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Towards a responsible agenda for academic literacy development: considerations that will benefit students and society

Abstract

The transition from secondary to higher education (HE) requires a change of cultural mindset (cf. Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003; Leki, 2006). It is widely accepted that the academic performance and motivation of first year students to stay in HE depend, among others, on how well they integrate into the university environment (Brinkworth et al., 2009). Academic integration or acculturation takes different forms.

The premise of this article is that students have to learn to engage with academic discourse, i.e., they must acquire the community's communicative currency, defined as different kinds of language used to reflect the community's current norms, practices, values and expectations (cf., among others, Duff, 2010; Gee, 1998, 2000; Hyland, 2009). As reflective and responsible practitioners we therefore need to outline a critical agenda for academic acculturation by reviewing the debate on the nature of literacy and, particularly, by discussing similarities and differences in epistemology and approaches to literacy. Such an agenda will have to recognise insights gained from, in particular, the New Literacy Studies (Street, 1998, 2004) and the Academic Literacies movement (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Scott, 2007), but it will also become enriched by a linguistic perspective (Biber, 2006; Blanton, 1994; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Halliday, 1978, 1985, 1993, 1996, 2002; Hyland, 2009). In developing a template for the agenda we accordingly acknowledge the theoretical defensibility and the feasibility of different approaches to academic acculturation.

Keywords: academic literacy development, academic discourse, academic acculturation or integration, higher education

1.   Point of departure

The mediocre academic performance and inadequate preparedness levels of higher education (HE) students across the world has been frequently addressed in the literature. Low throughput rates seem to be the leitmotif in these discussions. One possible reason for the continued discussion may be political, social and economic pressure on universities to increase students' graduation and retention rates. The South African data seem to confirm this tendency: Scott et al., (2007) and Scott (2009) reported that only 44% of undergraduate students registered for a three year degree graduated after five years of study. More recent data (Council on Higher Education (CHE), 2011) show that 49% completed their three-year degree programme after five years in the system.

Another reason why this is a sensitive and heavily debated topic (in South Africa, in particular) may be the elusive nature of factors contributing to student failure, among others a lack of appropriate levels of independence, initiative and self-regulation; complexities related to the physical and emotional wellness of students; and difficulties with policies and support mechanisms implemented at HE institutions.

In an attempt to address the needs of stakeholders (e.g. society at large, government, universities, companies providing scholarships and employing graduates, and parents), and beneficiaries (students, teaching staff and professional organisations), factors contributing to student failure have to be determined before informed decisions can be made on how to deal with them. Some factors are within and some beyond the control of HE and they are situated at different levels of curriculum development – cf. Scott (2009) for a comprehensive discussion.

Factors influencing academic integration pertain to different aspects that are often difficult to manipulate, among others, socio-economic, political and historical realities; or the nature of access to higher education, for example the role of entrance exams; or the massification of university education as opposed to vocational training (cf. Letseka & Maile, 2008; Scott, 2009; Teichler, 1998; Van Dyk et al., 2009). At an institutional level academic integration is influenced by the quality of teaching and learning, the amount and quality of principled planning to improve the existing educational system, the identification and communication of academic culture and difficulties with the formulation or implementation of policies and the delineation of support mechanisms (cf. Bitzer, 2009; Brinkworth et al., 2009; Darlaston-Jones et al., 2003; Leki, 2006; Van Schalkwyk et al, 2009).

At the level of implementation, we can identify, among others, the establishment of support programmes with respect to the students' physical and emotional well-being, including study skills support as well as time management training (CHE, 2010). Another area of focus is at the level of systematic materials design targeting linguistic behaviour where attention is given to the development of the students' academic literacy and academic language ability (CHE, 2010).

2.   The issue at hand

Drawing on Weideman's article entitled "Academic literacy interventions: What are we not yet doing, or not yet doing right?" in this number of the *Journal for Language Teaching*, the focus of our article will be on what really matters for us as reflective language practitioners in HE, i.e. we will concentrate on the development of academic literacy as the building block for acculturation and success in HE. We will contribute to the discussion by first reviewing the debate on the nature of academic literacy and literacy practices, on the basis of which we will outline a critical agenda for academic acculturation related to literacy. In doing so, we hope to provide stepping stones for universities engaged in taking decisions about academic acculturation, because we want to foster decisions that matter and benefit all stakeholders (that is inclusive of beneficiaries); decisions, in other words, that will address personal, academic, institutional, economic and social challenges.

3.   An attempt to define academic literacy

The concept of 'academic literacy' can be explained from different angles. In what follows, we will reflect on the most frequently used theoretical justifications – no more than a snapshot within the limitations of a single article. We will first explain the concept from a broader, pedagogical perspective. Next, we will discuss the contribution of the New Literacy Studies and the Academic Literacies movements. The focus will then shift to the link between academic literacy, language and learning, followed by an explanation of the concept from a linguistic point of view as a theoretical backdrop against which we will review the debate on different academic literacy practices and informed decision making that will result in academic acculturation or integration in HE.

