

Language Identity of First-Generation Students entering Higher Education in Namibia and its Impact on Learning

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ABSTRACT:

In Namibia, the accent of Higher Education is increasingly moving towards the provision of access opportunities to previously disadvantaged students. Most students, currently entering Higher Education at the University of Namibia, are First-Generation students whose parents did not participate in tertiary education. First-Generation entry has been investigated to some extent in First World countries; however, there does not appear to be relevant research done on First-Generation entrants in the Namibian context. Although experience indicates that the general profile of Namibian First-Generation entrants corresponds with those studied internationally, there are marked differences in their demographic identities. It is thus necessary to look at a group of First-Generation students at the University of Namibia who have achieved the prescribed entry requirements to enter Higher Education, but whose low marks in English Second Language disqualify them from entering degree programmes. Their lack of academic English skills is often regarded as their only problem and hardly any effort is made to investigate their personal strengths or to assist them with developing critical literacy skills. This article will discuss the language identity of these First-Generation entrants as English Second Language speakers and the impact it has on the acquisition of those academic and critical thinking skills necessary for successful tertiary study.

HIGHER EDUCATION:

Educational routes that are followed by students after having completed the senior secondary phase of school education.

FIRST-GENERATION STUDENTS:

Students of whom the responsible older generation – not necessarily birth parents – did not attend any university at any time of their lives.

CONTINUING-GENERATION STUDENTS:

Students of whom at least one of the responsible older generation – not necessarily birth parents – attended any university at any time of his/her life.

RESPONSIBLE GENERATION:

This is any person, irrelevant of familial ties, who takes care of a member of the younger generation, physically, emotionally and financially.

DISADVANTAGED SCHOOLS:

Because of reasons such as long distances from the capital and political disinterest, such schools have been neglected as far as human, as well as physical, resources are concerned.

ENGLISHES:

This term describes the different varieties of English that have developed and are actively spoken in those countries where English is commonly used, often as official language, by speakers of other languages

Introduction

Currently in Namibia, one of the most important aims of Higher Education (HE) is to provide previously disadvantaged students with opportunities to access tertiary institutions of learning. The older generation of Namibians, to a large extent, had been deprived of access to education. Therefore, their children are often the first in the family to attend tertiary institutions of learning. Although the issue of First-Generation (FG) students has been studied by scholars in other countries, little is known about FG students in the African context. Because of the particular demographic circumstances of the African, and in particular, the Namibian student, it is essential that attention should be paid to this specific field of study.

This article will focus on the language identity of Namibian FG students as English Second Language (ESL) speakers, and the impact it has on the acquisition of those academic and critical thinking skills students require for successful study at a tertiary institution. Finally, the value of critical literacy in order to enable students to conceptualise, argue and reason in the academic discourse as is expected of successful students will be discussed.

Profile of the First-Generation Tertiary Student

A number of definitions have been coined to describe FG entry into HE. FG students have been defined as college or university students from a family where no parent or guardian has earned a university degree (Lee et al., 2004; Lohfink and Paulsen, 2005; Pike and Kuh, 2005) or they may be first in their family who attend a tertiary institution (McConnell, 2000, p. 2). A student may not be first in a family to go to university if a sibling has already entered, but would still be FG. The definition that will be adopted for this article, however, will be:

First-generation students are those of whom the responsible older generation (not necessarily birth parents) has not had any opportunity to study at university at any stage of their lives (Thomas and Quinn, 2007, p. 51).

Thomas and Quinn (2007) warn that FG entry does not need to be put within the matrix of class and ethnicity, but it is a point of overlap of many factors. According to them, it is neither possible nor desirable to disentangle FG entry from its strands.

Background to the Namibian FG Student

Namibia is a large country, but relatively sparsely populated. There are huge distances between smaller towns, and the majority of the Namibian population lives beyond the reaches of the city's influence. There is thus a big divide between urban and rural existence. One area on which these demographic features have a negative influence is education. Most of the Namibian children are schooling in rural areas where, due to a number of reasons, schools are still disadvantaged. The teachers are not well-qualified and, although the official language of the country is English, a large number of teachers, even in the urban areas, are not proficient enough to use English as a medium of teaching. It appears that in extreme instances even English is taught by means of the vernacular.

