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Academic literacy interventions: What are we not yet doing, or not yet doing right?[1]

Abstract

We now much more readily accept a skills-neutral rather than a skills-based definition of academic literacy, changing our conceptualisations of what academic literacy is. Yet two issues have evaded scrutiny: first, there is the uncritical acceptance that academic writing is what should be taught, and institutionalised.

Second, there is a tendency to accept discipline specific academic literacy courses as necessarily superior to generic ones. There is a third, foundational level omission in our work.

That is that there is little reciprocity in what we learn from applied linguistic artefacts in the realms of language testing, language course design, and language policy making. Why do we not check whether the design of a course should be done as responsibly as that of a test? What can test designers learn from course developers about specificity?

There are many useful questions that are right before us, but that we never seem to ask.

Key words: academic literacy, academic writing, discipline specific, academic literacy test, curriculum, course, design

1. This is the amended text of an invited keynote paper presented at a colloquium on the state of academic literacy in South Africa at the Potchefstroom campus of North-West University on 26 October 2012.

Journal for Language Teaching, Volume 47, Number 2, pp. 11-24. 2013.
ISSN 0259-9570. DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/jlt.v47i2.1

1. The earlier question

Just more than 12 years ago the University of Pretoria arranged a seminar similar to the one presented at the North-West University in 2012 that formed the basis for this article, but on the topic: "What is worthwhile in language skills development?" This was indicative of the intense involvement and concern with issues of academic literacy, and the plans and designs we make to overcome what many still see as a critically important hurdle for student success: the ability to use academic discourse competently. It is instructive to look at the answers given on that early occasion to this question, and the ensuing discussion.

One presentation of that earlier symposium in Pretoria had depended heavily on theses taken *i.a*. from *Starting out right* (Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, 1998). Given that starting point, reading ability was identified as the primary problem. The presentation referred quite extensively to the work that had already been done in South Africa in this regard, by Platt and Alfers (2000) as well as by Lilli Pretorius (Pretorius, 2000). The reasons given for learners failing to learn to read at primary and secondary school, and the effect that has on further and higher education, were encapsulated in six statements. The most prominent of these concern the language status of the first language, the availability of appropriate material in that language, the issue of early or later exposure to the additional language, the likelihood of transferring reading proficiency in one's first language to such an additional language, and, of course, starting out right, or not so well, or wrong.

What has changed, one may ask? Not much, unfortunately, which may be construed an indictment of our profession. One might well be forgiven for thinking that perhaps the "deafening silence" that Pretorius (2000) took as her title has not been broken. The low status of African languages in the minds of their own first language speakers remains unaltered. There is an enduring scarcity of first language reading material for children who have an African language as first language. Often as a result of the deliberate choice of their parents, many of them are exposed to their additional language, English, before they have a settled competence in their first, against the conventional wisdom over many decades regarding mother tongue education. If the results of internationally benchmarked tests are to be believed, substantial numbers of children at primary school never learn to read properly in their first language. They therefore do not have an adequate, generic reading proficiency to transfer to an additional language, which in most cases is English, and which also happens to be the language of instruction. In short: they start out either wrong, or not so well, but certainly not right.

In order to advance our discussion beyond that starting point of the discussion of more than a decade ago, let us perhaps begin with the observation that our terminology has changed, indicating a change, too, in the conceptualisation of what the problem is. The 'skills' narrative that was so much part of our thinking just a while ago has now all but disappeared, and where it remains, it is usually a clear indication of our profession not being abreast of the times. Moreover, we may have many more lessons to learn beyond the one problem that we still appear not to have solved: how to nurture adequate levels

of reading ability or, as the issue was then framed: how to start out right. These two, the conceptualisation of the problem and the unresolved nature of one way of looking at it, are connected, as I hope to make clear in what follows.

In attempting to advance the discussion, my further suggestion is that our thoughts should go, rather, towards the interventions we develop, both in academic literacy testing, and in course design. These, and the design principles that underlie them, and to which I shall return in conclusion, are in my opinion the more profitable pursuit if we are to achieve what I call responsible designs for such interventions.

2. How our conceptualisation has changed

Let me begin with an observation about how our conceptualisation of what constitutes academic discourse has changed. We no longer stick to the behaviourist belief, so ably embodied in the audio-lingual method and its conventional predecessors, that listening, speaking, reading and writing are separate or even separable language 'skills'. Whenever one says the first – skills are not separate abilities - there is agreement, and one may expect to begin hearing advice on how we need to 'integrate' them, and how excellent a strategy their integration is.

