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STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS, ATTITUDES AND UNDERSTANDING OF ACADEMIC LITERACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Students are faced with various academic and non-academic challenges when they come to study at universities for the first time. They have to adapt to new ways of learning, new ways of using information and navigation through various academic sources, new ways of reading (critical reading and analysis) academic texts, new environments and also to finding ways to write for academic purposes. Along this journey, they develop perceptions and attitudes towards Academic Literacy (AL) and Higher Education (HE) at large. The study was aimed to investigate students' perceptions, attitudes and understanding of AL. AL practices such as reading and writing across disciplines, constitute central processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study (Street, 1998). A qualitative approach was used for this study. One hundred and fifty students from Natural Science Faculty participated in the study. The results of the study indicate a strong need for a student-centred pedagogy to be implemented during the teaching and learning of AL.

Keywords: perceptions, pedagogy, linguistic analysis, Higher Education, discipline, student-centredness

INTRODUCTION

Reading is making meaning from print. It requires that we use all four linguistic skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in order to comprehend texts. Learning to read and write is an academic skill which is a necessity for all students in academia. These skills are crucial to the development of any child as a social being. Street (2017) argues that learning literacy automatically brings cognitive, social and cultural benefits. These benefits assist in the development of skills necessary for students to cope with academic demands of Higher Education (HE) across disciplines.

Students are faced with various academic and non-academic challenges when they come to study at universities for the first time in South Africa. They have to adapt to new ways of learning, and using information as well as navigate through various academic sources, new ways of reading (critical reading and analysis) academic texts, a new environment, and find ways to write for academic purposes. Along this journey, they develop perceptions and attitudes towards AL and HE at large. It is through engagement in reading and writing in contexts such as communities and workplaces that learners come to terms with a variety of issues that they are

not necessarily conscious of learning explicitly, and, through this engagement, students develop skills to critique their own understanding of the world through reading and writing, both formal and informal. Reading and writing take place in specific sociocultural contexts where students as social beings spend most of their social and academic time before they enter formal education. It is this sociocultural context and the practices that take place that give reading (and writing) its meaning (Street, 2017). As part of an academic argument, reading and writing skills are given their meanings through formal reading and writing tasks in both formal and informal settings, since learning occurs anywhere where there is interaction between the mind a mind and external stimuli. It is these processes that enhance learning and when students enter HE, they are bound to have a voice, based on their previous experiences and engagements with the texts, to have perceptions and also attitudes, as part of their learning.

AL being considered as a social practice, varies within different social and academic contexts. Street (2017) argues that reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being. Knowledge is also always embedded in social practices, such as those of a particular job market, a particular religious culture, particular epistemology and ontology. AL is a hot topic in academia in that, it is always contested, regarding both its meanings and its practices about the best approaches to use when engaging with texts, which versions are best for a particular group and so forth. The current study focusses on students' understanding of AL, and based on their understanding, the study seeks to find out perceptions they might have about AL and how these perceptions influence their performance and understanding of the subject in a South African university.

Theoretical Framework

The current study focuses on the epistemological viewpoints of literacy as a social practice. It is based on the ideology that literacy as a social practice is rooted in socially constructed epistemological principles which enhance learning as a social process, focussing both on its meanings and its practices. Street (2015) argues that there are various ways in which reading and writing are addressed in academia, which are rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being. Academic Writing as a Social Practice, as argued by Gee (1996), allows us to conceive of academic writing as a complex of literacy practices patterned by discipline-specific ways of reading and writing. These ways of learning are rooted in both social and academic practices which are conceived by students in HE.

Through the social practice paradigm, reading and writing appear to be highly interwoven into local ways of life which are socially embedded in academic ways of both reading and writing. Mastery of such skills assists in students being able to master academic discourse which is a transferable skill across disciplines. Street (2015) argues that literacy as a social practice focuses on the everyday meanings and uses of literacy in specific cultural contexts and links directly to how we understand the work of literacy programmes, which themselves become subject to ethnographic enquiry. AL practices occur within events. In the university environment, AL events always involve literacy tools, genres or modes as students engage in comprehension processes or knowledge generation (Kalman *et. al.*, (2008). Reading and writing are construed as social practices in terms of the way that students bring their social beings to the texts which they critique in HE. This practice allows them to offer their academic opinions on

the current debates through academic discourses, and to engage and give balanced academic analysis of written texts without difficulty.