The biggest obstacle for children from rural areas in Namibia seems to be their culture. Most ethnic cultures do not allow children to question adults and children are often still regarded as *empty vessels* that should be filled with knowledge. Consequently, teaching is mainly conducted by means of rote-learning. School-leavers seem to have never learnt to think and reason for themselves. It appears therefore that many ESL students find it difficult to become independent learners. Furthermore, although the students enrolled at UNAM are assumed to have the necessary cognitive abilities to attend an institution of higher learning, they are hampered by the fact that the working English they bring to university is inadequate for successful tertiary studies.

In a study conducted in 2008 (Smit 2009), it was found that the majority of Namibian parents have not had much, or even any, formal schooling themselves. Although they realise the value of education for their children, it is ironically education which often creates a divide between parent and child, as unschooled parents cannot really participate intellectually in their children's schooling and make effective decisions about HE. Consequently, after completing their school careers, the children often do not have the necessary intellectual support and information needed for entry into HE. They are left to their own designs and often enter the university not well-informed about the different courses and the requirements for each of these courses. They are often dissatisfied with the information they have received and frequently cannot enrol for the courses they envisioned when they were planning their future careers.

Apart from the fact that students from rural areas are educationally disadvantaged, they also have to leave their villages and move to the capital city, often up to 1000 km away, if they want to pursue tertiary studies. Since parents are often subsistence farmers, they usually do not have the financial means to support their student-children. These young students are then to be accommodated for the duration of their studies by often distant relatives; the living conditions of the students are more often than not far from conducive to studying. Although they take the cheaper option of staying with family, students are often not aware that paying the registration fees is only the beginning of escalating expenses at the university. This burden of financial constraints usually has a further negative influence on the FG students' ability to persist at tertiary institutions.

UNAM is furthermore situated on the outskirts of the capital city and students have to travel long distances daily to attend classes. Because of money constraints, they often cannot afford taxi fare and have to travel by foot distances that usually exceed 5 km just to reach the campus. Although there are residences on campus, there is not sufficient accommodation for all the students. It is also regarded as cheaper by the parents if their child could stay with relatives – not calculating hidden costs such as taxi fare and lunch money. Consequently, already before the FG student starts his or her university career, he or she is again disadvantaged by default, when compared to the Continuing-Generation (CG) student, of whom at least one of the responsible older generation has attended a university at any stage in his or her life. This older generation who are responsible for CG students, thus usually have a better-paid occupation in an urban area where they can offer accommodation to their student-children.

To investigate what percentage of UNAM students is FG, a survey among all the students attending classes at the Language Centre at the beginning of 2008 was undertaken. It aimed at establishing the numbers of FG and CG students in each of the following three courses offered:

- ULEA – English for Academic Purposes (EAP), a semester course compulsory for all students;
- ULCE – English Communication and Study Skills, a semester course for those students whose school-exit marks for English were not high enough to qualify for the ULEA course;

- ULEG – a year course in General Communication in English, for those students who have achieved the requirements for admission at the university but whose school-exit marks for English were below a C-symbol.

In the survey, a distinction was initially made between university entrants, who are students enrolled at UNAM for the first time, and university students, who are students already previously enrolled at UNAM. The numbers of FG entrants and FG students were then compared with that of CG entrants and CG students. Of the approximately 1100 students who attended courses at the Language Centre, 1078 responses were received.

It was established that 629 of the 1078 students who responded were FG students. It is, therefore, imperative that particular attention should be paid to the profile and characteristics of the Namibian FG tertiary student. One aspect of importance is the academic literacy proficiency of students entering tertiary education. It was thus decided to take an in-depth look at the academic literacy proficiency of a group of students attending the course ULEG courses.

