

ACADEMIC LITERACY: WHAT'S IN A NAME?

T. C. Smit, Language Centre, University of Namibia

ABSTRACT:

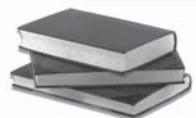
An alarming number of scholars have discussed Southern African students' low proficiency in academic literacy on entering tertiary institutions. This article will take an in-depth look into the current interpretation of what constitutes academic literacy. It will, furthermore, look at the relationship between critical thinking and autonomy in learning. The changing profile of Namibian university students, their ethnic, social and academic identities and the marked influence this has on designing courses to integrate them into a predominantly Western academic culture will be discussed. The focus will be on the Namibian students' need for direction and support in developing proficiency in critical literacy. Suggestions on how English for Intellectual Purposes can support courses in English for Academic Purposes will be given. Further research into the specific needs and strengths of first generation students is, however, necessary.

In the course of lecturing university students in Namibia, I have increasingly become aware that no matter what method of instruction is followed, students still seem to be bewildered at the end of a semester course in English for Academic Purposes (hereafter EAP), offered as an introduction to their academic studies. Conversations with lecturers from other faculties also indicate that students do not seem to gain much from EAP courses. Otaala (2005) has found that most of those students who participated in a survey indicated that they did not experience lasting gains in academic proficiency even after attending courses to develop literacy skills.

On the other hand, there appears to be constant upgrading and redefining of EAP course material in an attempt to satisfy the students' academic needs. Artificially loading courses and extending their duration, however, seem to be contra-productive. An innovative approach towards academic literacy is needed if students should derive lasting benefits; however, some of the qualities in the successful student profile, such as the development of critical thinking skills and self-reliance, defy easy reduction to attainable course goals and would be difficult to quantify within an assessed syllabus. This is not to say that such a syllabus cannot be devised, but only that it might not be possible to subject it to the same constraints and objectives (Sowden, 2003) set for existing EAP courses. Language courses which aim to promote learner autonomy need to incorporate means of transferring responsibility for aspects of the language that the learners process (such as setting goals, setting learning strategies and evaluating progress) from the teacher to the learner (Cotterall, 2000). However, before an informed solution to the current dilemma in EAP skills teaching can be suggested, it is necessary to consider the term *literacy* in depth.

LITERACY

From a post-modern perspective one cannot but wonder with Hasan (1996) whether the word *literacy* has not become semantically saturated in the long history of education. It seems that it has not only meant different things to different generations, but also different things to different people in the same



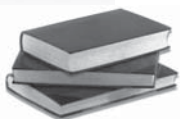
generation. It actually appears as if the word *literacy* has been honed in order to become understandable and interpretable by the larger community of educators. It remains, however, dangerous to widen the scope of meaning to an extent where it develops such blurred edges that *literacy* becomes something that can be owned like for instance *a car*, not a *Mercedes* or a *Mazda*, but a *car*! This might thus be read as a sign that in the fading academic jargon of yesterday the term is ripe for destruction.

Literacy should, therefore, rather be defined as the state of being literate or in possession of education; it cannot be used to define some fixed construct since it refers to a developmental process (Hasan, 1996). What would be helpful, though, is to recognise the conventional reference to the term *literacy* without accepting conventional views about language.

A number of scholars have occupied themselves with attempts to capture the essence of the term *literacy*. *Literacy* used to be understood as the ability to read and write in a language – the opposite being *illiteracy*. Nowadays, however, definitions seem to be concerned with the purposes that literacy serves in the everyday lives of people. In other words, there exists a more functional and contextualised, as well as a culturally relative, view of literacy as a social practice. Literacy has for instance been defined as “a life skill and the primary teaching tool for personal and community development and self-sufficiency” (Kaplan-Dolgoy, 1998, p. 16). Although literacy is politically neutral, it does appear to succeed in empowering by developing a critical creative spirit. Street (2005) describes an ideological model of literacy that offers a culturally sensitive view of literacy as it varies from one context to the other. This model describes literacy as a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill that is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the ways in which people address reading and writing are themselves rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being. According to Halliday (1996), to be literate is not just to have mastered the written registers, but to be aware of how society is constructed out of discourse; or rather “out of the dialectic between the discursive and the material” (p. 368). Thus literacy could be seen as a tool which for modern man “cuts across all shades of human endeavours” (Onukaogu, 1999, p.144).

New Literacy Studies as discussed by Street (2005) represents a further shift in perspective on the study and acquisition of literacy – from the dominant cognitive model, with its emphasis on reading, to a broader understanding of literacy practices in their social and cultural contexts. This approach has been particularly influenced by those who have advocated an ethnographic perspective in contrast to the experimental and often individualistic character of psychological studies of reading. New Literacy Studies approaches focus on the everyday meanings and uses of literacy in specific cultural contexts and link directly to how we understand the work of literacy in educational contexts. A broad-based perspective of literacy further includes the full array of communicative arts, reading, writing, speaking, listening, viewing and focusing on the visual arts of drama, film, video and computer technology.

From this discussion it seems thus apparent that literacy cannot simply be regarded as a semantically saturated term; what it refers to, however, is a socially powerful process which can be used in different ways – some perhaps more beneficial to a society, others to only some persons in it (Hasan, 1996).



