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Discipline-specific versus generic academic literacy intervention for university education: An issue of impact?

Abstract

In a context where progressively more underprepared students gain access to higher education, South African universities are obligated to offer appropriate support to such students that may reduce their risk in being successful with their studies. Part of this underpreparedness is the large proportion of students who enter universities with inadequate levels of academic literacy (AL).

As a point of departure, this article investigates the ways in which AL is defined in the literature, and then continues to explore the nature of AL interventions at South African universities with specific reference to generic and discipline-specific proposals for such interventions. It further discusses the apparent trend for interventions to increasingly situate AL practices in the context of the discourses of specific academic disciplines. Subsequently, the proposed benefits of these approaches are considered, which are then followed by a discussion of the kinds of evidence that are reported with regard to the impact of interventions (both generic and discipline-specific) on the academic literacy practices of students.

Keywords: Academic literacy, discipline-specific AL, generic AL, academic language support, academic language proficiency, English for Specific Purposes, English for Academic Purposes, academic writing, academic reading, Content-based Instruction, Language Across the Curriculum, Writing Across the Curriculum, genre-based approaches, higher education, impact

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1. Introduction

Globally, the last five decades or so have witnessed a sharp increase in the number of students studying at higher education institutions (Calderon, 2012). In essence, this 'massification' of higher education means that more students now gain access to higher education worldwide than ever before, and it is predicted that there will be an even greater increase up to 2035 (Calderon, 2012:1). This situation also holds true for higher education in South Africa, where education policy has focused on providing increased access to higher education, especially in the case of those people who have been previously disadvantaged educationally (Council on Higher Education, 2009:17).

It is further not surprising that this worldwide phenomenon has coincided with the proliferation of support mechanisms for students who are underprepared (and under resourced) for university education, mainly as a strategy to address issues of throughput at university. Therefore, although strategies for promoting access to higher education may have been relatively successful in the South African higher education sector, it is as important that students graduate in a reasonable period of time after having gained access. Although well-intentioned and done against the additional backdrop of having an inadequate number of skilled professionals in the country, the South African Government's education policy on increasing access to tertiary education created its own complexities in the sense that progressively more underprepared students gain access to university education. In this context academic support mechanisms should be seen as an integral part of higher education, where highly-trained professionals provide the best possible support to students in order to promote student success.

2. Academic literacy levels

One of the critical focuses of student underpreparedness is their levels of academic literacy (AL) in the languages of learning at South African universities (which are still mainly English and Afrikaans). Higher Education South Africa (HESA) developed the National Benchmark Tests (NBTs) with the specific aim of making testing instruments available that would provide:

> an accurate assessment of entry levels in order to inform institutions' understanding of and response to the nature of entry cohorts, including the varying levels of "preparedness" that must responsibly be addressed in first year curricula and foundation courses, in particular (Griesel, 2006:5).

The battery of tests that comprises the NBTs includes a substantial sub-test on the assessment of academic literacy levels of students. Similarly, the two literacy tests (the Test of Academic Literacy Levels [TALL] and its Afrikaans counterpart, *Toets van Akademiese Geletterdheidsvlakke* [TAG]), that were developed by the Inter-Institutional Centre for Language Development and Assessment (ICELDA) specifically assess the academic literacy levels of students entering higher education for the first time.

The results of these instruments administered over an extended period of time indicate that it would be dangerous to assume adequate levels of academic literacy on the part of students new to tertiary education. Such results have shown that a large proportion of students who gain access to tertiary education in South Africa shows high levels of risk with regard to their academic literacy ability (cf. Higher Education South Africa, 2009; Weideman, 2006). Clearly, relevant forms of intervention are necessary to address this situation in a way that would minimise student risk regarding their levels of academic literacy preparedness, and in doing so, eventually contribute to increased graduation rates.

Although the easiest strategy for universities would have been one of transference in terms of searching for the root of the problem in other sectors of education in South Africa, universities have been tasked to offer appropriate support to underprepared students that would increase their chances of being successful with their studies. More specifically, the Education White Paper 3 (Department of Education, 1997:29) states that:

> The higher education system is required to respond comprehensively to the articulation gap between learners' school attainment and the intellectual demands of higher education programmes. It will be necessary to accelerate the provision of bridging and access programmes within further education. It is of utmost importance that the political transformation of a university does not just result in the admission of unprepared students to the university without giving them a reasonable chance to succeed. The university must also go through an academic transformation to address the problems associated with changing student demographics.