The First-Generation UNAM Student

To investigate the academic literacy proficiency and language identity of FG student population in 2008 at the University of Namibia, it was decided to study the phenomenon as it is revealed by the members of one ULEG class in 2008. For the purpose of this study the university entrants and previously registered students in this class were grouped together and were classed as *FG students* and *CG students*.

The TALL (Test of Academic Literacy Levels), a standardised test, widely used by South African universities to determine students' academic literacy proficiency, was administered to 43 ULEG students. This is not a placement test, but is employed to determine the kind of academic support that first year students need. This test is commercially available and test analysis of results is done by the test providers.

When the tests results were received, the means of the CG and FG students were statistically compared. From a t-test, comparing the test scores of the FG and CG students, the following results were obtained:

Table 1: Group statistics:

ULEG	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Test Results: FG students	30	19.26	9.309
CG students	13	32.27	11.765

An independent samples test showed that the variances were equal and therefore a standard t-test for equality of means was used.

Table 2: Equality of means: FG and CG students

t-test for Equality of Means		
t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
-3.619	36	.001

The means were not equal because $t = -3.619$ ($p = 0.001$ thus < 0.005). There was thus a significant difference between the test results of the FG students and the CG students in this group, indicating different levels of academic literacy proficiency. Even though all the students in the ULEG group had low school-exit scores in English, these statistics strongly indicated that even at this level the FG students fared worse than the CG students.

The very low scores for both the FG and the CG students, furthermore, indicate that students who come to study at UNAM appears to lack the necessary cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), as defined by Cummins (1980), to be successful in their tertiary studies. When these results are related to the fact that FG students have a demographic profile which influences their studies negatively, it becomes imperative that serious attention should be given by authorities to ways that could assist FG students, not only with initial registration for courses, but also with their physical and emotional persistence at tertiary institutions, often against all odds.

The Language Identity of the FG UNAM Student

Globally, English is being less and less regarded as a European language and its development is also to a lesser degree being determined by the usage of its mother tongue speakers, especially in a country such as Namibia, where mother tongue English speakers represent approximately 0,08% of the total English speaking population (Wolfaard, 2001). Proficiency in English in Namibia, however, 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” (first language – L1 – and second language – L2 – speakers). Kachru (1986, p. 22) explains that his proposed three 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.

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).

It has been claimed (Kaplan-Dolgoy, 1980) that even if L2 students’ general English is adequate, their proficiency in academic English is not. Often their basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS, as defined by Cummins, 1980) are well developed. BICS functions in daily interpersonal exchanges and is concerned with pronunciation, basic vocabulary and grammar. It is also relatively cognitively undemanding and relies on the context to clarify meaning. CALP (as defined by Cummins, 1980) functions in understanding those academic concepts necessary for the performance of higher cognitive operations. A well-developed CALP enables a student to achieve academically at tertiary level. A large number of UNAM students exhibit well-developed BICS, but their CALP appears to be inadequate for tertiary studies.

Due to the way students were taught at school they remain dependent learners, even at tertiary level. Apart from their under-developed CALP, 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). It further appears that the appropriate cognitive skills which should be developed and nurtured from the primary school level onwards are not practised in previously disadvantaged schools, where rote-learning, rather than the active construction of knowledge, seems to be the preferred method of teaching.

Amuzu (1992) has further found that especially in rural schools, English is often, contrary to the country’s education policy, not the medium of instruction and that as a subject it is not effectively taught. Since the learners have little

opportunity outside the classroom to acquire spoken English, a large number of them leave school with only a 'smattering' (1992, p. 132) of the language. Amuzu continues that it is students in this group – and it is a large group – who find their studies tedious in the university or college if they happen to get admission.

Despite the fact that L2 tertiary students at UNAM experience problems in learning, they are intelligent and have an underlying ability to learn via an L2. In fact, personal experience tends to confirm that Namibian 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. It is thus the author's personal contention that increasing the length and loading the content of existing English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses will not satisfy the needs of the FG Namibian student. It is necessary to pay much more attention to developing students' cognitive and affective skills in order to provide a vehicle for the necessary transition from rote-learning to proficiency in critical literacy.