NEW DEFINITIONS OF ACADEMIC LITERACY

The acquisition of academic literacy that is essential for graduate studies is more than the ability to read and write effectively. Students need not only build interactive relationships with their lecturers and peers and develop good research strategies and good writing skills; they also need to adapt smoothly to the linguistic and social milieu of their host environment and to the culture of their academic departments and institution (Braine, 2002). Braine furthermore feels that a grasp of several graces and social realities, an integrated motivation, instead of a purely utilitarian or pragmatic one, may be essential for students to succeed at graduate level.

On the other hand, just behaving like a model student, pretending to understand what is going on in class, or even planning carefully before writing, would not compensate for a students' low proficiency in English or his/her inability to regroup and show flexibility when confronted with negative feedback and the inability to use effective learning strategies. The role of academia is not to teach students to reproduce knowledge, but rather to create new knowledge and to participate. As Hall (1995) aptly observes,

"Pupils' perceptions regarding the modes or methods through which they are being asked to learn influence positively or negatively the effectiveness of the resultant learning" (p. 22).

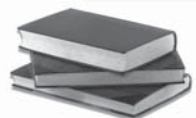
Therefore, instead of concentrating only on the practical application of literacy skills as far as correct academic writing is concerned, students need to be enabled to assimilate information in such a way that they can make informed opinions of the content information presented at a tertiary institution. A very important aspect, therefore, is that all aspects of underlying competence need to be in place before the teaching of study techniques can hope to be worthwhile. Attention should be focused on developing a student's confidence, critical thinking and self-direction skills, rather than honing techniques of note-taking and essay writing (Sowden, 2003).

Effective academic literacy acquisition is supposed to empower the individual to collaborate and play a positive role in any community of learners. Academic literacy, furthermore, should enable the individual to continually search for information and promote the art of content area enquiry; it is widely accepted that students who engage in content area enquiry learn that knowledge is dynamic. They learn that there are multiple ways of knowing and expressing. Most importantly perhaps is that students know that they play an active role in creating the world. To sum up, a truly academic literate person will be an interpretative, analytic, critical and creative thinker and will be able to connect the contents of any pedagogical curriculum. According to Onukaogu, (1999), the literate person will collaborate with members of her/his immediate discourse community and in so doing become a useful member of any community of learners.

FEATURES OF ACADEMIC LITERACY

CRITICAL THINKING AND CRITICAL LITERACY

Already in 1933 Dewey distinguished between **reflective thinking** and other operations in which the name of **thought** is applied. According to him, "reflective thinking involves a state of doubt or hesitation, perplexity or mental difficulty in



which thinking originates. It is also an act of searching, hunting and inquiring to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose of the perplexity" (p. 12). Paul (1985), currently the leader in this field, sees critical thinking as "learning how to ask and answer questions of analysis, synthesis and evaluation [and] the ability to reach sound conclusions based on observations and information" (p. 37).

Although certain critical thinking skills are common to various disciplines, many of the skills are specific to certain subjects. There thus exists very little consensus of what should be included under the generic term *critical thinking*; however, the following critical thinking skills appear to be most referred to: analysing, decision-making, problem-solving, judgment of credibility and recognition of assumptions. One of the major aspects of critical thinking is the ability to evaluate statements or arguments put forward by others (Pienaar, 2001).

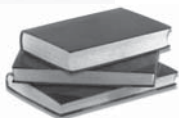
Critical language awareness and thinking abilities are furthermore powerful ways to promote social justice and the foundation of a just, humane and democratic society. It is also a way of helping the individual student to better understand the society he/she lives in and to better negotiate that society. According to Reagan (2003), it is in essence giving students the tools they need to make their own decisions – not only about learning, but about every aspect of life.

McLaughlin & De Voogd (2004) see critical literacy as focusing on issues of power and promotes reflection, transformation and action. Secondly, it focuses on the problem and its complexity. Thirdly, the techniques that promote critical literacy are dynamic and adapt to the contexts in which they are used. Finally, critical literacy is creating an environment to promote a critical stance. It is, therefore, not surprising that students who engage in critical literacy become open-minded, active, strategic readers who are capable of viewing text from a critical perspective. They understand that the information presented in text, maps, newspapers, academic journals and websites has been authored for a particular purpose. They know that meaning is "grounded in the social, political, cultural and historic context of the reading event" (McLaughlin & De Voogd, 2004, p. 56). They, furthermore, acquire the necessary tools to develop into autonomous learners who can take responsibility for their own learning.

AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

In order to assist the mainly post-colonial black students from disadvantaged educational backgrounds a large number of South African universities have introduced EAP courses to students in their first year as a foundation with the hope that they would continue to develop academically and become autonomous learners at tertiary level; however, Sowden (2003) indicates that fostering self-reliance and critical thinking is a long process and is not achieved by simple language lessons.

The main reason for introducing academic literacy development programmes or bridging courses and other scaffolding mechanisms at tertiary institutions is supposed to prepare academically unprepared students for the rigours of main stream academic studies. The support efforts are thus aimed at facilitating academic literacy development (essentially the rules of the academic game) which is a prerequisite for success at tertiary level (Du Toit, 1997). Personal experience, as well as research findings, however, indicates that many students think that learning



means glossing through a text or passively listening to a lecture. Somehow learning is supposed to happen magically with “a quick read and a cursory effort” (Santa, 2006, p. 472).

