Journal for Language Teaching 56 (2) 2022, 16 pages
https://doi.org/10.56285/jltVol56iss2a5387

The Academic Development approach to academic literacy in higher education South Africa: a disconnect between teaching and assessment

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ABSTRACT

Academic literacy, the ability to cope with the discourse demands of higher education, is believed to be a factor in the poor graduation rates among South African students. As a result, interventions to deal with low levels of this ability have been part of the broader effort by universities to boost student completion rates. In South Africa, two approaches to these interventions and the theories informing them have been offered to date. In the main, these approaches and their theories have either been generic or discipline-specific in orientation, with the latter being currently the most embraced of the two.

The present article is a case study of these two theorizations of academic literacy and aims to demonstrate that although the discipline-specific approach is the most favoured, a void exists currently regarding how its teaching might translate into assessment. This is the case especially when viewed from the way that this approach has been pursued in the field of Academic Development in post-apartheid South Africa. The article demonstrates, in other words, that while the discipline-specific approach, as pursued by the field of Academic Development, is convincing in terms of how it advocates for teaching, nothing equivalent has come from this field to balance the approach from the side of assessment.

Keywords: Academic literacy, language ability, language assessment, generic approach, discipline-specific approach, higher education, applied linguistics

1. Introduction and background

More than two decades into the new political dispensation, South African universities still have to grapple with low levels of student academic performance and its consequent high dropout and ultimate low completion rates. The country's graduation rates have, in the words of the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2013:15), been "found to have major shortcomings in terms of overall numbers, equity and the proportion of the student body that succeeds". This has mainly been attributed to the gap that seems to exist between the knowledge with which learners leave the high school and the type that university education requires them to possess to succeed academically. Not only has this mismatch, also known as the "articulation gap", been ascribed to the emotional and academic under preparedness of the students entering high education, it has also been seen as an outcome of a combination of the political and socio-economic factors that are unique to the country (CHE 2007; 2013). Indeed, Cliff and Hanslo (2009: 266) have argued that in the context of South Africa, the "articulation gap" is a function of "the quality of schooling of individuals or cohorts; the population group to which an individual belongs; the socio-economic status of individuals or groups; motivational and dispositional orientations of students, their approaches to learning; and so on". Cliff, Yeld and Hanslo (2003: 1-2) have similarly observed that "factors influencing [academic] success are a blend of cognitive, affective, motivational, socio-cultural, economic and institutional variables".

The essence of the "articulation gap", however, finds ultimate expression in student academic performance, and manifests itself differently in different disciplines (CHE 2013). Its logical and common result across these disciplines is that students under-perform, fail to complete their studies in the scheduled time or eventually drop out completely from higher education. As the CHE (2013: 57) rightly points out, "formal learning [and successful academic performance] depends on whether students can and do respond positively to the educational process in higher education". Among the academic resources that students need for this is the ability to cope with the demands of higher education in the chosen language of teaching and learning, an ability now commonly known as academic literacy (CHE 2013). There is a consensus, in other words, as the CHE (2010: 182) observes, that "the twin challenge of academic language and language of instruction (English) remains one of the most significant barriers to success and one which universities must address in a systematic and sustained manner." In a more general sense, academic literacy has been defined as being constituted by a student's ability to cope with the discourse demands of higher education (See Cliff, Yeld & Hanslo 2003; Van Dyk & Weideman 2004). To this end, from the point of view of the kind of language ability required for academic performance, the "articulation gap" means that students "have not been adequately prepared for, nor can they be expected to successfully negotiate the demands of, conventional language, learning and thinking required of them, particularly in the absence of curriculum and learning support" (Cliff, Yeld and Hanslo, 2003: 4). This, the CHE

(2013: 5) observes, is a challenge across the world and affects students in different programmes to different extents:

> it is evident that the completion rates are especially low in Engineering and Science degrees, all of which have particular significance for economic development. The rates of these qualifications are: BEng 23%; BSc 23%; Engineering diplomas 5%; Science diplomas 14%; Four-year Commerce degrees 26%.