Listening, speaking, reading and writing cannot be integrated because they already are. It would in fact be a greater chore trying to separate them than to integrate them (Kumaravadivelu, 2003: 226). Consider as an example how we might go about designing an academic listening test. Its format will probably be such that test takers *see* on a screen a lecturer conducting a class. Of course the students taking the test also *hear* the words he says, and we may think of that as listening, but their experience is of much more than what can be heard. They have notes in front of them, the same handouts as the original class had for the videotaped lecture. They are certainly not 'listening' to these notes. As in a real lecture, they have to integrate their *reading* of these with what the lecturer is saying (and pointing at, and gesturing about, or requesting them to attend to), so that they can answer certain questions afterwards. Guess in which format the questions are that they are asked? Or the format in which they will give their answers? The questions might of course be in listening format, but in reality they will not be: test taking constraints would dictate that they might well be in written form. The same with their answers. And then we have barely begun to consider what happens in between the test takers seeing and hearing the lecturer, and their reading and referring to their notes, both those supplied and taken (in *writing*). For in between they need to process cognitively the information that they have received.

What do we know about such cognitive processing? And can that be called 'listening'? Surely we cannot call 'listening' the further processing that takes place as they retrieve only the relevant bits of the information imparted in order to give a sensible answer, in writing, to a written question on what they have heard? So this academic listening test is really an integrated way of determining the ability of students to find, process

and produce information - and even that may itself be a limited way of looking at what has happened. For convenience we may call it a listening test, but we know we have not isolated 'listening' in the test as a separate skill. In fact, in the case of an academic listening test we might well strive *not* to isolate it, since it would take us too far away from the reality of language use in an academic setting, which is exactly what we want to test in the first instance, and not a disembodied ability.

So what we call reading, writing, listening, and speaking can in the first instance not really be separated. Abandoning the concept of "skills development" in favour of a less restrictive, more disclosed view of the language ability in an academic setting that needs to be developed, means adopting a more productive, skills-neutral view of such language use. One still sees little evidence of Bachman and Palmer's (1996: 75f.) - to some quite radical - stance on language 'skills' being taken seriously:

> We would thus not consider language skills to be part of language ability at all, but to be the contextualized realization of the ability to use language in the performance of specific language use tasks. We would … argue that it is not useful to think in terms of 'skills', but to think in terms of specific activities or tasks in which language is used purposefully.

What do we profit if we abandon a skills-based, restrictive view of academic language usage in favour of a skills-neutral, open idea of academic discourse? First, we acknowledge the truth that competence in language is far more than the 'skills' of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Academic language is

> imbued with cognitive as well as analytical processing. Academic language has functions like exposition, clarification, and conclusion; the academic demands for language therefore require us to do things with language like explain, define, compare, contrast, classify, agree, disagree, illustrate, elaborate, make claims, see implications, infer, exemplify, anticipate, and conclude. (Introduction to Weideman & Van Dyk, 2013)

That does not mean that writing, or reading, is not important. In some mass learning settings that characterise higher education in South Africa, the formal written academic text is the only language format in which most students have to demonstrate their ability to handle academic discourse. But, as Weideman and Van Dyk (2013) go on to point out in their introduction,

> … we would be seriously mistaken if we ignored what precedes writing:
>
> - the ability to *gather* academic information, either by listening or reading, or, having listened and read, by writing notes or discussing things further with others;
> - the ability to *process* that information by analysing it, i.e. sifting main from peripheral, comparing and contrasting, tabulating, summarising, making

inferences, and sometimes again discussing it with others before modifying our analyses; and, finally,

- the ability to *produce* new information (often in writing) that captures our own final opinion, and, though it has been produced in collaboration with many other voices, is distinctly our own.

A second sense in which our conceptualisation has changed is that we now know that language is much more than grammar. The functions of comparing and contrasting, classifying and inferring, or making claims and extrapolating, mentioned above, are one (functional) way in which we have gone beyond viewing language as grammar. Yet in this regard many of us may still find themselves in the same time warp as with our uncritical acceptance of 'skills'.

The construct proposed for ICELDA's Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL) and similar tests, according to Van Dyk and Weideman (2004a and 2004b; cf. too Weideman, 2011b), is therefore an encapsulation of how our conceptualisations of academic literacy have changed. Whether those new, perhaps more illuminating ways of assessing the ability to handle academic discourse have had the desired salutary effect on course design for academic literacy interventions is a question that we never ask. Have our more recent conceptualisations of academic literacy that have now been embedded in testing, had a positive effect on course design? If I have to answer from my own experience, I would have to say that we are neither doing things right, nor are we yet doing the right thing.

