

A Deliberation on Some of the Factors Which May influence English Communication Skills Students Performance in a South African University

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ABSTRACT The need for some kind of language support for under-prepared tertiary students has become accepted globally and institutions of higher learning have had to be innovative in their attempts to remedy this challenge. The usual challenges in offering such a support to students are further complicated by the peculiar environment of each higher institution. English Communication Skills (ECS) is an attempt by a South African university to provide literacy support for its students. A number of determinants have been identified in the literature for students' non-remarkable performance – profile of the students, their motivation levels, design of the course, teaching style, support from and policies of the university management and administration, etc. This paper examines some of the factors which may influence students' performance in an academic literacy skills course of this nature.

INTRODUCTION

Academic support is a deliberate intervention provided by universities to address the shortcomings of their students (see Zgheib et al. 2010) and this is exactly what the University of Venda has done with its English Communication Skills course.

The University of Venda (Univen) is a historically black disadvantaged rural-based comprehensive university based in a rural part of the Limpopo Province. It offers a wide range of degrees, diplomas and certificate courses for undergraduate as well as post-graduate studies. Among the courses offered, is English Communication Skills (ECS) which is a compulsory first year support pre-requisite to the completion of any programme and should be successfully completed before any degree/diploma can be conferred.

ECS is an equivalent of what is nationally and internationally known as *English for Academic Purposes* (EAP). EAP is literally located in English-medium universities worldwide. According to Afful (2007), EAP is offered under different names in different parts of the globe; for instance, many universities in India prefer the term *Communication Skills*; and in Sin-

gapore most institutions use the term *English for Academic Purposes*, a few use *English for Communication Purpose*, others, *English for Business* or *English for Engineering* etc.

In South Africa, EAP is offered in all tertiary institutions and it seems the preferred name is English for Academic Purposes. However, different names are used from time to time. For instance, at Univen the course was formerly called English Language Practical (ELP). At the Medical University of Southern Africa (now Medunsa Campus of the University of Limpopo) it is referred to as Academic Communication Skills, at the University of Pretoria and the North-west University the course is referred to as Academic Literacy Skills.

At Univen, ECS is spread over two first year semesters; the first semester focuses more on a general introduction to EAP which is often referred to as English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) while the second semester is more geared towards what is usually referred to as English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP). All university programmes at first year level are structured such that there are both space for completion of this module and time for the student to assimilate the necessary academic literacy skills at entry level that are necessary for the

rest of their university study. But sadly, this is not always achieved. The importance of ECS lies in the fact that it is geared towards addressing a specific academic need, that is, bringing the students' academic literacy needs to acceptable levels.

METHODOLOGY

Research Question

This paper is based on the researchers' observations and first-hand experience as ECS lecturers. It also draws heavily on the literature dealing with factors which may influence students' performance in an academic course. The question below is thus posed to assist the researchers to assist the researchers find answer to the issues raised in the paper.

What are some of the factors which may engender student performance in a course?

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

According to the literature, students' performance in a course can be determined by a host of factors. In this section some of these factors which may engender students' performance in a course are discussed as part of the overall literature review of the study.

Class Size

A benchmark visit by us to other South African institutions of higher learning showed that class size is a common problem, though not experienced on the same magnitude as the situation at Univen. Over 3000 students register for ECS annually, and students are divided into groups of about 300 students on average. The largest number at sister institutions is roughly 120. Class size is defined as 'the actual number of students taught by a lecturer at a particular time – the number physically present in a lecture room and who are interacting among themselves and with the lecturer' (Botha et al. 2006: 63; Fredriksson et al. 2013). This study takes decision to understand 'class size' as the total number of students allocated to a particular group, as practiced at the institution.

The issue of class size and the concept 'large' need clarification. Botha et al. (2006: 63) mention that the two concepts are viewed and expressed differently, however, 'eighty students

is the breaking point where traditional teaching techniques are no longer workable and new ones must be tried'.

Rationally, it is undeniable that large classes, often referred to as 'overcrowding', affects teaching and learning in a negative manner. The researchers' point of view is that teaching and learning does take place in overcrowded classes, but there are issues that make it difficult to produce quality and effective teaching and learning. Large classes put both the lecturer and the students at a disadvantage because of issues such as daily class management and control and at Univen, the issue is worsened by the scarcity of teaching facilities.

Research shows that class size does impact on the quality of teaching and learning. Botha et al. (2006: 76) explain that though class size should not be 'oversimplified', it does have negative effects such as noise levels and distance from visual information on board.

The researchers contention therefore is that whereas class size may not be overgeneralized, it stands as a possible contributory factor which may engender ECS student performance at Univen.