Discussion

Critical Literacy

Asubel et al. (1978, cited in Lovell, 1987) contrast meaningful learning and rote-learning. The essence of the meaningful learning process is that new ideas which are to be learned should be related to existing aspects of the learner's cognitive structures which are specifically relevant, such as an image or an already meaningful symbol, concept or proposition. In rote memorisation, on the other hand, definitions and concepts are learned without any recognition of the meaning of the words in the definition. For meaningful learning to take place, the learner must have relevant concepts available within her or his existing cognitive structure to which the new material can be linked.

Furthermore, since students in most African countries study through the medium of English, it is necessary that their command of the language should be adequate in order for them to cope with the demands of having to read textbooks and, by implication, to employ effective thinking skills in order to understand lectures in a wide variety of subjects (Chimombo, 1989). It is, however, true that FG students have probably had little practice in reading

skills throughout primary school when switching to English as a medium of instruction. This lack of reading practice results in students with insufficient world knowledge rooted in life experiences. This knowledge or schemata are necessary to enable the individual to make inferences and to form expectations about commonplace situations.

Although mastering subject matter is indeed crucial to students' academic success, it is not just the facts of the subject matter that are at issue. Each academic discipline has its own facts and lexicon, grammars, ways of making knowledge claims and ways of thinking (Hawkins, 2005). Furthermore, underlying literacy is communication. It means reading interpretatively and writing clearly. It is also the ability to think critically and to use language effectively in any message conveyance. Effective literacy acquisition is thus the communicative empowerment which enables individuals to interact with the written text/spoken discourse and to break the distance between the authors/speakers, irrespective of the type of discourse. This implies negotiation, constructing and reconstructing the discourse and being able to share, enhance and sustain the meaning and to converse and enter into dialogue with it (Onukaogu, 1999).

B. Pedagogical Difficulties

Many tertiary students appear to lack the conceptual maturity to make full use of what is available to them at a tertiary institution. It has also become widely accepted that students from educationally disadvantaged schools experience difficulties with their own communicative empowerment. There also seems to be a lack of analytical clarity which has led not only Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) practitioners but also mainstream teachers to feel paralysed in their abilities to respond to students' language needs (Amuzu, 1992; Allison and Tauroza, 1995; Shanahan, 1997).

This inability to assist students can be seen in the constant struggle to develop adequate pedagogies for the large number of multilingual students who are no longer at an early stage of learning English and 'who use everyday colloquial English with ease' (Leung et al., 1997, p. 543). Furthermore, there appears to be a glaring gap in research about the extent to which the affective side of the language may be an inducement to students' success in a tertiary ESL environment (Shanahan, 1997).

Often English for Specific Purposes (ESP), EAP and similar courses do not achieve the results they are designed to, and a significant number of students have serious difficulties in their early tertiary studies. The natural reaction of institutions and tutors is to blame such failure on a lack of English language skills. The most commonly proposed solution is to increase the number of hours at the institution. In EAP courses this does not appear to help, as students often fail to write good essays, to conduct themselves effectively in seminars or to manage their research well, not primarily because their English is weak but because, in Western terms, they are weak students; they do not know how to study and were not prepared in the school system.

Conclusion

It might, therefore, be necessary to develop a special course called English for Intellectual Purposes which will introduce students to the intellectual skills they will require and the study adjustments they must make, if they are to be successful tertiary students. In such a course, the focus should be primarily on the nature of the cognitive acts required by the specific tasks and assignments set within a distinctive academic context or discipline. Students need to be introduced first to the intellectual demands of university work and then given practice in the language structures they require to meet these demands.

The initial support work with students, and specifically FG students, in the Namibian context should thus concentrate on developing critical and linguistic, rather than academic, proficiency so that students can become aware of the different levels of discourse interpretation available to them and consequently become better equipped to own academic English. Their ability to draw inferences may become more targeted and they may succeed more effectively in fulfilling the demands of higher education.

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