3.1   Academic literacy defined from a broader perspective

The premise is that students need to obtain their degrees in as effective and efficient a way as possible. It is definitely not the case that most students entering university are so unskilled or ignorant that institutions cannot but provide remedial training programmes to be academically successful. Students, on the one hand, enter HE with different and diverse forms and levels of useful knowledge and skills that need to be fostered, but they, on the other hand, also have to be familiarised with the new context. Since students need to make progress by gaining access to the established academic community – it is not the context that has to accommodate to them – it is our responsibility as members of the community to empower them.

Success in HE depends *inter alia* on students' motivation and ability to adapt to new ways of pursuing, interpreting, organising, producing and communicating knowledge, and to get accustomed to the norms, standards, procedures, values and linguistic forms that constitute academic life. Lea and Street (1998:158) state that "[l]earning in higher education involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding,

interpreting and organising knowledge." Put differently, when students enter HE they are allowed (epistemological) access and consequently these students have to be supported to develop their awareness and abilities through assimilating, understanding, embracing, questioning, interacting and engaging with the codes and conventions of academia (Van de Poel & Van Dyk, 2013).

Entering HE could be considered a process in which students are assisted to inculcate themselves into a new culture (Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995; Geisler, 1994). This can only be achieved if students become acculturated into the academic environment by, among others, introducing them to the community's procedural, conceptual (declarative), and experiential knowledge (Gorzelsky, 2013). Although knowledge (in all its different forms) is an important constituent for surviving HE, it also refers to the ability to make, mediate and negotiate meaning in specific contexts and for specific purposes. On the one hand, knowledge presupposes understanding and interacting with the academic community at large. On the other hand, it postulates a meaningful engagement with different discourse communities, where a discourse community is a constituency that shares texts, practices, values, norms, etc. In other words, a discourse community can be identified by its accepted and acknowledged patterns of communication.

Being academically literate is therefore more than just being able to read and write. It is about being multiliterate and combining a range of abilities that are conducive for making meaning as well as mediating and negotiating knowledge (Carstens, 2012). Different discourse communities have different communication patterns. Becoming multiliterate enables students to understand and transfer knowledge and skills from and to contexts and move between different discourse communities.

If we broadly define academic literacy as the knowledge and skills required to communicate and function effectively and efficiently in different academic communities and achieve well-defined academic goals, academic literacy will also encompass students' ability to handle their respective identities as linguistic, visual, numerical, information and computational creators in various modes (digital, oral, textual) – cf. Carstens (2012). At this stage we can therefore say that academic literacy has a social (exchange information), cognitive (understand, organise and reason about information) as well as a linguistic (language) dimension. Consequently, we can draw up a (non-exhaustive) list of competencies that students need to complete an academic assignment:

  i.   analyse and interpret the instruction and set up a realistic work plan;

  ii.   manage responsibilities effectively;

  iii.   perform (online) searches and locate, evaluate and use relevant and applicable information for the task at hand;

  iv.   manage the acquired information effectively and efficiently;

  v.   construct knowledge and negotiate meaning appropriately and adequately by

analysing, synthesising and evaluating (written and visual) material and applying it to other cases;

vi. employ appropriate study techniques;

vii. handle, and produce, numerical data;

viii. interpret tables and graphs and make inferences, or draw a flow chart;

ix. employ critical thinking strategies in evaluating a case, study or thesis;

x. argue a case, by also providing relevant and appropriate evidence (steering clear of plagiarism);

xi. come to informed conclusions;

xii. write up an essay using relevant terminology, style and register;

xiii. improve computer skills to write an appropriate and acceptable essay;

xiv. design and present data at seminars (practising beforehand);

xv. manage time effectively and meet the deadline;

xvi. manage stress effectively and keep a realistic perspective on academic life;

xvii. engage in teamwork and peer review; and

xviii. enjoy the result and draw from it the motivation to do well the next time.

Even though academic literacy involves a range of non-linguistic abilities, most of them are directly related to the linguistic output, on the basis of which students will be evaluated. Moreover, it is somewhat artificial to distinguish between different sets of abilities, since in a task-based perspective the abilities are intertwined. Thus, for instance, with respect to (i) above, we can say that – in an ideal world – reading (and general linguistic) skills are activated against the background of general cognitive and study skills while students show how information and computer literate they are. When they exchange their findings within their community, students show social and general academic (linguistic, numerical and computational) literacy, while constantly updating their skills and abilities en route to gaining knowledge. In whatever way we try to understand the different facets, academic literacy is not a straightforward concept, as we will show in the following sections.

3.2 The contribution of the New Literacy Studies and the Academic Literacies movements

As a basis for outlining a critical acculturation agenda we will discuss the two main strands of academic literacy research, the New Literacy Studies (3.2.1) and the Academic Literacies movement (3.2.2), and how they are enriched from a linguistic perspective

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(3.4). Since this last component is often criticized it will be preceded by a section that ponders the link between academic literacy, language and learning (see 3.3 below).