Conversely, smothering newly arrived first year students with terms and terminology of academic conventions, however, results only in alienating especially students with an African background from the most-widely accepted, albeit Western, and more specific British, academic discourse community. Instead of embracing the new world of academic wealth, students tend to become bewildered and isolated, feeling inferior and disempowered. Therefore, from the idea of man as “product of his society,” one should move to the idea of man as “producer of his society” (Little, 1991, p. 6). Autonomy should, therefore, be defined as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Little, 1991, p. 7). This implies to have and to hold responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of learning. It includes determining the objectives; defining the contents and progressions; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition and evaluating what has been acquired (Little, 1991). It further assumes the understanding that learning concerns not only cognitive but also affective factors.

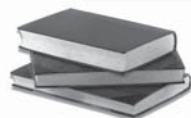
AFFECTIVE FEATURES OF ACADEMIC LITERACY

When a person studies, not only cognitive, but also affective or emotional abilities are involved. The functioning of a person’s cognitive domain is heavily influenced by the affective domain which encompasses feelings, emotions, attitudes, interests, value-judgments, self-concept and motivation. It has been shown that where intellectual intelligence and work achievement are concerned, intellectual intelligence comes second after emotional intelligence. Hugo (2001) finds that emotional intelligence consists of five elements, namely self-concept, motivation, self-regulating, empathy and adaptability in relationships. In order, therefore, to develop students’ critical thinking skills which will enable them to be successful in their tertiary studies, the influence of the affective domain on critical thinking should therefore not be disregarded.

It is encouraging that modern educational systems appear to be heavily implicated in the construction of a new kind of individual self. Such changes for the self are necessary for a student to adapt in order to be able to enter “the conversation of the educated” (Katz, 2005). Self-motivation also plays an important role in the process of becoming academically literate. Conceptual learning is strengthened by the intrinsic motivation to become literate. Interest in a subject can further contribute to enrich the amount, depth and wealth of conceptual learning from a text of own choice. Intrinsic motivation such as involvement, inquisitiveness and social interaction helps students to really comprehend the text and to use this newly acquired knowledge in problem-solving (Hugo, 2001). Furthermore, through access to reading and literacy English second language (hereafter ESL) students’ confidence and self-respect are increased. They can thus integrate more easily into the academic culture of their tertiary academic institution of choice.

SOCIO-CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF ACADEMIC LITERACY

The naturally developed literacy of social subjects will be socio-culturally specific. Different segments of a society will be literate in different ways, depending on what variety of language they use, for what and with whom (Hasan, 1996). The



argument for social literacies thus suggests that engaging with literacy is always a social act. The way in which lecturers and their students interact is already a social practice and affects the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants, especially the new students and their positions in relation to power. It is not valid to suggest that “literacy” can be “given” neutrally, and then its “social” effects only experienced afterwards. The “autonomous” model is always “ideological” (Street, 2005, p. 418) in both its view of what literacy counts and its view of how this literacy should be acquired.

Research, however, suggests that students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds are at a higher risk of lower achievement on wide scale measures (Kong & Pearson, 2003). Recent trends in research on students’ expectations and conceptions of learning seem to be instrumental in the rethinking of pedagogies and curricula which aim to ensure sensitivity to the “cultural expectations of the recipients of the innovation” (Kasanga, 2006, p. 139). If no such sensitivity is shown, it would not be surprising that students from different ethnic origins find it difficult to relate to the new academic culture they are immersed into. Van Rensburg (2004) feels strongly about the restrictive dimensions of a Western inspired academic literacy which adheres to features such as a discourse of transparency. He states

“If one takes academic literacies seriously, if one values the students’ experiences and the processes they engage in while crafting their written products, one has in fact to question the academic discourse of transparency, one has to reveal the workings of the written language and the value systems behind the works” (p. 217).

It is by way of cultural interaction with more knowledgeable members of a community within specific social, cultural and historical contexts in which all of the participants are striving to make sense of the messages they encounter, either from text or from each other, that learners become acquainted with new information (input) and not only through direct stimulation as suggested by behaviourist theories (Du Toit, 1999; Kong & Pearson, 2003).

NAMIBIAN STUDENTS’ ACADEMIC ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

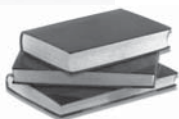
De Kadt (2000) argues that the type of English language proficiency appropriate to South Africa – and by implication, Namibia –

“involves the ability to communicate successfully with speakers of a range of varieties of English, and the ability to use language as a cognitive tool” [italics inserted] (p. 31).

Namibian students’ proficiency in English could be explored by using Kachru’s World Englishes paradigm (Kachru, 1986), in which a perspective on English – or rather Englishes – is proposed. Here the emphasis is shifted away from the dichotomy between “us and them” (the native and non-native users). Kachru (1986) explains that his proposed three concentric circles represent

“the distinct types of speech fellowships of English, phases of the spread of the language and particular characteristics of the uses of the language and of its acquisition and linguistic innovations” (p. 122).

