

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of English for Academic Purposes

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

English academic writing convergence for academically weaker senior secondary school students: Possibility or pipe-dream?

Tracey Millin ^{a,*}, Mark Millin ^b^a University of Stellenbosch, School of General Linguistics, Private Bag X1, Matieland, Stellenbosch, 7602, South Africa^b University of Otago, Department of Economics, PO Box 56, Dunedin, 9054, New Zealand

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 9 February 2017

Received in revised form 20 October 2017

Accepted 7 December 2017

Keywords:

Academic literacy

Academic writing

Reading to learn

English for academic purposes

Scaffolded learning

Academic convergence

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses key findings of a study which sought to assess the impact of the Reading to Learn (RtL) literacy intervention on individual student performance as applied to senior secondary school students at two schools in the Western Cape of South Africa. The RtL intervention was implemented against a backdrop of serious concerns about the state of literacy development in schools in South Africa, especially amongst non-native English-speaking students from low socioeconomic communities as well as migrant communities. By taking each student's written pieces of work, submitted at various stages throughout the academic school year, each piece of writing was assessed and codified, which allowed for a detailed examination of various patterns using both descriptive and inferential statistics. The salient finding was that students, who were shown to be academically weaker pre-intervention, generally exhibited a greater overall improvement in their respective English writing skills throughout the intervention. Thus, with an appropriately targeted intervention (like RtL) a convergence or 'catch-up' effect might likely occur for classes with large cohorts of non-native English-speaking students, who are immersed in English medium-of-instruction schools.

© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Higher education in The Republic of South Africa has shifted from elitism to mass production, resulting in a range of students, with diverse skills, from varied ethnic backgrounds, being given access to university (Fraser & Killen, 2003). The number of students exiting the secondary schooling system with a Bachelor's pass, a pass which provides entrance to university, has grown steadily over the past number of years. For example, according to the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in South Africa, the percentage of matriculants who qualified to study towards a Bachelor's degree was 14% in 2000, but has generally grown as follows in subsequent years: 20.1% in 2008; 19.9% in 2009; 23.5% in 2010; 24.3% in 2011; 26.6% in 2012; 30.6% in 2013; 28.3% in 2014; 20.8% in 2015, and 24.8% in 2016. However, entry into university carries with it the tacit

Abbreviations: ANA, Annual National Assessment; DBE, Department of Basic Education; FET, further education and training; NBTs, National Benchmark Tests; PIRLS, Progress in International Reading Literacy Study; RtL, Reading to Learn; SACMEQ, Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality; SES, socioeconomic status.

* Corresponding author. Current: University of Otago, Higher Education Development Centre, 65/67 Union Place West, Dunedin, 9016, New Zealand.

E-mail addresses: millintracey@gmail.com (T. Millin), markmillin@gmail.com (M. Millin).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2017.12.002>

1475-1585/© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

assumption that students have the pre-requisite academic literacy skills necessary for university study. But, the skills developed at school appear not to match the skills required to succeed at university. Other studies which have also reported on the under-preparedness of undergraduate students in South Africa are: Troskie-De Bruin (1999); Penrose (2002); Van Schalkwyk (2008) and Allardice (2013). According to Groenewald (2005), one-in-every-three students are at risk of dropping out of their university studies by the end of their first year due to university under-preparedness. Given that access to higher education in South Africa has become one of the pre-eminent mechanisms for addressing problems of social injustice and inequality, a relatively high dropout rate is of great concern. This concern is not limited to the South African context though. Other studies which have reported on the under-preparedness of students transitioning into higher education outside of South Africa are, for example: Greene and Forster (2003); Maloney (2003); Cukras (2006), and Nakata, Nakata, and Chin (2008).

Under-preparedness of students, particularly amongst previously marginalised students, exiting the secondary schooling system and transitioning into university is often seen as one of the biggest barriers to successful learning at university (McGhie, 2012; Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004). For clarity, under-preparedness in the context of this study refers to the weak academic reading and writing skills being developed in the secondary schooling system. In other words, under-preparedness refers to a lack of advanced reading and writing skills developed at school to enable students to read to learn independently, and consequently, demonstrate effectively through appropriate writing conventions, that learning has taken place. Describing secondary education in South Africa as a “high cost/high enrolment, yet low quality system” (Taylor, 2009, p. 12) is all the more distressing when contextualised against the backdrop of a growing body of research evidence, which paints a rather gloomy picture of literacy performance.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) assessment of academic literacy skills globally has revealed that more than 75% of South African students in the primary schooling system are performing below minimum international literacy benchmarks. The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) shows that 43% of South African Grade 5 students appear not to be developing basic reading skills (Howie, Van Staden, Tshele, Dowse, & Zimmerman, 2012). The latest PIRLS results are even more alarming with 78% of South African Grade 4 learners unable to reach lowest PIRLS reading comprehension benchmarks leaving South Africa placed last out of 50 countries for reading scores (Howie et al, 2016). The Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ) reveals that 25% of South African Grade 6 students are not acquiring basic literacy skills, and less than 40% of Grade 6 students achieve basic literacy skills only (UNESCO, 2011). Table 1 gives a summary of the more recent South African Annual National Assessment (ANA) literacy scores for the earlier years of schooling and the average national performance by language affiliation. Table 1 does not paint a positive picture for literacy skills development within the further education and training (FET) phase of the secondary schooling system, especially the First Additional Language cohort, which encompasses most of the students in this study. Poor literacy development in the earlier grades means the senior secondary school phase suffers, because insufficient literacy building blocks are developed during the earlier years of schooling.

A long term consequence of the data presented in Table 1 is that tertiary institutions inherit the deficient literacy skills of the basic education system, resulting in high dropout rates amongst undergraduate students. For example, during a pilot run of the National Benchmark Tests (NBTs) in 2009 – an entrance exam offered to students at universities across South Africa, 46% of students who wrote the test were classified as students in need of an augmented or extended degree programme if they were to succeed at their studies. An additional 7% of students were classified as students in need of long-term academic support. Hence, 53% of the applicable undergraduate students (who supposedly hold a Bachelor's Pass) were in need of academic literacy support at university (MacGregor, 2009). If the support is not given, graduation rates decline as students either fail to finish a three-year degree in three years, or fail to graduate at all.

Letseka and Maile (2008) reported that the graduation rate in South Africa is approximately 15% – arguably one of the lowest graduation rates worldwide; hence, the need for greater literacy support. However, support programmes of various kinds are costly to universities and students alike, further constraining an already over-burdened tertiary education sector. Alternatively, intensive academic literacy development support could be made available to students in senior- or upper-

Table 1
South African annual national assessment literacy performance (2012–2014).

	National Average (2012)	National Average (2013)	National Average (2014)	2012	2013	2014
English Home Language				0–49%	0–49%	0–49%
Grade 3	52%	51%	56%	43%	43%	34%
Grade 6	43%	59%	63%	61%	32%	23%
Grade 9	43%	43%	48%	61%	63%	52%
First Additional Language				0–49%	0–49%	0–49%
Grade 6	36%	46%	45%	76%	59%	58%
Grade 9	35%	33%	34%	79%	83%	82%

Notes: The South African DBE uses seven levels of learner achievement. Levels 1, 2 and 3 comprise learners who achieved a performance score of 0–49%; Levels 4 and 5 a score of 50–69%; Levels 6 and 7 a score of 70–100%. Table 1 shows the national average, and percentage of students who fell within the 0–49% range of scores (academically at risk students) across all 9 provinces of South Africa from 2012 to 2014. The summary for the 2015 and 2016 academic years are not yet available. Source: DBE (2014).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6843038>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6843038>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)