3.2.1   The New Literacy Studies movement

The point of departure of the New Literacy Studies is that literacy should be conceptualised within a broader social order. Advocates of this approach, such as Barton (1994), Barton and Hamilton (1998), Fairclough (1992a), Gee (1991; 1996), Kress (1997), Lea and Street (1998; 1999), and Street (1984; 1995; 1998), agree from an ethnographical and communicative competence point of view that literacy practices involve more than the issue of declining standards or a single problem (in many cases, language) that needs to be fixed. Moreover, it does not suffice to 'teach' skills as if they were discrete linguistic items, as is often the case in remedial academic literacy courses. Instead, the New Literacy Studies encourages literacy practices to be treated as "social practices and as resources rather than as a set of rules formally and narrowly defined" (Street, 1998:1). They, thus, move away from a one-dimensional deficit model, as they call it, and conceptualise literacy as three overlapping frameworks: study skills, academic socialisation, and academic literacies.

In the *study skills framework* literacy is a cognitive skill that differs from individual to individual as a set of discrete items that students need to and can learn. Once identified and learnt, they are transferable to other contexts without any difficulty. If students, for example, learn the grammar and spelling of a language, they should not have any difficulties passing their exams in the prescribed time, i.e. language will not be a problem. If they don't pass their exams, there must be a problem. As already mentioned above, the study skills framework has therefore often been referred to as a deficit-model and it has received criticism for its almost blind faith in remedial training courses. Another point of critique is that, although clearly academic, it does not include non-linguistic modes such as visual, gestural and digital (Carstens, 2012) but confines itself to language – this is also true of the main body of research from proponents of the academic literacies movement and those who consider academic literacy only from a linguistic point of view (see discussions below). Street (1998:9) points out the framework's limitations by claiming that one should rather "get away from the formal associations of traditional study of grammar, as though it were simply a set of rules the user had to observe". Instead, focus should be on interpreting and representing experience and forms of social (inter)action.

The social dimension of literacy is dealt with in the context of the *academic socialisation framework* and is equated with students' need to be acculturated into disciplinary or subject-specific discourses (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). This approach assists students to think and communicate like the discourse community they are part of. The biggest point of criticism levied against this approach is that discourse communities are not always stable, i.e. we cannot speak of the academy as a single, universal and fixed culture. This approach also presupposes that knowledge is easily obtainable and once acquired transferable to other contexts. Very little attention is given to the fact that we as members of multiple communities need a multiplicity of ways in which to make meaning (Carstens,

2012). It is hardly possible that once you have learnt something, it automatically gives you epistemological access and you will have acquired the communicative power considered to be appropriate and applicable to the academic context. Another point of criticism is that one size does not fit all. We face continuous change: institutional practices and policies change due to political pressure, affordability and sustainability play a role, economies of scale influence practices, new developments bring about change and pedagogical predispositions transform reality. Putting forward an argument for empowering students by making norms, standards, procedures and linguistic forms of a specific discipline explicit is thus easier said than done (Street, 2004).

Given the multiplicity of literacies students have to face, the *academic literacies framework* sees literacies as a set of social practices that deals with the notion of meaning making from a framework of student identity, power and authority, and relationships of institutional discourse and power regarding what counts as appropriate and adequate (Carstens, 2012). This is a more theoretical and politicised perspective than that adopted in the academic socialisation framework. In this context the literacy demands of the curriculum involve a variety of communicative practices (Street, 2004:15). This approach claims to support students in such a way that they will be able to switch practices from one setting, genre, field or discipline to another and thus transfer knowledge as they are no longer powerless and outsiders, but rather part of the inner circle of academic practices. It could be argued that the academic literacies framework is highly ideological and whether students in effect become part of the inner circle remains an open question. Lea (2004:741) terms this problem a "lack of attention to pedagogy", quoting Lillis (2003:192), who admits that "[w]hilst powerful as an oppositional frame, that is a critique of current conceptualisations and practices surrounding student writing, academic literacies has yet to be developed as a design frame which can actively contribute to student writing pedagogy as both theory and practice." Although several case studies have been reported in the literature, they are all quite small and not generalisable. Moreover, when economies of scale, affordability and quality assurance need to be accounted for, the academic literacies framework is particularly problematic, since student support is labour intensive.

In sum, the three frameworks that constitute the New Literacy Studies movement are not mutually exclusive (Lea, 2004): one seems to build on the other and there is even some overlap. There also seems to be commonality in terms of theory and practice. In an ever-changing academic environment, where everything is relative, it is in our opinion enriching to take cognisance of all three frameworks to inform our research, and teaching and learning practices. The academic literacies framework gave rise to the Academic Literacies Movement. Since this movement played such a pivotal, although not unproblematic, role in our understanding of academic literacy it deserves some focused attention.

3.2.2   The Academic Literacies movement

The early 1990s mark the beginning of systematic enquiry of what is nowadays known as the Academic Literacies movement. Since then it has gained considerable support due

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to the fact that advocates of the philosophical foundation of this movement questioned traditional practices in relation to academic communication and literacy in HE and tried to provide some answers to the nature and role of academic discourse. According to Lillis and Scott (2007:5) the Academic Literacies movement "... draws on a number of disciplinary fields and subfields [and] it is a field of enquiry with a specific epistemological and ideological stance towards the study of academic communication, and particularly ... writing." In its quest it relied on the following disciplines and/or areas of research: anthropology, the New Literacy Studies movement, applied and sociolinguistics as well as systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (writing in particular), literary theory, rhetorical studies, critical discourse studies, communication studies, language and learning, sociology and sociocultural theories of learning, psychology, and multimodality.

