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Language learning interventions

A B S T R A C T The writers of this article set out to explore the effectiveness and efficiency of a number of language learning interventions with students who failed a Senate discretionary access module designed to address the articulation gap between schooling and university. The article discusses various reasons for student failure despite language interventions. The students discussed in the first part of the article all visited the lecturers in the English for Specific Purposes Unit on more than one occasion for personal consultations. At these contact sessions, students were encouraged to make use of a number of language, reading and writing interventions within the system. Their use was optional and most of the students in the study did not avail themselves of the opportunities presented. On reflection, the conclusion reached by the lecturers was that students did not understand the amount of time that they needed to invest in their language development to be successful and to overcome the combined effects of previous experience and fossilization. They therefore applied to the university Senate to change the module from a semester to a year model to enable them, through a compulsory assignment system, to force students to put in the hours necessary to succeed. The results for that intervention show that the hypothesis was correct and students need more time and structure if they are to improve their language competence sufficiently.

Keywords: language learning interventions; English for specific purposes; language competence; fossilization

1. Introduction

Improving language proficiency is always a challenging task but never more so than in distance education where the lecturer is separated from the students whose only exposure to language is the study material. This article describes how lecturers at the University of South Africa accommodated and tracked a small group of Language and Learning Skills (LSK) students who

had failed the module and then presented themselves for face-to-face tutoring. The purpose of documenting the impact of various interventions was not only to track their impact on the small group of students but also to find a way to improve the language learning of all students registered in the module, which had a consistent success rate of approximately 42%. So, although the unit of analysis was initially the small group, the whole LSK group then became the unit of analysis. The study was thus both exploratory and explanatory in nature.

This article describes how the lecturers dealt with the students in office consultations but also how they referred them to other interventions in the university. Two of the interventions were normal distance education contact sessions: group visits and tutorials at learning centres. The other interventions were based on sound second language learning theories relating to increasing comprehensible input, creating opportunities for meaningful output and grammatical consciousness-raising. Use of the interventions was optional: some students used them intermittently, others not at all. The result was that at the end of the semester the students all failed again. On reflection, the lecturers concluded that the most significant factor seemed to be the commitment of time to language learning. They changed the teaching/ learning model to include at least four compulsory assignments and extended the duration of the module to a year with positive results.

The questions posed were: What impact did the consultations have? What impact did the other interventions have? For the other interventions, did the impact for these students differ from the impact for other students? If the interventions were (un)successful, why, and what could be learnt from the experience? What patterns emerged? The lecturers wanted to explore these questions in order to build an explanation for student success or failure.

The evidence sources used were forms completed by the lecturers on each student reflecting what was done at each consultation as well as which interventions the students were using; data from tutorial attendance registers as well as input from the head of the Department of Student Support; data from language classes run by the John Povey Centre and examination results for the small group of students for the first part of the study and the whole LSK group for the second part.

2. Alternative university entrance

In 1999 the Language and Learning Skills module (LSK) was first presented as a semester course at the University of South Africa (Unisa). It is one of a range of Senate discretionary modules offered to people with a senior certificate but without matriculation exemption to provide an alternative access route to the university. The module has two outcomes:

Outcome 1: Learners can communicate effectively using spoken and written English that is appropriate for university study.

Outcome 2: Learners can take responsibility for and manage their own learning during at least the first year of undergraduate study.

The skills to be developed in the module were determined by examining an audit by the Dean of the Faculty of Arts of all the courses in the Faculty. Some of the information requested related to the skills necessary for students to cope with or pass first-year modules. It was clear that

students had to be able to read and write in defined ways; in other words, they needed 'situated academic literacy' (Gee 1999) suitable for open distance learning, not social language competence.

The guide is designed in such a way that it tries to build on students' assessment of their current skills in reading and writing. So students are asked to complete a needs analysis survey evaluating their skills. They are then given an activity that requires them to read and answer questions related to the skills in the survey. The feedback provides a reality check for people who estimate their reading skills to be advanced when in fact they are hardly adequate. The guide also moves from a very visual format, through texts commonly encountered in everyday life, to extended academic text. Another principle used in the guide is consistent development of the academic layer of vocabulary, through vocabulary boxes that explain terms, and tasks that give practice in using terms. There is some input on grammar but it is ancillary, not central, to the course.

A tape is included in the package and is integrated in activities in the study guide. Students are also provided with tutors at regional centres.

