

A University OL Course Focusing on Academic Reading and Writing

Introduction

Central to university access is language proficiency in the chosen medium of instruction (Blue 1993:5, Johns 1993:274). Thus, effective language support could mean the difference between success or failure at tertiary level. This paper outlines a programme for the teaching of English academic language skills within the context of an open learning programme which aims to redress past inequities at tertiary level in South Africa.

The English language course is taught within the context of the Career Preparation Programme (CPP) which provides an alternative access route to tertiary and higher education for out-of-school and out-of-work young adults who possess a matriculation certificate, but fail to meet the entrance requirements of tertiary institutions (Strydom 1996:5). The planning phases of the programme involved lengthy negotiations with local community leaders and leaders in education in the Free State region. These negotiations were aimed at discovering the educational needs of the regional community so as to ensure that the university addressed these needs. The process was recorded in a working document compiled by the (then) head of the Interim Management Committee of the University of the Free State (Strydom 1996:11). This process of consultation in the Free State region proved so successful that it led to the formation of a representative board who would determine policy and take management decisions regarding co-operative initiatives and resultant programmes. The driving force behind the effort was to provide learners with open access to tertiary institutions of their choice, whether it be university, technikon or technical college. The establishment of this bridging programme was preceded by a pilot study which was aimed at researching the feasibility and viability of an OL programme in rural areas. The project was undertaken by the South African Institute for Distance Education.

SAIDE PILOT PROJECT AND FEASIBILITY STUDY

The South African Institute for Distance Education (SAIDE) was asked to do a feasibility study on increasing access to higher education using a distance learning approach. This meant the use of resources such as structured study guides, workbooks, texts, electronic media and methods of delivery other than the traditional lecture mode (Bitzer & Pretorius 1996). Class sessions would be organized with a qualified facilitator who would assist students in the learning process, but who would not lecture on the content in a traditional lecturer-dominated mode. This would enable students to remain in their home environment, earning credits, which would allow them to access educational opportunities at proposed the community colleges and universities or technikons of their choice. Thus, Resource-based learning (RBL), as proposed for the CPP, was a combined approach of contact and traditional distance education (Strydom 1997: 7).

The feasibility study investigated the presentation of Mathematics, English, Accounting and Science. The evaluation of this feasibility study was done by academics and

specialists from SAIDE, the British Open University and participating universities (Natal and UFS) (SAIDE 1995). The courses were implemented over a period of six weeks at the UFS and the University of Natal, using imported materials from the British Open University, the Open College in the UK and the Open Learning Institute of Hong Kong.

The SAIDE findings of this study revealed that OL, through resource-based learning, could be successful in South Africa, but success would depend on the extent to which students received general counselling and support in the transition to independent learning (SAIDE 1995:33). Students would need guidance to develop appropriate study skills (these include reading and writing skills) and close monitoring of their progress to ensure success. The SAIDE report did not, however, present guidelines on how or by whom this support should be given (SAIDE 1994). Thus, student support in open learning programmes may take different forms in different systems and usually includes some form of tutoring, foundation courses and individual counselling (Strydom 1997:20).

THE CAREER PREPARATION PROGRAMME

The feasibility study led to the launching of the CPP programme in 1996. The programme started with only six students in 1996 and was only really established in 1997 with 185 students. The university appointed subject co-ordinators in each of the four subjects that were presented that year. The subject co-ordinators were responsible for quality control, course design, course administration and assessment as well as course monitoring. The brief for the English course was to design and implement an English course that would meet the requirements of the Department of English and the Unit for Strategic Services at the UFS. The course was intended, like the other courses on the CPP, to bridge the students into tertiary study. The course would carry full first-year accreditation and students would be able to continue their second year of English at any of the higher and tertiary institutions in the region.

As a means of quality control, SAIDE was contracted by the university (The Unit for Strategic Services) to monitor the implementation of the four subjects presented in 1997. SAIDE was briefed to monitor quality and progress; and to provide in-service training where required. Co-ordinators for each of the subjects were required to provide frequent reporting on progress of both students' learning and the materials development undertaken for the course.