Under-preparedness of Students

According to van Schalkwyk (2008:7) the term 'under-preparedness' implies that students do not have what it takes to be successful at university. That is, they are not well equipped to 'meet the demands of tertiary education'. The term is also referred to as 'at risk', 'under-prepared', and 'educationally disadvantaged'. 'Under-preparedness' is linked to poor preparation of learners and may not be overlooked when investigating student performance (Zgheib et al. 2010).

Under-preparedness manifests itself in different forms due to the students schooling background. Lecturers at one of the institutions we visited for benchmarking mentioned that they tested students and classified their students into 'low risk', 'average' and 'high risk'. This shows that under-preparedness is wide-spread and needs to be dealt with aptly. Seemingly, very few students at Univen received private or what is normally called ex-Model C schooling where it is believed that language teaching is more meaningful. The researchers mention this with caution because it may not always be the case that students from privileged backgrounds do not struggle. However, most students from priv-

ileged backgrounds tend to be more confident and they are able to use language more effectively. It is also to be noted that almost all students, irrespective of their background struggle with academic writing which is a necessity in higher education. Hence, some universities both local and abroad have writing centres to deal with such cases. There is no such centre at Univen and the ECS class size prevent effective teaching of writing.

Maturity of the mind also plays a major role in student performance, that is, the students' mental ability to move over and deal with matters beyond normal and basic schooling. According to ICAS (2002) '[s]uccessful students learn that membership in an academic community depends on their engagement with complex ideas and not just their own experience'. Quite often one hears students complaining about too much work, difficult work, not understanding, and so forth, an indication that maturity of the mind has not yet set in.

Student Motivation and Commitment

It is a well-known fact that highly motivated individuals are responsible beings who have potential and are capable of good performance. Motivation is primarily linked to students' desire to participate and engage fully in a learning situation. It is described as a 'process through which individuals instigate and sustain goal-directed activity' and viewed as a process through which 'an individual's needs and desires are set in motion' (Rakes and Dunn 2010: 79). It is seen as a 'key factor in successful learning' and it can be 'intrinsic (that is, derive from the personal interests and inner needs of the learner)' or 'extrinsic (that is, derive from external sources such as material rewards) (Ellis 1994: 36).

Students' self-management skills and their attitude toward ECS also need consideration. For instance, despite being advised to avoid clashes when choosing groups (Department of English Handbook 2012: 3), some students nonetheless find themselves experiencing clashes with other subjects. This becomes problematic because quite often students overlook ECS classes. However, in some cases, clashes are caused by the way time is allocated on the main time table.

Students' innate abilities could also be a contributory factor to student performance because some students shy away from participating, showing signs of inhibition, and obviously depend on other students to help them. Innate

abilities relate to an individual's natural, inborn 'cognitive skills index value' (Melvin et al. 2005).

Consistency in Teaching and Assessment

Teaching and assessment are inseparable entities in teaching and learning for the production of quality education (Hung et al. 2010). In a situation where students write the same examination at the end of a course it is essential to maintain uniformity and consistency in teaching and assessment across all groups. Though the ECS course outline prescribes aspects to be dealt with, the content disseminated in class and the choice of tasks often depends on the lecturer. Due to the differences in training and educational backgrounds and lack of clearly defined standards, inconsistencies occur in the delivery of the course to the different groups. These differences are quite significant so they could influence student's performance in ECS.

CONCLUSION

The importance of ECS to Univen students cannot be denied, however, for such a course to play a meaningful role in the academic lives of students it has to be carefully planned, coordinated and managed. The factors discussed in the paper are very crucial as they affect student performance, as such, every effort should be made to remedy the problem. It is mind-boggling that students pass ECS but are still found wanting in as far as academic literacy skills are concerned. This reflects the multidimensional nature of any support course and the need to find a holistic approach to the notion of under-preparedness. As indicated in the abstract the success of ECS is determinant upon diverse factors and most importantly, upon the various stakeholders having the same understanding of the central notion of 'academic support', how it is enhanced, recognised and applied in the whole academic culture of an institution. Once this common understanding is achieved the necessary investment will be made in ECS to enure ills like large class sizes are remedied. The detrimental effect of large class cuts across all levels of the education system including the inculcation of academic literacy in tertiary students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Attempts to reduce the interaction challenges associated with large classes are of course

influenced by factors, some of which are immediate and others long term. Long term factors include the need to review admission requirements into Univen to remove the need for a compulsory literacy course for all students hence improving the ratio of student to lecturer while immediate remedies including support for lecturers to include other types of instruction in addition to the usual classroom teaching and interaction. In addition, efforts should be made by the Univen authorities to reduce ECS class size as no effective teaching and/or learning can take place in such large classes. The time table issue can be resolved by dedicating special slots to ECS only, that is, during such periods no other first year courses should be taught. Furthermore, all ECS lecturers should undergo continuous professional development training, that way, the differences in training and educational backgrounds could be bridged. Psychological services should be utilised to deal with student preparedness, motivation and commitment issues.

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