The multifaceted nature of the sources of the articulation gap that were dealt with earlier has meant that the higher education sector has had to respond to this phenomenon in a myriad of ways. Efforts to address this gap from an academic literacy point of view has seen the introduction of academic literacy assessment and instruction. Of all the factors identified, and that were mentioned above as contributing to student performance, support in developing language ability was the one universities could do something about, since they cannot change school, socio-economic status or similar factors. So these interventions are not surprising. Although it has, in some cases, been used for making access decisions, academic literacy assessment was initially aimed at serving as a signal for students who might need extra language support to enhance their chance of success at university study. At the undergraduate level, this assessment has taken the form of two standardized tests of academic literacy called the National Benchmark Test in Academic Literacy (NBT AL) and the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL), and has materialized at the post graduate level into the Test of Academic Literacy for Postgraduate Students (TALPS).

Both this assessment and the instructional interventions meant to address what it reveals about levels of language ability should, as a matter of logic, feed into each other. The process of their design should therefore be reciprocal (Weideman 2019). In other words, since the reason for the existence of both these interventions is the same, the construct on the basis of which they are designed should be the same. From the time the issue of the "articulation gap" became a concern, however, several instructional approaches to addressing it from the point of view of academic literacy have seen the light of day. These approaches have been so divergent, controversial and in some cases even baseless that the best way to conceptualize and teach academic literacy in South Africa still needs a clearer identity. In the ultimate analysis, these approaches have translated into two main ways of thinking about academic literacy. These are the generic and discipline-specific interpretations of this phenomenon. As will be shown later in this article, the discipline-specific approach is currently the most preferred in South Africa in particular and around the world in general. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that its unquestionable credentials notwithstanding, this approach is, as pursued by Academic Development practitioners in South Africa at least, limited by its entire focus on teaching at the expense of clarity on how the teaching should translate into principled assessment. The argument is that it does not yet have benchmarks against which to measure the effects and impact of teaching. The article starts by exploring a few examples of a variety of approaches

to academic literacy that can arguably, be classified as generic. It then goes on to deal with the discipline-specific perspective.

2. Methodology

This article is a case study of the two main ways in which the idea of academic literacy has been approached in South Africa to date. These are the generic and discipline-specific approaches. The article investigates several generic courses of academic literacy that have been reported in the literature in South Africa as well as the way the discipline-specific perspective has been conceptualized in order to highlight the latter's characteristic schism between teaching and testing in practice. This is a kind of study which Dornyei (2007: 152) refers to as an "experimental case study" and which is "intended to provide insight into a wider issue while the actual case is of secondary interest; it facilitates our understanding of something else." The present article is, in other words, the kind of experimental case study that Dornyei (2007) further describes as the "multiple or collective case study", "where there is even less interest in one particular case, and a number of cases are studied jointly in order to investigate a phenomenon or general condition". It is for this reason that Dornyei (2007: 152) concludes that "a multiple case study is, in effect, an instrumental case study extended to several cases."

3. Earlier approaches to academic literacy in South African higher education

Although their focus is on how they arrived at the current definition of a construct of academic literacy for the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL) that was referred to earlier in this paper, an article by Van Dyk and Weideman (2004) is quite revealing in terms of how academic language ability was initially conceived in response to the articulation gap at that time and in their immediate academic environment. They provide details of a test developed by the University of Pretoria and Hough & Horne Literacy Consultants called the English Literacy Skills Assessment for Tertiary Education (ELSA PLUS) and used by this university to assess levels of language proficiency for university education and ultimately to determine whether students needed additional support for them to succeed in their studies. This test, Van Dyk and Weideman (2004) further write, was designed on the basis of a commercial and industrial one owned by Hough and Horne Consultancy called the ELSA (English Literacy Skills Assessment). The ELSA PLUS was, in the words of Van Dyk and Weideman (2004: 137), "a norm-referenced placement test, where the first language user of English is used as the norm. It is a proficiency test; it is skills-based and not syllabus-based". The test was organized into seven sections that focused on the following:

- Phonics (the ability to recognize and discriminate between English sounds)
- Dictation (the ability to write down spoken English and adhere to academic writing conventions)

- Basic numeracy (language use is integrated with an elementary familiarity with numbers)
- Reading comprehension (at elementary and intermediate levels)
- The language and grammar of spatial relations
- A cloze procedure (the ability to create a semantic whole by completing sentences coherently)
- Vocabulary in context (the ability to extract the relevant information from a given context to determine the meaning of certain words or phrases on a basic, academic and advanced level).