Universities have responded through the implementation of various interventionary measures, more notably foundation year courses and extended programmes which include academic literacy support, as well as dedicated academic literacy interventions for mainstream students. Because universities differ with regard to the student populations they serve, a number of different approaches have been proposed to address issues in academic literacy development specifically.

It is important to point out at this stage that offering additional support to underprepared students who enter university education is not a novel idea in South Africa. Even before democracy in 1994 many universities and technikons offered support in the form of bridging courses, potential development programmes and the like, often located in academic support or academic development (AD) units. These support mechanisms were implemented mainly with a focus on developing those abilities of students that would make them succeed with their university studies. One of the primary focus areas of such support was the development of what was seen at the time as the 'inadequate language ability' of students. After a discussion of the different ways in which the concept of AL is defined in the literature in the following section, the remainder of the article focuses on the nature of academic literacy support mechanisms that currently feature prominently in the literature on such interventions in South African higher education.

3. Academic literacy defined

A crucial issue often revisited in the development of academic literacy is one of 'situatedness': what is, therefore, the theoretical 'home' for the development of academic literacy. In essence, to which discipline(s) do we turn in order to find theoretical grounding for what we do in academic literacy development, so that we can make responsible choices in the face of existing evidence? A theoretical foundation for AL becomes even more important in providing the kind of training to AL practitioners that would enable them to design responsible and relevant solutions to problematic issues in academic literacy development.

The most obvious discipline to which AL intuitively belongs is that of applied linguistics. However, similar to academic literacy, applied linguistics has been notoriously difficult to define. The main reason for this seems to be that:

> from the time that it first emerged as an attempt to provide a theoretical basis for the activities of language teaching (in the 1970s) … it became an umbrella term for a variety of disciplines which focus on language issues … (Richards, 2009).

Applied linguistics as a discipline has, therefore, become extremely diverse in its inclusion of language-related sub-disciplines. The difficulty of arriving at one agreed-upon, all-inclusive definition of applied linguistics becomes clear when we consider that the discipline includes, amongst others, sub-disciplines as diverse as language acquisition and learning; language course design and evaluation; language testing; composition studies (writing); computer-assisted language learning; bilingualism and multilingualism; language management (language policy, language planning); socio-linguistics; translation; interpreting, text editing, sign language; lexicography, forensic linguistics and language pathology.

Probably one of the more productive perspectives on applied linguistics is that of Weideman (1987, 2003a) in his definition of applied linguistics as 'the design of solutions to language problems'. Seen this way, it places the endeavour of AL intervention squarely in the discipline of applied linguistics, a discipline that is regularly characterized by its more practical orientations towards solving language problems. As applied linguists (and more specifically, the designers of academic literacy interventions), it may be insightful for us to consider more closely Weideman's specific view on the nature of applied linguistics. As mentioned above, Weideman perceives applied linguistics in the first place as a discipline of design. We therefore identify real-life language problems, design solutions for them and present theoretical (and practical) justification for our designs. In this sense, the latter part of this article focuses on various proposals for designing solutions to the problem of how students acquire the academic literacy practices in a university context.

The way in which we justify our designs is often closely related to how we define AL. The point is that the way in which we define academic literacy (and through such definition

declare our allegiance to specific theoretical perspectives) will have a distinct influence on how we approach the design of AL interventions.

Perhaps the most problematic aspect in how academic literacy is defined in the literature is that it is by no means a unitary concept – there is no universally accepted definition of academic literacy. As Parkinson, Jackson, Kirkwood and Padayachee (2008:12) note:

> Even academic literacy, which is a more restricted notion than literacy as a whole, and might thus be expected to be clearly one thing, is, … interpreted differently by different groups".

Although it is not unusual to still find 'skills-based' discussions on the 'academic language problems' of students, and that there is a need to improve students' reading and writing skills for them to be successful in higher education, defining AL in this way has become increasingly contested in AL research (see Archer, 2006). A perception of academic literacy as the skills of reading, writing, speaking, listening and thinking/reasoning harbours the danger that these 'skills' could be construed as a neutral set of skills that could be taught out of context to new entrants in university education (see Parkinson, 2000; Jacobs, 2005; Butler, 2007). A skills perspective may also inevitably lead to an overemphasis on some skills while others are neglected, sometimes losing their inherent interrelatedness with regard to the typical tasks that university education requires of students (cf. Kumaravadivelu, 2003). The substantial focus on the development of reading and writing (with writing being the most prevalent of the two) in the literature is a point in case. Although the over-emphasis on writing is in no way surprising when one considers the dominance of writing practices in higher education assessment (Archer, 2006), the risk of favouring writing to the detriment of other modes in the development of AL is obvious. A neglect of addressing strategies for accessing and processing information (which typically take place through the abilities of reading, listening and cognitive processing), will eventually also affect students' ability to produce academic texts in a relevant and appropriate manner.

