EMBEDDING LITERACIES: FINDING SOCIAL SPACES FOR DEALING WITH LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

A. L. van Wyk
Head: Unit for Language Development
University of the Free State
Bloemfontein, South Africa
e-mail: vwyka@ufs.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The growing hegemony of English in South Africa; sub-standard schooling and school language in education policy have inhibited access to English literacy for many students studying in English at university. One of the more tangible outcomes of these factors is the high attrition rate at tertiary level. It is generally accepted that a once-off literacy intervention does not meet the language needs of the majority of our L2 students and more interventions are necessary. However, it is a struggle to find meaningful, sustainable spaces in the curriculum to achieve this. This article describes the various social spaces that are being explored at the University of the Free State to integrate literacy in the curriculum. The efficacy of the various interventions is not investigated or discussed in detail. This article outlines the spaces and how these are used to integrate literacy across the curriculum and concludes with lessons learned from these interventions.
Key words: academic literacy; literacy development; student access.

INTRODUCTION

Widening access at South African universities has spurred Higher Education to rethink ways of assisting a linguistically diverse group of incoming students as they face the challenges of tertiary education. One of the main challenges is epistemological access. Many of our students study in their second language, which is English. Most of these students have not had the opportunity of acquiring the English cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) needed to succeed in the academy. Many tertiary students come from a failing schooling system – the legacy of apartheid education – where they have been socialised in ways that inhibit a deep approach to their learning (Van Wyk and Yeld 2013, 67) As a result, we need to acknowledge that our students' beliefs about learning at university need to be radically altered and that the language of instruction requires support measures that go beyond one-year, skills-based courses that aim to 'fix' the student. It was thought, a decade ago, that additional tutorials and once-off generic skills courses would somehow 'solve' the problem. Rose (1985) referred to this notion as 'the myth of transience'. In addition, the shift of a portion of government subsidy to

successful exit instead of enrolment increases the pressure to provide significant and effective support to stem the tide of attrition. Besides academic literacy courses, institutions of higher education need to find meaningful ways of integrating academic literacy into the curriculum as the path to gaining academic literacy is a long and laborious journey and students need as much meaningful opportunity to acquire these skills as the institution can create (Hafernik and Wiant 2012, 30).

Reading academic texts and writing academic essays and assignments are tremendous challenges for many students studying in a language that they are still acquiring and higher education is called to be responsive to these literacy needs of incoming students. We have not yet been able to successfully meet these educational challenges in South Africa.

> ... two decades after the political transition from apartheid to democracy, the system has not yet come to terms with the educational realities of the majority population groups, who continue to be affected by the legacy of apartheid (Scott 2013, 17).

This article outlines a cross-curricular approach to literacy delivery. The theoretical and philosophical foundation is briefly described, then, the context will be outlined and finally, the five current literacy interventions are described. The article concludes with observations about lessons learned from the implementation of these interventions.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

We view literacy as socially situated in the context where it is needed, which means that literacy taught in one context is not necessarily transferred to another context. Thus, reading and writing are not discrete, transferable entities and academic literacy is shaped in the context that it is practised. Students are socialised into academic discourse by role players in the academic context such as peers, lecturers and others who work with students' reading and writing in context (Gee 1990). Students who join the university become part of the academic community where they have to acquire new ways of 'saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations' (Gee 1996, 127). Students learn the new Discourse from other members of the academy and they attempt to simulate this new Discourse as they go along. Gee (1990, 159) refers to this process as 'mushfaking'. The learning process is complicated quite considerably if students are acquiring the new Discourse in a language that is not their mother tongue and they have not yet acquired the required levels of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) to make access easier.

The above conceptual framework has teaching and learning implications. Higher education institutions have the responsibility of ensuring opportunity for literacy acquisition.

Creating an enabling environment for literacy acquisition also means raising staff awareness of the difficulties that English second-language learners (ESL) face when attempting to write an academic essay or read an academic text. In addition, academic staff need guidance to facilitate literacy acquisition in the content areas. Just such an intervention is described below. Another implication of the above theoretical approach is that we embrace and acknowledge diversity and the social capital (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990, 115)) that our students bring to the learning situation. It is also the responsibility of the institution to understand and recognise the ways in which our students' prior learning experiences have influenced their literacy practices. For example, if students have been socialised to rote memorise and learn answers dictated by the educators, then that student will have great difficulty finding answers to problems and formulating a written response to a prompt that requires much reading, selection and synthesis.