The English language users in Namibia could most probably be located in the Outer Circle of Kachru’s three concentric circles, as they use English that is institutionalised as an additional language. In the Outer Circle most of the users are



multilingual, multicultural and “extremely creative with the English in expressing their multi-identities” (De Kadt, 2000, p. 26). Even if second language (hereafter L2) students’ general English is adequate, their proficiency in academic English appears not to be adequate (Kaplan-Dolgoy, 1998). Often their basic interpersonal communicative skills (hereafter BICS, as defined by Cummins, 1980) are well developed. BICS function in daily interpersonal exchanges and is concerned with pronunciation, basic vocabulary and grammar. It is also relatively cognitive undemanding and relies on the context to clarify meaning. Cognitive academic language proficiency (hereafter CALP, as defined by Cummins, 1980), functions in understanding academic concepts for the performance of higher cognitive operations in order to achieve academically at tertiary level. Although a large number of the Namibian students exhibit well-developed BICS, it appears that their CALP is inadequate for tertiary studies.

Due to the way Namibian students were taught at school, they remain dependent learners, even at tertiary level. They often find academic concepts and terminology too abstract and difficult as these are less easily understood and experienced than ideas and terms employed in social situations (Kaplan-Dolgoy, 1998). Not infrequently they come from a school background which does not encourage self-direction and introspection or independence of mind – in short, it does not equip them to study independently at universities with a Western-dominated academic culture. Since fostering self-reliance and critical thinking is a life-long process (Sowden, 2003), true academic literacy cannot be achieved by simple language lessons.

Despite the fact that a large number of L2 tertiary students find their tertiary studies difficult, they are intelligent and do have the underlying ability to learn via an L2. In fact, personal experience confirms that black students seem to be very adept at learning and controlling more than one language. However, students have often not mastered adequate meta-cognitive skills in their own language to transfer to English. Gagné’s hierarchy of learning (Lovell, 1987) emphasizes that success in solving problems depends on prior acquisition of a wide variety of knowledge and experiences. If an adult is thus expected to solve problems, he/she must also have been given the chance to acquire the necessary background material.

Students at tertiary institutions are however suddenly expected to participate in a new global economy, in spite of the fact that they have attended at least 12 years of schooling that kept their literacies stunted, inflexible, isolated and anemic (Baine, 2006). Those students who have not grown up in a “college-going tradition” are less likely to have been exposed to the “folklore of academic life” (Penrose, 2002, p. 438) and are thus likely to feel less at home in that life, regardless of ability and motivation. Making EAP courses compulsory entails the implantation of British (not just Western) academic culture and the further imposition, therefore, of some form of “post-colonial colonialism which is conveyed to the students as if it was the only academic culture in the world” (Fandrych, 2003, p. 17).

It is no secret that the students whose natural development diverges from the pedagogical standards typically belong to the disadvantaged classes of the community (Hasan, 1996). Furthermore, there are indications that students who never really master their first language (hereafter L1) and who never had the opportunity of developing cognitive skills in their L1 will not have these crucial skills in their L2 either (Fandrych, 2003). Sometimes, however, students seem to



be "convinced that they have mastered enough English to carry them through college" and they do not "appreciate the purposes of the EAP course at their stage of maturity in the learning process" (Fandrych, 2003, p. 19). It, furthermore, appears that goals set for pedagogic literacy development are objectively better suited for, and familiar to, some section(s) of the community; thus perpetuating the inequalities of social positioning through the workings of the pedagogic system (Hasan, 1996). De Kadt (2003) makes a forceful statement that one of the underlying causes of students' difficulties in acquiring academic literacy proficiency appears to be that within the monolingual teaching and learning practice specific practices of knowledge construction are valued, which tends to disadvantage students who are not from strongly literate middle-class backgrounds (De Kadt, 2003).

The linguistic unpreparedness of ESL students at institutions in South Africa, and by implication Namibia, has been widely researched and documented by a large number of researchers in the field of academic literacy in South Africa (Butler and Van Dyk, 2004; Chimbganda, 2001; Coetzee-Van Rooy & Verhoef, 2000; Davids, 2003; De Kadt, 2003; Fandrych, 2003; Hugo, 2001; Johl, 2002; Kamwanamalu, 2003; Kasanga, 2006; Parkinson, 2003; Read, 2004; Santa, 2006; Van Wyk, 2002; Weideman & Van Rensburg, 2002). Furthermore, lecturers responsible for introducing students to academic conventions at most universities in Southern Africa experience the same kind of difficulties and frustrations as far as students' readiness for academic studies is concerned as we do in Namibia. All of them seem to agree that the academic unpreparedness of university students is reflected in their relatively poor results across disciplines (Kasanga, 1999). All kinds of possible reasons for this phenomenon are proffered – the most popular being that students are from disadvantaged educational backgrounds. Although this is indisputable and cannot be ignored, personal experience indicates that this kind of diagnostic approach hems possible opportunities for the student to develop autonomy and does not encourage the blossoming of those latent intellectual abilities that students bring along to university.

