

## **Bridging the Gap: English as an Lingua Franca in Higher Education**

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As part of PanSALB's new language awareness campaign, the month of August has been chosen for the celebration of English. It's a time to reflect on its fascinating history as well as on the ways in which the language touches and enriches our lives. But it also give us an opportunity to think about the ways in which English as an academic lingua franca, unfortunately, remains a stumbling block for many South African students. My aim isn't to criticise the use of English as an academic lingua franca, but rather to explore some of the reasons why this stumbling block exists and to provide some insight into the remedial measures that help students bridge the gap between secondary and tertiary education.

### **The Gap**

For better or for worse, English is the primary Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) at many South African Higher Education (HE) institutions.<sup>1</sup> It's the academic lingua franca<sup>23</sup> despite the fact that less than 10% of the national population use it as their mother-tongue.<sup>4</sup> The continued dominance of English is not an uncontroversial topic, however, and tensions remain between 'policy planners, language practitioners, higher education managers, academic staff, and students'<sup>5</sup>.

It's well known that a gap exists between secondary and tertiary education. There are primarily two reasons for this gap. The first is that for many South African students, English is a second, third or sometimes even fourth language. This means that when entering tertiary education, students must study in a language that is not their mother tongue. This has been cited as one of the primary reasons for poor performance at university.<sup>6</sup> According to the Council of Higher Education, a lacking proficiency in English remains a 'significant barrier to success' and must be addressed in a 'systematic and sustained manner'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, recent research at the University of the Free State shows that out of eight critical risk factors for underperformance at university, two

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<sup>1</sup> In education, English is the medium of instruction at more than 80% of schools in SA. (Kamwangamalu, *One language, multi-layered identities: English in a society in transition, South Africa*, 272).

<sup>2</sup> Khoklova, *Lingua Franca English of South Africa*, 983 – 991.

<sup>3</sup> Rudwick, *Englishes and Cosmopolitanisms in South Africa*, 417; Kamwangamalu, *One language, multi-layered identities: English in a society in transition, South Africa*, 268.

<sup>4</sup> van der Walt & Evans, *Is English the Lingua Franca of South Africa* 188; Parmegiani & Rudwick, *isiZulu- English bilingualism at the University of KwaZulu-Natal: an exploration of students' attitudes*, 108.

<sup>5</sup> Rudwick, *Englishes and Cosmopolitanisms in South Africa*, 417.

<sup>6</sup> van Rooy & Coetzee-van Rooy, *The language issue and academic performance at a South African University*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> CHE, 2010. Quoted in van Rooy & Coetzee-van Rooy, *The language issue and academic performance at a South African University*, 32.

pertain to performance in English Language. These are: performance in Grade 12 English mark (home, second or additional), and performance on the Academic Literacy portion of the National Benchmark Test.

The second cause of the gap between secondary and tertiary education is due to low levels of academic literacy. The literacy levels of many South African students entering into higher education are below expected standards, which sadly means that many students are underprepared for tertiary education.<sup>8</sup>

### **Bridging the Gap**

The good news is that support for these students comes in many forms: extended degree programmes, writing support centres, language and literacy courses, and academic advising are just four such interventions. Literacy and language support takes place under the umbrella of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), the aim of which is to prepare students for academic study in English. What is important to note about academic language and literacy development, however, is that it takes time. Studies show that students need between 4 – 7 years to become fully proficient.<sup>9</sup> I highlight this because there is a common misconception that proficiency in spoken English equals proficiency in academic English. And the shift from secondary education to higher education is not something with which only second language learners struggle. Even first language English speakers struggle to make the jump.

In his research on language acquisition, Cummins distinguishes between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP).<sup>10</sup> Essentially, BICS is conversational proficiency and CALP is academic proficiency.<sup>11</sup> Although this distinction is not without its fair share of criticism and controversy, it is a useful distinction when considering that these constructs speak to differing levels of proficiency and do not ‘...reflect just one unitary dimension’.<sup>12</sup> In other words, students may be fully proficient in the ‘core grammar’ of a language and many of its ‘sociolinguistic rules’, but, even so, will need to spend much more time (12 years or so in school) attempting ‘...to extend this basic linguistic repertoire into more specialized domains and functions of language’.<sup>13</sup> This ‘specialized domain’, i.e. academic proficiency in English, is what many academic language and literacy support units at South African universities (and universities all over the world) are concerned with. Ultimately,

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<sup>8</sup> van Rooy & Coetzee-van Rooy, *The language issue and academic performance at a South African University*, 32; Sebolai, *The differential predictive validity of a test of academic literacy for students from different English language school backgrounds*, 105; Prince, *The relationship between school-leaving examinations and university entrance assessments: The case of the South African system*, 133; Weideman, *Assessing academic literacy: a task-based approach*, 81.

<sup>9</sup> Hakuta, Butler & Witt, *How long does it take English learners to attain proficiency?*, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Cummins, *Bilingual Children's Mother Tongue: Why Is It Important for Education?*, 15 – 20.

<sup>11</sup> Cummins, *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*, 58.

<sup>12</sup> Cummins, *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*, 59.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

CALP is more cognitively demanding<sup>14</sup>, is context-reduced<sup>15</sup>, and is more complex to acquire. To train students in both CALP and even BICS is no easy feat; it takes time and effort. But it is of the utmost importance when we consider what a difference it can have in students' lives.

But what exactly do we mean when we talk about academic literacy? According to Cummins, academic language proficiency is '...the extent to which an individual has access to and command of the oral and written academic registers of schooling'.<sup>16</sup> Let us unpack this a bit more. A widely used construct of academic literacy comes from Patterson & Weidemann, who state that academic literacy has to do with '...the flow between speaking, careful listening and note-taking, effective reading, sound critical thinking, forming and discussing opinions, and good processing of arguments (usually and eventually in writing)...'.<sup>17</sup> Ultimately, academic literacy can be described as the ability to, 'think critically', 'distinguish between essential and non-essential information', 'synthesise and integrate information from a multiplicity of sources...', 'understand relations between different parts of a text', 'be aware of the logical development and organisation of an academic text', and 'write in an authoritative manner'.<sup>18</sup> All of these are vastly complex skills which take years to master. And the acquisition of these skills becomes even more complex when having to master them in another language.

This is the primary concern of EAP professionals: to make students aware of the different demands of university and to improve upon student success by supporting them in the development of academic literacy and English language skills. However, this awareness must extend beyond students and EAP professionals to faculty, teachers, policy-makers and even the broader public. An awareness of the issues that students face can have a trickle-down effect into teaching and assessment practices so that support is no longer a side-lined effort, but rather an integrated and holistic endeavour. And so as we use August as a time to celebrate English and reflect on its impact on South African society, let us also be mindful of the fact that there is still much work to be done in helping students acquire the necessary language and literacy skills to be successful in their HE endeavours.

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<sup>14</sup> New content and new ideas are learnt at the same time as new language

<sup>15</sup> There is little assistance of gestures, facial expressions or intonation as there is with BICS

<sup>16</sup> Cummins, *Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*, 67.

<sup>17</sup> Patterson & Weidemann, *The refinement of a construct for tests of academic literacy*, 139 – 140.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 139 – 140.

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