Students' prior learning is influenced by micro- and macro level social contexts such as the legacy of Apartheid education, which still lingers. Many schools still do not have libraries and many teachers still lack the content knowledge and the English language proficiency required to produce successful readers and writers (Hugo and Nieman 2010; Nel and Muller 2010). Reading and writing are not systematically taught as discipline-based content areas in schools with teachers opting for what Rubagumya (2003,162) calls 'safe talk', which means copying from the blackboard and chorus answers from pupils and repeating what the teacher has said. These types of prior learning experiences do not encourage the development of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), which is needed for success at tertiary level (Cummins 1984; 2009).

In the light of the above, what then will promote literacy engagement and subsequent epistemological access for a cohort who need more than language instruction to succeed? We know that effective literacy engagement in education can minimise the negative effects of poverty and the resultant low access to print materials, poor schooling and socio-political marginalisation as well as assist with identity formation (Cummins and Early 2015, 28; Guthrie 2004, 5). Cummins and Early (2015, 30) posit several instructional responses that facilitate and are critical to student literacy engagement. Literacy achievement is closely aligned with print access and literacy engagement. Their (Cummins and Early 2015) framework includes: the teaching of academic literacy across the curriculum; language input and output should be carefully scaffolded, many opportunities for maximising literacy engagement should be created, and students' comprehension should be assisted by building and activating background knowledge and connecting content to their lives and lived experiences. Students' academic, cultural and linguistic identities should be affirmed in their academic work. In other words,

recognising their cultural and linguistic identities by helping them to draw on their L1, for example, and display their accomplishments in their L1. The interventions outlined below attempt, with varying degrees of success, the inclusion of the instructional responses described above.

CONTEXT

The University of the Free State is home to 33 000 students of whom 75 per cent study in a language that is not their mother tongue. The university has a parallel medium of instruction policy with English and Afrikaans being the languages of instruction. All incoming first-year students take the National Benchmark Test and, on the basis of their scores, 80 per cent of first-year students are placed into courses that aim at developing academic literacy through content that is relevant and authentic to the students' chosen field of study. The high proportion of students demonstrating a need for such support is not unique to UFS, but shows rather the scale of the challenge faced by all higher education institutions if they are to meet the educational needs of their incoming students. Literacy interventions are steered by a content-based instruction (CBI) approach to literacy development. This means that literacy is taught through content that is meaningful, authentic and relevant to the students' chosen field of study. The first-year literacy courses introduce students to cognitive academic language skills as required in their faculties. Besides the literacy courses, there are several other academic literacy interventions that span the undergraduate curriculum. A concerted effort to integrate literacy skills across the curriculum is an institutional imperative given the literacy levels of many school-leavers entering the university.

LITERACY INTERVENTIONS

Literacy interventions include staff development and student development and touch on curriculum development as will be demonstrated by the description of these interventions. The article outlines the content of the academic literacy courses, which form the point of departure of the literacy development. This will be followed by a description of a programme called Academic Facilitation Sessions (AFS) and then the supportive work in the writing centre is described as well as a module evaluation and redesign project and a staff development programme.

Academic literacy courses

Literacy courses are faculty based in that the content used to teach the literacy skills is relevant,

meaningful, theme-based content for that faculty and the literacy skills pertain to the type of academic skills needed in that faculty. Literacy courses are presented in the humanities; economic and management sciences; natural and agricultural sciences, health sciences and law. The courses include two main reading components, viz. an intensive, in-class reading section and an extensive graded reading component. Using the authentic academic text, students learn to read critically, identify and extract main ideas, read for details. Time is spent in class on pre-reading activities that scaffold students' comprehension of the text they are about to read. Our instructors are mandated to connect the topics to students' lives and to encourage them to relate to their own experiences. Much time is spent teaching summarising and paraphrasing, which are two key skills across all faculties. Students also focus on writing from reading, for example, writing a paragraph or essay based on classroom reading. The syllabus includes vocabulary building; using a variety of reading strategies relevant to the selected texts as well as pre-, while- and post-reading activities.

In the extensive, graded reader programme, students' reading ability is assessed in five areas, viz. comprehension; inferencing; identification of main ideas in paragraphs; vocabulary and comprehension of the difference between fact and opinion. Based on the results of the test, students are placed on an appropriate reading level where they are able to read easily and with good comprehension. Students are placed on levels from 2–6 in the graded reader programme and are able to move themselves up a level each term as their reading develops. Students complete an on-line quiz based on the reader and they read approximately 100 (1 text) pages per week. The quizzes from part of a freely, available, on-line programme called M-Reader.