(Van Dyk and Weideman, 2004: 137)

Van Dyk and Weideman (2004: 137) conclude on the basis of this content that "the test assumes that language ability can best be defined in terms of its structural component: Language is, in this view, a combination of sound, form and meaning". What Van Dyk and Weideman (2004) demonstrate, by extension, is that the user of this test also understood language proficiency for academic success to be constituted by the same construct that underpinned this test. The test user would, by implication, also expect the language intervention following this assessment to focus on the areas of language ability that the test itself focused on. This is, in other words, how what is now known as academic literacy was understood and would logically be approached in that context. Instead of this 'restricted' view of language, Van Dyk and Weideman (2004) argue that we should rather adopt an 'open', interactive and functional perspective. A number of further criticisms of this view of language ability have been made (see Blanton 1994; Bachman & Palmer 1996; Cliff & Yeld 2006) and therefore do not require elaboration here.

Another example of how academic literacy teaching was conceptualized is evident in a critique of an academic literacy course taught at the Central University of Technology (see Sebolai 2014), a decade after a reasonable degree of consensus had been achieved regarding the generic meaning of this concept. Sebolai's (2014) article is a case study of an academic literacy course whose origin was poor student performance on a standardized test of academic literacy called the Placement Test in English for Educational Purposes (PTEEP), but whose focus deviated completely from the construct of this test and was clearly an outcome of its designer's intuition. In the main, the course designer's thinking about academic literacy was no different from that of the owners and users of the ELSA PLUS referred to above; language ability was understood to involve a mastery of discrete points of English grammar. The way in which academic literacy was conceptualized in the course supposedly fits into what has been labelled the "deficit-model" of language ability in which as Van Dyk and Van de Poel (2013: 48) explain, literacy is understood to be

> a cognitive skill that differs from individuals as a set of discrete items that students need to and can learn. Once identified and learnt, they are transferrable to other contexts without difficulty. If students, for example, learn the grammar and spelling

> of a language, they should not have any difficulties passing their exams in prescribed time, i.e., language will not be a problem. If they don't pass their exams, there must be a problem.

This approach has been a subject of criticisms for a number of reasons. The first is that, as pointed out earlier, it mirrors the structural-situational and audio-lingual methods of language teaching that focused on accuracy at discrete-point level of language performance. In the field of applied linguistics, this has long been discredited for being on the opposite end of what people actually do when they use language for communication. The distinction that Van Dyk and Weideman (2004) make between what they call 'restrictive' and 'open' views of language ability is a perfect illustration of what these two opposite views of language ability mean.

Not only does Sebolai (2014) give a detailed critique of the concept of academic literacy underpinning the course offered at the Central University of Technology above, he also reveals how divorced the teaching methods used in the course were from currently accepted ways of second language teaching. What appears to have consolidated this uninformed way of approaching academic language teaching was that those in the upper echelons of the effort to run this course at that university where themselves not even experts in any form of language teaching at all (Sebolai 2014). The course was, unfortunately, largely the outcome of intuition and tradition, rather than deliberation and theoretical defensibility.

Yet another understanding of academic literacy teaching is revealed in a study by Van Wyk and Greyling (2008) that focused on the impact of a course of academic literacy taught at the University of the Free State. In this course, academic literacy teaching was organized around reading and writing development. The reading component of this course comprised intensive and extensive reading. In the words of Van Wyk and Greyling (2008: 209),

> the intensive reading programme is the component that is done in class where the focus is on authentic academic texts across a wide range of disciplines. Classroom activities focus on those features of the text that cause L2 readers difficulty … Features such as discourse markers and anaphoric relations are explored, while students practise their cognitive and metacognitive strategies.

The extensive reading part involved the use of graded novels in which as Van Wyk and Greyling (2008: 210) explain, "a wide range of interesting topics which aim at building general knowledge and providing the student with reading material at a level that is comprehensible to him/her" were used. Also, connected to the reading component of this course was the vocabulary building section. In this case, "students study selected academic words as they appear in the context of the reading passages, and are quizzed on these every week. A large proportion of classroom time is devoted to teaching words/concepts and word derivations, connotations, primary and secondary meanings, as well as word functions (Van Wyk & Greyling, 2008: 210)." Finally, the writing component involved students' written responses to their reading of the graded novels as well as writing instruction that focused on the production

of coherent texts. Both reading and writing were taught "as two sides of the same coin" while the whole course itself was aligned with the specifications of the Placement Test in English for Educational Purposes (Van Wyk & Greyling, 2008: 209-210), a standardized test of academic literacy that was, at the time, used by the UFS to measure academic language readiness among newly arriving students and that was also referred to in the foregoing paragraph.