Although the multidisciplinary inclination, in our opinion, forms the very essence of this movement, it also leads to critique against it (see Street (2004:12); Lillis (2003:192) above). The major obstacle is that it loses conceptual clarity and as a result loses what it originally intended to be, i.e. a field of critical enquiry. Moreover, it becomes narrow in focus (student writing) and application (support). Nowadays, the Academic Literacies movement tends to be nothing more than criticism guided by postmodern reasoning. Lea (2004:741) in this regard affirms that

> [w]hilst agreeing with Lillis that academic literacies has yet to be fully developed as a design frame, I argue that the focus of this body of research, both on critique and primarily on student writing, might also indicate why the work has not yet been taken up by educational developers concerned with pedagogy and practice more broadly, rather than specifically with supporting assignment writing.

An important observation concerning the multidisciplinary nature of academic literacies arises from Lea's remark. Since research is often conducted by experts in a specific discipline, for example history or law, one may not expect that these researchers are necessarily trained in the areas of education or linguistics (the natural academic home of writing), or even interested in the "language" elements related to their specific disciplines. This is not to say that their research is not informative, or does not add value, or that linguists would know the communication requirements of a specific discipline better than the disciplinary experts. One would expect that linguists involved with academic literacy development would know what the communication requirements of a discipline are because they are able to use the conceptual and analytical tools for studying, for example, differences between text types and genres. The point we want to make is that there is a lack of interdisciplinary collaboration with regard to developing theory and responsibly designing practices to enhance academic literacies that will truly benefit students.

The ethnographic and qualitative character of Academic Literacies research is highly acclaimed. However, studies are usually small scale. This method enables scholars to thoroughly investigate students' and teachers' approaches to, and interpretations of writing in HE (Lea, 2004), but it also leads to a lack of generalisability of findings

and it hinders implementation on a large scale. Furthermore, the research focus is predominantly on specific groups of students (usually traditionally marginalised groups) and on assignment writing only.

The strong focus on student writing is based on the reality that "... the main form of assessment and as such writing is a 'high stakes' activity in university education. If there are problems with writing, then the student is likely to fail" (Lillis & Scott, 2007:9). This corresponds with observations by Van de Poel and Gasiorek (2012:294), who stress that "... there is a persistent gap between staff and student expectations with respect to what is considered "good" academic writing ... Students often do not know what qualities their instructors are looking for in their writing, and as such do not have confidence in their ability to write in [and for a particular] context." Note that a case could also be made for lecturers not being clear in their instructions and sending conflicting messages about their expectations to students (Louw & Van Rooy, 2010). Even so, Lillis and Scott (2007:9) continue and say

> Clarifying the nature of the 'problem', however, is far from straightforward and for this reason it is the definition and articulation of what constitutes the 'problem' that is at the heart of much academic literacies research, involving critical and empirical exploration not least of the following questions: what is the nature of 'academic' writing in different sites and contexts?; what does it mean to participants to 'do' academic writing?; how are identity and identification bound up with rhetorical and communicative practices in the academy?; to what extent and in which specific ways do prevailing conventions and practices enable and constrain meaning making?; what opportunities exist for drawing a range of theoretical and semiotic resources into academic meaning making?

A strong insight resulting from the academic literacies research, and one that will echo throughout this article, is that there is no homogenous academic culture with norms and practices that can simply be learnt and universally applied. Nonetheless, advocates of the academic literacies movement continue to claim that once students have developed an (academic) identity and mastered the values, conventions and practices of a discipline, they will be able to easily switch practices and apply their abilities to other areas. This seems to be contradictory to what was critiqued in the first instance (a single academic culture). It appears that the notion of communities of practice is ignored here and that at any given time there will be a range of diverse communities of practice, even in one discipline such as law. Thus, the question remains: Do students really ever become part of THE inner circle of THE academe?

Another irrefutable benefit of the Academic Literacies movement is that it brought home the importance of situated writing practices and it truly involved all stakeholders. Consequently, some subject experts (very few in actual fact) nowadays pay much more attention to student writing by socialising students into the culture of the discipline and building their academic confidence. This approach by academic experts should be welcomed, because it could support academic literacy development as part of a suite of strategies employed by a HE institution. One could, however, not defer academic

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literacy development to academic experts only because this approach could have some drawbacks of which we will briefly discuss two. If the academic expert is the only person tasked with developing academic literacy, there is a risk that softer skills, like writing and language awareness raising in general, will be neglected, as lecturers have content to cover (and teaching time is precious). In interviews we found that lecturers first and foremost see themselves as subject experts and not as "language teachers" (a question of professional identity).

Moreover, they do not consider it to be their "job" to support students all the way (possibly a question of methodological ignorance) – cf. Van de Poel and Van Dyk (2013). The second shortcoming is that it regularly happens that (often junior) disciplinary experts also (have to) take on the job of academic literacy experts.