The writing component involves paragraph and essay writing. Topics are authentic and based on themes relevant to their chosen fields of study. The scoring of the written work is done by means of an analytic scoring rubric involving a three-draft system (Draft one: outline, organisation and content; Draft two: vocabulary, usage and mechanics; and draft three: the whole rubric). The component that is weighted the most is content as we emphasise the students' meaning-making rather than an exclusive focus on grammar and usage. Students become involved in writing as a process and writing to learn as well as learning to write. We draw on students' understanding of concepts by allowing the use of their mother-tongues in the group work sessions when they brainstorm the topics.

All literacy courses are presented in 4 hours of teaching per week and class sizes are limited to 35 per group.

A small evaluation of the literacy courses was implemented in 2011 using a pre-test and post-test application of the NBTs. Only 26, first-year students agreed to participate and the

results are demonstrated below. Figure 1 shows the scores of students across the various levels of the pre- and post-tests of the NBT. At pre-test (Figure 1), 44 per cent of the scores were classified as Basic, 16 per cent classified as Intermediate-Lower, and 32 per cent as Intermediate-Upper and 8 per cent as Proficient. Thus, demonstrating that most of the students in this cohort were candidates for academic support. However, the graph also demonstrates that the number of students who fell in the Basic level decreased and the number of students who achieved at Intermediate-Lower and Intermediate-Upper actually increased at post-test, thus suggesting some improvement. The number of students who tested at the Proficient level, remained the same.
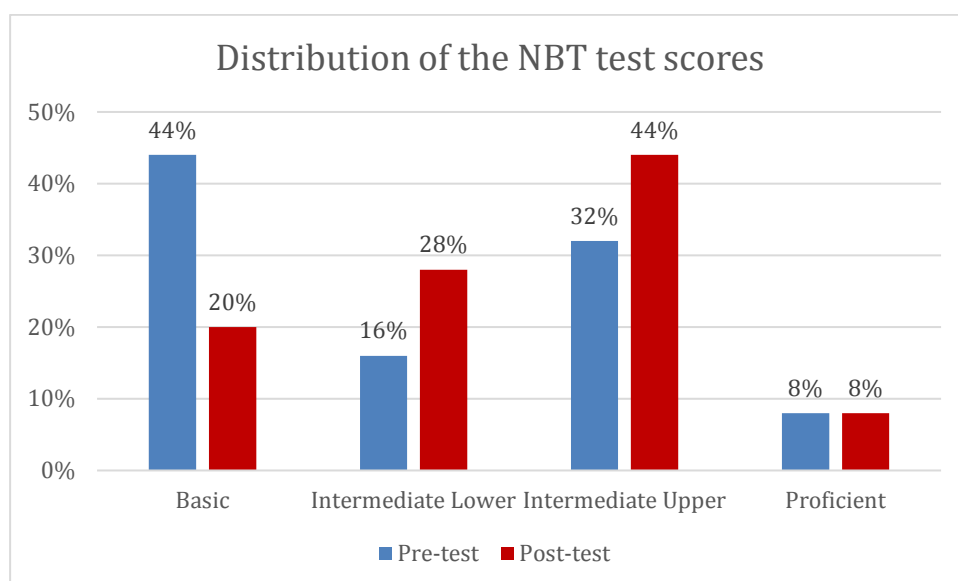

Figure 1: Distribution of the NBT AL test scores, pre-test and post-test

Academic facilitation sessions

In an attempt to assist incoming first-year students in the Faculty of Humanities, a programme was initiated called the Academic Facilitation Sessions (AFS). The idea is to provide a means of academic scaffolding (contextualized support for meaning) in the content areas. This programme is aimed, in particular, at easing the extended curriculum (four-year curriculum) students into the content areas. The AFS promotes the integration of language competencies with disciplinary content. The distinguishing characteristics of this intervention are: sound educational philosophy grounded in theories of experiential learning; social constructivism and co-operative learning; the programme is backed by a research component; students are divided into small groups (30–35) with a trained facilitator; use of a collaborative student workbook (scaffolded activities that integrate the literacy skills) and close collaboration between the

content specialist and a language practitioner. The process was researched over a period of four years and some quantitative and qualitative evidence suggests that the programme achieved a measure of success. There is a significant relationship between class attendance of the AFS sessions and academic performance, but because many factors impact on student learning, it is not possible to attribute success to this factor alone (Naude 2013, 9). The key qualitative findings were that students said that they enjoyed the class activities and that these helped them to personalise, make meaning and relate to the academic content. Students expressed that they learned not only the 'what' (this relates to the content), but also the 'why and the how' (the learning process) of learning (Naude 2013, 9). One of the more rewarding findings was that students were able to articulate and demonstrate their competency acquisition. For example, students articulated that they gained confidence in the structured class discussions and the opportunity to present content to peers grew their confidence and assisted them to test their own understanding of the content. They also learned how to present content and learned to use the appropriate language for this purpose.