The pass rates are fairly consistent, in the low forty percents, but thousands of students have gained access to the university this way. The worry is that there are some students who fail repeatedly. Lecturers have over the years come to some conclusions about the reasons for failure and have tried to address the problem through a variety of mechanisms, which will be discussed in this article.

The first part of the article focuses on a small number of students who had failed LSK as the unit of analysis. These students self-selected in that they chose to consult the lecturers personally about their failure and lecturers were thus able to track the ways in which they used time and resources to improve their competence. Reflecting on the results of this research led lecturers to formulate a hypothesis that students did not commit sufficient time to their language learning or make use of optional learner support so they needed to be guided to invest time through a compulsory assignment system. The second part of the article reports on the impact of extending the time and increasing the work for the module, so the whole LSK registration for 2004 is the unit of analysis.

3. Reasons for failure

The authors hypothesized on the basis of their experience with LSK students over several years that their language development has fossilized and that their previous educational background had not developed a culture of learning, an ability to study independently, a facility to make optimal use of resources or a sense of how much time they needed to invest to succeed.

3.1 Fossilization

In any consideration of the results for this module it must be borne in mind that the students are trying to obtain admission to the university through a Senate discretionary route because they did not get matriculation exemption. They are generally weak students anyway so the average percentage is low and there are few distinctions. There are generally many students in the thirty to forty percent range, reflecting a language phenomenon known as 'fossilization'. In language learning, fossilization is the 'tendency not to advance beyond a minimally adequate level of competence' (Kilfoil & van der Walt 1997: 195). In this instance, the pass rate for

standard grade English for second language users has been as low as 35% in the past. Because many ESL learners do not have opportunities to use English outside the classroom, and because they might even have little access to reading material in the school, let alone at home, they develop sufficient competence to achieve the lowest pass mark and their language does not develop any further. The reason for thinking that fossilization might be a factor is the pattern of results of students who enrol and fail repeatedly:

Table 1: Indications of fossilization

	May 2003	October 2003	October 2004
Wrote	4284	3305	2836
30-40%	1122	1057	702
% of written	26.2%	32%	24.8%

Extensive input and output, that is, use of the language to read and write far more often than they did in the past, could break fossilization. That is why two of the interventions, the library reading scheme and the Veterans' Project, focus on increased reading and writing. However, for these interventions to succeed, students need to commit the time.

3.2 Previous educational background

Firstly, previous experience has led students to be dependent rather than take responsibility for their own learning. Students regard themselves as empty vessels so they think that visiting a lecturer is the only action they need to take to improve their marks. Their emphasis is on the transmission of information and improving marks, rather than on developing language and learning skills and becoming independent learners. There is the argument that students did try to take responsibility for their own learning by coming to the lecturers for help regularly. The reverse of that is that they could not help themselves and were not willing to invest time in the other interventions and thus put the onus on the lecturer.

Secondly, students fail to recognise the use of resources in learning and thus fail to access and integrate resources. Many of the students who fail repeatedly come from previously disadvantaged groups. They had no libraries or resource centres in their schools or communities. At school they often had no textbooks and certainly no other reading material. The ESP lecturers provide a range of opportunities or resources for students but they either do not use them or they fail to make optimal use of them. A further implication of this lack of resources in schools, homes and communities is poor reading speed and inadequate reading skills.

Thirdly, students underestimate the amount of work it takes to succeed. All Unisa undergraduate modules are twelve NQF credits. That means that students should put in at least 120 notional hours of work per module to succeed. In a sixteen-week semester, studying five days a week, students would have to work one and a half hours a day to ensure success. It is estimated that it should take students forty hours to work through the input given (the guide), a further forty hours to do the activities in the guide and the assignments, and then they have forty hours to revise the work. Students from previously disadvantaged schools have come through an impoverished system in more ways than one. Large class sizes have meant that teachers set few

essays or other types of writing that have to be evaluated so students coming into the university system have little writing experience at schools or feedback on their writing. They do not see writing as a means of learning nor do they know that they should practise a process approach to writing and rewrite until work is satisfactory. They are reluctant when they come to see lecturers to rework an essay; they would prefer a different topic every time. A process approach is demonstrated in the guide, but previous experience is so ingrained or the new approach is interpreted as content, not method, so some people do not change their behaviour.

Fourthly, students ignore essential time organizational tools. In a way this point relates to the previous one. Students do not plan to set aside time each day to work on the course. They do not plan to finish certain portions of the work according to a timetable and to complete and submit assignments by due dates. Planning properly is essential to success.