Learning Approaches in Academia

The provision of students with a choice of an option to have their studies either in a face-to-face (F2F) or online modality, contributes to overall student satisfaction and better engagement with academic content (Beetham et al., 2009). Previously, traditional approaches which were used in primary, secondary and HE in Southern Africa included F2F classes, a method in which teachers and students convene in a shared physical environment to learn together. This approach gained renewed attention during the pandemic when the global educational landscape was disrupted (Villamor, et.al, 2024). It has been observed that online learning has negative effects on students' academic performance when compared to the performance of students in F2F classes (Bir, 2019). Students and lecturers alike still prefer an approach where students are skilled with texts analysis as the new online methods put students at risk of unfairly using Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems, which mostly result in unfair use of academic texts.

Textbooks offer an additional set of benefits in that they are a source of exposure to academic discourse. Textbooks, then, potentially contribute to improving the quality of learning in many important ways, including a number of transferable language related skills (Pecorari, Shaw, Irvine, Malmstrom and Mezek, 2012). Any deficiency in interaction with the textbook negatively impacts student learning; the effects are measurable through assessments given, either formal or informal. Textbooks are considered as a source of exposure to academic discourse, a discourse that students must be able to produce in their assessments, engagements within the university, at work and in their communities.

F2F instruction provides a dynamic learning setting marked by direct interactions between lecturers and students in HE settings. It is considered the best teaching method as it contributes to active engagement between teachers and students as it also encourages student involvement, which is a critical aspect of classroom participation. On the other hand, technologically-enhanced learning strategies can improve learning in F2F classes and the creation and use of digital resources for asynchronous learning or using social media (and other platforms) can encourage collaborative learning (Lewohl, 2023). Understanding how these learning approaches impact teaching and learning is significant in the academic space to create learning environments that are engaging, inspiring and productive.

It must also be noted that each of these approaches has certain disadvantages when it comes to teaching and learning. F2F learning brings challenges as some students cannot participate in group discussions and are too shy to ask questions in class in the presence of their classmates. Online learning, even though it sounds interesting and easy to implement, is beset by issues such as network accessibility, especially in remote areas in southern Africa, challenges with access due to data and other network-related challenges, as well as challenges with the authenticity of assessments as, in most cases, students can cheat the system since it is difficult to tell who is behind the computer screen doing assessments. Blended learning seems to be a solution as it combines both F2F and online approaches into one teaching and learning strategy.

Struyven, Dochy and Janssens (2005) argue that the way in which a student thinks about learning and studying, determines the way in which he tackles assignments and evaluation tasks. There are other factors such as motivation and stress, which have lasting impact on the students' academic journey. In a study conducted by Fayda-Kinik (2023), it was discovered that academic stress among students has become a central factor hindering the effectiveness of online education. Academic stress is an influential factor for the level of self-directed learning readiness and recommended a variety of educational strategies to reduce academic stress that online learning students encounter during their classes. Academic stress which occurs as a result of deficiencies to critique use and understand academic texts affects the learning processes of students in academia and has lasting effects for students to graduate on record time. A blended learning approach is a solution in today's 4th Industrial Revolution as it recognises teaching both in traditional and online ways, thus accommodating students' learning in a hybrid manner.

Challenges with Reading and Critiquing Information

Reading and writing skills are crucial in the development of students to navigate, critique and analyse various academic information from various disciplines in HE. Students need to be able to critique academic texts by being able to tell what the text says, what the text describes and to give a balanced interpretation of the text. To do this, they need to be skilled in AL and have comprehension skills which will enable them to use academic texts without academic challenges. Learning to read and write within a specific discipline entails understanding the ways of making meaning within a discipline where a student studies. AL goes beyond reading and writing; it also involves skills such as critical thinking and, critical text analysis (Lea & Street, 1998). Writing is often used as a means to demonstrate successful acquisition of course content, but it also serves as a platform through which where students work through and solidify their newly acquired knowledge (LaMance, 2019).