The programme consisted of a combination of University courses and Technical College courses. This decision was taken after much negotiation with all tertiary institutions and represented the results of a collaboration process in the region (Strydom 1996:12). The courses were presented at the Further Education and Training (FET) colleges in the Free State region. Once students completed the CPP year, they would be free to choose one of the options, viz. Technical College, Technikon, University or Vocational College (Strydom 1996:13). The courses they completed would be accredited by the institutions in the region. Students would choose one of three programme options, Economic and Management Sciences, Human and Social Sciences and Natural and Agricultural Sciences. The English course formed part of option 2.

The CPP programme is currently run in Bloemfontein, Bethlehem, Welkom, Oudsthoorn and Sasolburg. Another region will be included in 2003 when the programme will be presented in Phuthaditjhaba in Qwa-Qwa. The courses are facilitated in the regions by means of appointed facilitators who have scheduled weekly contact sessions with students. Course development is done by the course co-ordinator at the University. Facilitators are trained by the course co-ordinator and facilitators are provided with a course guide which provides guidelines for the teaching of course components, teaching methods, assessment and monitoring of students. The course guide contains a list of the kind of language problems experienced by the learners and provides guidelines for addressing these in contact sessions. The course guide outlines the programme for the year and all assessment dates are given at the beginning of the year. Each student receives a course guide detailing outcomes, assessment and course requirements. It is necessary to define the concept open learning and how it relates to the CPP before detailing the contents and methods of the English course.

OPEN LEARNING

The term open learning means different things to different institutions. The term can be defined as education which has as its aim the removal of unnecessary barriers to learning and "the provision of reasonable chances of success for students in an education and training system, centred on specific needs and located in multiple locations of learning (Strydom 1997:37). Adey (1995:1) views open learning as learning "without the structures and strictures of convention. The responsibility for the learning process is placed squarely on the shoulders of the students. Students decide what they will learn and how they will learn". The latter definition implies that learners have the know-how and skills required to make relevant and successful decisions. Axiomatic to the development of any programme of learning is the understanding of the learners and their needs. Thus, effective pedagogical interaction proceeds from a thorough understanding of learners and their needs (Van Lier 1996:4). Students who experience difficulty reading and writing in their chosen language of instruction would need much language support to fulfill the reading and writing requirements demanded by distance learning in its traditional form. If the language skills of a learner group are not adequate, then the teaching approach has to be adapted to appropriately address these needs. Thus, the University of the Free State opted for a hybrid teaching mode which is a combination of OL methods and traditional teaching. The programme is characterized by the following:

- learner-centred;
- located in several rural regions;
- learner support provided in materials, method and counselling support;
- provides access to further and higher education in institutions in the region;
- addresses immediate needs; and
- provides instructional resources.

The concept language proficiency needs some clarification so as to gain an understanding of the immediate language needs of the target group.

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

If a planned programme intends to assist learners who have a low proficiency in their chosen language of instruction, then this means that facilitating their communication skills in that language may, in part, facilitate the successful completion of their studies (Grabe & Kaplan 1996:29, Saville-Troike 1984:199).

If a language programme is to meet the immediate language needs of a group of learners, then it is necessary to determine what communicative tasks or skills are needed by the learners and then to decide which teaching approach to use to achieve these goals (Eskey 1997:135). Thus, learner needs and the context should determine and inform the teaching approach. If learners read poorly and are not able to understand the discourse of their academic materials, then learning becomes a struggle to comprehend and integrate content. Weyers (1999:341) emphasizes that it "is widely accepted that target language input, specifically comprehensible input, is the first vital component in the language acquisition process". Failure to concede to this basic student need leads to the student's failure in acquiring the language of learning (Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991:142). It is, however, true that comprehensible input alone is not enough to ensure second language acquisition (VanPatten 1996:5). Language input and activities should therefore be carefully selected so that learners can hear or see language that expresses some meaning (i.e. meaning-bearing input). These activities should push the learner to attend to particular features of language while they are reading or writing, listening or speaking (VanPatten 1996:6). Comprehensible input alone does not ensure SLA, but initiates a process in which the learner's attention is focused on form through the use of genuine communicative activities; in this case, genuine academic communicative activities. Thus, an English course that aims to facilitate language learning at tertiary level should enable students to develop the skills needed to use that language in the academic discourse community, viz. academic communicative skills (Richards 1985:5). What are those academic communicative tasks which students are required to perform at tertiary level?