4. Aspects of learning and the implications for language learning

Underlying the reading, writing and language interventions that are in place are certain beliefs about how people learn additional languages after the beginner's stage: through comprehensible input, increased output and grammatical consciousness-raising. These are familiar theories and will not be discussed here. General theories of learning and performance, learning styles and learning at a distance are all pertinent as well, and are briefly discussed in relation to language below.

4.1 Learning and performance

There are many definitions of learning ranging from behaviourist through cognitive to constructivist and beyond (Mergel 1998). Young et al.'s (2003: 131) definition of learning as 'knowledge acquisition through cognitive processing of information acquired both from being part of society and from individual thought processes' contains elements of cognitive and social constructivist theories. In other words, students need to process new input cognitively and make it their own by linking it to what they already know. Young et al. go on to define performance and learning performance as dimensions affecting students' demonstration of learning in institutional environments. They state: 'performance can be defined as a multidimensional construct involving the behaviors [sic] or actions that are relevant to the goals of the course with three primary determinants of relative variance: (1) declarative knowledge and procedures that are prerequisites for successful task performance, (2) procedural knowledge and skills, and (3) volitional choice or effort expended' (2003: 131). Adding the two together, learning performance becomes 'students' self-assessment of their overall knowledge gained, their skills and abilities developed, and the effort they expended in a particular class relative to other classes' (2003: 131). Universities might more traditionally evaluate learning performance through formative and summative assessment and make judgements about knowledge and skills gained relative to certain criteria.

The one element the institution cannot judge is the amount of time spent, although lecturers can and should give advice to students on the minimum amount of time they need to spend on a course each day in order to pass or do well. Students need to invest time in learning (Trindade et al. 2000). Data from a study of one third of its undergraduate modules in 2004 reveal that 56.11% of Unisa students polled (N = 17 564) do not put in the minimum amount

of time needed to pass a module. In a contact situation students have fixed time in class and the example of their peers to make them aware of time constraints but in distance education the time needed to learn adequately has to be made explicit so that students' behaviour can be modified to support learning. Structure can also help to realize the desired outcomes in distance education: the number of assignments set can force students to put in the hours necessary to succeed in their learning. Time management skills can also be highlighted so that students learn to manage competing demands on their time. Young et al. (2003: 137) believe that 'students must have the ability (time available for studying) and the willingness (time spent on studying) to raise their learning performance'. They go on to say: 'learning is a two-way street where the primary contribution from the instructor is appropriate instructional methods and the primary contribution for the student is study time' (2003: 139).

The link between time invested and performance is picked up later in the article. It seems to be a significant factor in success.

4.2 Learning styles

People have different learning styles that might predispose them towards a certain instructional method or enable them to achieve better when the method matches their style. A distance education method that focuses on printed text only will cater for a limited number of students. A blended approach to education is thus preferable to help all learners achieve the outcomes of a course. Perraton and Hülsmann (2004: 4) state: 'Mixed-mode courses are thought to have lower dropout rates than those that use a single medium'. Learning should include interactive, experiential, concrete, social, real-world orientation experiences as well as text. Lecturers should still include written activities, though, as they are central to the text-based reality of tertiary learning and 'can encourage students to explore and incorporate abstract concepts into their learning and are typically the basis for reflection-type activities' (Young et al. 2003: 134).

4.3 Language learning at tertiary level

How do people learn a language once they are past the beginner's stage, which is predominantly oral-aural? At school, the method might still remain oral-aural to some extent, but text begins to play a large part. At university, learning is text-based: students study the texts of others and produce texts of their own. The situation in distance education environments does not even provide any oral-aural balance. Therefore, a language course in a distance education situation is likely to be print-based with some additional media such as tapes and videos included and it will focus on reading and writing. The types of student support for language learners at Unisa includes face-to-face interaction for those who choose to attend tutorials.

Shalem and Slonimsky (2004) point out another dimension of the text-based reality at tertiary level. There is a crucial difference between common sense and formal knowledge and when students come into the university there is an interaction between different codes that can inhibit their chances of success in the academic environment. The university needs to bridge between diverse students and systematized bodies of knowledge that are mediated through text.

4.4 Articulation gap

Access and foundation programmes should seek to close the articulation gap between school

and university. Lecturers need to identify and place students with potential who have fallen victim to this articulation gap. In this way they can develop the intellectual capacity of students who have the potential to graduate and increase participation, retention and success rates.