The next intervention attempts to establish closer collaboration between the content area specialist and the language practitioner.

Module evaluation and redesign project

This project is also referred to as the module makeover and is likened to the refurbishing of a house. It is a service offered to academic staff members by the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL). Innovative approaches to curriculum delivery are explored with individual staff members who ask for assistance to improve content delivery. Staff members from the CTL (this includes a language practitioner from the Unit for Academic Literacy) meet with academic staff members and select one of the three module makeovers. These involve the following: a minute makeover (1 week); a mini makeover (1–2 weeks) and a major makeover (3–6 months). The mini makeover merely implies a quick change to the design, layout and organisation of the module (likened to the repainting of a house). The language practitioner encourages the content specialist to add a glossary of key terms to the module. Making the module more reader friendly (different fonts, graphics, colour and visuals) is of value to the second-language learner who is supported by more modes than just the written word.

The mini makeover (likened to the addition of a room to an existing house) involves the incorporation of one or more learning technologies or teaching tools such as Blackboard, podcasting, powerpoint or prezi. The language practitioner assists the content specialist to select a number of language skills for integration. The skills are mapped for each level of the degree

programme and staff members select some of these that they feel comfortable to include in their module delivery. For example, explaining key terminology before starting the lecture; using various methods to introduce vocabulary; how to facilitate students' reading with appropriate pre-reading activities and other techniques for scaffolding listening and writing.

The major makeover can be compared to the demolishing of a house and rebuilding it from scratch. Methods such as the flipped classroom approach or the migration of content into an e-guide format are introduced to the content specialist. The language practitioner assists with the design of assessment; identifying and implementing scaffolding methods at all levels of course delivery. For example, how to set guided prompts when assessing first-year students and gradually removing the scaffolding as students' progress to the second year of study. Content specialists are assisted to create rubrics for the second-language learner: a rubric that allows for meaning making as well as vocabulary, usage and mechanics. Academic staff are informed about the difficulties that second-language students experience with, for example, reading their textbooks or other related academic material. They often find the material difficult; the reading load is heavy, their slow reading speed aggravates matters and the limited time available does not allow them to engage actively with all their reading material (Hafernik and Wiant 2012, 81). The language practitioner suggests techniques to assist students to overcome these difficulties such as how to read for a purpose; how to apply reading strategies such as the SQ3R (Survey, Read, Recite Review); spend time in class assisting students to identify main ideas in sections of their prescribed reading, send students away with specific questions to answer after reading sections of their prescribed texts. These questions could be included in the printed module for the course. Content specialists are presented with a range of options from which to select. In short, academic staff members are encouraged not to focus on differences in a diverse student population, but to implement strategies that assist all students to gain epistemological access.

The intervention described above is very new and, as yet, there are no research results to report here.

Writing centre

The writing support provided from the writing centre supports the integration of skills in the disciplines across faculties. A content-based approach (language skills are taught using content that is relevant and authentic as vehicle) is taken with all interventions. In other words, generic workshops and short courses are avoided in favour of workshops using authentic material and tasks when students need them in assessment tasks or other discipline-related tasks.

Interventions take the form of individual, small group and larger group interventions. Several workshops are made available on-line and students are able to work through these at their own pace and in their own time. This participation is tracked and additional links are included where students struggle. Workshops cover topics like paraphrasing, summarising, paragraph formulation, developing arguments and linking ideas within a text.

Assistance from the writing centre is characterised by close collaboration with academic staff members. If students come to the Write Site, their lecturers are contacted and writing centre consultants are briefed beforehand about task expectations and requirements. This process assists students' understanding of what is required by their disciplines and helps to clarify the relationship between what they learn in the faculty-based literacy courses and the specific requirements of each discipline (McWilliams and Allen 2014, 18).

We have a careful data collection system in place. Every student and every staff member completes a form indicating how they were helped and what intervention was implemented. The consultant completes a form identifying what the students' needs were and which interventions were implemented. Data gathered in this way help to inform teaching on the academic literacy courses and students' needs are communicated to academic staff members by means of a short report by staff from the Write Site.