3. Is teaching writing the solution?

Our uncritical acceptance that teaching writing must be the solution if students seem unable to write merits separate attention. It is the default solution of university administrators who see problems of academic literacy and want a quick solution, and it is a solution, unfortunately, despite our professionally knowing better, that we quite often support enthusiastically. Yet there are arguments, and ones that I believe are convincing, against such a default solution. Let me summarise that argument (cf. Weideman 2006) as briefly as I can.

First, the isolation of 'writing' as a separate skill has demonstrably impoverished research on writing, that might have been informed, and certainly greatly enriched by broader, applied linguistic research themes and methodologies.

Second, treating writing as a separable skill has had demonstrably negative effects on designing solutions on how to teach it, as argued ably by writing experts such as Lillis (2003).

Third, the institutionalisation of writing in courses (such as the conventional American "freshman composition"), in dedicated classes, and in writing centres is questionable not only conceptually, but also as regards the contextual appropriateness of the solution

devised, as well as its current historical relevance. How appropriate are American solutions, made in a context that is light-years removed from the South African language situation?

The fourth, and more positive point, has already been made: it is demonstrable that a skills-neutral perspective leads to a disclosure and opening up not only of one's conceptualisation, but also of the designs that are informed by such a disclosed view. And let me immediately note, in case that there is any misunderstanding, that the term 'disclosure' is used here in a highly technical sense, that in which it was conceived (Dooyeweerd, 1957: 58ff.) and elaborated (Dooyeweerd, 2012: 74ff.) over many decades in a responsible analysis of history. This analysis allows one to pinpoint what constitutes a historical advance, or disclosure, on the one hand, or, on the other, historical retrogression, as in social solutions like Nazism (Dooyeweerd, 2012: 79f.) and apartheid. What constitutes an advance, historically, must arguably have some effect on the responsibility with which we design interventions. Since our academic literacy designs are imaginative, emancipatory plans made in the service of others (Weideman, 2007: 44f.), they are more likely to serve the interests of our students, and so enhance their potential to have appropriate results, if the perspective informing them anticipates and articulates such disclosure.

There are several ironies about the isolation of writing, and academic discussion pertaining to it, in dedicated journals and books. The first, of course, is that its conceptual base is usually entirely conventional, and reified in behaviourist starting points of 60 years ago that themselves hark back to late 19th century concepts, yet it is not uncommon to find solutions proposed that are driven with present-day political correctness. The impression generated by the conceptual isolation of writing in the scholarly journals and publications that are dedicated to it today is that of a (legitimate) critique of Western hegemony, and of the abuses of power associated with institutionalising one kind of dominance, while happily living with its own ascendancy into the dominant, mainstream solutions that subsequently may impose themselves on supposedly powerless Third World academic institutions. In true relativist fashion, it is only its own solutions that are exempt from critique.

How then should we approach the 'writing' problem? Perhaps we can begin by admitting, when we make the plan to address the problem (which is most certainly not reducible to a 'writing' problem), that our designs should perhaps use successive strategies, as outlined above, to bring everything that we need (vocabulary knowledge, information recording and retrieval ability, even individual learning style knowledge) into play, and even before the 'writing' problem is addressed.

4. Discipline specific solutions

In my experience, one of the most popularly appealing current assumptions in the design of academic literacy solutions is that discipline specific course designs must be superior

to generic ones. Equally notable is the lack of any accompanying discussion, let alone empirical data or analysis, either to support or disconfirm this. So the assumption stands, and soon, like many others we make, it assumes the status of fact.

The only really serious examination of this assumption that is backed up by conceptual and empirical analysis of data that I know of is that done by Adelia Carstens (2009) in her second doctoral thesis. Her experimentation with two courses for second year students in the humanities involved a first group that was exposed to a highly specific academic literacy course design, and another that underwent a more generic intervention. Using a statistical technique that allowed her to make sense of very small samples, she found, unsurprisingly, that the highly specific course she had designed delivered superior results. But she also found that the more generic course had delivered results that were impressive not only on their own terms, but also in comparison with those of the slightly better intervention. In other words, she concluded: if we do not have the luxury or the logistical means to set up highly specific courses, generic ones still offer a reasonable, rational and entirely defensible alternative solution. Of course, as one reviewer has pointed out, experimentation done with small samples should ideally be replicated with larger samples, for the sake of credibility. But the point remains: in a world in which it is fashionable now to do otherwise, we too readily accept that our assumptions are facts.

So I would like to ask a follow-up question today that we never ask, which is: if specific is superior, how specific do we need to be? For the answer, I shall use a particular set of imported solutions recently introduced at one South African university to achieve the assumed superiority of specificity.

