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# ARTICLES / SAGGI

## NEGOTIATING LANGUAGE TRANSITIONING ALONGSIDE ACADEMIC LITERACY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

**BRIDGET CAMPBELL**
**(University of KwaZulu-Natal)**

**LORAINE PRINSLOO-MARCUS**
**(University of KwaZulu-Natal)**

**Abstract**
*Lo studio, condotto presso la Facoltà di Scienze della Formazione nel KwaZulu Natal, mira all'apprendimento basato su indagini narrative ed è la seconda fase (monitoraggio della transazione linguistica di studenti presso un Istituto sudafricano: uno studio longitudinale) di un progetto in sei fasi.*

*La prima fase della ricerca esaminava il modo in cui gli studenti trattano la loro transazioni linguistiche dalle scuole secondarie agli studi universitari, evidenziando ai ricercatori le molte sfide riscontrate nel tentativo di sviluppare simultaneamente le competenze linguistiche e l'alfabetizzazione accademica. Uno dei risultati evidenziati nella prima fase, indica che l'insegnamento dell'inglese nelle scuole rimane problematico per molti studenti, pertanto abbiamo scelto di collocare la seconda fase dello studio nella Facoltà di Scienze della Formazione presso la stessa istituzione universitaria. La domanda che si pone in questo articolo è la seguente: che impatto ha la competenza della lingua inglese percepita da neo-insegnanti al terzo e quarto anno sul proprio sviluppo di alfabetizzazione accademica?*

*Per sollecitare risposte alla nostra domanda di ricerca ci siamo basati su schizzi elaborati dagli studenti e discussioni di gruppo. L'articolo rivela che nonostante i partecipanti frequentino l'università da tre o quattro anni per diventare insegnanti di inglese, la loro competenza della lingua inglese rimane una sfida. Tale difficoltà deriva dalla propria istruzione scolastica ed è legata alla transazione linguistica attraverso tutti i livelli di istruzione. La*

*ricerca indica che gli studenti ritengono che le sfide riscontrate con la lingua inglese abbiano ripercussioni negative sulla loro alfabetizzazione accademica.*

**Keywords:** Academic literacy; higher education; language transitioning

## Introduction

South Africa's colonial legacy and history of apartheid have contributed to the complexities of language in education in the country. What further compounds the language issues is that South Africa has 11 official languages and the 1997 Language in Education policy states that in Grades 1 and 2 all learners shall learn at least one approved language. It is the norm for South African learners to be taught in their mother-tongue for the first three years of their schooling. Thereafter, in Grade 4 of the primary schooling phase, the transition to either English or Afrikaans as Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) should occur as mandated in the Language and Education Policy. Those first language (L1) speakers of African languages who do not transition to English or Afrikaans during the primary schooling phase, have their first experience of language transitioning when they enter secondary school where the LoLT shifts to their second (L2) or third (L3) language. Language transitioning encompasses a lot more than what happens in the classroom. It is inclusive of the language shift from the L1 used at home to the L2 or L3 used at school and in higher education, as well as the LoLT. It also includes the shift from the L1 used outside of classrooms to the L2 or L3 used in the classrooms. To have had no exposure to English as the medium of instruction until secondary school is a disadvantage as "English language proficiency plays a central role in students' ability to engage with their courses and be successful, and has a framing impact on their ability to engage with other literacies" (Hurst, 2014:11).

As English appears to have gained dominance as the LoLT in many South African schools, perhaps there is an assumption that on entering higher education institutions, students' English language

proficiencies are sufficient to meet the linguistic demands of higher education. A large percentage of these students would, in all probability, have experienced schooling that continues to be influenced by the policies and practices of the apartheid government wherein there was language exclusion. Another challenge for many students who gain access to higher education institutions, is that the institutional LoLT is their second or third language and they battle with the transition from secondary school English requirements to English at university. In addition, all students have to be orientated into the Academic Literacy genre and many students who are not mother-tongue speakers of English thus face multiple obstacles in terms of language. Academic Literacy development is challenging for all students and as Bourdieu, Passeron and de Saint Martin (1994:8) argue, academic language is "no one's mother tongue, not even that of children of the cultivated class".

