UNDERGRADUATE BACHELOR OF EDUCATION STUDENTS’ EXPERIENCES ON THE IMPORTANCE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION FOR EDUCATORS MODULE

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Abstract

Language policy and implementation has been a long debate in South African education system that led to the introduction of the Language in Education Policy (RSA; 1998). The aim of this paper was to investigate the undergraduate students’ experiences towards English language and communication for educators’ module. On their first year as teacher trainees, they are introduced to five fundamental modules in Education - one of them being Language and Communication for Educators (known as EDS). Language and Communication for Educators is a fundamental subject that aims at introducing student teachers to English academic reading and writing skills. The skills are meant to help them through their degree studies and beyond. Students are also introduced to issues of South African Language in Education. The qualitative research approach was used to investigate the students’ experiences about the skills learnt from Language and Communication module. Students’ experiences were investigated through interviews, document reviews and focus group discussions. Constructivist paradigm was deemed necessary for the study and case study design.

Halliday’s Systemic Functional Linguistics theory as it outlines syntactic structure and functions of language in context. Curriculum Theory was also used to support the theory of the study. The study aims at understanding experiences of students’ academic reading and writing skills. The main topics dealt with in this module are sentence structures, paragraph writing, summarising and referencing styles.

Findings of the study was that student s believed that the module helped them through their undergraduate academic studies even in writing and reading in their discipline-specific literacies. They clearly reflect on the course that when they were taught the module, they did not understand the importance of the module. They only became aware of the importance of academic reading and writing skills when they had to use them in their specialisation modules and when they went to schools for work-integrated learning sessions.

Recommendations were that the module is necessary for teaching academic reading and writing skills at first year level. All undergraduate students must be introduced to these skills. Language skills also helped them to be familiar with the language in education policy as stated in the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 2006. The module also helped them to be able to understand their university language policy.

Keywords: Language and communication for educators; Language Policy; fundamental subjects/modules; English second language.

1 INTRODUCTION

Several studies have been conducted nationally and internationally to evaluate students’ experiences about the academic reading and writing. Lea & Street (1998) looked at perceptions and practices of student writing in United Kingdom’s higher education and adopted a concept of academic literacies as framework for understanding university writing practices. In a similar study looking at the declining trends in educational standards and students’ poor English proficiency in Tanzania, (Komba, Kafanabo, Njabi, & Kira; 2012) argue that there is a link between students’ academic achievement and their proficiency in language skills, particularly in the language of instruction. Buhere (2018) in seeking solutions to students’ poor reading and writing in Kenya recommends that local universities need to develop programmes aimed at addressing deficiencies in students or to reform existing ones to address the problem.

In South African universities, a lot of research has been conducted in different faculties to investigate the first-year students’ access to academic discourses (Pineteh, 2014; Mbirimi, 2012; Mgwashu, 2011; Van Schalkwyk, Bitzer & Van der Walt, 2009; Bangenzi & Kapp, 2007). In almost all institutions of higher learning, academics complain that first year students cannot read and write and they are unable to
produce coherent written academic writing. The students also have varying experiences about the academic literacies that prepare them for academic reading and writing in universities. It is therefore, the role of universities to ensure that they create opportunities for first year students to gain good epistemological access to academic communities. It is through these premises that the researcher tried to investigate the students’ experiences about the effectiveness of Language and Communication for Educators module.

Language and Communication for Educators (later known as EDS) is a fundamental module aimed at introducing all first year B. Ed. student teachers to English academic reading and writing and issues of Language Policy. English is the medium of instruction and the language of teaching and learning (LOLT) at the University of Fort Hare. It is also a second language to almost all the students in this university as the students come from various language groups. According to Language in Education Policy (RSA; 1998) language is a tool for thought and communication, duly supported by (Vency & Ramganesh; 2013) who state that language is the vehicle of thought. Concurringly, Prah (2003), defines language of instruction as the one in which basic skills and knowledge are imparted to the population, and the medium in which the production and reproduction of knowledge is taught. According to Mohamed (2006), communication skills are necessary for the correct interpretation of lectures, texts, and assessment tasks. The module introduces students to issues such as paragraph writing, paraphrasing, cohesion and coherence within and between paragraphs, note-taking, summarising, using accurate citations and references.

The study might be beneficial to both national and international teacher training institutions to ensure the availability of fundamental modules that help to introduce first-year undergraduate students to academic literacies. This might also help curriculum developers to ensure that courses like this one teach the basic skills that students might need through their academic career. Lecturers might also gain information about students’ perceptions and how lecturers could improve teaching strategies in fundamental modules. Since this is the module offered at the faculty of education for all prospective teachers, it may therefore help students develop awareness of discipline-specific reading and writing skills that are pertinent to the education discipline.