This is potentially problematic as junior academics might resist or would be unable to offer a "critical stance" towards the discourse in their discipline. Firstly, inexperienced members of staff are often impressionable and they might find it improbable that the "gurus" in their disciplines should be questioned at all. Disciplinary lecturers (experienced or new) are secondly not necessarily trained as academic literacy specialists and they, among others, do not question these kinds of practices. Educational institutions tend to forget that one needs to be socialised into a field before truly being an expert; and that critical stances are ideally developed from within a deep and broad understanding of a field; and that it may take a while for entering academics to develop the necessary knowledge and understanding required to be able and to become willing to critique the discourse of a discipline. Academic literacy development could therefore not be delegated solely to academic subject matter experts.

3.3   The link between academic literacy, language and learning

Regardless of the criticism, Academic Literacies research has truly shaped our thinking and practices, but a link between academic literacy, on the one hand, and language and learning on the other has to be established. As this article focuses on academic literacy, we will not discuss issues of multilingualism and studying through a second or additional language or the effects of these on academic success. However, we acknowledge that language and its effect on learning, particularly in multilingual settings, is considered to be one of the most significant challenges for success in education (cf. Van der Walt, 2010; Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2010b, 2011; Van der Walt & Kidd, 2012).

Academic literacy, language and academic performance (an indication that learning occurred) are closely related. Language, in fact, could be considered the cornerstone of literacy and literacy, in turn, is crucial for academic success. Kasanga (1998:114) contends that the "... ability to use English [in contexts where this language is used as language of teaching and learning] is closely bound up with the ability to an understanding ... of higher-level study." This resonates with Cliff and Yeld (2006), who claim that academic achievement depends, among others, on the critical relationship between language and the demands associated with higher education. Collett (quoted in Fouché, 2007:48) notes that

> [t]he academic process is transacted through language and students with ... weaknesses in their ability to manipulate the structures of the language are unquestionably at a disadvantage. To put it another way: language is the most basic tool for building academic literacy.

It can thus be defended that language underpins literacy, but that it is a means to an end and not a goal in itself. There is agreement among authors such as Christie (1985), Halliday (1978, 1993), Lemke (1990) and Martin (1991) that language becomes a vehicle or an instrument that enables students to understand how knowledge is structured and how to negotiate meaning, that is language facilitates learning. Halliday (1993:93) maintains that "[t]he distinctive characteristic of human learning is that it is a process of making meaning – a semiotic process; and the prototypical form of human semiotic is language."

It is, in other words, an epistemological matter where the role of language and meaning in constructing knowledge is considered (Renzl, 2007). Language could, from this point of view, be seen as fundamental to learning and thinking or as an essential condition for knowing (Alexander, 2005).

From this it could be deduced that academic literacy thus includes, but is not limited to, language ability. Bachman and Palmer (1996:75) define language ability as a "... contextualized realization of the ability to use language in the performance of specific language use tasks." This builds *inter alia* on the work by Cummins (1980; 1984; 2000), and Cummins and Swain (1986), proposing two theories of language proficiency: Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). CALP, instead of focussing on the four language skills, i.e. reading, listening, writing and speaking and their integratedness *per se*, also includes conceptualisations of non-linguistic contextual cues and cognitive demand. The linguistic tools which an individual has to master are: (i) topical knowledge, (ii) language knowledge, (iii) strategic competence, and (iv) affective schemata (Bachman and Palmer, 1996).

It should be noted here that the framework postulated by Cummins is highly context sensitive and was originally developed for use in schools and enhancing the success rate of minority language children. Coetzee-Van Rooy (2010a) investigated the extension of this framework to the South African HE sector in an attempt to come to a better understanding of the relationship between language and academic success, particularly in multilingual higher education settings. She (Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2010a:33) concludes, among others, that the applicability of the Cummins framework to South African HE settings is problematic as it was

> … postulated for a more typical 'inner circle' context, whilst higher education in South Africa today takes place in a more typical 'outer circle' context. One of the differences is that the linguistic identities of the learners in the outer circle are often multilingual, compared to the bilingual or monolingual identities of learners in the inner circle.

She contends that before such a framework could be implemented in a country like South Africa the hypotheses should be tested particularly "… in the multilingual outer circle and in a context where adult learners [need to] engage with more developed cognitive skills" (Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2010a:34).

One should also acknowledge that there is reciprocity between negotiating and making meaning, and context (Gee, 2000) and that language is the instrument used to make these interact with each other. Applied to the academic context, academically literate students should be able to activate the entire palette of their academic communicative competence to eagerly analyse and understand an assignment, seek and collect relevant information, process and internalise the information by analysing, comparing and categorising it, and present it to the academic community in accordance with reigning academic conventions (register, style and the like). This process is summarised in the words of Bachman and Palmer (1996:95) as: "[It is] the interaction of the language user's language knowledge and topical knowledge with the context (the language use task), mediated by the metacognitive strategies and facilitated by positive affect." It again refers to the association between subject knowledge and language, and the strategic knowledge to perform the task.

3.4   Academic literacy defined from a linguistic point of view

Since language plays such an important role in learning and academic success, we will now try to define academic literacy from a linguistic perspective.

