipline-specific teaching of writing which they thought would give epistemological access to students, particularly within their various disciplines.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study have revealed that students and academics at the institution where the study was conducted are faced with two challenges. The first challenge relates to the language of communication, a problem referred to in this paper as language barrier. The other challenge is the difficulty with acquisition of discipline-specific discourses. It was gathered from the findings that the ALUGS module, the only academic literacy module at the university under study, focused mainly on equipping students with linguistic skills for successful writing of essays that characterise most writing practices in the institution. Two problematic issues were identified from the way writing was conceptualised in the module. The first issue relates to the

condition of teaching writing and the impact on the students. The second issue is on making a case for an alternative method of teaching academic literacy at the university under study.

It was found that academic literacy, also referred to as Discourse, conceptualised within the ALUGS module from a deficit perspective, was incapable of producing the original Discourses that the university community demands. Both practitioners and students agreed that what was being taught in the module had no relevance to the expectations of practitioners in students' various disciplines. A recommendation from one of the lecturers was to house academic literacy within each discipline at the university. This, she said, would make it easier for students to be familiar with how writing is done in their communities of practice.

The argument in this paper is that it is essential for every academic literacy module to focus on two things: access to the language of discourse and access to the discourse itself; the latter is referred to in this paper as epistemological access. What was found in this study was that the module that caters for academic literacy practices in the university under study focuses only on the access to the linguistic part of the students' needs at the expense of the epistemological integration into their various fields of study. We therefore argue that until the latter (epistemological access) is put into consideration, our students will continue to be kept behind the gates within our various communities of practice.

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