A similar approach to the one by Van Wyk and Greyling (2008) is evident in the renewal of an academic language course reported in Sebolai and Huff (2015) at the Central University of Technology in 2013. Essentially, this was a reading and writing course which was informed by the construct of a test of academic literacy called the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL) which was also referred to earlier in this article. Although the PTEEP was used for determining the language needs of students at this university as well, the TALL was viewed as a better basis for developing this course because the designers of the course felt that the construct of the test was more elaborate than that of the PTEEP (Sebolai & Huff 2015). The reason for their decision to focus on the two skills and not on listening and speaking, for example, was, among others, informed by the observation Gee (2003) makes that, in higher education particularly, achievement in learning is often manifest through reading and writing (Sebolai & Huff 2015). The decision was also taken, Sebolai and Huff (2015) point out, in the context of the prominent role that Lea and Street (1998: 160) – albeit in discipline-specific contexts – assign to these two language skills in higher education: "academic literacy practices – reading and writing within disciplines – constitute the central process through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study." The main focus of the reading component of the course is exemplified in the list of the learning outcomes for the first unit of this course:

- Locate information and clarify meaning by skimming, scanning, predicting and using other strategies
- Distinguish between main ideas and supporting details
- Understand relations between different parts of a text and be able to identify and use transitions and linking words to achieve cohesion
- Use context clues to figure out the meanings of new words, recognize metaphors and distinguish between different parts of speech
- Identify and explain what is not directly stated in the text by making inferences, drawing conclusions and making generalizations about a text
- Use support that is substantial, relevant and concrete
- Use critical thinking skills to apply what has been read to real world situations

(Sebolai and Huff, 2015: 341)

The writing section of this course prioritizes academic essay writing in which students are taught to "understand organizational structure, recognize genre specific vocabulary and syntax, critique the effectiveness of arguments and use writing strategies successfully" (Sebolai & Huff, 2015: 345).

As will become clear in the section below, the approach followed in the design of these last two courses has not been spared criticism by the academic development proponents of the discipline-specific approach to academic literacy. One such criticism is that the reading and writing focus of these courses is not only reading and writing deficit-driven, the approach used in the teaching of these skills was, in the view of their critics, also decontextualized in the sense that it did not cater for the needs of students in specific disciplinary contexts.

4. The current approach to academic literacy teaching in South African higher education

As pointed out earlier in this article, the currently preferred way of thinking about academic literacy is discipline-specific. Part of the basis for its existence is its diametric opposition to the generic approach that was outlined in the previous section. The proponents of the former have discredited the latter on the grounds that it is "a model of language as an instrument for communication, which sees language as a vehicle for transmitting thought that pre-exist language" (Boughey & McKenna, 2016: 3). To this end, Boughey and Mckenna (2016: 3) have expressed their displeasure at the generic approach in the following words:

> Clearly, the need to 'transmit' thought in a language other than one's language adds complexity to the model and often leads to assumptions that the problem is with the students' proficiency with the 'vehicle' of transmission, that is the forms of additional language.

Related to the discontent expressed against the three courses of academic literacy dealt with earlier is Boughey and Mckenna's (2016) further criticism of these courses that they adopt decontextualized approaches to student development. In the words of Boughey and McKenna (2016: 5),

> such decontextualized approaches include generic 'academic literacy' courses which construct the ability to read and write in socially legitimated ways in the academy as simply a matter of acquiring a set of neutral, a-social, a-cultural and a-political 'skills'. These courses often completely fail to acknowledge that reading and writing in the ways sanctioned by the academy have implications for students at the level of identity.

Alternative to what Boughey and McKenna (2016: 3) have called "a model of language as an instrument for communication, which sees language as a vehicle for transmitting thought that pre-exists language", they have proposed what Christie (1985) described as the model in which language is used as 'a resource for making meaning'. This model, Boughey and McKenna (2016) point out, follows from Halliday's (1973, 1978) Systemic Functional Linguistics where language use is determined by what they call the 'context of culture' and 'context of situation'. This has been interpreted by some to mean that academic literacy teaching should be discipline-oriented and a collaborative effort between language and subject specialists. In this approach,

focus should be on "what counts as knowledge in the discipline, and then making explicit for students the principles through which new knowledge is created" (Jacobs, 2013: 132). Lea and Street (2006: 159) have argued further that for them to engage optimally with higher education, students need exposure to a form of literacy which covers "a variety of communicative practices, including genres, fields and disciplines". The students will, in other words, need to be taught to "switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting" (Lea & Street, 2006: 159).