The relationship between language and academic performance finds its roots in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) research, particularly target language use (TLU) analysis and writing assessment (Donohue & Erling, 2012). TLU analysis needs some consideration. Principles from SFL are often used to analyse rhetoric, register, genre, and text from both first and additional language users, but also ethnographic analysis has been used extensively, especially by advocates of the Academic Literacies movement who "have argued for shifting attention from the written text … to the language users, calling for a focus on social practices, identities, relations of power and associated affect ... Much target language situation analysis, therefore has taken the form of discourse analysis." (Donohue & Erling, 2012:211). Discourse competence is not synonymous with language proficiency or language ability, but there is a relationship in that language ability refers to the capacity to construct meaning from interpreting and producing discourse (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Thus, a text produced by a student, for example, is evidence of that capacity to construct meaning.

From a sociolinguistic point of view we should take note of what Oller (1979) stated already three decades ago, in other words that language is a complex, integrated system that cannot be broken up and approached from discrete points of view – one component should always be interpreted in relation to another. Communicating (and in this case, constructing meaning through discourse) is considerably more than the sum of its linguistic components. These ideas gained prominence with the introduction of communicative language teaching in the 1970s and 1980s with a move away from

learning discrete linguistic components towards a more socially constructed position where it is assumed, among others, that language cannot be separated from the specific context in which it occurs (Weideman, 2011). The focus was on the systematic use of linguistic, strategic and pragmatic variables relevant for authentic communication (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980) and language knowledge was part of communicative competence that included linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence (Canale, 1983). Skehan (1988:213) explained the four components of communicative competence as follows:

> [the] linguistic component [is] concerned with the operation of the language system, e.g. syntax and vocabulary; [the] sociolinguistic component ... implicates our capacity to work out the meanings of actual utterances as well as to know how to use language appropriately in different situations, e.g. to change register and formality; [the] discourse component ... involves our ability to process language at a scale beyond the level of a sentence, i.e. an ability to participate in conversation as well as to process written texts of some size; [the] strategic component, which is implicated when other components are in some way insufficient. [However], the relationship between these competences is not entirely clear, nor is the way in which they are integrated into overall communicative competence ... Nor is it clear how communicative competence is translated into communicative performance.

Bachman (1990), and later Bachman and Palmer (1996), then reorganised and systematised the work by Canale and Swain and came to the conclusion that strategic competence is a cognitive ability rather than a language related skill. Language ability could therefore be seen as something that exhibits language knowledge and strategic competence, as stated by Weir (1990:11): "... account must now be taken of: where, when, how, with whom, and why language is to be used, and on what topics, and with what effect." It is thus about the integration of language knowledge, subject knowledge, and context instead of requiring students to perform artificial, discrete tasks focussing only on grammar, vocabulary, reading or writing.

This was confirmed by Douglas (2001) when he stated that in TLU analyses, authentic content and tasks take prevalence, allowing for interaction between language ability and subject knowledge. Kumaravadivelu (2003) also noted that we should rather not think of four separate language skills that could be integrated, as they are already integrated. This corresponds with Bachman and Palmer's (1996:75) now well-known argument:

> We would … not consider language skills to be part of language ability at all, but to be the contextualized realization of the ability to use language in the performance of specific language use tasks. We would ... argue that it is not useful to think in terms of 'skills', but to think in terms of specific activities or tasks in which language is used purposefully.

Language ability should also be seen as competence to negotiate and construct meaning in specific contexts. Blanton (1994:228) in this regard alludes to the fact that

> ... we must foster behaviours of 'talking' to texts, talking and writing about them, linking them to other texts, connecting them to their readers' own lives and experience, and then using their experience to illuminate the text and the text to illuminate their experience.

From an open, non-restricted, view of language we would like to state that academic literacy thus means being able to use, manipulate, and control language and cognitive abilities for specific purposes and in specific contexts (cf. Fairclough, 1992b; Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004). Language and cognition have to be integrated at different levels and in different contexts. Students need the ability to act with authority and with voice, that is intentional personal idiolect and academic individuality (cf. Bakhtin, 1981; Blanton, 1994; Hyland & Sancho Guinda, 2012) and we have to accept that a set of skills, once (if ever) learned or acquired, may not necessarily be acceptably transferred or applied to other contexts. This usually happens implicitly and cannot necessarily be considered a directly related outcome of any teaching and learning initiative (Gee, 1998). This underlines that academic literacy is not the same as language proficiency: language courses (often addressing discrete items) do not *per se* address academic literacy. Should we then give up helping students to become academically literate?

The answer to the question raised in the previous paragraph is obvious. Of course we have the responsibility to support students; the question should rather be how do we support them best from a linguistic point of view? The first answer to this question seems to be found in SFL, a theory of language that views language as a social semiotic, one that centres on the function of language or how we can use language to achieve certain goals within certain contexts. The roots of SFL, as we understand it today, are to be found in the work of particularly Halliday (1985), but was further developed by Halliday (1996) himself and other prominent figures such as Martin (1992) and Hasan (1996). In this theory language is seen as a resource that is used for expressing meaning in a specific context and with a specific purpose in mind, taking into consideration the participants. SFL relies on function and meaning rather than on form (or syntax), uses text rather than sentence as object of orientation, and emphases usage rather than grammaticality. In SFL the system (a representation of relations) takes priority.