Academic literacy is also defined more generically in the literature. Such definitions are not skills-based in the way described above, but focus on the functional academic literacy abilities required of students in tertiary education. Weideman (2003b:xi) proposes a definition that makes it possible to avoid a focus on discrete language skills when he defines AL as the "accessing, processing and producing of information", with the focus of these activities on typical tasks that learners should perform in the tertiary context. He extends this definition by offering a comprehensive breakdown of the more specific functional abilities required in a tertiary context (Weideman, 2003b:xi). In this particular case, Weideman's definition was developed in the context of language testing where the focus is on an accurate determination of those AL abilities students need in order to be successful in tertiary education.

There is, furthermore, increasing evidence for AL being perceived as the acquisition of discipline-specific AL practices where language 'skills' cannot be separated out as neutral skills. To this end, Parkinson (2000) and Goodier and Parkinson (2005) note that

neutral skills acquisition should not be the organizing principle used in the design of, for example, AL interventions for science students. Parkinson (2000) proposes a theme-based AL course for science that utilises science content, featuring science-specific writing, reading, listening and speaking that are used in the learning of science content. Goodier and Parkinson (2005) proposes a discipline-based approach in which the notion of discourse communities and the genres important to such communities form the basis of AL interventions.

However, in the context of discipline-specific perspectives on the nature of AL, the majority of studies discussed in the next section of the article define AL in the particular context of the 'New Literacy (and Literacies) Studies' (cf. McKenna, 2004; Jacobs, 2005; Archer, 2006; Jackson, Meyer & Parkinson, 2006; Jacobs, 2007; Paxton, 2007; Jacobs, 2010; McKenna, 2010). Generally, these definitions support a 'social practices' account of academic literacy and emphasise the fact that one cannot ignore evidence that academic literacy practices are regulated by the norms, values and ways of thinking and behaving in distinct discourse communities (with particular reference to academic disciplines constituting such communities). In this sense, the quest for students to acquire such AL practices requires of them to become 'apprentices' in specific disciplinary discourse communities.

4. The nature of academic literacy interventions

The purpose of this section is to address current deliberations about the nature of academic literacy interventions with specific reference to the broader issue of generic versus discipline-specific AL intervention. Although it appears as if some tertiary institutions still prefer a curriculum model that highlights the generic nature of academic literacy abilities, there is currently a strong move towards acknowledging the discipline-specific nature of academic discourse in different academic disciplines, and, as a result, a strong focus on how academic literacy practices are embedded in the contexts of such disciplines.

The discussion focuses firstly on the general orientation of studies regarding their being either specific or generic in nature. It then explores notions on the potential benefit to students, and, thirdly, the actual gains (evidence) presented to show the impact of the intervention on the academic literacy practices of students.

According to Parkinson, Jackson, Kirkwood and Padayachee (2008:12-13), the variety in academic literacy interventions in South Africa is reflected in three aspects, namely:

> what the intervention stresses (e.g. grammatical correctness, reading and writing, etc.), mode of delivery or nature of the intervention (whether mediated by consultants or accredited courses of various kinds), and thirdly, how discipline specific the intervention is with regard to content and genre.

Very little evidence exists in the current literature, however, of AL interventions that focus exclusively on the decontextualized teaching of English grammar. The current debate to offer relevant AL support to underprepared students rather seems to be situated around the issue of whether, as a broad distinction, generic AL courses or discipline-specific courses are most appropriate as an interventionary measure. Apart from offering theoretical justification for interventions, the idea of 'appropriateness' in this context should include notions about the impact of interventions on students' academic literacy practices.