Valentos and Decano (2021) argue that the increasing need for AL in higher institutions of learning is one of the leading indicators of current reading problems in many countries in Europe and Africa. Reading and writing skills are critical skills in the understanding of academic texts. Brevik (2019) is of the view that reading comprehension is a multi-faceted process that involves interactions with a given text in terms of its sociocultural context, reader activity and the text itself in terms of how it is constructed. These interactions, when mastered, assist with comprehension. While on the other hand, Pretorius (2013) is of a view that poverty, poor schooling, low literacy levels and unemployment tend to go hand in hand in creating academic reading and writing challenges in the education system.

Reading comprehension is defined by Snow (2002) as a process in which the reader extracts and derives meaning while interacting with written material. The reader, text, and activity are essential components of reading comprehension. In most cases, students with comprehension challenges are affected when required to work with various tests in HE in South Africa. Reading and writing are skills that need to be taught so that those engaging with academic texts know how to critique academic texts without challenges. Throughout text engagement, the reader is an active participant in the interaction with the reading material throughout the reading process; when reading with meaning success fully, comprehension occurs, which enables successful critiquing of academic texts. Reading is an essential instrument for learning because

it helps students to reason, analyse, assess and evaluate what they have read. Having the ability to read is essential for a successful life as well as for studying the curriculum subjects (Valentos and Decano, 2021: 163). Reading helps one to get information that one can utilize to create more knowledge through various engagements with various texts in academia. Reading is not always understood, hence there are students whose reading is at a frustration level. They are frustrated by the mechanics of reading and a lack of understanding. The frustration emerges as a result of reading without any reading strategies. Learning to read in HE without any use or understanding of reading strategies is one of the causes for reading at a frustration level. Arguably, students need to be introduced to reading strategies at the HE level so that they can cope with the demands of voluminous readings.

Reading comprehension plays a vital role in self-paced learning. Self-paced learning is difficult to emerge for students who struggle with reading and comprehension. This is due to their reading comprehension skills which are at a frustration level. Valentos and Decano (2021: 163) argue that in order to overcome the difficulty met by frustrated readers, it is highly recommended that language teachers intensify the reading intervention program and devise reading strategies to help increase reading comprehension of students amidst this pandemic crisis. Valentos and Decano (2021), discovered that one of the reasons behind reading at frustration level is the lack of interest which affects their ability to comprehend the material. Academics have a pivotal role in helping students develop and maintain a positive attitude towards learning and literacy; they need to help students achieve their full potential by giving them tasks that will assist them with reading comprehension. The PIRLS (2021) reports also indicate that learners struggle with reading in their indigenous languages, which is a significant contribution to the challenges that are experienced by students later in their academic lives in HE. The report (PIRLS,2021) is also significant in that it gives comparisons on learner achievements in English and Afrikaans, which are two of the established languages of South Africa. Even though there is a slight growth of percentages in English and Afrikaans, students still struggle with academic reading and writing in HE where content is presented in both English and Afrikaans (van Dyk, 2005). Reading skills and development need to be actively developed at the Primary School's level; such a practice will enhance learners' AL levels to such an extent that they are not vulnerable to academic failure at a later stage in their academic lives (Pretorius 2013:75).

Students Desired Learning Approaches

A lack of AL in HE is believed to be a factor in the poor graduation rates among South African students (Sebolai, 2022). Teaching and learning in HE institutions is manifested by factors such as cultural identities which actively operate in three domains: institutional, discipline-based, and personal cultural domains (van Dyk and van de Poel). These factors impact teaching and learning in both a positive and negative way, due to power paradigms and cultural belief systems which pre-existed based on values, principles or norms of a particular community which frame the options of students' behaviour and use of information for academic purposes. It is of paramount importance to be aware that students, as they come to HE, possess multiple identities and discourses which are influenced by their social and academic backgrounds. Boughey (2002) as quoted by Bharuthram and McKenna (2013) argues that cultural understandings refer not only to textual conventions, but also to what counts as knowledge and how knowledge is constructed within the institution and the discipline. In a study conducted by