Although many South African higher education institutions expect students to complete modules which aim to prepare them for academic writing in English, students who are battling with their basic English proficiencies often go unnoticed and are thus faced with additional challenges. In the institution in which this study was situated, all students are expected to use English as LoLT. Students are also required to complete a 16 credit module – Academic Literacy in English for Undergraduate students. The aim of this Academic Literacy in English module is to teach first year students the patterns, structures and communicative purpose of the genre of academic argument by introducing students, in an explicit way, "to the process of academic reading and writing, and by developing their capacity to produce coherent, cohesive and logical texts (orally and in writing) within the context of an intellectually challenging examination of themes which are of contemporary academic interest in education" (UKZN, 2020:363).

In the 2016 review of South African Higher education, The Council on Higher Education described the articulation gap between secondary school and university as "a discontinuity in the transition from one educational phase to the next educational phase" (2016:164). The review further emphasised that "the articulation gap is not confined to subject knowledge but encompasses a range of

facets of learning such as conceptual development, academic literacies, and socialisation" (Council on Higher Education, 2016:164). What is not mentioned is that many of the students also face challenges with English as a medium of instruction.

Although not specifically mentioned as a social justice issue, language has a role to play in whether students succeed or fail at university. According to Boughey and McKenna (2016:3):

> Language use is understood to be a system of choices which are made on the basis of a user's understanding of the context in which they are located. From this perspective, many of the difficulties experienced by students with regard to language can be seen to stem from the alien and alienating nature of the higher education context.

Thus, language can serve as a deterrent to accessing the literacy codes needed to be successful in higher education (Hurst, 2014). The notion of Academic Literacy has roots in Lea and Street's New Literacy Studies movement which frames the discourse in universities as one of many literacies. According to Van Schalkwyk, Bitzer and Van der Walt (2010) Academic Literacy refers to how to speak, act, read and write within the required discourse. Liebowitz (2010:3) takes this notion further and "defines 'Academic Literacy' as encompassing: Reading and Writing; Numeracy; Digital literacy; Information literacy; Discourse and language as in English, IsiXhosa or Afrikaans […]". Academic Literacy does not only involve the student because it is conceptualised as:

> A socially constructed practice, [that] forces us to see the acquisition thereof as a contested space, which involves negotiation of meaning between the different parties involved; students, institutions and academics. Moreover, it helps us realise that the term hides the diversity of literacies that exist in different social contexts. (Bengesai, 2012:4)

The term Academic Literacy "can then be extended to the idea of academic literacies, each of which is shaped by the particular disciplinary context in which it is used. This then accounts for the fact that quite different kinds of texts are valued in different disciplines" (Boughey & McKenna, 2016:3). It is difficult for students – particularly for those who are not proficient in English, to negotiate their way around these diverse and often unfamiliar literacies. A balance thus needs to be established between assisting students with honing their English language proficiency and the linguistic skills they bring to university, and developing the academic language needed for success in higher education (Singh, 2015). Singh states that academic writing is an essential productive skill that all tertiary students need to ensure academic success, as this skill requires a complete, active engagement with the facts and principles of a particular discipline. Thus, the onus is on the lecturers to find the balance between assisting the students with developing their English language proficiency and acquiring the Academic Literacy conventions specific to each discipline. To achieve this is to know our students and their linguistic strengths and weaknesses and through this study, we hope to know and better understand our students and their linguistic needs.

## 1. Conceptual Framework

It is important to this study to distinguish between English language proficiency and Academic Literacy. The word proficiency is defined as advancement in knowledge or skill (merriam-webster.com); the ability to do something well because of training or practice (oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com); the fact of having the skill and experience for doing something (dictionary.cambridge.org). Accredited language services state that in terms of language, the term "proficient" refers to a speaker using the language more formally and to a speaker who is less comfortable with the language than a native user of said language.

Thus, to be proficient in a language is to have sound knowledge as a result of practice, skill and experience in said language but to use it with less familiarity than a native speaker.

There are many definitions of Academic Literacy and Braine's (2002) broad definition is that Academic Literacy includes skills such as writing for a specific audience, having the ability to research the topic and to write using appropriate English and vocabulary. Papashane and Hlalele (2014:662) state that "the practice of academic literacy involves using the appropriate strategies to read and produce (write, speak) texts that are considered lingually and technically appropriate within various academic contexts".