4.1 Proposals for discipline-specific interventions

The literature on AL intervention in a South African tertiary context provides ample recent evidence to suggest that academic literacy interventions are increasingly being situated within disciplinary contexts. However, as long ago as the early-1990s, some researchers contended that generic language support (even if such support emphasized language use for a tertiary context) was not adequate and specific enough for the kinds of language that were required in specific disciplines. In one example, what may have been seen as a fairly radical approach to language learning at the time, a support course for engineering studies was team-taught successfully (by a language and subject expert) at the University of the Witwatersrand in the early 90s (cf. Kotecha, 1991; Kotecha & Rutherford, 1991). Examples of other interventions (in this case, foundation courses) at the same university include a similar focus on the importance of subject/discipline specificity, be it in the form of collaborative teaching and learning (see Starfield, 1994) or English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses that focused on the language requirements of specific subjects in respective disciplines (see Granville & Dison, 2005). Another study with a discipline-specific focus from an era that was dominated by courses in English grammar (McKenna, 2003) is that of Jiya (1993). Jiya's study criticises the 'formal English course' at the University of Fort Hare on the basis of its generic nature and suggests that English for science students should be taught in the context of the particular disciplines (in this case, science), mainly because of "the emergence of parameters other than competence in English, which play a significant role. For example, determinants like difficulties with the tentative nature of science, scientific language and logic were able to surface" (Jiya, 1993:83).

As already mentioned, a substantial number of more recent studies in the South African higher education context support a discipline-specific orientation in the design of AL interventions. Parkinson (2000), for example, reports on a theme-based language course in the sciences that addresses a range of scientific literacies in a genre-based approach. Her main argument against a generic AL course for science students is one of relevance – if the aim of the course is, therefore, to "familiarize students with a wide range of literacies in science, focusing in particular on genres which are important in science" (Parkinson, 2000:382-383), this must be reflected in the content of such a course. Goodier and Parkinson's (2005) research discusses two discipline-specific academic literacy interventions, one for management studies and the other for science. They also argue strongly for undergraduate academic literacy courses to be based in the disciplines students are studying. They consider the acquisition of academic literacy as "entry into a

new discourse community, where the student is intimately bound up with how to read, write and speak about the discipline" (Goodier & Parkinson, 2005:66). Again, the relevance of the support offered to students is the main contention, the argument being that irrelevant content not grounded in the discipline is demotivating to students and generic skills are not transferred to the disciplines where the skills are necessary. Granville and Dison (2005) argue for the inclusion of meta-cognitive reflective skills in a discipline-based EAP course that forms part of a foundation course for humanities at the University of the Witwatersrand. Essentially, they also strongly advocate the importance of language support that is embedded in the discourses of specific disciplines (Granville & Dison, 2005:101). Kapp and Bangeni (2005) report on the use of a genre-approach for the teaching of academic writing in the Language in the Humanities Course at the University of Cape Town. The course makes use of key social science concepts and, in so doing: "This focus enables us to engage in conceptual and language development work which articulates with students' other courses …" (Kapp & Bangeni, 2005:8). Jackson, Meyer and Parkinson's (2006) study investigates reading and writing tasks of undergraduate students of science aimed at confirming dominant genres used in this discipline. They further discuss the implications of their research for the design of a discipline-based science communications course. The research takes as point of departure the notion that students new to university studies seek access to the specific discourse communities of specific disciplines. The study therefore emphasises the importance of information on AL practices gained from academic staff in science and reiterates the fact that AL practitioners cannot work in isolation from the disciplines they serve.

Archer (2006) cautions against the overemphasis of writing ability in AL interventions and proposes a multimodal approach to the teaching and research of academic literacy practices. She reports on an AL course for engineering at the University of Cape Town that is designed around a specific engineering project and that requires of students to produce information in the two common genres (the written report and poster presentation) used in the engineering academic community (Archer, 2006:453). Archer (2006:452) believes that: "Producing text in the written mode can be a major stumbling block to students in South Africa, especially as many have to write in a language that is not their own and have to adopt discipline-specific discourses and genres". As a strategy for the development of AL, Bharuthram and McKenna (2006) investigate the benefits of writer-respondent intervention in the discipline-specific academic writing of students in the Department of Clothing Technology and the Department of Somatology at the Durban Institute of Technology. Through this study, they wish to encourage mainstream lecturers to utilize the drafting-responding process in their own practice, "given the specialised nature of academic writing and the fact that ways of writing and knowledge of the discipline are inextricably linked" (Bharuthram & McKenna, 2006:496). For Jacobs (2005, 2007, 2010), strong collaboration between disciplinary specialists and AL practitioners is central in the provision of relevant AL support. She also maintains that: "recent developments in AL research emphasise the need to focus on discipline-specific strategies that embed ALs in disciplines of study, rather than approaches which decontextualize AL" (Jacobs, 2005:475). She advocates an approach that is closely related to Nunan's (1992) collaborative approach to language teaching and learning, and in Allie et al., (2008) there is evidence of the integration of AL practices to the practical