Staff development

The University of the Free State has a parallel medium policy of instruction, viz. English and Afrikaans. University management initiated a project to identify the language needs of academic staff members who are mostly second-language speakers of English as is the student body. The desire for English-medium classes is ever-increasing among students of all non-English mother tongues. Staff members and students alike have expressed concern over the English language abilities of academic staff members in relation to mainly lecturing and writing assessments. University administration decided to allocate resources to the English language development of staff as it acknowledges that staff development will affect both staff and students in the long run.

Interviews were conducted with 80 staff members on Bloemfontein campus and Qwaqwa campus. The interviewees were selected from all faculties and represented the cultural diversity of the university. These interviews were conducted individually by an English Language Specialist (ELS) from the United States.

The ELS posed the following five questions to each staff member:

- What is your academic and professional background?

- What courses do you teach; how many students are in your English-medium versus your Afrikaans: medium sections?

- What are your needs in relation to English, specifically related to speaking, listening, reading and writing?

- If you could have any kind of language-related intervention, what would it be?

- Is there anything else you think we should know about language on campus?

Findings of this survey revealed some interesting results. Accents of staff members vary across campuses, but not a single staff member who was interviewed struggled to convey experiences, thoughts and opinions in English and, it appears that communication issues in the classrooms are more about culture than about language. Staff members identified difficulties with culture-appropriate humour as well as worldview and foundational knowledge. A survey of examination papers, assessment prompts and written course guides did, however, demonstrate a significant need for writing assistance among staff members.

The ELS made the following recommendations to university management:

- That translation and editing services on campus be increased;

- Staff development that would entail cross-cultural communication, culturally relevant pedagogy and literacy across the curriculum should be implemented;

- Seminars with the following topics should be made available to staff members: the role of global Englishes; language policy, language rights and power; culture, identity and language; the importance of fluency combined with accuracy; individual language learning differences including factors like motivation, affect, aptitude and learning styles; principles of effective correction in the language-learning classroom; language transfer from first language and culturally relevant pedagogy.

The evidence gained from the above survey highlights the needs of second-language academic staff members in a diverse linguistic environment. This survey had the added advantage of raising awareness of staff members and management alike to the urgency of a concerted, focussed effort to integrate language skills in the curriculum in that it highlighted the needs of students and staff alike.

The above literacy interventions provide much needed insights and lessons, which could assist in the furthering of literacy integration. These are discussed in the section below.

DISCUSSION

The aim of this multi-faceted approach to literacy development is to initiate understanding among faculty members and create opportunity for staff involvement in interventions that facilitate embedding of literacy skills in the curriculum. The aim is to take a systemic approach to integration of the literacy skills. Our definition of *systemic* is that every content specialist on all three campuses should have an understanding of students' literacy needs and should be involved in some way to promote epistemological access. Our challenge is to provide a flexible framework to facilitate the needs of lecturers and students in different disciplines and to facilitate an understanding of the literacy engagement framework as described in section 2.

Interventions aimed at students such as the CBI literacy courses and the AFS programme did provide evidence of some success as recorded in the sections above. One of the more important facts to emerge from the processes of implementation, is that literacy transfer is facilitated by collaboration with content specialists, specifically those who are involved in the AFS; Write Site and module redesign interventions. It is important to note that a few content specialists were hesitant about imparting language skills at first because literacy skills may not be as evident or measurable in a content area and the content specialist may lack the know-how to make their tacit knowledge of the literacy of the disciplines explicit (Jacobs 2007,66). Regular meetings and training sessions with content specialists and tutors alike, did facilitate the process of promoting understanding of, not only, the skills and competencies, but also forged good relationships among faculty members and language practitioners. Without this solid relationship of trust and mutual respect, embedding literacies across the curriculum could be very difficult to achieve. This process is, however, time-consuming and labour-intensive as interventions such as the module redesign project require multiple, face-to-face, individual meetings. These factors make this type of intervention cost-intensive and puts a strain on limited human resources. Institutional buy-in and support is vital if interventions like these are to make any impact.

The above description of the literacy interventions currently implemented at the UFS may appear to present a rather bottom-up, simplified approach to making academic literacy skills systemic. Currently, in spite of curricula renewal, literacy skills are still generally seen by academics as something 'apart' or separate and not their responsibility – a view that will take time and much institutional effort to change. The interventions described in this article are an attempt to create ways (social spaces) of reaching out to academic staff members (who are very aware of their students struggles with reading and writing) to encourage and enable them to

facilitate epistemological access with a variety of adjustments to course delivery.