Botha (2022), most Australian students prefer the ‘conventional’ evaluation methods such as the multiple-choice examination and the essay format. More ‘alternative’ assessment tasks like portfolios, simulations, case-based evaluation and presentations and alternative assessment methods—mostly related to these tasks—such as self and peer assessment are some of the learning and assessment methods highly favoured by students. This is also the case in Southern Africa as most students in language-based assessments, do not like activities where they have to write paragraphs, paraphrasing tasks, essays and assignments.

Perceptions and Attitudes about AL

Eybers and Paulet (2022) argue that epistemology, as a philosophical branch concerned with ways of knowing, encapsulates beliefs and theories that individuals come to hold about knowledge and knowing. When students come to HE, they bring with them cultural identities and persuasions. These identities influence the way in which knowledge is negotiated within the academic landscape, mostly between a lecturer and student and also when students engage with academic texts. Student engagement and student challenges in HE in general are used to assess and predict the quality of student learning experiences and outcomes and have been linked to persistence, retention, classroom motivations, course achievement and improved graduation rates (Gay & Betts, 2020; Hussain et al., 2018, Ferrer et al., 2022; Flynn, 2014; Jung & Lee, 2018; Lee, 2014; Pinchbeck & Heaney, 2022). These studies argue that students’ learning challenges emanate from their inability to comprehend and critique academic texts.

Van de Poel and van Dyk (2013) argue that the high percentage of students struggling with their studies in their first year of university studies emanate from both social and academic challenges. These challenges result more from social factors than academic factors; they are mostly based on students not understanding their new environment, i.e. academic culture, or not being able to speak the new community’s language. Due to these challenges, students develop perceptions about AL as a subject. Their perceptions emanate from their attitudes towards their experiences of university life. If their feeling and experiences related to their other modules are good, they are more likely to treat all other modules with the same attitude, and vice versa. At some point students develop a lack of interest in their studies.

Lack of interest in their studies impacts their learning in a negative way. Lack of interest in the module can be a significant barrier to effective reading and comprehension. Students may struggle to engage with texts that they find uninteresting or irrelevant. This will also have effects on their class attendance, how they treat the module, and the rest of their other modules. These attitudes contribute to high module repetition rates and high levels of stress due to extending their stay in the university, which also has financial implications. ‘South Africa loses roughly 30 percent of all first-year students due to either drop out or do not successfully complete their first year of enrolment. AL practices and argumentation are cultural tools for conveying knowledge – sometimes in emotional ways (Van Dyk, Van de Poel and Van der Slik, 2013)’.

RESEARCH DESIGN, METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLING

This article reports on a study conducted at North-West University in South Africa and focuses on students’ perceptions about AL, which then influence, their attitudes towards the module, the overall participation and pass rate of the module.

Sampling

The study took place at the North-West University Potchefstroom campus, in the Department of Academic Literacy. The participants in the study are first year students enrolled for the AL module in the second semester, in the Faculty of Health Sciences. One hundred and fifty-five first year students, out of two hundred first year students participated in the study. An informed consent was obtained from the participants. All participants were over 18 years at the time of the study. The participants were of mixed linguistic groups: 15% were white English First Language speakers, 35% were Afrikaans-speaking students, 49% were Black African who speak seTswana (23%), seSotho (11%), sePedi (6%) isiZulu (3%) and TshiVenda (2%) as their first languages. The participants were selected because they represented all the South African linguistic groups (English, Afrikaans, Nguni group, Northern and Southern Sotho, and Venda group), and also represented the Black and White social groups. The linguistic groups represented have different social and linguistic upbringings. The group also represented different school backgrounds in terms of quintiles (quintiles 1 – 5) where quintiles 1-3 represented students who are a product of government schools which are the mostly disadvantaged, often located in rural or low-income areas. Quintiles 4 - 5 are the least disadvantaged schools, typically found in wealthier communities. It was worthwhile conducting a study in a class where lots of identities and cultures are represented.