This brings me to the last point made by the proponents of the discipline-oriented view of academic literacy which is that academic literacy is not just about language and that it is also realized in non-linguistic ways that are visual, gestural and digital (Carstens 2012). This, together with the point Christie (1985) makes about academic literacy being a function of the situational and cultural contexts of different disciplines, is indisputable. What is disputable though is that language teaching is often not explicitly recognized as a component of academic literacy in its own right, one that should be approached, when instructional designs are developed, from the point of view of applied linguistics and be seen to complement other co-approaches to this complex phenomenon for the purpose of ensuring well-rounded academic literacy development among students. I deal with this point further later in this article.

5. The disconnect between teaching and assessment

The theoretical defensibility of the discipline-specific view of academic literacy notwithstanding, it represents a case of a divide between teaching and assessment. Within the context of this perspective, the rate at which the effort to theorize academic literacy teaching issues has grown has been accompanied by an equivalent lack of theorizing on how it should be assessed, especially prior to any instructional intervention. This has been characteristic of how Academic Development practitioners, who alongside language teaching professionals, have had a vested interest in academic literacy to date. There has been a disjointed and conflicting understanding of academic literacy between these two groups. The former have solely focused on how academic literacy should be taught or what it should be on the one hand, while language assessment professionals have focused concomitantly on theorizing academic literacy teaching alongside its assessment, on the other. This has meant that in the case of the former, more energy has been expended on theorizing on how academic literacy teaching should be approached without taking into account what implications this has for assessment, while the approach in the latter case has been to view academic literacy teaching and assessment as two inseparable subfields of applied linguistics. The latter has in fact used the principles underpinning language curriculum and language assessment development as the basis for proposing and designing solutions for responding to the challenge of low levels of academic literacy among first year students. This has been the case because in most cases, those who have not separated teaching from assessment in their approach are applied linguists who have expertise in both while those who have done so are experts in teaching or academic development and neither in educational measurement nor language assessment. It is necessary, at this point, that the nature and focus of the field of applied linguistics is briefly dealt with first for the sake of clarifying the difference between these two approaches.

Applied linguistics has been through several definitions over the years, all of which cannot be dealt with in the limited space of this article. For the purpose of creating the necessary context for the present article, however, the latest definition of this discipline is the most relevant. This definition is that applied linguistics concerns itself with language-related problems in society (see Weideman 2014). In several of his writings, Weideman has expanded on this understanding by further describing applied linguistics as a discipline of design; one that designs solutions for the language related problems referred to above. What this definition suggests is that there is no applied linguistics without a language problem of some sort.

The most logical point of departure for dealing with any problem in life, many will agree, is to try to understand its basics first. Language-related problems are by no means an exception to this, and this has been the approach in applied linguistics for many years. For the purpose of responding to language learning problems in language education, for example, applied linguists have as a matter of convention always started with establishing and analysing the needs of the learners – the problem in this case – involved and breaking these down into teachable units. These units are commonly referred to as objectives or outcomes in all teaching and learning in general. Next, the applied linguist creates a framework that specifies what knowledge areas and how much of each of these will be covered by the course. Then, appropriate content and teaching methodologies are determined. Finally, the applied linguistics practitioner determines the most appropriate context of language use in which these teachable units can best be taught and assessed. The applied linguist would, in other words, need to determine whether language needs can best be addressed in a reading, writing, listening or speaking instructional context. The graphic visual in Figure 1 below, is a very simplified depiction of the step-by-step process typically followed in language course development.