It is further maintained that unprepared learners are more dependent and for longer on concrete empirical experience before they can move to the stage of abstract logical operation; existing academic literacy retardation only delays this transition. Du Toit (1999), however, states that a history of cultural deprivation, chronic academic failure or exposure to an unsuitable curriculum or pedagogy will not make any student, with his/her own unique identity, less ready for the acquisition of academic literacy than the student from a strong educational background.

According to Braine (2002), the main conflict between students and the acquisition of academic literacy in English was found to be the "lack of membership and social contact with their chosen academic discourse communities" (p. 64). It has thus become high time that the focus should move from concentrating on the weaknesses of students and their low proficiency in academic literacy towards marrying their personal discourse identities to the demands created by membership of the academic discourse community that they enter when they commence their tertiary studies.

It has become increasingly evident from research done that student identity is a very important factor in the acquisition of academic literacy skills (De Kadt, 2003; Katz, 2003; McKinney, 2004; Van Rensburg, 2004). African students are often made

to feel that their language is inferior to the Western mainstream academic culture. This usually leads to a loss of confidence (Parkinson, 2003). *African identities* [italics inserted] (De Kadt, 2003, p. 100) tend to be understood in essentialist terms; as such they are conservative in nature and resist being influenced by other cultures. Most African students thus feel that they are required to accommodate to the mainstream Western academic literacy culture (De Kadt, 2003) and that they have to redefine themselves continuously at various levels (Van Rensburg, 2004). Ethnic identity further appears to be forged in the interpretation of events and social experiences that are part of post-modern social practices in changing communities (Bean, 2003). To illustrate this, one of De Kadt's (2004) students can be quoted

"The university is like breeding a new culture, new cultural behaviours. You have to be integrated. There is no space to behave as an African because there are different people from different backgrounds that you have to mingle with and come out a new person. You have to compromise yourself" (p. 94).

In a post-modern world of constant movement and flow, media images of advertising and commerce seep into young people's lives and strongly influence identity development (Bean, 2003). The linear class and power structures of the modernist culture have been altered by the post-modern landscape, rendering older theories of identity development less useful in describing the world contemporary teens navigate – shopping malls, freeways, the internet. These fluid spaces are disorientating and disrupting a fixed sense of place. It spills over into their interior world. Instead of clear anchors in family, community and institutions like schools to forge a coherent identity, these fluid spaces create feelings of disconnection and alienation. Identity in a mall culture is constructed through consumption of goods, with selfhood vested in things (Bean, 2003). Young people are, therefore, not surprisingly often referred to as the 'instant gratification' or even 'quick fix' generation. They have to become social actors, struggling with social relationships to construct positive identities in fluid times.

It becomes thus increasingly important that pedagogues should acquaint themselves with the influences that these fluid times have on the identities of their students as identity seems no longer to be anchored in stable employment, communities or institutions. It is rather constructed through the properties of individual action carried out in non-places. Identity now is a matter of self-construction amidst unstable times, mores and global consumerism (Bean, 2003). Students, therefore, need to be positioned in another way by and in academia. No longer are they the disadvantaged, the under-prepared, the illogical, irrational novices; they should be appreciated for having expertise themselves (Van Rensburg, 2004) and for the wealth of cultural identity that they bring along, even if they are the first in their families to attend a tertiary educational institution.

ADDRESSING STUDENTS' NEEDS

Baine (2006) aptly states:

"We need a vision of literacy and learning that promotes bold innovation, new perspectives and creativity, rather than fear, weakness and the lowest possible expectations. Educational policy has us running as fast as possible in the wrong direction, narrowing what should be broad, standardizing what should be diverse, open and daring to innovate" (p. 369).

He continues that in order to develop excellence in students across their life history, policy that supports flexibility in students' learning is needed so that literacy can



continue to morph as it wills. The policy should move the lexical language of English out of the centre and invite inquiry into language and literacies as varied and multi-dimensional.

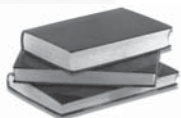
EXISTING ACADEMIC LITERACY COURSES

Difficulties, however, do arise from teaching EAP in the context of a particular kind of academic culture, usually a Western academic culture in a society with a cultural background and history which are very different from the Western model (Fandrych, 2003). Making EAP courses compulsory inevitably entails the implantation of British (not only Western) academic culture and the imposition, therefore, of some form of “post-colonial colonialism” (Fandrych, 2003, p. 17) which is conveyed to the students as if it was the only academic tradition in the world. Course developers should rather focus on a certain level of operational intelligibility, appropriateness and communication. These skills are not necessarily language-specific. English – both for academic and non-academic purposes – becomes a tool, a means to an end. Thus, a working command which enables L2 users to apply this tool in their active and passive linguistic activities to understand and be understood (Fandrych, 2003) should be envisaged by course developers.

It appears, however, as if existing EAP and English for Specific Purposes (hereafter ESP) courses have forced language practitioners to surrender insights into language acquisition; to go along with expectations and demands of subject lecturers who are not familiar with research in the development of an academic literacy that prepares the student not only to pass existing university subjects but prepare him/her for a life time of intellectual development. Such courses have led to an emphasis solely on the direct, or explicit, teaching of supposed subject-specific academic genres and academic conventions. Great care is taken to analyse specific genres, identify their features and then teach them in a more or less prescriptive way (Katz, 2001). In this process the student as an individual is totally neglected or even left out of the equation.