Ethical Considerations

The participants who took part in this study were adequately informed about the nature of this study, what would be done, when it would be done and how it would be conducted. No one was forced to take part in this study, although all were requested to. Privacy and anonymity were ensured during the study. All the respondents were assured of their privacy and anonymity. A written consent from the participants was obtained.

Research Design and Methodology

The aim of the study was to investigate students' perceptions, attitudes and understanding of AL and how these factors impact their participation in the module as well as their overall pass rate. A qualitative approach was used for this study. A research questionnaire was used to solicit data from the participants; interviews were also conducted randomly. One hundred and fifty students from the Natural Science Faculty participated in the study. The class setting included 67% female and 33% males. Participants in the study were given questions to answer. Questions were in response to their perceptions about AL. Interviews were also administered to 10 male students and to 10 female students. These were chosen randomly. Data were analysed, guided by epistemological viewpoints of literacy as a social practice as argued by Gee (1996) and Street (2015). Qualitative data analysis is defined as the classification and interpretation of linguistic (or visual) material to make statements about implicit and explicit dimensions and structures of meaning-making in the material and what is represented in it (Flick, 2013:5). Data analysis focused on participants' responses with expert analysis of the participants' perceptions, attitudes and understanding of AL with a focus on skills such as reading and writing across disciplines. Crotty (2003) describes methodology as the strategy, plan of action, process, or design in doing research with a focus on methodology as a technique or procedure a researcher uses to gather and analyze data.

In order to evaluate students' perceptions within the context of AL, their views, concerns, perceptions, attitudes and understanding of AL were ascertained via the following research questions below: were administered and guided this present research:

- What is your understanding of AL?
- Do you think AL equips you with the necessary academic skills? Which are those skills?
- Is there a link between AL and your other modules in your field of study?
- How would you like to be assessed from this module?
- Do you think that the AL module is boring: why do you say so?
- Which section of the module do you understand better?
- Which section would you remove if you were teaching this module? Why?
- What is your overall comment about the AL module?
- What kinds of writing do/did you expect to do at university?

The following interview questions were used to solicit data from the participants through the use of a recording device.

1. Do you think that the AL module is boring: why do you say so?
2. What kinds of writing do/did you expect to do at university?
3. Do you think the AL module assisted you much on your reading, writing and text production and analysis? Please explain.

Data Presentation and Analysis

● What is your understanding of AL?

When asked this question, the majority of the participants, 88% (132 out of 150) indicated that AL is a module that gives them skills of reading and writing, and this module acts as a guide by introducing them to the rules for using texts in HE by guiding them how to use academic texts in their other modules. The responses indicate that the participants are aware of the need for the AL module and how the module will assist them in their later stages of their academic lives. The remaining 12% are not clear in terms of module importance and offering. Their responses show that they registered for the module because it was a requirement for their degrees; beside it being a requirement, they see no need for the module in their academic lives. They label the module as boring, as difficult with lots of activities compared to their other modules, and it takes much of their time trying to complete the activities. This is where attitudes and perceptions develop. They are developed by a few people who try to influence others to have similar beliefs about AL. This belief is spread by those who: (i) hate the module and want to recruit others to develop similar ideas about the module, (ii) see that they will not make it to the examination because they have failed many activities which contribute to examination entrance. The results indicate that it is a small percentage of students who create and spread wrong perceptions about AL and influence others in the process.

● Do you think AL equips you with the necessary academic skills? Which are those skills?

When respondents were asked this question, the majority, 68% (102 out of 150) answered by indicating that AL as a module assisted them with paraphrasing skills, reading with understanding, referencing and finding academic sources. The remaining 32% were not sure of skills that come with AL. Even though these are stated in the module description, they could not identify these skills. Those who were confused were those who still need assistance with reading and comprehension skills as they struggle with critiquing academic texts and making

their voices heard through reading and writing. Those who view AL as a difficult module experienced challenges answering this question.

- Is there a link between AL and your other modules in your field of study?