extent of team–teaching in engineering studies (similar to the studies by Kotecha [1991] and Kotecha and Rutherford [1991] referred to earlier in this article). Paxton (2007) focuses on making use of students' 'interim literacies' in a language and communication course for economics based on the Adjunct Model of Content-based Instruction, and again highlights the specific (and in many cases, foreign) nature of the literacy practices in commerce that students need to acquire.

In one of the few studies that assesses the effectiveness of an academic literacy intervention, Parkinson, Jackson, Kirkwood and Padayachee (2008) report on the effectiveness of an academic literacy intervention for science students specifically. They maintain that, as a result of the course being based in science content, it means that "materials can be carefully designed to rehearse the significant written genres expected of a science student … while drawing on texts appropriate both in level and genre" (Parkinson, Jackson, Kirkwood & Padayachee, 2008:14). Focusing on the disciplinary context of history, Carstens and Fletcher (2009) aim to provide quantitative evidence of the impact of a history-specific essay writing intervention for second year university students. This small-scale, genre-based intervention was designed in collaboration with staff members of the specific discipline in order to establish appropriateness and adequacy regarding the "relationship between disciplinary purposes and writing conventions in the field of history" (Carstens & Fletcher, 2009:320). In a study that features the discipline-specific humanities foundation course at the University of the Witwatersrand, Stacey (2009) elaborates on the characteristics of literature as a discipline-specific literacy, and traces the writing efforts of one specific student involved in the course towards acquiring an understanding of literacy (and more specifically, writing) practices that dominate in the study of literature. Van Dyk, Zybrands, Cillié and Coetzee (2009) describe the impact of a content-based writing intervention at Stellenbosch University and report tangible successes with their approach. Studies by Van Schalkwyk, Bitzer and Van der Walt (2009) and McKenna (2010) also advocate for the discipline (and social context) specific nature of AL support, largely based on the idea of distinct discourse communities in academia.

Although some of the studies mentioned above are strongly situated in specific theoretical perspectives on what constitutes AL, many use an eclectic combination of theoretical perspectives as justification for their proposals on intervention design. The point is, however, that all these studies are aligned with the notion of specificity of AL practices. The aim of this investigation is not to provide a critical review of all the literature cited in these studies, and therefore it should suffice to point out that these studies are grounded in established research traditions (accompanied by voluminous bodies of literature) such as the New Literacy (and Literacies) Studies, Rhetorical Studies, Systemic Functional Linguistics, English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), Content-based Instruction (CBI) and discipline-specific writing and genre studies.

4.1.1 Proposed benefits of discipline-specific interventions

All of these studies (either explicitly but sometimes implicitly), make statements about the potential benefits of their approaches. Some of the major advantages in making use

of a discipline-specific approach that are discussed in the studies listed above include, amongst others, that:

- Materials can be authentic and involve real academic activities and tasks in which the specific discourse community engages;
- Materials are relevant (and interesting) to learners in themselves, and therefore contribute to student motivation;
- Genres appropriate to specific disciplines can be taught;
- Exploring a closer collaboration between disciplinary (content) experts and AL practitioners towards the situatedness of AL practices is beneficial in unlocking discipline-specific AL practices for students – therefore, making the often tacit academic literacy conventions used in academic disciplines visible to content lecturers and to students should be beneficial in the acquisition of such practices;
- Making use of respondents from specific disciplines to comment on student writing in a writer-respondent intervention may improve student writing in such disciplines;
- Connecting students' past and current academic literacy experiences could ease their transition into discipline-specific AL practices;
- Utilising students' 'interim literacies' to discover their processes of making meaning could be used in the design of curricula that focus on the needs of students from diverse backgrounds;
- Employing strategies for reflective thinking (and students using their own voices in such reflection) eases the transition of students' everyday language to the 'academic languages' required by academic disciplines; and
- Adapting to a multimodal reality that also awards prominence to other modes of representation (such as the visual), and not only writing, aligns current AL practice with the realities of a changing world.