Courses in academic literacy at many tertiary institutions also seem to concentrate mainly on the intellectual, rather than the social transition from high school to university culture. They are not designed to counter the typical first year students’ expectations of sitting in a large lecture hall taking notes rather than being engaged with the process of doing it (Brent, 2005). Furthermore, it is not uncommon for newly appointed university lecturers to have little or no teaching experience as they are often appointed for their academic qualifications and research powers (Du Toit, 1999). Students easily become passive receivers of subject-specific text only. One of the lecturers’ main tasks should rather be the creation of opportunities for students to interact directly with the content in the meaningful context of real communication. Braine (2006) sees the opportunity as consisting of tasks and/or other problem-solving activities that are “interactive, supportive and mediational and that are executed in an atmosphere that is intrinsically motivating” (p. 368).

It has further been argued and evidence has been given that the teaching committed in many ESP and EAP courses are premature and questionable (Katz, 2001). It appears that students with a general literacy in English can acquire subject-specific genres without specialised subject-specific courses, but that helping those students without that general literacy should be the focus of language development courses. This argument can be taken further by suggesting that



students need training in intellectual skills which can be done by incorporating appropriate studies of literature in order to develop those skills that are associated with academic success. Academic literacy programmes should thus focus on the real-world skills needed by students in their present context, namely the academic discourse community (Van Wyk, 2002).

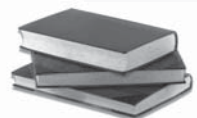
A NEW DIMENSION ON ACADEMIC LITERACY PROGRAMMES

Language courses which aim to promote learner autonomy need to incorporate means of transferring responsibility for aspects of the language that the learners process (such as setting goals, setting learning strategies and evaluating progress) from the teacher to the learner (Cotterall, 2000). One such model that could be employed is interactive instruction. As a learner-oriented model, interactive instruction moves away from direct control over student learning. It aims at facilitating student academic literacy development by focusing on various forms of students' self-regulating and thus emancipation and empowerment (Du Toit, 1999). From the Vygotskian perspective (Du Toit, 1999), it is formal instructional interaction that becomes the vehicle for conveying and internalising linguistic ability, leading to inner speech as a source of knowledge and self-control. Interactive instruction also aims to minimise the high levels of anxiety generally associated with rote memorisation of large volumes of relatively meaningless content at great pace. Instead, it offers the recognition, support and opportunities to students in which they will experience and develop their own distinctive ways of thinking through active involvement.

Learner-oriented instruction thus needs to aim at developing student autonomy in the teaching-learning process. Its main concern, therefore, should centre round identifying student literacy needs and capacities and providing instructional scaffolding. Instructional scaffolding could be initiated by the lecturer in the form of classroom activities initially requiring collaborative interaction. It also should provide students with appropriate models and strategies that are internalised and modified and provide scope for students to develop their own self-regulating abilities. The notion of instructional scaffolding can be linked up with Cummins's (1984) stance that the more context-embedded the initial interactions, the more successful they will be in developing context-reduced language and literacy development. At the same time the notion of instructional scaffolding is also compatible with Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (Du Toit, 1999), since the activities initiated by the lecturer must require students to draw on the resources they already have as well as stretching these resources to new and more complex levels.

The road to academic literacies involves pedagogies of integration, extended process and grounding in genuine inquiry (Brent, 2002). In order to develop rich and complex curricula and assessments for literacy, models of literacy and of pedagogy that capture the richness and complexity of actual literacy practices are needed. Furthermore, in order to build upon the richness and complexity of students' prior knowledge, their "home background" needs to be treated not as a deficit but as affecting deep levels of identity and epistemology and thereby the stance that students take with respect to the "new" literacy practices of the educational setting (Street, 2004, p. 420).

Meta-cognition is believed to be the foundation for becoming a successful student,



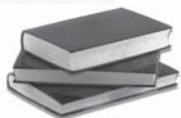
Students who achieve well in school know when they have understood and they know how to employ a variety of strategies to attain meaning (Santa, 2006). Helping students to see themselves as members of the academic community may be the most important challenge faced in the university at large and in the writing classroom in particular (Penrose, 2002). Though the virtues of feeling at home in academia have been much debated in the profession, research suggests that this sense of belonging may be crucial to students. Penrose (2002) suggests that teachers of writing courses and researchers need to continue to explore pedagogies that will concentrate their efforts not just on validating personal identity or on demystifying the conventions of academic communities but also on helping students forge identities as members of those communities.