Street (1985) makes a distinction between the autonomous model of literacy wherein literacy practices are neutral and universal and the ideological model which acknowledges that literacy practices are embedded in social practices and thus vary from one context to another. If literacy practices were simply neutral and not particular to individual experiences, one has to question why students battle to attain English literacy proficiency and why they often struggle to acquire Academic Literacy competency.

The autonomous model of Academic Literacy is simplistic and does not consider factors that influence students. Boughey and Mckenna (2016) argue that it is the autonomous model of literacy that governs many South African universities. If this is the case, it can be assumed that those teaching the students are not considering individual backgrounds and needs and that scaffolding is not practiced. The assumption will be that all students no matter their backgrounds or language proficiencies can be taught in the same way and simply have to learn particular language conventions. What Boughey (2010) maintains is that success in education is dependent on factors inherent to the individual such as intelligence, motivation and aptitude, but that structural factors are often such that they privilege some and disadvantage others.

In Street's (1985) ideological model, there are different literacies as both reading and writing are viewed as being immersed in social practices. Whilst Mckenna (2010) agrees, she contends that:

> the real key to whether a student will pass or fail relates to the literacy practices she brings with her to the University from her school and home environments, and the extent to which these have commonalities with the

> literacy practices of her chosen discipline. This is an entirely arbitrary situation; she did not choose which literacy practices would be available to her up to the point of university entry. And yet, I contend, that this, more than anything else, will determine whether or not she passes. (2010:8)

Lecturers' pedagogic practices should therefore be informed by the knowledge that, especially in multilingual South Africa, the language proficiencies of students entering university vary greatly, as McKenna highlights. However, literacy practices are not only about language and hard work, as cultural capital also plays a role in language development.

Bourdieu (1986:243) identified three forms of cultural capital and stated that institutionalized cultural capital makes it "possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes". He was of the opinion that what has a negative impact on academic achievement is social class. Thus, sociocultural backgrounds dictate that some students might struggle as "scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family" (244). Therefore, in addition to developing the necessary level of English language proficiency and taking on a new literacy – Academic Literacy, some students have to assume suitable cultural capital, which according to Bourdieu takes time and happens unconsciously.

## 2. Methodology: An arts-based narrative inquiry

Narrative Inquiry is "how people make meaning from experience" (Kitchen, 2009:37) and understand these experiences through narratives (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). In examining the nature of Narrative Inquiry, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) write of the relationship between living a life story, telling that story and reliving it. We wanted our students to go through this process and thus encouraged them to think about, talk about and visually depict their

literacy stories. The images brought an arts-based dimension to the study.

The use of images in research is a legitimate research methodology (Mitchell, 2018) and "drawings or other art forms created by participants can provide a way for individuals to think about, reflect and actually see their experiences" (CohenMiller, 2018:6). Botsis and Bradbury (2018:1) agree that "visual-narrative methodology offers generative, creative ways to understand South African students' lived experience of languages and their subject positioning". As part of the visual methodology, the participants who are all L2 speakers of English either in their third or fourth year of study, were asked to sketch how they feel about their English language proficiency and how they cope with Academic Literacy. To ask that students use visual depictions to explore their feelings and competencies is not a new research method and is appropriate to this study. According to CohenMiller (2018), arts based research has moved into the realm of investigating social justice issues and we view language as such. Language and identity are linked and Mitchell (2018:368) advises that "the use of drawings, for example, to study emotional and cognitive development, trauma and fears, and, more recently, issues of identity has a rich history". CohenMiller (2018) contends that to ask participants to draw, will encourage them to better express their experiences and that the drawings will also allow the researcher to read between the lines and gain additional understanding of the phenomenon being researched.

In writing about arts based research, Barone and Eisner (2012) have identified four measures against which to judge the research. The first question to ask is whether the research exposes issues not necessarily yet noticed by others. We suspect that many of our students' academic challenges at university are firstly rooted in language difficulties and secondly in the challenges presented by Academic Literacy. What we hope is that the drawings will reveal the challenges so as to assist us in knowing what aspects of students' English Literacy proficiencies need developing alongside the development of their Academic Literacy competencies. Barone and Eisner's second measure by which to judge the merits of arts based research is the type of questions posed by the readers as a result of

having been exposed to these issues. As lecturers, we should ask ourselves questions as to ways in which we can be more responsive to the English as well as the Academic Literacy needs of our students. The third measure is how focused the research is and, in our study, the focus is very specific as it explores how third and fourth year pre-service teachers of English perceive their literacy proficiencies. The fourth and final measure is the extent to which others can relate to the research and we believe that other students will relate to what the drawings divulge. We also opine that exploring the participants' perceptions of their literacy development, will alert ourselves and other lecturers to the challenges of students.