The context in which language transpires thus concerns *field* (the actions of participants in a particular context), *tenor* (the participants and the nature of the relationship between them), and *mode* (the functions that the texts serve, that is for example spoken or written, argumentative, descriptive) – cf. Halliday (1978; 2002) for a full explanation. SFL according to Fang (2004:336)

> … reconceptualizes language as a semiotic tool intimately involved in the negotiation, construction, organization, and reconstrual of human experiences. It demonstrates how linguistic choices (i.e., grammar) contribute in a systematic way to the realization of social contexts. In this conception, language is more than a conduit of meaning; it is a principal resource for making meaning.

The second answer can be found in corpus linguistics where real data (language that actually occurred) is used to proof that discourses (spoken/written, formal/informal, discipline specific/more generic, etc.) differ tangibly. Corpus linguistics is according to Cook (2003:73) "concerned with the patterns and regularities of language use which can be revealed by systematic analysis. … The results have been staggering, not only because of the descriptive facts uncovered but also because of their implications for linguistic theory and for our understanding of what it means to learn and know a language." Biber's (2006) comprehensive work on academic language is of particular significance here. He employs a multidimensional approach (cf. Biber, 1988) to linguistic variation in analysing academic discourse to confirm perceptions and to reveal patterns of language use not necessarily expected – note the implied use of both quantitative (analysis) and qualitative (theoretical justifications) strategies here. An important line of argumentation in the 2006 source is that students display difficulties in their communication, predominantly in terms of the appropriate use of register and style. This is not only the case with additional language users, who are at particular risk, but also with students who have the benefit of studying in their home language. The work of Van Rooy and Terblanche (2006) and Van Rooy (2008) is of importance here, particularly within the South African context. In the former the focus was on the academic writing of additional language users of English.

The authors attempted to come to an understanding of the "underlying regularities that characterise second language varieties of English in the Outer Circle" (Van Rooy & Terblanche, 2006:178). Interestingly, they found that there are similarities between Black South African English (BSAE) student writing and the academic writing of students who study in their home language. There are of course also differences between the writing samples of BSAE and home language writers used in their study: style (colloquial, frequency of personal pronouns and reduced forms), integration of information, and specificity differences occur – cf. Van Rooy and Terblanche (2006). In the latter, differences and similarities between BSAE and the English of native speakers were investigated. Van Rooy (2008:269) in this study came to the conclusion that, based on an investigation of the mentioned differences and similarities, BSAE should be considered a variety of English

> on the ground of the stylistic differences between the [Tswana Learner English Corpus] and [Louvain Corpus of Native English Speaking Students], particularly its greater interpersonal as opposed to informational focus, as well as discourse-functional differences in the use of linguistic forms.

However, the litmus test for applied linguists and educational practitioners is (and will probably remain) continuous assessment of the language descriptions and theorising stemming from analyses of corpora. More importantly, the ability of academic literacy practitioners to use the descriptions from corpus work to design courses, plan for the effective offering of courses and to design tests.

In Section 3 of the article we reviewed the debate on different academic literacy practices from the perspective of the most frequent rationalisations. In what is to follow we will

address the implicit challenge underlying the discussion above: on what should we base our decisions when we plan academic literacy interventions and what should underpin our academic literacy practices?

4. From literacy to acculturation

Academic literacy has been described as the ability to partake in academic discourse (Boughey, 2000) and students will only be able to acquire and develop this ability once they are exposed to the discourse, considering that each discipline may have its own discourse. Since we assume literate students to take part in academic discourse, they have to engage in "systematically organised sets of statements which give expression to the meanings and the values of an institution, [being able to] define, describe and delimit what ... is possible to say and [what] not" (Kress, 1989:7). Van Schalkwyk (2008) claims that students will in the end be judged by the way they demonstrate mastery of the discourse. The flipside of the 'discourse coin' is of course students' mastery of content. Academics in disciplines, other than languages or linguistics, tend to focus on content issues rather than discourse. The real challenge in our opinion is to integrate academic literacy practices with that of the discipline – cf. Van de Poel and Van Dyk (2013) for a discussion on different approaches to academic literacy development – and to support students to demonstrate the required knowledge and skill through language.

In an institutional context academic mastery of the discourse resides in reading (whether reading to write, reading to learn …) and writing (the core of literacy) and academic literacy should be exhibited by students in showing proof of effective reading and writing (Gee, 2003). The importance of reading and writing is also reflected by the observation by Lea and Street (1998:160) that "academic literacy practices – reading and writing within disciplines – [are those that] constitute central processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study." Aligned with previous remarks that reading and writing (as skills) are not easily isolatable, Williams (2004) warns that we should be careful not to limit a rich concept like academic literacy to a restricted view of being able to read and write.

Students should be empowered to "... switch practices between one setting and another, to deploy a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting, and to handle the social meanings and identities that each evokes" (Lea & Street, 1998:159). Blanton (1994), and Bachman and Palmer (1996) also provide workable definitions of academic literacy that are broad and inclusive, do not deny the importance of context, voice and authority and support students to communicate in a manner that is approved and accepted by a specific community. Being able to partake in academic discourse thus refers to ways of thinking and using language in a specific context, which is determined by complex and social activities embedded within that context's ideological framework (cf. Van de Poel and Gasiorek, 2012).