In this university, a series of faculty-specific academic literacy workbooks are now used that are supposed to serve, for example, the humanities and social sciences, as well as the natural sciences and other faculties. Since this is an ambitious and apparently extensive series, I shall refer only to a sample of three of their coursebooks (Brown & Hood, 2002; Seal, 1998; Wharton, 2009). We should note that the series was considered by the course administrators to be superior to any generic or locally produced course. The assumption was therefore not only that specific was better, but that local was inferior.

In the case of the one dedicated to the natural sciences (Wharton, 2009), the topics include the solar system, the earth (volcanoes, earthquakes), water and oceans, the atmosphere, climate, demographics, a bit of physiology, followed by a topic or two on nutrition. If it were not for the bits on physiology or nutrition, you could be forgiven for thinking it was a low-level geography textbook. Yet this is the language course offered as solution, serving as text to develop the “discipline specific” academic literacy of all natural science students, who find themselves in a faculty, in the specific case, as its dean has explained to me, with a good nine subfields or disciplinary groups. A quick glance at the contents page, in other words, reveals that for students of mathematics or applied mathematics, physics or chemistry, zoology or botany, agriculture, architecture or food sciences, there is either nothing or very little that is relevant in terms of the course designer’s intentions. Tutors on these courses also report that the texts are pitched at such a low level that students resent having to engage with them, since they claim to have

already dealt with similar content at school. Another old problem of so-called "content based" courses therefore surfaces, as well: the content is either not challenging enough, or pitched at too low a level to engage, and the language development is forgotten or left unattended. There is no indication of the reading level of the texts selected, since the course designers do not need to justify their designs to anyone.

In the case of the two dedicated to humanities and the social sciences (Brown & Hood, 2002; Seal, 1998) the same problem is evident. Topics range over adolescence, adulthood, intelligence, group dynamics, gender, sexual harassment, the mass media, crime, culture, and so on. What possible relevance can there be here for students of history, and literature, the arts and performing arts, linguistics, translation studies, interpreting, French, or ancient culture? Potentially, provided of course that texts are pitched at the right level, there seems to be some relevance for students of sociology and psychology, and, at a stretch, journalism or perhaps political science. But the greater majority of disciplines (and students) in this particular faculty of humanities are excluded, by virtue of the logic of those who prescribe and teach these courses, from this "discipline specific" intervention. What their discipline specific intervention has in fact achieved is, for the greater majority of students that they should be serving, nothing more than a (to them undesirable) generic course.

Had their woes ended there, one might have argued some points in mitigation, but they do not. Teachers of academic literacy on these courses report that the majority of students who actually come to academic literacy classes to be subjected to the two books referred to are not from the faculty of humanities, but from economic and management sciences! This is so because academics have notoriously weak control over timetables. In this specific case, what should have been a time slot ideally suited for humanities students became, through the logistical nightmare that is the university timetable, a less than ideal one for them, but one that perfectly suited students of economics and accountancy, who were then promptly exposed to such disciplinary relevant subject matter as alternative lifestyles, crowd behaviour and fairy-tale lessons for girls.

There is many a slip twixt the cup and the lip. Perhaps we should sober up a bit about what is contextually possible and feasible. The brief analysis above has referred only to the topics that these purportedly discipline specific textbooks offer. Of course, disciplinary discourses are characterised by more than the themes or topics they cover; their typicality may also show in, for example, the way they present evidence, that is to say in methodological, stylistic or other particular features. Yet we should ask the critical questions, and perhaps have a greater regard for local, contextual knowledge and applied linguistic expertise such as that which I have referred to above.

Perhaps the best indication that our current plans are not dealing with the problem effectively is that we need to intervene again at postgraduate level. We often think of constraints such as contextual appropriateness and feasibility as external ones. They are not. They are internal design conditions for the language solutions we propose, and directly affect the designs so proposed. So it is to a consideration of these conditions that I finally turn.

5. Reciprocity in design

There is another omission in our work, which lies at what I consider to be an even more fundamental level. That is that there is little reciprocity in what we learn from designing applied linguistic artefacts in the distinct realms of language testing, language course design, and language policy making. These three subfields of applied linguistics each produce their own kind of solution, which we conventionally experience as language *courses*, language *tests* or language management *plans*. But actually these designs operate at two levels: there is a normative, conditioning design, and an end-user format of the planned solution that is aligned with the original design. The following table (Weideman, 2011a: 15) summarises this:

Table 1: *Levels of applied linguistic artefacts*

Prior, conditioning artefact	End-user format of design
language curriculum	**language course**
construct and test specifications	**language test**
language policy	**language management plan**