## 3. Participants

The socio-linguistic backgrounds of students add to the complexity of their transitioning from secondary to tertiary education. Our study is located within a school of education where isiZulu is the L1 of 80% of the student population and we thus anticipate that there will be problems around their language transitioning.

The language situation at the university in which the study is located is complex as noted by Rudwick and Parmegiani (2013:92):

> Zulu L1-speakers currently entering the institution who have graduated from township and rural secondary schools (ex-Department of Education (DET) schools) often have weak literacy skills in both their mother tongue and English due to the poor quality of schooling. In contrast, Zulu-speaking students who graduated from an ex-Model C or private school[s], often have stronger academic literacy skills in English than in Zulu.

The identification of participants was through voluntary purposive sampling. All participants are isiZulu L1 speakers and the gender-mix is three males and one female. Two are third year students and the other two are in their fourth year of study.

Barbour (2007) points out that participants should be familiar with each other as well as being homogenous in terms of one factor. In this

study, the familiar factor is that the four participants are pre-service teachers of English who are well acquainted with university life and each other. Barbour also cautions against what she refers to as "herd mentality" and we tried to obviate this with a gender mix of three males and one female. Another difference is that one of the participants attended a deep rural school and the others matriculated in ex-model C schools[1]. They did not all attend these schools for the duration of their schooling as two moved across from township schools[2] when they graduated to the secondary school phase.

Another reason for the deliberate selection of the participants is that they are well known to one of the researchers and Du Plooy (2009:123) states that "previous knowledge of the target population and/or objectives of the study can result in a researcher using his or her judgement to select a sample". In addition to one of the researchers knowing the participants well, the findings of phase one of our research project on the language transitioning of students, indicated that first year students have the sense that their Literacy proficiencies regressed over the course of their first year at university.

In this second phase of the study, we wanted to find out how students who are close to graduating as teachers of English view their Literacy proficiencies. It is for this reason that we purposefully selected third and fourth year pre-service students for this phase of the study.

1 Model C schools were in existence for a very brief period towards the end of Apartheid. They were historically white, privileged schools which opened access to students of all races. Though the term had a very short existence in policy, the term has come to be used in South Africa to denote any school that was well-resourced and had previously been designated for the white population group.

2 The term 'township schools' usually refers to underdeveloped and/or under resourced schools, racially divided and attended by primarily non-white learners. A township is a suburb or urban area of predominantly black occupation, formerly officially designated for black occupation by Apartheid legislation.

## 4. Data collection

The field texts in this study were students' reflections, visual depictions and focus group conversations. The process began with an explanation of the objectives of the study and issues of anonymity and voluntary participation. Ethical clearance (HSS/0118/019) has been granted for the study and all students signed an informed consent form.

To aid in addressing the research question, the reflective process began with participants individually reflecting on their Academic Literacy development in relation to their perceived English language proficiencies. As all participants had completed an Academic literacy in English module and were either in their third or fourth year of studying, they were familiar with the term *Academic Literacy*. The participants then visually depicted their reflections and were given as much time as they needed to complete the exercise. As part of the reflective process, participants' visuals were displayed and each drawing was closely examined by all in the group. Each participant explained their depictions and thereafter, the other participants and the researchers added their own observations and asked questions related to what had been said or visually depicted. A lively discussion ensued during these conversations. The researchers did not limit the time spent on each visual. The aim of the activities was to allow for the participants' perceptions of their Literacy proficiencies to spontaneously come to the fore through art and for others to interpret the pictures in their own way.

