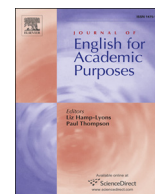


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Journal of English for Academic Purposes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap

An “enlightening course that empowers first years”?: A holistic assessment of the impact of a first-year academic literacy course



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 October 2016

Received in revised form 7 February 2017

Accepted 26 February 2017

Keywords:

Academic literacy

Impact

Effect

Programme evaluation

Student success

Language testing

ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study which assessed the impact of an academic literacy course on students' academic literacy levels. A combination of instruments suggested in an evaluation design by Fouché, Van Dyk and Butler (2016) was drawn on. Firstly, a pre-test/post-test design was used with three instruments, namely a valid and reliable academic literacy test, a writing assignment which was assessed by means of a rubric, and a quantitative assessment of the same writing assessment. Secondly, a student questionnaire was used to determine whether the abilities addressed in the course are those relevant to students' content subjects, and to which extent relevant abilities are addressed in the academic literacy course. Finally, students' academic literacy results were correlated with their marks in other subjects. Findings indicate that the academic literacy course comprehensively and effectively addresses a wide range of academic literacy abilities, though areas such as avoiding plagiarism and academic vocabulary range need further attention. The impact of this course seems to be much more pronounced after a year than after one semester. In addition to sharing the outcomes of this evaluation with the reader, the study further aims to highlight challenges of such an evaluation study to future researchers.

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1. Introduction

Academic literacy¹ interventions have become commonplace at South African universities to address the low academic literacy levels with which students enter higher education institutions (Cliff, 2014, p. 322; Sebolai, 2014, p. 52; Davies, 2010:xi). However, very little research has been conducted to determine the impact of these interventions (Sebolai, 2014, p. 52; Butler, 2013; Terraschke & Wahid, 2011, p. 174; Carstens & Fletcher, 2009, p. 319; Storch & Tapper, 2009, p. 218; Holder, Jones, Robinson, & Krass, 1999, p. 20). The current article is a continuation of a study reported on in Fouché (Forthcoming), which aims to address this research gap by evaluating the impact of an academic literacy course at a South African university,

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¹ Van Dyk and Van de Poel (2013:56) argue for an “open, non-restricted view of language” and define academic literacy as “being able to use, manipulate, and control language and cognitive abilities for specific purposes and in specific contexts”. The current study accepts this working definition of academic literacy, which is a term broadly used in the South African context. It is, however, similar to “English for Academic Purposes” which is used in many other countries.

using instruments suggested in an evaluation design for academic literacy interventions, as proposed in Fouché, Van Dyk and Butler (2016), Fouché (Forthcoming) reported the improvement in students' academic literacy levels in the first semester of an academic literacy course. The current article considers the improvement in students' academic literacy abilities over the entire two-semester period. It further reports on the importance of various abilities for students to be successful in their studies, and to which extent those abilities were addressed in the academic literacy course, by considering student questionnaires. After sharing how an academic literacy course of this nature could be evaluated, the article reflects on challenges experienced in the implementation of the evaluation design, and on how future researchers could learn from these challenges.

Several researchers agree that students' academic literacy and academic language abilities are unlikely to improve significantly without some type of intervention. Rosenthal (1996:24), for example, argues that language proficiency improves over time through practice. Eskey (1983:322) agrees that students need to be explicitly guided for their academic language usage to improve. According to De Graaff and Housen (2009:729), several studies have confirmed that “instructed learners ultimately reach higher stages of inter-language development and higher levels of proficiency than uninstructed L2 learners”. Holder et al. (1999:27)_ENREF_91 show that “the predictive validity of [students'] literacy ratings will be maintained” unless academic literacy levels are directly addressed (cf. Farnill & Hayes, 1996, p. 264; Thompson, 1990, p. 101). It thus seems likely that some form of academic literacy intervention is necessary for students' academic literacy levels to improve significantly, and that a significant improvement in academic literacy levels can likely be attributed to an academic literacy intervention. If it has been shown that there was in fact a significant improvement in students' academic literacy levels between the onset and the completion of an academic literacy (or similar) intervention, the assumption that this improvement can be attributed to the academic literacy course (as indicated by the literature above) can be strengthened by asking students to which extent the academic literacy intervention addressed the academic literacy needs they have in other subjects. That was done in the current study, and is discussed in Section 4.4. The methodology employed in this part of the study is further discussed in Section 3. The next section considers the background of the current study.

2. Background

To determine whether students are at risk of being unsuccessful in their studies due to low academic literacy levels, the North-West University Potchefstroom Campus requires all first-year students to write the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL) or its Afrikaans equivalent, *Die Toets van Akademiese Geletterdheid* (TAG),² before commencing their studies. At-risk students complete the first (one semester long) module of an academic literacy course. Thereafter, a second module (again of one semester) is presented and must be completed by all students (both at-risk at not at-risk students). Both of these modules are presented in students' first year of studies. In 2015, a total of 624 students registered for the first module, and 843 registered for the second module. The academic literacy course (called AGLE) is a generic course which services all of the Potchefstroom Campus' faculties (including Arts, Natural Sciences, Theology, Education Sciences, Economic and Management Sciences, Law, Engineering, and Health Sciences). Students attend two 50-min classes per week, and each module (or semester) of 12 credits runs over approximately four months.

The course addresses the following outcomes:

Semester 1.

1. Identifying word meaning from context;
2. Paraphrasing text;
3. Making effective notes from presentations and reworking these notes to paragraphs and mind maps;
4. Including references in a text;
5. Understanding academic genres and identifying and finding reliable academic sources;
6. Explaining the concepts of active reading, skimming and scanning;
7. Using skimming and scanning to obtain information from texts;
8. Identifying the qualities of, and being able to write good introductions and conclusions;
9. Creating a table of contents, and using it to plan and structure text;
10. Writing paragraphs with clear topic sentences, one main idea and applicable support;
11. Identifying action words and content words in examination questions and assignments, and planning well-structured responses to examination questions;
12. Identifying reasons for using the passive voice;
13. Identifying inaccurate information;
14. Writing correct sentences;
15. Calculating basic percentages;
16. Explaining and being able to identify visual manipulation;
17. Referring correctly to different parts of graphs and tables;

² The current study only focuses on the students who study through the medium of English, and will thus refer to only the TALL and the concomitant English academic literacy courses from this point onward.

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