The participants in this study indicated that there is a link between reading academic articles and analysing them, which are skills gained in the AL modules. The majority of the participants indicated that AL assisted them with information finding techniques, finding sources, critiquing of academic texts and writing reports in their other modules. These are the skills which the majority of participants 92% (131 out of 150) indicated assistance with. Other skills such as paraphrasing and visual literacy were less favoured by the participants as they did not comment about them. The students did indicate that there is a strong link between the content that they learn in the AL module and the content in their other modules, more specifically when it comes to text analysis.

- How would you like to be assessed in this module?

The majority of students do not prefer assessments which are essay types (Botha, 2022). It was also the case in this study; the majority of the participants indicated that they would like assessments where they could choose from the given alternatives, such as in multiple-choice assessments (choosing between columns and true/false assessments). It was also indicated in the study that the total for each assessment should not exceed 50 marks and should not take more than an hour.

- Based on your engagement with the module so far, which section of the module do you enjoy?

The majority of the participants indicated that from the eight topics (Academic Acculturation, Task Analysis, Referencing, Finding and Integrating Information, Argument structure, Text Production, Academic Essay and Visual literacy) covered in the eight weeks of the semester, 85% (127 out of 150) selected referencing, finding and integrating information, argument structure while very few,(about 11 selected visual literacy and academic essay content), while the remaining 12 selected topics on argumentation structure, task analysis and academic acculturation. These were the views of students pertaining to their engagement with the AL content. Based on the responses received, it could be argued that some students have perceptions about the module is content related to reading and writing. This is because only 11 students (7%) out of 150 selected topics on academic essay and visual literacy. This selection could be understood in terms of their frustration when it comes to written tasks as many do not like written tasks, as part of assessment. There is a perception among participants that academic writing involves a lot of rules; as a result, they do not like tasks that involve extensive academic reading and writing.

- What is your overall comment about the AL module?

The majority of the participants indicated that they like the module and enjoy attending AL classes because they learn from the content that is presented on a weekly basis. When asked to comment on where the module needs to be improved, their responses differed. Some indicated that the essay writing component needs to be removed as it takes too much of their time, and in addition, they still have other modules to focus on. The other group indicated that there must be a change in terms of assessments as there are many assessments in the module, yet they carry small percentages in terms of final mark weightings. The participants are of the view that AL is

an important module in their academic lives, but it needs to be presented in a hybrid mode. The aim will be to accommodate those students who might struggle with academic language: perhaps recordings of classes that were conducted online. The second reason highlighted by the participants involves both consultation times and availability of staff to attend to their queries when they struggle with online assessments. One respondent said, “If lecturers are always available to assist us, we will avoid temptation to use artificial intelligent (AI) wrongly”.

Interviews

Interviews remain a vital aspect of the data collection technique, since they are mostly open-ended and easy to clarify. It is easy to correct any ambiguities in the language, since the researcher is there to oversee such linguistic limitations which may not be easy to avoid when using only a questionnaire as the data collection tool. The following questions were used to solicit data during interviews. Twenty students participated in the interview process (ten males and ten females) who were randomly selected from the group. Three questions were asked from each participant:

- Do you think that the AL module is boring, why do you say so?

The AL module is perceived as the difficult module to pass. The perception exists as many students find it difficult to cope with the demands of HE especially at first-year level in South African universities. As students are still struggling to cope with the demands of HE, they develop negative perceptions if they do not get the assistance they need with their reading and writing tasks.

- What kinds of writing do/did you expect to do at university?

The participants indicated that they expected to do lots of essay writing. Essays which are mostly analytical or argumentative on a specific topic given by a lecturer. They indicated that they do not have a specific reason for their answer but said that essays are the most common writing piece they are exposed to from the high school. Some indicated creative writing assignments which include short stories or poetry. The majority of participants indicated that they are content that they studied AL which was new to them, which is why they struggled with it, as they had to develop new skills such as critiquing texts.

- Do you think the AL module assisted you much on your reading, writing and text analysis? Please explain.