Several pedagogical accommodations need to be made if literacy delivery is to be successful at student level. We have outlined these and mentioned a few examples as they occur in the various interventions. Students are more likely to be motivated to learn if authentic tasks and materials are presented to them. They are eager to engage in activities that have an immediate influence on the task at hand. Literacy delivery is more successful in smaller groups (35–40 students per group) where structured group work is controlled and feedback is provided to each group (Thies 2012, 17). Another important pedagogical consideration is that literacy is best facilitated through activity-based, experiential learning where activities are purposefully constructed to provide students with ample opportunity for application of the skills. This requires time which has institutional timetabling implications. Without institutional commitment, this issue cannot be addressed.

Our university is in the throes of providing institutional guidelines for the embedding of literacies in the curriculum, but much advocacy and persuasion is required before commitment to the incremental, systemic integration of academic literacy skills in the disciplines is achieved.

CONCLUSION

On the surface, many South African higher education institutions are providing open access in that a very diverse student population now have access to education. The greatest concern, however, is the attrition rate as mentioned above. Students are unable to gain epistemological access and cannot engage in a meaningful way with their learning. It is the responsibility of the institution to address these needs with understanding and insights gained from much research on the role of language in learning that has been done in this country and internationally. Higher education is challenged to make the unwieldy institution more accommodating as it searches for viable, more comprehensive ways of embedding literacies in the curriculum.

REFERENCES

Bourdieu, P. and J. Passeron. 1990. *Reproduction in education, society and culture.* Newbury Park: Sage Publications.

Cummins, J. 1984. *Bilingualism and special education: Issues in assessment and pedagogy.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Cummins, J. 2009. Fundamental psycholinguistic and sociological principle underlying educational success for linguistic minority students. In *Social justice through multilingual education,* ed. T. Skutnabb-Kangas, R. Phillipson, A. K. Mohanty and M. P. Panda, 19–35. Toronto: Multilingual Matters.

Cummins, J. and M. Early. 2015. *Big ideas for expanding minds: Teaching English language learners across the* curriculum. Ontario: Pearson.

Gee, J. P. 1990. *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses.* London: Falmer Press.

Gee, J. P. 1996. *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses.* 2nd ed. London: Taylor and Francis.

Guthrie, J. T. 2004. Teaching for literacy engagement. *Journal of Literacy Research* 36(1): 1–30.

Hafernik, J. J. and F. M.Wiant. 2012. *Integrating multilingual students into college classrooms: practical advice for faculty.* Toronto: Multilingual Matters.

Hugo, J. and M. Nieman. 2010. Using English as a second language instruction: Concerns and needs of primary school teachers in South Africa. *Journal of Language Teaching* 44(1): 59–69.

Jacobs, C. 2007. Towards a critical understanding of the teaching of discipline-specific academic literacies: Making a tacit explicit. *Journal of Education* 41:1–24.

McWilliams, R. and Q. Allen. 2014. Embedding academic literacy skills: Towards a best practical model. *Journal of University teaching and learning* 11(3): 1–19.

Naude, L. 2013. Research in the extended curriculum of the faculty of humanities: The academic facilitation sessions programme. Unpublished executive summary. Bloemfontein: University of the Free State.

Nel, N. and H. Müller. 2010. The impact of teachers limited English proficiency on English second-language learners in South African schools. *South African Journal of Education* 30(4): 635–650.

Rose, M. 1985. The language of exclusion: Writing instruction at the university. *College English* 47(4): 341–359.

Rubagumaya, C. 2003. English medium primary schools in Tanzania: A new linguistic market in education? In *Language of instruction in Tanzania and South Africa,* ed. B. Brock-Utne, Z. Desai and M. Qorro, 49–170. Dar es Salaam: E and D publishers.

Scott, I. 2013. Paving the way for systemic change: Curriculum change for development and equity. In *Surfacing possibilities: what it means to work with first-generation higher education students,* ed. J. Pym and M. Paxton, 14–25. Illnois: Common Ground Publishers.

Thies, L. C. 2012. Increasing student participation and success: collaborating to embed academic literacies into the curriculum. *Journal of Academic Language and Learning* 6(1): 15–31.

Van Wyk, A. and N. Yeld. 2013. Academic literacy and language development. In *The global student experience: An international and comparative analysis,* eds C. B. Kandiko and M. Weyers, 62–77. London: Routledge.