Blue (1993:6) outlines these as follows:

Figure 1.1: Major study activities and skills

Study activities	Skills required
Lectures	Listening so as to understand content, coping with different accents and varying speeds of delivery, listening for key words and phrases, recognising discourse markers, assessing the importance of different parts of each lecture, making notes, asking questions.
Seminars, tutorials, supervisions	Asking and answering questions, understanding and expressing different points of view, comparing different approaches, ideas, reporting on work done, making notes.
Practicals	Understanding instructions, asking questions, requesting help, securing access to relevant equipment, etc., coping with informal language and jargon, recording results.
Reading text books, articles, etc.	Understanding the overall content, distinguishing main points from supporting detail, skimming, scanning, evaluating, coping with constraints of time, making notes.
Writing essays, reports, etc.	Construction of reasonably accurate sentences and paragraphs, coherent structuring of ideas, referring to other authors.
Writing thesis/dissertation	As for writing essays, but with more importance possibly being attached to a thorough discussion of the literature, an adequate introduction, discussion, conclusion, reporting on the research project undertaken, knowledge of conventions for quoting and referring to other authors, etc.
Examinations	As for writing essays, reports, etc., but with the added pressure of having to read and understand the questions, exercise one's memory, plan relevant answers on the basis of present knowledge, and write coherently, all under severe time constraints.

(Adapted from Blue 1993:6)

The list above indicates a formidable number of language and study skills needed by the student at tertiary level and provides a valuable framework for determining which language skills are relevant for academic success. The above representation of the communicative tasks, required by the academic community, may not be uniform and universal as there is no such thing as a “stable academic discourse community” (Raimes 1998:149). The emphasis of a programme should fall on the local situation, the needs of the student population and factors such as their prior learning experience.

At most higher education institutions testing and assessment are done in writing and most work is based on reading tasks as indicated in Figure 1.1 above. Thus, not only must students acquire the language skills to cope with the reading and writing tasks in English, but as pointed out by Blue (1993:11), students need to be made aware of their language needs in relation to the tasks that they are required to perform. It is relevant to look at the specific academic tasks that the target population are required to perform on the CPP as this will shape the choice of content for a language programme for this target group.

Learners on the CPP are required to perform some of the academic communicative tasks as set out in Figure 1.1. These are:

- the ability to understand instructions, perform discipline-related tasks and make notes in contact sessions;
- the ability to read textbooks and study guides;
- the ability to write assignments and tests; and
- the ability to write examinations.

Thus, any language programme which aims to address the immediate needs of the learners has to address the development of the above skills otherwise it cannot be regarded as learner-centred or as adequately dealing with the academic literacy needs of the learners (Eskey 1993:11).

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY OF THE TARGET GROUP

The results of the SAIDE research pointed to the students’ need for sustained academic support (including language support) to achieve independent learning. Another study (Strydom 1997) done on the counselling needs of students on the CPP, illuminated the lack of language proficiency and concludes that “students had a below average English reading comprehension ability which has an adverse effect on students’ chances of academic success and suggests that the counselling system should develop initiatives to address students’ reading ability” (Strydom 1997:222). The findings of the SAIDE feasibility study coupled with the findings of the Strydom (1997) study suggested that language proficiency would indeed be a barrier to accessing tertiary study successfully. Matriculation results of the target group for English, revealed an average score of an E symbol. Samples of students’ writing and their scores on a reading proficiency test, further emphasized the low language proficiency of the target group. Thus, the language needs of the learners would have to be a fundamental consideration in the development of the English course.

The challenge would lie in reconciling the course content and requirements of the Department of English, which included a literature component, with the language needs of the learners. It is necessary to clarify what is meant by proficiency so as to be best able to determine the needs of low-proficiency learners at tertiary level.

AN ACADEMIC LITERACY COURSE

The Academic Reading and Writing Skills Course as it currently exists, evolved over a period of six years, four of which, involved a close study of the target group and their needs through an action research study. The initial phase of the English course, for this target group, included a full literature component as this was a requirement of the Department of English. This proved difficult from the beginning. A research review, the researcher's own observations coupled with an understanding of the students' prior learning experience, led to the inclusion of an academic reading and writing skills component. The inclusion of additional course content resulted in tension on two levels. Firstly, learners were not able to cope with the workload, and secondly, there was not enough time to provide learners with the embedded contextual support and practice which are conducive to automaticity, and hence, Second Language Acquisition (SLA). These tensions begged the question: Can literature and academic literacy be taught effectively in one course to a target group with low language proficiency? Maley (1993:10) makes the point that "we have to assume that students have already attained a level of competence in the language, and a familiarity with literary conventions" to deal competently with a literary text. Without this competence, the literary experience becomes one of rote-learning and empty repetition of critical terminology without understanding (McRae 1991:43). Therefore, a course which does not address this basic need cannot be regarded as learner-centred nor as addressing the needs of a group who need extensive language skills' development. This particular learner group needs a course which focuses on the following premises:

- Course content should be selected on the basis of the language proficiency levels of the target group;
- Learning tasks should model real-world academic tasks (Grabe & Stoller 1997:5);
- Academic reading strategies, such as pre-reading activities, skimming, scanning, summarizing and post-reading activities should be systematically taught to provide learners with the contextual support which facilitates SLA;
- Writing skills needed in the academic context should be specifically taught, viz. the process of think-plan-draft-revise-write-edit and rewrite should be practised as this encourages the process of discovering meaning (Ferris & Hedgcock 1998:39);
- A programme of language through academic literacy should focus on the symbiotic relationship between academic reading and academic writing. In other words, reading-based writing tasks should be the focus (Hudson 1998:49); and
- If students have not attained a certain level of language competence as well as a familiarity with literary conventions, then a programme of literature will not facilitate SLA.

THE CURRENT ACADEMIC LITERACY COURSE

The current academic literacy course has as its main goal the development of students' academic reading and writing skills to a level that will give them a fair chance of success at tertiary level. The main objective of the reading component is for students to read academic texts with good comprehension. The main objective of the writing component is to develop students' ability to express information/ideas clearly and logically in paragraphs and essays. These main objectives guide the selection of methods, materials and sub-objectives necessary to achieve these goals.

Methods

The methods selected and currently in use to achieve the reading goals are the following:

- An extensive reading programme which means that students read as much as possible, from a variety of texts, and where reading is experienced as pleasurable, and reading materials fall well within the linguistic competence of the students (Day & Bamford 1998:8). Students are required to read two books a week from a selection of Graded Readers. The books vary from 50-100 pages each. Student reading proficiency is tested at the beginning of each year and according to the results of this test, students are placed at an initial reading level. This is a level at which the student can read books easily with good comprehension (Day & Bamford 1998:97). The majority of students fall within two reading levels (low intermediate range). Students move up level by level as the year progresses. By the end of the year students will have read approximately 40 books and moved up four levels.
- A programme of intensive reading. Intensive reading involves the reading of short academic texts rigorously. These sessions are characterized by three stages, viz. pre-reading, while reading and post-reading activities. The basic aims of the pre-reading activities are to motivate students, to activate their existing background knowledge and to alleviate potential problems that they may encounter when reading. The while-reading questions are important because these are the questions that draw students' attention to problematic features of the text and also point to meaningful relationships within the text. The post-reading activities give students feedback on how well they have understood the passage as a whole and at the same time give students a sense of achievement (Eskey & Grabe 1988:224, Grabe 1986: 32).
- Vocabulary development is an important component of SLA and students study academic words from the textbook (*Making Connections* by J. Pakenham published by CUP). Students study the words which are reinforced through an independent booklet of vocabulary activities which is provided to each student.

The writing objectives are achieved through the following methods:

- the writing process itself is explicitly taught. Students learn that good writing does not automatically appear on a page which is then handed in without further consideration. Good writing takes time and effort. The process of planning, writing, revising and editing can help students craft decent expository writing (Ferris and Hedgcock 1998:39, Grabe & Kaplan 1996:167).
- Paragraph writing with feedback

- Expository essay writing with feedback
- The writing of reading reactions. Reading reactions provide a relatively undemanding context in which students develop their writing skills. As the novel (Graded Readers) forms the basis of the writing, the student does not need to create entirely new ideas or arguments. Students can therefore devote their attention and energy to expressing their thoughts about the novels in a clear and organized way.

The above constitutes a brief outline of the academic reading and writing skills course as it is currently presented in several regions in the Free State and Oudtshoorn.

CONCLUSION

Any language programme of OL should focus on the learners' immediate language needs as well as the demands of the context in which the students are required to function. The teaching approach should be adapted so as to make learning accessible and relevant. Low-proficiency learners should receive a language programme which aims to improve their academic communication skills and simultaneously facilitates SLA. Without adequate language skills to access tertiary learning, an academic qualification will remain unattainable to many learners with low language proficiency in their chosen medium of instruction.

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