Here was generic feedback in terms of how the module assisted the participants. They all agreed that it was a learning curve for them, and that they found learning to be a journey which need not finish at first-year level, but which should continue throughout their academic disciplines. One participant indicated that ‘the module is an academic life skill, it assisted me with the new ways of using information from various texts and assisted me with referencing, which is something I learnt for the first time in my life’. The participants in the study signalled a need for the AL module to be offered as a support skills-based module, where students across disciplines, both first and senior students can make bookings and ask for assistance when they are stuck with academic writing.

DISCUSSION

The current study argued that AL should be seen not as just as a set of skills, but as a social practice influenced by disciplinary expectations and the academic community (Lea & Street, 1998). The participants indicate a feeling of unpreparedness for university life which impacts negatively on their academic success at university. This is due to lack of exposure to academic reading and writing tasks, and poor transition from high school to HE which leads to difficulties in adjusting to university life, among other things. These challenges experienced directly impact their ability to perform well not only in AL as a module but in other academic subjects as well. Students' comments about the module indicate that they have developed perceptions. These perceptions occur due to their inability to critique, engage and analyse academic texts for further use. When they are overcome by these challenges, their perceptions about the module become negative. The study has found that students' perceptions about a module are mostly influenced by two things: negative perceptions are influenced by frustrations that come with the module, especially when the module demands aspects which they find difficult. The second perception, a positive one, is influenced by clear understanding of the module's objectives and finding multiple ways to solve given solutions, which results in good pass rate. Perceptions in general are the indicators of what is going right or wrong in the curriculum which must, at times, guide the module content facilitators/instructors/lecturers in terms of multiple ways of engaging students for better encouraging and results.

The results indicate that the AL module plays a big role in assisting students with their reading and writing needs, which is a good thing, academically. The results also indicate sections within the module which students find interesting. This shows that their perceptions are also influenced by their ability to read for meaning/understanding. If they cannot comprehend what they read, they develop negative perception. Based on these results, it appears that the most significant skill which we need to assist students with is a reading for meaning. Reading with comprehension seems to contribute towards students' success at HE as most students struggle with reading and writing in English due to their lack of reading and writing skills and a lack of exposure to academic texts. As a result, they find academic reading and writing difficult. This then contributes to their reading at a frustration level (Valentos and Decano, 2021) which contributes to students developing negative perceptions about the module.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Van Dyk, Van de Poel and Van der Slik (2013) argue that South African universities lose roughly 30 percent of all first-year students due to either drop-out or do not successfully complete their first year of enrolment. Some of the drop out are due to perceptions developed about HE and mostly, the inability of students to cope with reading and writing demands of HE as these demands need them to be able to critique academic texts without challenges. Critical analysis of academic texts is a skill that students need to bring from their high school to HE, and this is not always the case in South Africa.

The academic demands of South African HE dictate that each student entering HE must be able to read without challenges, in order to cope with university. Perceptions then develop when students entering HE struggle to critique academic texts as their reading is mostly at a frustration level (Valentos and Decano, 2021). There is much that could be done to remedy the

situation, but due to time frames students spend in HE, I can only recommend academic ways of solving the current situation. The challenge seems to start with reading and writing. Reading skills need to be developed for those coming to the university for the first time. There must be a year-long module that will be aimed at assisting struggling students with reading strategies, reading for meaning and how to critique academic texts. The second part should focus on academic writing as this is not just normal writing, but writing for a particular audience and a particular discipline. In this way, we could minimise students' hardships across disciplines, and also minimise the dropout rate in South African HE.

The current views expressed in this article reflect views for students in a multilingual South African HE system. Previous studies (Lea and Street 1998), Van de Poel and van Dyk (2013), Botha (2022), Eybers and Paulet (2022) and Sebolai (2022) have also revealed students' perceptions about their experiences in HE and results have varied from issues of access, financial struggles, social and academic challenges within HE, to issues of classroom practice (Valentos and Decano, 2021). These issues have contributed to new ways of teaching and learning in HE, such as hybrid teaching and learning. Central to students' challenges is the issue of AL skills which are essential to their academic life, as most students still struggle with reading, writing and comprehension in HE. New ways of teaching these skills need to be re-designed and re-implemented in order to increase students' voices, engagement and participation in HE.

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