These designs, I have long suspected, have more in common than just being related as normative and factual technical objects. This suspicion grows much stronger when one refers to a recent conceptual analysis of what 'validity' means in language testing (Weideman, 2012). Validity and validation are inordinately important in designing language tests, as everyone who has been involved at that point of applied linguistic design will be able to testify. Yet there are many more, potentially equally important, design principles that should engage us. Here, for example, are some of the design principles that one may identify as being of equal importance in language testing (Weideman, 2012):

- Systematically integrate multiple sets of evidence in arguing for the validity of a test.
- Specify clearly and to the public the appropriately limited scope of the test, and exercise humility in doing so.
- Ensure that the measurements obtained are adequately consistent, also across time.
- Ensure effective measurement by using a defensibly adequate instrument.
- Have an appropriately and adequately differentiated test.
- Make the test intuitively appealing and acceptable.

- Mount a theoretical defence of what is tested in the most current terms.
- Make sure that the test yields interpretable and meaningful results.
- Make not only the test, but information about it, accessible to everyone.
- Obtain the test results efficiently and ensure that they are useful.
- Align the test with the instruction that will either follow or precede it, and as closely as possible with the learning.
- Be prepared to give account to the public of how the test has been used.
- Value the integrity of the test; make no compromises of quality that will undermine its status as an instrument that is fair to everyone.
- Spare no effort to make the test appropriately trustworthy.

If one replaces 'test' in the above with 'course', or 'material' that will be used for instruction, it is clear that the principles identified here have wider applicability. As a technical artefact, a language course undoubtedly has to be effective or valid, consistent, differentiated, appealing, theoretically defensible, yield meaningful results, be accessible, efficient, accountable, and so forth, just like a language test. What has further reinforced the suspicion that these principles may be more generally applicable design conditions for other kinds of applied linguistic designs, notably language curricula and courses, is that they derive from the same emerging applied linguistic framework.

So the final number of awkward questions we need to ask are: Why do we not explicitly check whether the design of a course should be as responsibly and carefully done as a test? How can we learn more from language policy development about making tests more accessible and accountable? For certainly, language policy developers (not always, but in examples of their best practice) go about their work in studiously participative fashion, carefully taking all interests into account. Similarly, what can test designers learn from course developers about specificity?

If a condition for test design is that the test must be a differentiated test of ability, that may be what course designers who strive to have faculty specific courses designed are trying to achieve. Should we not be developing faculty and discipline specific tests? In short: we can learn much more from each other if we utilise and exploit what is probably a common framework of design principles.

There are many useful questions that are right before us, and that we never ask. But the point is: we need to exploit the reciprocity that is available within applied linguistics. Where institutional and other constraints prevent us from doing so, we can take a leaf out of the political activism handbook associated with postmodernist approaches in our field, and challenge them.

6. Conclusion

I hope that I have pointed out that we have made significant advances in designing solutions for developing language ability. It is unfortunate that, in my experience at least, the advances we have made have not yet bedded down properly. That is a function of a deeper malaise: our inability to secure a proper professional basis for language teaching. It is as unfortunate that the surrounding language context, not the least of which is the enduring low status of African languages, has not improved over the last decade.

So the challenges have not become fewer, or easier. It is almost unavoidable to conclude that we have a bigger challenge on our hands than we may care to acknowledge. In the case of the institution whose efforts to introduce discipline specific courses were used above to show how it should preferably not be done, for example, students are additionally exposed to 'graded' reading materials contrary to the professional wisdom about this (Gebhard, 1999). And they are placed on this part of the intervention on the basis of the results of a substandard 27-mark 'reading' test that is called a "language proficiency test". As any professional language tester knows, one usually needs a longer test for a reliable result.

This test is known (even on a large sample of more than 1000 students) to have a reliability level, measured in terms of Cronbach's alpha, of well below 0.64. The only difference between it and the locally developed available test of academic literacy levels, apart from the latter always achieving reliability levels in the vicinity of 0.94, is that it was specially developed for the academic literacy interventions of that institution by a visiting American scholar.

Do we have the courage to acknowledge that unprofessional, substandard and contextually inappropriate designs constitute a much more serious challenge than we may have wanted to admit up to now? We may, too, be seriously underestimating the stubborn inertia associated with our profession, that reluctance we have to engage with the new, and the unwillingness to let go of outdated views. Yet our professional challenge remains: for the students in our care, we need to plan, design and develop rationally defensible courses and tests, and we need to do so with imagination and care. In short: we need to design with responsibility. It is better to know how big the challenges are, than to stick our heads in the sand and pretend they are not there.

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