1.1 Undergraduate students’ experiences about EDS

In all institutions of higher learning, it is necessary to enquire about the students’ experiences to ensure fair and smooth student-lecturer-content relationship. This concurs with the issue of SFL in outlining structure and function of language in context and the issues of curriculum theory. According to Christie (2002) experiential meta-function deals with language resources that represent experiences. Since most of the students come from areas where English is a second language, having attended rural schools where English is taught as first additional language, their language and communication skills through English are not well-developed. The experiences they have from the high school and on entering university or academic life are different. They unanimously believe that they need to be introduced to academic reading and writing skills that prepare them for academic success and close the gap between secondary school and university academic literacies. This relates to what (Mgqwashu; 2011) regards as reflexive pedagogy of ensuring epistemological access for first year students. It is believed that a teaching practice to maintain and facilitate epistemological access for first year students is fundamental.

1.2 Challenges faced by first-year EDS students

As many other universities in South Africa, University of Fort Hare consists of students who are taught through English second language (ESL). Most of EDS students are experiencing poor reading and writing skills, poorly formulated sentences and paragraphs, paragraphs that are completely flawed lacking cohesion and coherence. These are the topics that are basics for EDS module as it targets to teach these skills to allow the student teachers academic literacies and language issues that will help them through their career as educators. Many researchers have conducted research through the fundamental academic literacy modules in their disciplines in various universities (Pineteh, 2014; Mbirimi, 2012; Van Schalkwyk, Blitzer & Van der Walt, 2009; Bangeni & Kapp, 2007). In a similar study, although conducted among under-prepared first year students (Van Schalkwyk, et.al. 2009) believe that reading and writing play a fundamental role in student learning, and their acquisition during the first-year at university could be regarded as a critical factor in student success. They believe that for most students the nature of reading and writing always differ from that which they had been used to in schools (Van Schalkwyk, et al. (2009). Students’ academic reading and writing challenges may be improved by introducing students to academic literacy skills during their first year of study at university.
1.3 Effectiveness of EDS as fundamental module

Since students’ academic writing and reading skills is a challenge in most faculties of most universities, several research studies have been conducted globally. Baik & Creig (2009) conducted a study in Australia to investigate the impact of an adjunct English language tutorial program on the academic performance of first-year Architecture students. According to them the module was known as Language and Academic Skills, aiming to ensure that first-year students are supported to develop the necessary language skills to progress through their courses. The findings of the study showed that there was a great improvement to those students who were good attendees of that module (Baik & Creig; 2009). Similarly, Lea & Street (1998) investigated student writing in United Kingdom higher education focusing mainly on an academic literacies approach. Their research was based on the premise that in order to understand the nature of academic learning, it was necessary to investigate the understandings of both academic staff and students about their own literacy practices. The findings of their research led to three different themes that underpin the study; firstly the suggestions that students lack basic literacy skills; secondly the student-tutor relations concerning assumptions and understandings of assignment titles and thirdly the broader institutional level concerning the implications of modules, assessment and procedures of student writing (Lea & Street; 1998). Modules that introduce students to academic literacy skills might be effective in developing their academic success.

1.4 Research questions

What are the undergraduate students’ experiences towards English language and communication for educators’ (EDS) module?

Which academic literacy challenges are faced by first year students who are registered for EDS module?

How effective is EDS module in developing students’ academic literacy skills?

1.5 Research objectives

To investigate undergraduate students’ experiences about the importance of English language and communication for educators’ module.

To enquire about the academic literacy challenges experienced by EDS students.

To explore the effectiveness of EDS module in developing students’ academic literacy skills.

1.6 Theoretical Framework

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory was adopted for the study since it focus on outlining syntactic structure and functions of language in context. According to Christie (2002) SFL theory has led to the emergence of the theory of language in education and has widely been used in teaching and learning of English language from all levels of education. Halliday’s SFL consists of two meta-functions, experiential and logical meta-functions. Experiential meta-function was suitable since it involves those resources in language that represent experience. Whereas the logical meta-function deals with the forms of logical connectedness of connecting experiential meanings in various ways (Christie; 2002). This was where the participants’ experiences concerning the importance of EDS came into effect.

Curriculum theory was also beneficial for the study as it focus on how the curriculum is designed and what to teach in that curriculum. Young (2014) believes that for most of the time curriculum theory was regarded as based on the school curriculum but now it applies to any educational institution since colleges and universities also have curricular. Young (2014) goes on to associate curriculum theory with Bernstein’ process of re-contextualisation which refers to how elements of disciplinary knowledge are incorporated into curricula for learners of different ages and prior knowledge.

2 METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study that aimed at getting the in-depth views and experiences of the participants about the importance of EDS. The study adopted case study in line with qualitative approach. This research design was more useful for this study as it gave guidance to the researcher in collecting, analysing, interpreting and presenting data.
2.1 Ethical clearance

Since the study was conducted by the researcher together with the students in her classes, no ethical clearance was requested. The study had no intentions of forming any harm of danger towards the participants. The participation was explained to participants that it was optional and they had the right to withdraw anytime they felt not ready to participate. Their anonymity was assured and that their responses would only be referred to as student responses.