## 5. Analysis, discussion and key findings

The discussions helped to shift "participants into a creative modality" and provided them "with a new language of description or an alternative vocabulary for articulating their experiences" (Botsis & Bradbury, 2018:3). In addition to their visual depictions, participants had an opportunity to share their drawings and to explain or highlight their perceptions. In many studies, participants' interpretations of their visuals are often ignored (see Hayik, 2012, as cited in Botsis & Bradbury). However, in this study these interpretations form a key

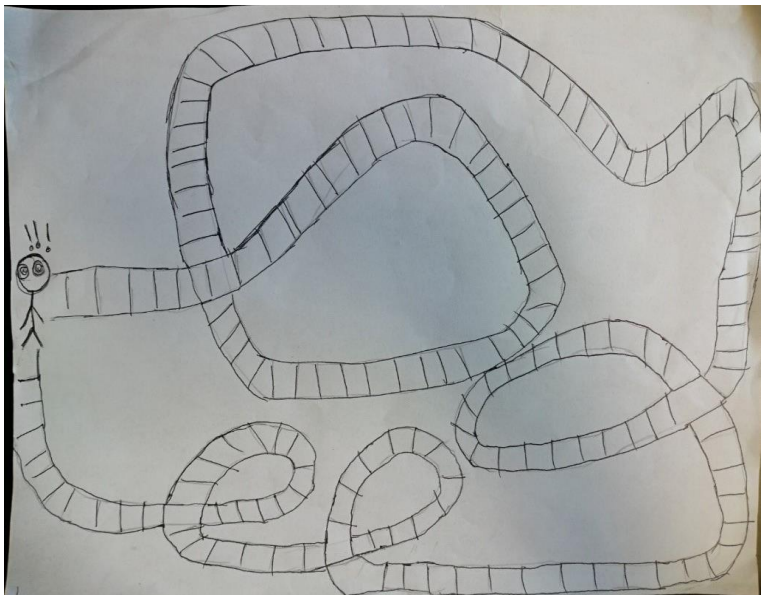
component to determine the participants' perceptions of their English proficiencies and what this means for how they cope with the demands of Academic Literacy. After each participants' description of their drawing, the other participants and the researchers commented by adding their own observations, thus adding another layer of analysis. Many interesting points regarding not only the participants' perceptions of their English proficiencies but also the challenges they face in developing these proficiencies as well as Academic Literacy proficiencies came to the fore in the lively discussion of the images. The interpretations of the "other" were very telling as these discussions revealed what was often hidden to the artist.

We present our analysis and discussion of the findings with vignettes alongside the students' visuals, which are followed by brief background information on each participant and their description of the visuals. Key points pertaining to the discussion of their visuals with the other participants and researchers are shared in an effort to bring to the fore student perceptions of their English proficiencies. Challenges that participants face in developing their Academic Literacy competencies are also noted in this section.

## Participant 1: Thandeka

*Background*

Thandeka is an African, female, third year student and isiZulu mother-tongue speaker. She attended a multiracial ex-model C school where both English and Afrikaans were used as the medium of instruction. At school, she felt as if she had to sink or swim, because her home language is different to the LOTL. English became a social barrier as she struggled to make friends because of their language differences. isiZulu was not used at all in the general school setting. She performed better in English in secondary school.



"Am I going the right way?"

What a roller coaster ride academic writing has been. Am I even going in the right direction? English is not my mother-tongue. I am in my third year; I still find it confusing to switch between English and Zulu. Translating in my head is difficult! I really feel that I am trying my best. I even do a mind map and I keep all the rules I have learnt about academic writing in mind. Then, when it's marked, everything is wrong. Some students think that because I went to an ex-model C school I don't struggle with Academic Literacy. They are wrong. You see, English was for school and Zulu for home. At home I had no one to practice my English with. We are not so different. Academic English is tough for everyone.

School and university is different. At school we were told what to do, how to do it and what will be asked and we

> practiced this. Here you have to be critical, you have to think about different things, you are out of your comfort zone. It creates confusion. Things are unfamiliar to me.

*Thandeka's description*

What comes to the fore in Thandeka's image is that because her mother-tongue is not English, she feels challenged and confused about her English competency and her Academic Literacy development. She works hard and knows the expectations of the academic genre but battles to transfer the theory into practice and her results are incommensurate with her efforts. Her image clearly indicates the roller coaster ride, and the cross tracks are indicative of all her challenges with regard to English and to Academic Literacy. What compounds her challenges is that she speaks isiZulu at home and is not exposed to English beyond the surrounds of the university. Therefore, she feels that she needs to further develop her English language proficiency and assumes that this will help her cope better with academic writing.