Pityana (SAUVCA 2003) writes in his capacity as chairperson of the Matriculation Board and member of SAUVCA-CTP HE Admissions Project in a preface to Perspectives on Entry Thresholds and Enrolment Systems:

Section 2 illustrates, through the analysis of performance on assessments of academic literacy and/ or Mathematics knowledge and skills, the very low level of preparedness of entry cohorts across higher education institutional types. Yeld draws the stark conclusion that, "... entering cohorts reveal serious gaps and deficiencies in their knowledge and skill repertoires, and can be regarded as underprepared, on the whole, for regular-admission tertiary-level study" (p.45). This reality, underscored by strong empirical data, points to the need for entry thresholds as well as appropriate forms of curriculum responsiveness to meet the challenges of increasing diversity in learner profiles.

The question is, what is the best way to address such an articulation gap, to include various learning styles, to enable students to work with text, and learn through and about English? One attempt to address all these aspects is the Unisa access module Language and Learning Skills. Access modules are a laudable attempt to increase access to the university and ensure success. However, at the moment there is no pre-testing to identify candidates with potential and the open admission system leads to fairly high failure rates of students who have had their expectations raised and who do not want to hear, after they have been admitted, that they do not have the potential to succeed at university. As many students attempting to enter the university through the access route are from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, the lecturers in the English Department, who run the module, attempt various interventions to help the students to pass. This paper gives details of the course and the interventions and reaches a number of rather unpalatable conclusions about the ability of students from disadvantaged background to act as self-directed learners who can take responsibility for their own learning by optimizing resources and committing time to their endeavours.

5. Types of intervention and their impact

In this section interventions put in place for LSK students and their use by seventeen students writing the supplementary examination in the second semester of 2003 who repeatedly visited lecturers in their offices for assistance are described. The frequency of the visits and the type of assistance being given in these visits are examined; for example, writing of essays, aspects of the guide and grammar. Other types of intervention available and the ones these students were using are considered; for instance, tutorials at learning centres around the country, group visits by lecturers to various centres, the reading scheme, diagnostic test and exercises, the John Povey Centre language classes and the Veterans' scheme.

These interventions fall into two categories. The first category is interventions that address fossilization: reading, writing and grammar. The second is interventions that introduce contact and a more social and blended mode of learning in distance education for all students, not only language learners. Recent research into learning shows that people usually learn in social interaction and negotiation (Mergel 1998) and that a blended or mixed mode approach is

preferable to a single mode to cater for different learning styles (Trindade 2001). In terms of contact, students may also phone, write or send an e-mail. Through Students On-Line, students have access to a threaded discussion forum.

The purpose of this research was to ascertain which, if any, of these interventions assisted the students who visited and to benchmark where possible their results with those of other LSK students who made use of the interventions. Unfortunately, inadequate data often foiled attempts to correlate and analyse the situation.

5.1 Student visits

Although Unisa is a distance education institution there are thousands of students on campus each day. Some study permanently in the library on the main campus as this is the only real study area they have. Such students have access to internal telephone lines and can contact the lecturers in this way. Others make use of their proximity to the lecturers to visit with or without appointment on a frequent basis. Students not permanently on campus also come in to consult personally with LSK lecturers in Pretoria, usually by appointment.

During the second semester of 2003, 31 LSK011-9 students consulted with lecturers on a regular basis. Of the 31 students, seventeen consulted lecturers on two or more occasions. The number of visits ranged from two to ten. For the purposes of this article the focus is on students who consulted lecturers twice or more. All students were writing a supplementary examination at the end of the semester, which means that they had failed at least once before.

Lecturers kept a record of activities during visits and elicited the other interventions that students used to try and improve their English skills. The following activities were used during students' visits: essay writing, diagnostic test, multiple-choice exercises and vocabulary building. At the consultations, students were informed of various resources. Of the seventeen students who consulted with lecturers, five attended tutorials; three attended the group visit in the first semester (LSK Workshop); one joined the reading scheme; six attended Povey classes and no students were part of the Veterans' Scheme. The greatest investment in time was in visits to the lecturers, which shows an alarming dependency on lecturer input and lack of an independent learning culture that makes use of a resource-rich environment.

The group was small but additional results of larger samples of LSK students, such as those provided below in the discussions of tutorials and John Povey Centre classes, reinforce the trend that LSK students fail despite the availability of interventions. They experience access without success.