Within the socio-cultural perspective for students to develop their literacy knowledge and skills, students must have many opportunities to engage actively in the meaningful literacy practice of a given community – even before they master those practices; they must also receive support and scaffolding as they gradually move toward full participation and independent control of those practices (Kong & Pearson, 2003). Implementing strategy teaching is, however, not enough. Strategy instruction can be misinterpreted by both lecturers and students as an organised bundle of procedures, rather than as a philosophical shift in what it means to teach and learn. One strategy is taught after the other without much thought given to the teaching and learning principles underlying strategy learning. Effective strategy teaching is not really about assigning students to take notes or develop a concept map. Instead, Santa (2006) suggests that effective strategy teaching is about teaching students how to tap into a deeper understanding of themselves as proficient students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

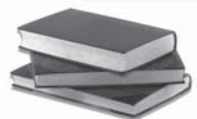
I advocate that adult education or tertiary education should become an instrument for arousing an increasing sense of awareness and liberation in students and, in some cases, an instrument for changing the environment itself. Much still needs to be done to change practices so that instructors could be responsive to students' needs without too much spoon-feeding because autonomy is paramount at the tertiary level of education (Kasanga, 2006). Therefore, on a practical note, for good academic discourse to flourish, it is necessary that the classroom environment should offer immediate feedback on drafts, talks and journals; a focus on high level goals and sufficient items to develop an argument rather than turning to highly efficient but low-investment strategies based on retelling information (Brent, 2005). Through reading, writing, discussion and the use of a variety of comprehension strategies, including predicting, self-questioning and summary, students learn essential information and can make critical evaluations (McLaughlin & De Voogd, 2004).

Furthermore, if critical pedagogies were to approach the classroom not just with the apparatus of democracy or co-creation of curriculum but with a review of educational processes and even rhetorical theories, students might experience empowerment at the level of decision-making. Critical pedagogues could frontload students' experiences with pedagogy and backload their own critical agendas, giving terminology to certain practices helping students reflect on what aided their learning and voting on grading contracts, course text and curriculum with a fuller knowledge of their own opinions. This process would, however, involve



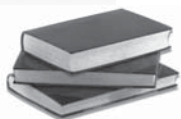
“listening to students’ voices” (Thelin, 2005, p. 137).

Finally, instead of concentrating on so-called *academic literacy proficiency*, I propose that the main goal of literacy courses at tertiary level should be concerned with preparing the students to become independent, critical thinkers and to create an intellectually well-prepared soil in which a life-time of education and intellectual growth can come to fruition. It would, however, need a paradigm shift from English for Academic Purposes towards English for Intellectual Purposes in which essential critical thinking skills can be nurtured and developed a personal commitment to life-long learning.

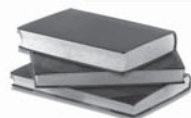


REFERENCES

- Baine, R. (2006). You are Here: The Moment in Literacy Education. In *Research in Education*. Vol. 40; p. 355 – 371.
- Bean, T. W. (2003). Developing students' critical literacy: Exploring identity construction in young adult fiction. In *Journal for Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. Vol.45; p. 638 – 653.
- Braine, G. (2002). Academic Literacy and the Non-native Speaker Graduate Student. In *Journal for English for Academic Purposes*. Vol. 1; p. 59 – 68.
- Brent, D. (2002). Reinventing WAC (again): The first Year Seminar and Academic Literacy. In *College Composition and Communication*. Vol. 52, 2; p. 253 – 276.
- Butler, H. G. & Van Dyk, T. J. (2004). An academic English language intervention for first year engineering students. In *South African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*. Vol. 22, 1 & 2; p. 3 – 7.
- Chimbganda, A. B. (2001). Evaluating English for Academic Purposes: what students and staff say. In *Journal for Language Teaching*. Vol. 35, 2 + 3; p. 147 – 159.
- Coetzee-Van Rooy, A. S. & Verhoef, M. M. (2000). Perceptions of English Proficiency: views from Southern Sotho Speakers. In *South African Journal for Linguistics, Supplement*. Vol. 38; p. 163 – 186.
- Cotterall, S. 2000. Promoting learner autonomy through the curriculum: principles for designing language courses skills with EAP classes. In *ELT Journal*. Vol. 54, 2; 109 – 117.
- Cummins, J. (1980). The Cross-lingual Dimensions of Language Proficiency: Implications for Bilingual Education and the Optimal Age Issue. In *TESOL Quarterly*. Vol.14; p. 197 – 205.
- Davids, L. (2003). Language and Education in Namibia. In Cuvelier, P., T. Du Plessis & L. Tech (eds.) *Multilingualism, Education and Social Integration*. Pretoria: Van Schaiks. p. 196 – 206.
- De Kadt, E. (2000). English language proficiency in South Africa at the turn of the Millennium. In *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, Vol. 18; p. 5 – 32.
- De Kadt, E. (2003). Writing in English with an "African Voice:" ownership, identity and learning. In *Journal for Language Teaching*, Vol. 37, 1; p. 93 – 103.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How to Think*. Boston: Heath.
- Du Toit, F. (1999). The Development of Academic Literacy in the Mainstream Classroom: A Functional Model for Teacher Education. In *Journal for Language Teaching*, Vol. 31, 2; p. 154 – 175.
- Fandrych, I. (2003). Socio-pragmatic and cultural aspects of teaching English