*Comments and discussion*

Ntuli is surprised that he shares the same perceptions about academic writing and that the confusion Thandeka expressed mirrors his feelings in terms of his language proficiency. He thought that the confusion created by Academic Literacy only exists for those from rural schools, where learners would learn English as an additional language but would mostly communicate in isiZulu. It is clear that Ntuli also assumes a direct correlation between a person's English language proficiency and Academic Literacy development. On the other hand, Dumisani is of the opinion that the root of their confusion with English and with Academic Literacy lies in their attitude towards English rather than the schools that they attended and stated "this negativity comes about because students feel that they will never be able to connect with the type of English used at university".

Dumisani recognises that it is not just about language competence and that factors such as attitude can play an important role in a student's Academic Literacy development. Ntuli's response was that the problem lies with how the language is taught at school: "We are now given these pieces and told to connect but how have we come to have these pieces? [...] how do we connect these pieces?". Ntuli feels that teachers "spoon fed" them so that they could "save themselves from going deeper into something that they don't even understand that is the reason why they are teaching us in isiZulu, any other language than English, which we are supposed to be using".

Bheki agrees with his comment that "in high school[3] it was better, we were told what to do. We still struggled but it was better. At varsity[4] there is that difficulty, you can't write like you did in high school, you won't get the same marks. That's the problem. There is something, I think the language isn't the same".

Bheki raises an important point that Academic Literacy is about more than just English language competence. It is also about taking on the different norms and values at university and demonstrating this through their literacy practices and what he is alluding to is that not all students have the prerequisite institutional cultural capital. Bheki also relates to Thandeka's questioning whether she is "on the right track" with her Academic Literacy development. Bheki sums this up as follows: "We don't know where we are going, we are trying but the results aren't pleasing – aren't what we expected".

*Main perceptions*

What came to light after the discussion around Thandeka's image is that students are of the opinion that there is a disconnect between English used at school and the English Academic Literacy proficiencies required at university. These perceptions indicate to us that it is not simply a matter of having basic English language proficiency developed at school level, but it is also about acquiring the Academic Literacy practices of the university which can only be developed at university. School does not prepare students for the

3 High school refers to secondary schooling.

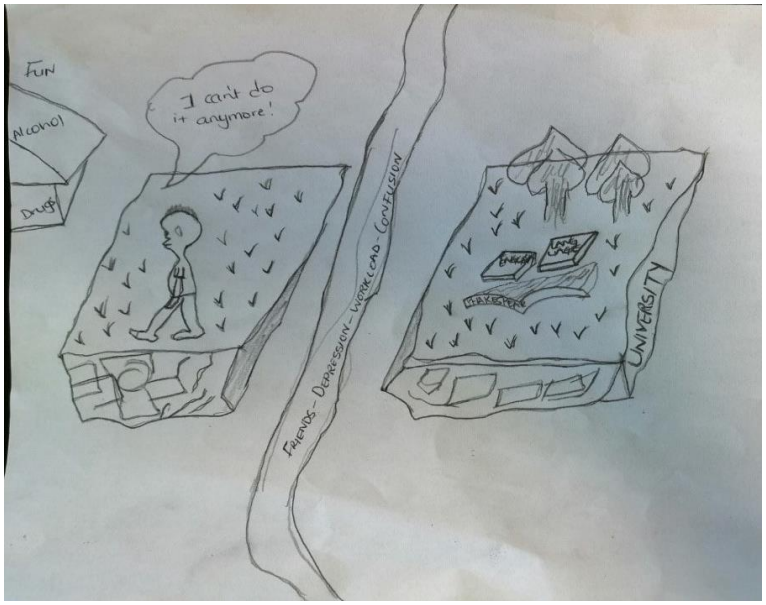
4 "Varsity" is a South African term, used as a colloquial abbreviation for university.

academic discourse used at university and at third and fourth year level, students feel confused and disappointed in their English as well as their Academic Literacy development.