5.2 Tutorials

Tutorials are contact classes that are held at Unisa learning centres throughout South Africa. Trindade et al. (2000: 2) maintain: 'Distance learning methodology also requires that some kind of support mechanism is available to students so that they can overcome their learning difficulties, obtain supplementary information, evaluate their own progress and exchange ideas with teachers, tutors and fellow students'. LSK was allocated 45 hours for tutorials because it is an access module; it is up to the tutor and the centre to divide these hours. Tutorials focus on the study guides and assignments provided as part of the study material. Tutors are given tutor packages that include guidelines and study materials for the course.

Tutorials have several advantages. Students receive face-to-face tutoring. They receive individual attention which they lack in the open distance learning context. Students write essays that tutors mark so they have feedback on a regular basis. Learning difficulties are immediately identified and remedial work is provided where possible. Tutors give lecturers feedback on problem areas in the study material and the course as a whole.

Difficulties were experienced in tracking student attendance owing to the disorganized attendance register system so how often the specific group attended class is difficult to judge. However, lecturers were able to ascertain that 61 students registered to attend tutorials at the Thutong learning centre in Pretoria in the second semester of 2003. Of the 61, two students had no results; two students obtained 0%; 41 students scored below 50%; sixteen students scored above 50%. As mentioned, only five of the focus group took advantage of tutorials and none passed. The head of the Department of Student Support stated in a personal interview that access courses are the worst in their experience in terms of students' commitment to regular attendance (private communication, 2004). It again comes down to the problem that students do not know how much time they need to invest to pass. However, irregular attendance could also have other causes such as students not having funds for transport to centres (Lephalala 2003).

5.3 Group visits

Unisa has evolved from being a correspondence university into an open distance learning university offering a blended mode of tuition including print-based guides, various electronic media and contact sessions. Group visits include visits by lecturers to a number of centres around South Africa, and/ or the use of videoconferencing, to establish contact between lecturers and groups of students.

The purpose of group visits is to enable students to meet their lecturers and fellow students and discuss issues related to specific courses. Group visits are by their nature short and two or three hour sessions per paper are not effective in achieving coverage of the material.

While group visits were held in Pretoria for access students in the first semester of 2003 they were not repeated in the second semester. Instead, students were referred to the language courses offered by the John Povey Centre, discussed below. As all the students in the focus group were repeating LSK, three had attended the group visits in the first semester.

5.4 Reading scheme

The Pledge to Read project began in 2001, when the South African National Literary Initiative launched the Masifunde Sonke reading campaign ('Let's all read together'). In response to Masifunde Sonke, Unisa's main campus launched a Unisa Reading Campaign, consisting of a series of programmes designed to raise levels of student awareness and draw their attention to the importance of books and reading in their daily lives. Pledge to Read was initiated by the Department of English as its contribution to the Reading Campaign. The 'pledge' required participating students to commit themselves to reading fiction for at least 30 minutes every weekday.

By filling in a brief questionnaire whenever they return a novel, students build up a reading record that provides the data for researching the influence of sustained silent reading on academic performance. The questionnaire records their student number, the date, the title and

author of the book and how many pages they actually read. This record also enables Unisa to monitor reading rate and the popularity of particular titles and authors.

The conviction driving this project is that reading fiction for pleasure is the most effective way to increase a student's ability to understand and write standard academic English. These improvements in the language of learning affect performance in all learning areas, including Mathematics, Science and Technology.

However, only one student made use of this scheme and even he did not read enough to build up a reading habit or enhance his language and vocabulary competence. Once more, the investment in time was lacking.

5.5 Diagnostic test and exercises

In response to the stubbornness of common errors in student writing at all levels and to their prevalence among access students, the English Department sent all access students a tutorial letter in 2003 entitled Test of English Comprehension and Usage, and Remedial Exercises. The tutorial letter provides the answers for self-evaluation. Students are under no obligation to do the test or to read the explanations in the second section or to do the remedial exercises. The responsibility is theirs.

The most that can be claimed for this tutorial letter is, therefore, that it promotes grammatical consciousness-raising for those who are open to this. If a student is prepared to answer all the questions in the tests, to read all the explanations in the next section, to complete all the exercises, and then to erase all answers and repeat this operation in the pursuit of perfect scores on all items, then at the end of it all this student will know exactly what is meant by the different grammatical terms used. It is believed that this increased awareness will accelerate a growing control of academic English in the context of the general demands of tertiary study. As already stated, the student needs to invest time.