2.2 Selection of participants

Participants were selected from the third year B. Ed students who worked as tutors for EDS module. At third year level, students who excelled in the first year EDS module are given a chance to apply and work as tutors, working in collaboration with EDS lecturers. Five tutors are selected per year and all five of them were selected as participants. They were the best participants since they were using the academic literacies gained during their first year in their second and third year modules. Towards the end of the semester students are given course evaluation forms to reflect on the module. Because of the scope of the study, only five out of 180 first year course evaluation forms were randomly selected to get their experiences about the module.

2.3 Data collection methods

Interviews were conducted with all five participants and they were allowed to reflect on how the module helped them to gain academic success in the university. Voice recorder was during one-on-one interviews and the responses were later transcribed for analysing. Document reviews were conducted within the students’ course evaluation questionnaires that consisted of only three qualitative questions.

2.4 Data analysis

From the data that was collected through student responses and group discussions, all the participants mentioned the importance of EDS as a fundamental module. They all stated that the academic skills that they got, did not only help them to pass that module but also helped them throughout other modules. Since some of them have also been to schools for work-integrated learning, they said that they were able to share some of those reading and writing skills with learners at schools. During group discussion, they also raised the issue that EDS module must also be taught at second year level of B. Ed. studies.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Undergraduate students’ experiences towards English language and communication for educators’ module

The participants for the research had almost the same experiences about the role of EDS as their first-year module. Their view was that the module helped them a lot in developing their academic reading and writing skills. They unanimously agreed that if this module was not part of their studies, they would not been able to pass other modules as this is the only module that introduces them to academic reading and writing. Their view is that at first they undermined the importance of the module until they were expected to produce written tasks in other modules, where they had to use the academic reading and writing skills from EDS module. They also stated that even their communication skills in English language improved through the use of group tasks and tutor assistance. This is what one of the student participants said:

At first I used to construct my paragraphs without having the main idea or topic sentence. In EDS you learn that in a paragraph your first sentence, which is your introductory sentence must be your topic sentence. Then the following sentences must support that sentence. In doing so, your paragraph will have a meaning and there should be cohesion and coherence between your sentences. When you have the skills of paragraph writing, you are able to incorporate them to other modules… (Student’s response).

In addition to that, the other student had this to say:

The module was an English building module, from paragraphs, formation of a paragraph, topic sentences, supporting sentences and concluding sentences. This information is the information which we often take advantage of and hardly take notice of. This information assisted me during
3.2 Academic literacy challenges faced by first year students

Since many researchers have raised the concern about university students who are lacking academic literacy skills, students in this faculty also had the same problem. The faculty therefore introduced this module to help bridge the gap between high school and university academic skills. As Pineteh (2013:12) states that many students are "struggling to maintain academic writing standards that are acceptable in higher education", it is undeniable that modules like EDS are a great requirement in higher education institutions. The students even reflected as follows:

Although I was looking forward to study in the university, I was not sure whether I would be able to respond correctly to learning content. Firstly I was not sure about my English language level as I was told that all modules are done in English. In EDS I learnt about how to read and analyse texts. I also learnt about summary writing and taking notes. These skills help me when I am reading and preparing for tests and examinations… (Student’s response).

Concurringly, another student said:

My main challenge during classes was that I felt out of place as I was unable to associate what was taught during lectures with what I hoped for. Although I believed that I had no challenge with English language, during my first classes at university, I did not even understand the instructions and was not sure how to write the tasks offered to us. It was when I attended EDS when I got the idea of how to write acceptable tasks that are at university level… (Student’s response).

3.3 Effectiveness of Language and Communication for Educators module in developing students’ academic literacy skills

The effectiveness of this module was the main finding of this study where all participants echoed that this was the module that allowed them access to academic literacies. None of the participants was against teaching of this module. This is also visible by the increased attendance in classes by almost all students. According to Van Schalkwyk, et.al. (2009: 192) ‘the academic support module which focuses directly on the acquisition of academic literacy and seeks to help the students to establish links with the different disciplinary discourses’ is a basic requirement. One of the participants concur with this statement by saying:

The module assisted greatly with being able to reference work, assignments which required these referencing skills, from being able to reference journals, books and other sources. The referencing skills assisted greatly in being able to avoid plagiarism in academic work. The skills which I acquired from this module in first year in all these years have been of great use to me when writing assignments… (Student’s response).

From the course evaluation responses, first year students also confirmed that EDS module was more effective in giving them academic access. They believe that their success in other modules was influenced by the skills they learnt from EDS. Their ability to use these skills in other modules relates to Bernstein’s theory of re-contextualization that deals with how knowledge is selected, how it is sequenced and how it is paced.

4 CONCLUSION

The study was aimed at investigating the students’ experiences about EDS as fundamental module. It was clearly understandable that this module is a basic requirement for first year B.Ed. students. From the findings, all the participants reported the effectiveness of the module and its use across the curriculum. They even recommended the content of this module in their respect specialisation disciplines. They believe that the academic skills and language skills learnt from this module still benefits them in other academic fields. It is therefore, recommended that almost all faculties need to consider having fundamental modules that introduce new university entrants to academic reading and writing.
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