- for Academic Purposes in Lesotho. In *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*. Vol. 21; p. 15 – 27.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1996). Literacy and Linguistics: A functional Perspective. In Hasan, R & G. Williams (eds.) *Literacy in Society*. Essex: Addison Wesley Ltd. p. 339 – 378.
- Hall, K. (1995). Learning modes: An investigation in five Kent classrooms. In *Educational Research*. Vol. 37; p. 21 – 32.
- Hasan, R. (1996). Literacy, everyday talk and society. In Hasan, R & G. Williams (eds.) *Literacy in Society*. Essex: Addison Wesley Longman Ltd. p. 377 – 424.
- Hugo, A. J. (2001). Lees en studier op tersiêre vlak: die affektiewe komponent van lees verdien ook aandag. In *Journal for Language Teaching*. Vol. 35, 2 + 3; p. 138 – 157.
- Johl, R. (2002) Akademiese geletterdheid: van studievvaardighede tot kritiese geletterdheid. In *Journal for Language Teaching*. Vol. 36, 1 & 2; p. 41 – 61.
- Kachru, B. B. (1986). The Power and Politics of English. In *World Englishes*, Vol. 5; p. 121 – 140.
- Kamwanamala, N. M. (2003). Language and Education in Africa: emancipation or alienation. In Cuvelier, P., T Du Plessis & L. Teck (eds.) *Multilingualism, Education and Social Integration*. Pretoria: Van Schaik. p. 175 – 183.
- Kaplan-Dolgoy, G. (1998). The effect of Teaching Second Language Students a Combination of Meta-cognitive and Cognitive Strategies for Reading and Listening. Dissertation: Master of Arts, UNISA.
- Kasanga, L. A. (1999). Building cognitive academic Language Proficiency through an integrated teaching approach. In *Journal for Language Teaching*. Vol. 32, 2; p. 105 – 115.
- Kasanga, L. A. (2006). Learners' belief systems and writing instruction. In *Journal for Language Teaching*. Vol. 40, 1 p.139 – 162.
- Katz, E. (2005). Names of Power and the Acquisition of Academic Literacy. In *Journal for Language Teaching*. Vol. 39, 1; p. 99 – 112.
- Kong, A. & Pearson, P. D. 2003. The Road to Participation: The Construction of Literacy Practice in a Learning Community of Linguists. In *Research for Teaching English*. Vol. 38, 1; p. 85 – 125.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner Autonomy: Definitions, Issues and Problems*. Dublin: Authentic language Learning resources, Ltd.
- Lovell, R. B. (1987). *Adult Learning*. Worcester: Billing and Sons, Ltd.
- McLaughlin, M. & De Voogd, G. (2004). Critical Literacy as Comprehension: Expanding Reader Response. In *Journal for Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. Vol. 46, 1; p. 52 – 62.



Onukaogu, C. E. (1999) Effective and Efficient ESL and Nigerian Mother-Tongue Literacy Acquisition: Can Literature be a Catalyst? In *Language, Culture and Curriculum*. Vol. 12, 2; p. 143 – 155.

Otaala, L. A. (2005). Action Researching the Interaction Between Teaching, Learning, Language and Assessment at the University of Namibia. DPhil Tesis: University of Western Cape.

Parkinson, J. (2003). The effect of tertiary study at an English medium university on the written English of speakers of Black South African English. In *Journal for Language Teaching*. Vol. 37, 2; p. 248 – 267.

Paul, R. W. (1985). Bloom's taxonomy and critical thinking instruction. In *Educational Leadership*. Vol. 42, 8; p. 36 – 39.

Penrose, A. M. (2002). Academic Literacy Perceptions and Performance: Comparing First-Generation and Continuing-Generation College Students. In *Research in the Teaching of English*. Vol. 36, 4; p. 437 – 461.

Pienaar, G. C. (2001). Teaching critical thinking skills in the language classroom. In *Journal for Language Teaching*. Vol. 35, 2 + 3; p. 125 – 137.

Read, J. (2004). Assessing Language Proficiency in Vocational Training Programmes. In M. Kriel (ed.) *The Language Web: Essays in Honour of Victor Webb*. Port Elizabeth: University of Port Elizabeth. p. 178 – 186.

Reagan, J. (2003). Critical Constructivism and Language Teaching: New Wine in New Bottles. In *Journal for Language Teaching*. Vol. 37, 1; p. 120 – 131.

Santa, C. M. (2006). A Vision for adolescent literacy: Ours or Theirs? In *Journal for Adolescent and Adult Literacy*. Vol. 48, 6; p. 466 – 476.

Sowden, C. (2003). Understanding Academic Competence in Overseas Students. In *ELT Journal*. Vol. 57, 2; p. 377 – 385.

Street, B. V. (2005). Recent Applications of New Literacy Studies in Educational Contexts. In *Research in the Teaching of English*. Vol. 39; p. 417 – 423.

Thelin, W. H. 2005. Understanding problems in Critical Classrooms. In *College Composition and Communication*. Vol. 57, 1; p. 114 – 141.

Van Rensburg, W. (2004). The discourse of self-hood: students negotiating their academic identities in a writing centre. In *Journal for Language Teaching*, Vol. 38, 2; p. 216 – 228.

Van Wyk, A. (2002). A university bridging course focusing on academic reading and writing skills. In *Journal for Language Teaching*. Vol. 36, 1 + 2; p. 220 – 231.

Weideman, A & Van Rensburg, C. (2002). Language Proficiency: current strategies, future remedies. In *Journal for Language Teaching*. Vol. 36, 1 & 2; p. 152 – 164.