The question remains: How do we open up epistemological access? How do we open up the covert rules of academic discourse (Boughey, 2002)? In our opinion the answer

does not lie in debates on autonomous or ideological approaches to academic literacy development, often found in the literature. The former refers to the perspective that students have problems and that their problems can be fixed; literacy then resides in the individual's ability to decode text. The latter refers to the perspective that students should be provided with the opportunity to develop agency and gain a voice; literacy then resides in shared values belonging to shared discourse communities. The answer rather lies in the academic acculturation of students, which entails much more than just socialising students into academic discourses, but rather socialising them into the norms, values and practices of the academic community at large, as well as within disciplines.

We are in need of explicit instruction and implicit disclosure (among others through multiple exposures to adequate and appropriate information seeking, information processing and information producing tasks) to relevant skills and issues related to language, thinking, studying, arguing, etc. Students need to be exposed to the academic world in general and to disciplines in particular.

They need to interact with texts, with peers, and with lecturers. Being acculturated then means to be able (and motivated) to assimilate, understand, embrace, interact, and engage with academic discourse at different times and in different spaces. Thus, students need to accommodate and their practices need to approximate the academic community's communicative currency that we want to redefine here to embrace different kinds of language used to reflect the community's current norms, practices, procedures, values and expectations (cf., among others, Duff, 2010; Gee, 1998; 2000; Hyland, 2009; Van de Poel & Gasiorek, 2012). We need to understand that acculturation is key to academic success and that we should be in search of teaching and learning practices that will foster this.

We should, in other words, rethink and redesign learning experiences and courses, re-examine the way courses are delivered and recognise that systems of support for learning are as important as the delivery of subjects and courses. Academic acculturation is hard work and for students it entails growing to become a member of the academic community, acquiring and learning 'the' norms and practices of the academic culture, becoming academically literate and mastering the academic discourse. Acculturation is about using the community's currency with comfort and confidence. In the course of achieving academic success students should be guided through a process of awareness raising and practising, and experience the norms and expectations to be met and the vehicles (each with their own constituents) to be used.

5. Responsible and informed decision making

We are of the opinion that we should focus on supporting our students' academic acculturation process rather than their academic literacy development as such. In doing so, we will move away from debates about which theories and practices are best – even though theorising is urgently needed to inform our decisions – and in the process we might address the real needs of all stakeholders.

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Current debates concerning ideological vs. autonomous approaches, integrated or embedded modules vs. stand-alone modules, generic modules vs. discipline specific modules, etc. do not seem to contribute to responsible decision making – as far as we know there is no conclusive evidence that one is necessarily better than the other; all have advantages, disadvantages and limitations. To strike a balance between being informed and being responsible seems to be key here.

This balance is, of course, not easy to obtain. While inviting students to become members of the academic community, the established community also has to accommodate the newcomers (and vice versa?). In this process we will continuously need to make trade-offs, among others, between

- institutional culture,

- student demographics,

- policies and practices,

- affordability and sustainability (economies of scale),

- resources (human, financial and infrastructure),

- knowledge and skills of lecturers,

- horizontal (across other subjects/disciplines) and/or vertical (over the extend of the programme) integration in the curriculum, and

- quality assurance.

Weideman (2006:84) reasons that each "… trade-off generates a need to weigh or assess, to harmonise and then justify a tough and responsible technical design decision." We thus have to constantly reflect on the changing nature of curricular acculturation while we rethink teaching and learning support in an informed and responsible manner, that is we need to continuously consider the implications for the beneficiaries (in essence the students) and the stakeholders (in essence the institution).

Whether we want to approach the case of acculturation from a holistic or an analytic point of view, we need to ensure that we act in an informed and responsible manner. In the end it will come down to our, and our institutions' maturity (readiness) to design and apply solutions to the benefit of all involved, or put differently, we need solutions that have impact. To measure impact in educational settings, however, is "... difficult, partly because there are typically many factors involved which are difficult to control, so that the impact of any one element in the system is hard to distinguish" (Howes, 2003:148).

Still, this should not prevent us from consistently and continuously investigating, enquiring and critiquing our own ventures, or as Weideman (2007:45) puts it "… [we

should] embody an emancipatory, liberating and healing enterprise … [from which it will be clear that] we are liberated not only from trends and dogmas, but to positive action".

6.   Conclusion

In this article, we strived to provide some of the building blocks required for implementing and fostering academic acculturation. Inspired by the central questions in the title of Weideman's essay, this article tried to contribute to the topic of academic literacy interventions by addressing it from a theoretical perspective. It provides a bird's-eye view of literacy and literacy practices by considering overlapping and divergent frameworks, enriching them with considerations from linguistic theory.

This has culminated in a provisional, and non-exhaustive, agenda for informed decision making that acknowledges our responsibilities as academics and decision makers as well as the practicalities and feasibility associated with academic acculturation. Indeed, it is difficult to define a concept such as 'academic literacy'. What is of importance though, is that we continue to be reflective and critical (also with respect to our own practices). In doing so we need to build on previous knowledge and experiences and develop solutions that will benefit our students, our institutions and society at large.

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