4.1.2 Reported impact of discipline-specific interventions

Although the studies reported above offer theoretical justification for their specific approaches to the design of AL interventions (with some explicitly preferring discipline-specific course design over generic courses), very few offer evidence of the real impact of their proposals on the academic literacy development of students. The crux is that, although a theoretical justification is an essential part of our proposals for intervention, the ultimate success of such interventions is determined by the impact they have on student learning. In the face of statements such as "… basing academic literacy courses in the disciplines that students are studying is essential in assisting students to acquire the discipline-specific genres, and is **likely** [my emphasis] to be far more effective than a generic course in facilitating students' access into the discourse community of their disciplines" (Goodier & Parkinson, 2005), one would expect to find substantial evidence

for the impact of discipline-specific interventions. However, from the collection of studies referred to above, there are only three studies with an explicit focus on evaluating the effectiveness of the interventions. In the first of these studies that evaluates the impact of a discipline-specific course for science students (the study by Parkinson, Jackson, Kirkwood & Padayachee, 2008:17), the authors state that "it is hard to assess the communication in Science course directly". They choose to make use of an assessment instrument that evaluates generic AL ability, a choice that is subject to the same criticism of the transferability of such abilities discussed below for generic proposals. They also included a student evaluation in which students perceived the course to be 'beneficial and relevant'. In the second study, Carstens and Fletcher (2009) made use of a pre-test/post-test experimental design that showed encouraging results regarding the statistically significant writing improvement of a small sample of history students. An opinion survey further showed that the students who took part felt positive about what they have learned in the intervention, and more specifically, that they could see the relevance of the intervention for their other subjects as well. However, although the results of this study are promising with regard to the positive impact of the intervention on the development of discipline-specific academic writing, the small sample of students (only 10 students were involved in the intervention) makes it difficult to apply the findings to contexts where AL practitioners are regularly confronted by class sizes of more than a hundred students. The third study, which discusses a writing intervention for health sciences students (Van Dyk Zybrands, Cillié & Coetzee, 2009), presents empirical evidence for some improvement in the discipline-specific writing of these students. Similar to the study by Parkinson, Jackson, Kirkwood and Padayachee (2008), they made use of additional lecturer and student evaluation of the course, both of which showed positive results.

There is further an account of improvement in student writing regarding better marks achieved by students in a writer-respondent intervention (Bharuthram & McKenna, 2006) and the study by Stacey (2009) discusses mixed results in the improvement of only one student's written paragraphs. Other evidence primarily consists of opinion-based (perceptual) data gathered through questionnaires completed by students (Goodier & Parkinson, 2005; Granville & Dison, 2005; Bharuthram & McKenna, 2006). There is, therefore, little substantial evidence on the successes of most of these proposals. Admittedly, although not all these accounts were written with the purpose of evaluating the proposals, are we not obliged to offer evidence by way of subsequent publication?

4.2 Proposals for generic academic literacy interventions

Considerably fewer accounts of generic AL interventions are reported in the recent literature. Van Dyk (2005) discusses the importance of the reliable assessment of students' AL levels, but also reports some preliminary findings on the success of a generic AL intervention (which made use of Weideman's [2003b] course book, *'Academic literacy: Prepare to learn'*). Van Wyk (2007) and Van Wyk and Greyling (2008) report on a generic AL course at Free State University that "aims to develop students' skills in reading academic texts and their ability to write logically and express themselves clearly" (Van Wyk & Greyling, 2008:205).

The one main claim made by generic proposals to AL intervention is that:

- Teaching students the generic AL abilities required for higher education (focusing on 'authentic' academic task types) should contribute to academic success, i.e. it should enable students to apply these abilities successfully in their mainstream courses.

4.2.1 Reported impact of generic interventions

In both generic proposals referred to here, there are attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of the interventions. Although the study by Van Dyk (2005:46) reports some initial improvement in generic AL levels as measured by the TALL, he emphasises that "only cautious conclusions are possible" and that a longitudinal study is necessary in order to provide evidence for the long-term effects of the intervention. Similarly, the studies by Van Wyk (2007) and Van Wyk and Greyling (2008) relate some success in the development of generic reading ability of students, but the impact of the course as a whole is not assessed. In addition, a difficulty that plagues both interventions is that of the transferability of AL abilities. Does an improvement in student scores on the TALL (in the study by Van Dyk) and the Placement Test in English for Educational Purposes (PTEEP) (used in the studies by Van Wyk and Van Wyk & Greyling) necessarily mean that students would transfer the improved AL abilities to their mainstream subjects?