The students in the focus group were asked to do the diagnostic test. Eight did so. Their scores ranged from 47% to 78% with most in the lower 60. There was no correlation between these scores and their examination results. It points to the well known difference between students' ability to achieve well in discrete-point language tests but then do badly in integrative reading and writing tasks.

5.6 The John Povey Centre classes

The John Povey Centre, which is based in the Department of English, organized additional tuition to LSK students who were repeating the course. The Centre targeted those students who were due to write supplementary examinations in November and those who had re-registered as they had failed the module several times. Students were sent letters informing them about the classes to be held in the second semester. Others were notified at the LSK group discussion workshops that were held in the first semester, in April, at Unisa. Students' response to the invitation was overwhelming but only 400 could be accommodated.

The 400 LSK students were divided into six groups consisting of between 50 (the largest group) and 26 (the smallest group) students. Four tutors were involved. The programme offered three hour classes, three times a week.

These classes are based on teaching and learning theories which point out the benefits of providing immediate feedback (Sturges 1964) and employing formative assessment strategies (Hughes 1989; Dann 2002) to facilitate learning in ESL contexts. These studies show that these two factors are of importance particularly in this situation where students enter with poor language competencies, come from a culture of rote learning and are still not clear about what open distance learning entails. In this instance students were afforded the opportunity to consult with tutors who were readily available to offer support whenever they encountered difficulties. Students were also assessed and allowed to discuss and reflect on their work through constant practice.

Of the 400 students who attended the classes only 46 passed the examination. The highest mark obtained was 70% but the majority of participants' marks were in the 50s. Only six of the students who consulted with lecturers on a regular basis ('visiting' students) attended the classes. However, none of them passed the examination. Instead, four showed slight improvements in their marks while two had a marginal drop in marks.

5.7 Veterans' scheme

The Veterans' Project is a writing project undertaken in the ESP unit of the Department of English. It is designed for students who have failed and are repeating LSK. The project is based on theories of second language learning including Krashen's (1982) theory of comprehensible input and theories of output (Pica et al. 1989, Pica et al. 1996, Swain and Lapkin 1995). According to these theories, learners' language output increases when they are exposed to comprehensible input whether oral or written, and when they produce language in spoken or written form for the purposes of communication. Kilfoil's (1997) study on using an adapted dialogue journal with ESL learners at secondary and tertiary level with adult learners confirms these theories as students participating in the project improved their examination results significantly.

However, none of the students who form part of this unit of analysis took advantage of this project.

6. Summary of results

None of the students passed LSK in the October / November 2003 examination period. Examination results ranged from 25% to 47%. Of the seventeen students, ten students showed improvements in their marks; six students showed a marginal drop in marks and one remained the same (27% in June and November). (See Table 2 on the next page.)

Students who made use of two or more other interventions showed a slight improvement in marks. However, the one student who had consulted ten times and made use of all interventions available actually showed a drop in marks from 42% to 36%.

Lecturers had put in place theoretically sound interventions to help weak students but nothing seemed to work. It was time to reflect on the reasons for this failure of the systems which had been proven to work for other students.

7. New hypothesis

The investment of time seemed to be a decisive factor. If the module was structured to give students more time and provided compulsory assignments that guided students to work consistently, it could make a significant difference to the results of LSK students. It is possible

Table 2: Results of visiting students

	Visits	2003 marks	Previous marks	Interventions	Activities during visits	Comments on forms
A	2	38	39	Student visits	Essay writing Diagnostic test	Diagnostic test results: 62%. Needs more writing practice
B	2	31	27	Student visits	MCQ questions	Difficulty with answering questions
C	4	33	30	Student visits	Writing process Journal	Need for more reading and writing practice
D	10	36	42	Student visits, Tutorials, Group visits, Reading scheme, Povey classes	Diagnostic test Writing process Journal entries	Poor reading skills Poor time management
E	3	37	30	Student visits, Tutorials, Group visits, Povey classes	Diagnostic test Writing process	Diagnostic test results: 78%
F	6	27	27	Student visits	Essay writing	Improved writing
G	2	37	45	Student visits	Essay writing	Language errors Writes off topic Improvement in essay structure
H	8	33	35	Student visits Tutorials	Essay writing Diagnostic test MCQ exercises	
I	2	36	26	Student visits	Essay writing	
J	4	40	45	Student visits	Diagnostic test Essay writing	Diagnostic test results: 60%
K	3	47	40	Student visits Povey classes	Diagnostic test Vocabulary building	Diagnostic test results: 64%
L	2	44	28	Student visits Povey classes	Vocabulary building Journal Essay writing	
M	5	25	20	Student visits Tutorials	Diagnostic test Journal entries Mind maps Essay writing	Need for grammar development
N	6	38	28	Student visits Tutorials Group visits	Exam strategies Writing process Diagnostic tests	Diagnostic test results: 47% Poor reading and writing skills
O	5	28	38	Student visits Povey classes	Essay writing Reading MCQ exercises	
P	2	2	39	Student visits Povey classes	Essay writing	Writes off topic Lack of focus
Q	2	2	38	Student visits	Writing process Diagnostic test	Diagnostic test results: 62%