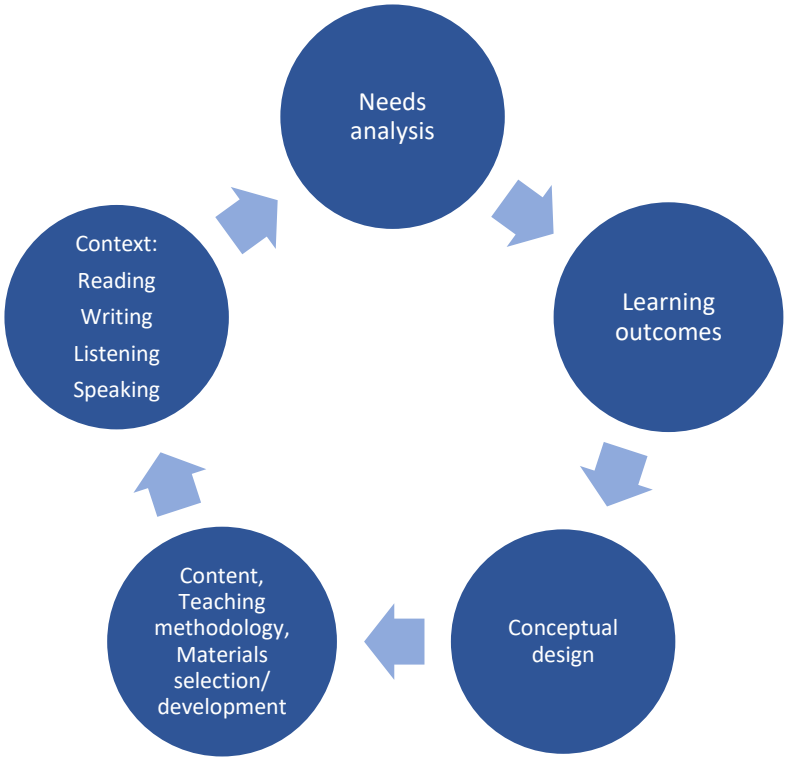

Figure 1: The cyclic process of language course design and development

The approach outlined above is also conventional practice in language assessment, another sub-field of applied linguistics. For them to develop a test, for example, a language testing practitioner starts by clarifying and then defining the language ability they intend to measure.

Next, they break this definition, also known as the test construct, into language knowledge specifications. This is done not because language ability is understood to be a mastery of discrete points but to ensure that what the test is intended to measure is adequately specified so that the extent of its focus on these specifications can practically be investigated and quantified to ensure that it ultimately measures nothing else but what is clearly specified. Fulcher's (2010:92) graphic representation of this procedure in Figure 2 below is a more detailed depiction of this language test design process.

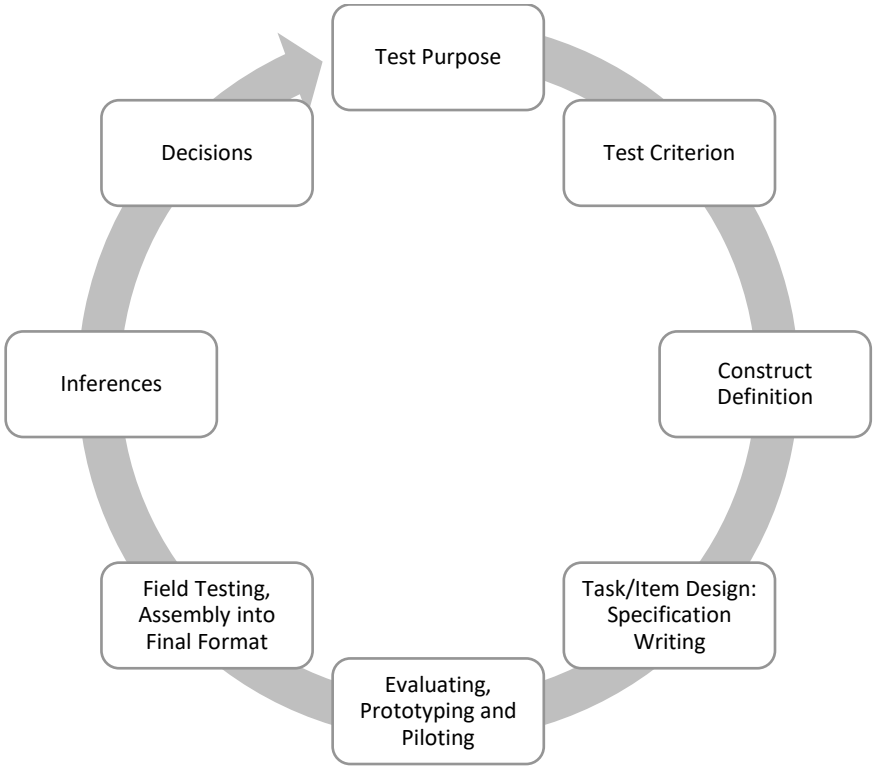

Figure 2: The cyclic process of language test development

The ultimate purpose of the applied linguistics approach to course and test design dealt with here is to ensure validity and ultimately, accountability. Being clear and specific about what is taught and tested is at the heart of accountability in applied linguistics. In a period in which language tests are expected to help identify students who might struggle with their studies and language courses are expected to help alleviate this, the importance of test and course validity and ultimate accountability on the part of those who design these artefacts cannot be overemphasized.