4.3 Major points of criticism

The main criticisms levelled against discipline-specific interventions seem to highlight the practical difficulty of implementing such interventions successfully in higher education contexts. Therefore, although it may be desirable to design AL interventions for all the different disciplines at a university, how practical is this strategy in a context that is constrained by a variety of factors such as limited numbers of AL practitioners and increasing numbers of students? Another concern focuses on the degree of specificity of such interventions. How specific should they be in order to have a real impact on learning? Connected to the degree of specificity is the fact that AL practitioners usually do not have expert knowledge of the other disciplines, and may be required to immerse themselves in such disciplines in order to, firstly, understand the complexities inherent in such discipline-specific AL practices and then to make a relevant contribution in the development thereof. Furthermore, the success of some of the proposals discussed above may depend to a large extent on the quality of the working relationship between academics from different disciplines, an additional complication that may have an influence on the success of the intervention.

Generic AL interventions, on the other hand, have been criticised on the basis that the abilities learnt in such courses may not always be transferred to students' other subjects (Goodier & Parkinson, 2005). A possible reason for this is that the material (reading texts and academic tasks) used in generic courses is just too far removed from students' other subjects for them to make the necessary connection on their own. Although the

designers of generic AL courses may take great care in the selection of, for example, reading texts for such courses, such texts may simply not be interesting to all students.

As a result, student motivation may be low to engage in any serious way with such courses because they are unable to see the relevance of what they do in generic AL courses for the rest of their studies. In other words, although the argumentative academic essay is a default writing genre that is regularly taught in generic AL courses, it is not the main genre used in, for example, business studies or natural sciences (Goodier & Parkinson, 2005). It may, therefore, be difficult for students to see the relevance in learning to use this genre if it is not required of them to do this type of writing in their other subjects.

4.4 The challenge for AL practitioners

What is then to be gleaned from the discussion above? Based on largely uncontested notions on the specificity of academic literacy practices, it is understandable that the idea of specificity (in whatever guise) seems to have found widespread appeal in AL interventions. In the face of the limited availability of substantial evidence on the impact of discipline-specific proposals, the verdict is still out, however. The same is true for generic AL interventions. The point is that a declaration of possible benefits is substantially different from showing evidence of such benefits having materialised. This situation will presumably only change if a sustained effort is made to make visible the real impact of our proposals.

At this point, the main challenge for AL practitioners who want to improve their own practice is that there seems to be an oversupply of studies that are largely descriptions of and theoretical justifications for interventions. There are too few studies that report on the real successes or failures of such interventions. As noted above, one should be able to show how the proposed benefits of a discipline-specific approach benefit student learning, something that holds true for generic AL interventions as well. Admittedly, on the crucial issue of impact, it is interesting to note that where generic AL interventions usually focus on generic AL abilities that are aligned with those assessed by means of generic AL tests, the impact of discipline-specific proposals is to be measured by how well students have acquired the discipline-specific academic literacy practices of different academic disciplines. Although it may seem easier to provide empirical evidence for the impact of generic interventions because one could simply use the same assessment instrument initially used to test AL levels, such results will probably be viewed with suspicion related to the issue of transfer of abilities.

In this instance, the problem is that one would only be able to say something about the decontextualized abilities tested by the specific instrument and not whether the same abilities have actually improved in the context of students' mainstream courses. These tests also regularly focus on the receptive ability of reading (as a means of accessing and processing information), and although it could be said that these abilities are also utilised for text production, it would be irresponsible to claim benefits for writing if writing ability is not explicitly assessed.

5. Conclusion

Following McCabe (2011), part of the responsibility of AL practitioners is one of making informed choices. This implies, on the one hand, that it is part of our responsibility as accountable applied linguists to select the most appropriate and relevant theoretical justification for our designs. On the other, we need to consider the practical implications for the successful implementation of such designs. Again, the ultimate 'success' of such interventions depends on whether we can present conclusive evidence on their impact.

Therefore, although there is substantial evidence of an increasing awareness of the situatedness of AL practices in different disciplines in higher education, it appears as if we are caught up in a perpetual state of making proposals for what should be the most appropriate AL interventions. In this way we are propagating a situation where newcomers to the field tasked with the AL development of students may follow the latest theoretical fad without access to any substantial evidence on the impact of such proposals.

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