that students do not find 120 hours to work on the module in a semester when they receive their material in February and write in May. Also, in a semester system, it was only possible to set two assignments and difficult to return the marked assignment to students with feedback before they had to sit for the May examination. Assignments were therefore not compulsory. The module needed to promote active learning and give students sufficient assignments to ensure that they spent all the time they needed on the module. During 2003 the Department of English thus sought approval from the Senate to change LSK from a semester to a year module for 2004.

The year module enabled the ESP Unit to set five assignments, four of which were required for admission to the examination. Assignment 1 and Assignment 5 were compulsory. Assignment 1 required students to write an essay. They were given individual feedback by markers as well as generic feedback in a tutorial letter. Assignment 5 required students to rewrite the essay taking the feedback and their subsequent learning into consideration to produce an improved draft. Assignment 1 had to be submitted with Assignment 5 for purposes of comparison.

Despite the fact that the assignment tutorial letter spelt out clearly that students needed to submit four assignments, many students did not. Eventually the ESP Unit admitted students who had completed three assignments, which still excluded 1533 of the 4609 registered students (33%). This difficulty reinforced the belief that the culture of learning among these students is weak.

Below is a statistical analysis of data based on a comparison between the results for the year module and the results for the previous two semester examinations. The percentage of weak students is higher in October 2003 than in May 2003 because the first semester intake had a high proportion of first time registrations and the second semester a higher proportion of supplementary candidates. Certain anomalies in data, such as a higher percentage passed before adjustments than passed/registered, also reveal that the students doing supplementary examinations are concealed in the way the data are presented.

7.1 Comparison of examination results for semester and year model

Table 3 summarizes the examination statistics for the two semesters and the year module in LSK.

Only two-thirds (66.6%) of the 2004 registered students were admitted to write the examination (against the almost 99% in the previous two examinations). Previously there was automatic admission. Now they had to complete four assignments to be admitted to write the examination. As a result, about six out of every ten registered students wrote the October 2004 examination, while the percentages for the previous two examinations were 87% and 80.6% respectively. A further consequence was that just over one-third of the registered students passed the October 2004 examination. The same figures for the previous two exams are 40% and 31.5% respectively.

A closer analysis of the admitted students shows that significantly more admitted students sat for the October 2004 examination than in the other two cases (see Table 4). It might be deduced that some students who know they have not done the work and are not prepared, have the sense not to go and write the examination. The 2004 students may have felt better prepared for the examination, having completed at least three assignments.

Table 3: Summary of examination results

EXAMINATION	May 2003	October 2003	October 2004
Number of students registered	4920	4101	4609
Number of students admitted	4845	4054	3076
Number of students written	4284	3305	2836
Number of students passed	1975	12921	546
Number of students failed	2309	2013	1290
Number of marks adjusted (to pass)	97	277	235
Number of marks adjusted (distinction)	147	0	1
Number of marks adjusted (supplementary)	87	226	
% Admitted / Registered	98.48%	98.85%	66.74%
% Written / Registered	87.07%	80.59%	61.53%
% Written / Admitted	88.42%	81.52%	92.20%
% Passed / Registered	40.14%	31.50%	33.54%
% Passed before adjustments	37.70%	24.75%	42.62%
% Passed / Admitted	40.76%	31.87%	50.26%
% Passed / Written	46.10%	39.09%	54.51%
Average Mark %	46.93	44.30	48.94
Standard Deviation	15.00	11.43	12.09