As pointed out early, there is no evidence to date, that this is the same approach that academic development practitioners have followed in their pursuit for discipline-specific thinking about

academic literacy. This is notwithstanding the fact that most of these practitioners come from an educational professional background wherein the principles of course and test design briefly dealt with above should apply. As also pointed out earlier, a result of this has been that in present day South Africa, the discipline-specific perspective of academic literacy teaching has been propounded at the exclusion of what it might imply for testing at best, and that it is at loggerheads with those of generic academic literacy testing at worst. This divide has continued to widen as the two fields involved namely, Academic Development and Applied Linguistics continue to be more specialized and more innovative ideas continue to emerge from within them: the former continues to grow in its focus on teaching whereas the latter continues to do the same in its focus on the technicalities of both teaching and assessment.

This situation is reminiscent of the division between language teachers and language testers that arrived with the advent of what Spolsky (1978, 1995) referred to as the psychometric-structuralist era in the evolution of language testing in the 20th century where, as a result of the technical trajectory that this field had taken, considerable authority came to be wielded by testing specialists. This is how Stoynoff and Chapelle (2005: 3) explain this development:

> Throughout the century, testing specialists extended research methods, improved their ability to develop and empirically evaluate tests (often by applying increasingly sophisticated statistical procedures and techniques to test development), and built more comprehensive theories to explain the abilities they sought to measure.

Stoynoff and Chapelle (2005: 3) further add,

> … as the science of testing expanded, so did the gulf between what teachers knew and what testing specialists knew about testing… This division of labour permitted both cultures to focus on what they did best. Teachers taught, and test specialists developed standardized tests that schools used to evaluate students.

As indicated above, this mirrors the divergent way that Academic Development and Applied Linguistics practitioners have approached academic literacy in South Africa, with the former pursuing a credible theory of teaching academic literacy but failing to do the same from the perspective of its assessment. More specifically, while the discipline-specific perspective of academic literacy has argued for this way of conceptualizing academic literacy, it has, from the point of the field of Academic Development at least, not generated any theory for its assessment. As also pointed out earlier, this is not consistent with the applied linguistics approach to language teaching and assessment that was dealt with earlier in this article. Neither is it consistent with the field of education in general. In applied linguistics, teaching and assessment are opposite faces of the same coin; one cannot exist without the other. It is for this reason, one suspects, that Weideman (2013) lamented the divorced approach to the way academic literacy had been conceptualized in South Africa in the years recent to this publication. In the words of Weideman (2013: 9), "… there is little reciprocity in what we learn

from designing applied linguistic artefacts in the distinct realms of language testing, language course design, and language policy making."

6. Conclusion

The aim of this article was two-fold. The first was to revisit the way the notion of academic literacy has been conceptualized for the South African higher education context in the last thirty years. This exploration revealed that two main approaches to the thinking about this phenomenon have emerged in South Africa. The first was generic while the second and the most embraced currently is discipline specific. The second aim was to demonstrate that the latter – albeit informed by a credible theory – is lacking in terms of how its proponents in the field of Academic Development particularly, think it should translate into assessment. In this regard, the article attempts to explain why when so much has been written about academic literacies for different disciplinary contexts has there not been a single standardized test to assess these. The article locates this difficulty at the centre of lack of assessment literacy especially among Academic Development practitioners who have been at the forefront of this approach. At the same time, the article highlights the difference between the balanced approach to academic literacies that applied linguistics practitioners have followed, and a potentially imbalanced one that has been pursued mainly by Academic Development practitioners, most of whom have a background in education. In the approach by academic development, theorizing about the teaching of academic literacy has been the sole focus while both the teaching and assessment of this phenomenon has been the focus, in applied linguistics. The article highlights the extent to which discipline-specific academic literacies development still needs to be given attention from the point of view of responsible assessment.

This attention would, in the context of South African higher education, mean that more thinking goes into how the now well-known principles of test design such as validity, reliability and accountability, for example, apply to the assessment of discipline-specific academic literacies. The current lack of thinking to this effect will continue to render the currently attractive view supporting this approach incomplete.

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