Table 4: Admissions

Written / Admitted	May 2003		October 2004		
	N	%	N	%	
Wrote examination	4284	88.42	2836	92.20	
Did not write	561	11.58	240	7.80	
Total	4845	100.00	3076	100.00	29.522 ***
Written / Admitted	October 2003		October 2004		
	N	%	N	%	
Wrote examination	3305	81.52	2836	92.20	
Did not write	749	18.48	240	7.80	166.770 ***
Total	4054	100.00	3076	100.00	

*** : p < 0.001

More admitted students passed the October 2004 examination than in the previous two examinations (50.3% against 40.8% and 31.9%). The passed/ written percentage for the October 2004 examination (54.5%) is eight to fifteen percentage points higher than the previous examinations.

The success rates on the three examinations are presented in Table 5. The success rate for the October 2004 examination significantly outperformed that of the semester examinations.

The average mark for the 2004 examination is the highest of the three scores (almost 49%

Table 5: Examination success rates

Success rate / Written	May 2003		October 2004		
	N	%	N	%	
Passed examination	1975	46.10	1546	54.51	
Failed	2309	53.90	1290	45.49	48.300 ***
Total	4284	100.00	2836	100.00	
Success rate / Written	October 2003		October 2004		
	N	%	N	%	
Passed examination	1292	39.09	1546	54.51	
Failed	2013	60.91	1290	45.49	146.025 ***
Total	3305	100.00	2836	100.00	

*** : $p < 0.001$

against 47% and 44%). The average examination results of the year course were then compared with both semester examination average marks (see Table 6). In both instances significant differences (on the 0.1-percent level) in favour of the year course resulted. This means that the year course produced a higher average examination mark.

Table 6: Comparison of examination results

Examination	N	M	s	df	t
October 2004	2836	48.94	12.09	7118	6.300 ***
May 2003	4284	46.93	15.00		
October 2004	2836	48.94	12.09	6139	13.755 ***
October 2003	3305	44.30	11.43		

*** : $p < 0.001$

7.2 Comparison of Assignment 1 and Assignment 5 results

A similar procedure was followed in the comparison of the marks in the two assignments. Table 7 shows again a highly significant difference between the average (M) scores of the two assignments. This means that Assignment 5 secured higher marks.

Table 7: Comparison of assignments

Assignment	N	M	s	df	t
Assignment 5	1532	61.06	17.55	3444	28.68 ***
Assignment 1	2485	44.16	19.05		

*** : $p < 0.001$

The ESP Unit wished to measure if learning occurred during the course of the module. Having students resubmit an improved draft of Assignment 1 after receiving feedback and having three or four months in which to work through the whole course should have demonstrated whether learning had taken place. A significant improvement of 16.9% occurred.

8. Conclusions

It seems that however good the lecturers' intentions are in promoting active learning, a culture has developed among students of not putting in the required time to get the desired results. It is clear from the analysis of the examination results from the two semester examinations in 2003 and the year examination in 2004 that having only better prepared students writing the examination resulted in an increase of about ten percent in the success rate of students, a statistically significant difference. It also appears from the data that automatic admission was characterized by large dropout rates between admission and writing and that the dropout rate for the year module was considerably lower.

A year model provides a better learning option in the environment in which Unisa is operating as it allows for formative assessment and feedback, both of which promote active learning. While the change to a year module is clearly benefiting a certain band of learners – those who would otherwise have scored in the mid forties and upwards – those who fail despite the change need further consideration. It is particularly important to inculcate a culture of learning and spending sufficient time to achieve success, using every opportunity and resource optimally. It is the opinion of the lecturers that the news has spread now that in LSK compulsory assignments mean just that. Many students had internalized their version of the rules of the module from doing LSK themselves once or more times beforehand, or from speaking to those who had, instead of reading the assignment tutorial letter carefully. The lecturing team has also made the instructions in the 2005 tutorial letter stronger, louder and more obvious. Over and above emphasizing the importance of submitting assignments in the first tutorial letter, the lecturers have also compiled an additional tutorial letter to familiarize students with the year model and assignments. In this tutorial letter, due dates are highlighted and the importance of submitting assignments is stressed.

While various interventions remain options for students to enrich their language learning, the lecturers believe that the compulsory assignment system within a year model is the most effective means of language learning support for distance education students doing this module.

(The authors wish to acknowledge Mr O. Kilpert, Institute for Curriculum and Learning Development, for his assistance with the interpretation of the data.)

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