**Participant 2: Dumisani**

*Background*

Dumisani is an African male, third year student and isiZulu mother-tongue speaker. At secondary school Dumisani learnt English as home language and isiZulu as first additional language. He went to a multiracial school because he wanted to be with his friends. In the discussion, he revealed that his parents are uneducated and only know isiZulu. The choice of which secondary school to attend was left to him. He noted that his parents had no idea about the school's language policy. His primary schooling took place in rural areas where he was taught in isiZulu.



> "I just can't do it anymore"
>
> I just can't do it anymore. Here I am and I feel disconnected from varsity. It's like my life is split into two different regions. There is a barrier and I think I know what it is. When we got to varsity we were told that it would be fun. But soon the confusion began.
>
> The language used at varsity is very different. At varsity we critique everything, I can't anymore, even when we are given assignments we have to critique. The lecturer explains the assignment in English, and if we don't understand we meet somewhere and talk in Zulu about it. We feel disconnected and confused. The language spoken in res is different from the language spoken in class. English is only used in class and mostly by the lecturer. Students don't add much to what the lecturer says, we just accept. I can't do it anymore. I feel depressed and I need to de-stress. I go to clubs, I turn to drugs and alcohol. It helps a bit to distress from the disconnection I have with university. If only isiZulu was used in class as an academic language, I am more comfortable with Zulu. I think I would connect more. I want to connect more but the language barrier is just too big.

*Dumisani's description*

Dumisani's visual of his English development depicts a divide between, what he calls, two regions – himself on the one side and the university on the other. He sees a disconnect between the two regions which contribute to feelings of depression and confusion. Contrary to what he expected, university has not been fun and he blames the workload for this.

Central to his life at university is language. He uses the words "English" and then as an extension of this "language" and "Shakespeare". He notes that the language used in university lectures, is very different from the language used at school, even though he

went to a "multiracial school". At university the emphasis is placed on students' ability to critique topics in English which is challenging for Dumisani who states "at varsity we critique everything, I can't anymore, even when we are given assignments we have to critique". To critique, as an Academic Literacy practice, is something all students probably had little or no exposure to in secondary school. Lecturers should be aware that there is a distinction between language proficiency and Academic Literacy and that the challenges students face with certain Academic Literacy practices do not simply relate to poor language proficiency. Dumisani notes that the language spoken outside of the lecture halls is isiZulu. In Dumisani's explanation of the assessment process he emphasises the disconnect between the use of English in the classroom and the use of isiZulu outside the classroom to clarify assessment tasks. Dumisani states that: "The lecturer will explain the assignment and maybe we don't understand. We will then decide to meet somewhere. When we meet and we explain the assignment to each other we use our own language, which is different from the one the lecturer used. This causes confusion, disconnection". He also notes that he would be more comfortable with isiZulu being used as academic language and that "English is only used in class and mostly by the lecturer. Students don't add much to what the lecturer says, we just accept". Dumisani's statements clearly reiterates his preference for the use of isiZulu in the classroom, instead of English.

Bourdieu (1986) maintained that not having the required capital within a given field can have an adverse effect on the success of individuals. This is possibly what caused Dumisani to draw himself walking away from his life at university and thinking "I can't do it anymore" which signals that he has given up. In his attempt to deal with the "disconnect" he experiences, which is synonymous with feelings of confusion and depression, he searches for fun and drugs and alcohol became his coping mechanism. His solution to the disconnect, which is a proposal that isiZulu be used as the language of instruction, neglects to consider that students would still need to learn a new literacy – Academic Literacy. Dumisani's sharing of his insecurities due to his lack of under-preparedness for university and

how he had coped with his fears is worrying as he turned to self-destructive behaviours.

*Comments and discussion*

Bheki agrees with Dumisani's perception that language is the main contributing factor to the disconnect between secondary school and university. He explains that most students know what the answers are when lecturers ask questions during lectures, but that they do not know how to formulate their answers in English. When he has to write about a particular topic, he struggles to unpack it, because it is in English and when he does not understand the question, he ends up writing about irrelevant things. This points to his challenges with English as well as with Academic Literacy. This problem is not new in South African universities. Bheki's explanation that students battle because they are not proficient in English was identified as an issue by Webb (2004:148) who stated "English as the medium of instruction in many higher education institutions in the country may compromise the success of English as an Additional Language (EAL) students, particularly those whose English proficiency is below the required levels". The ideal, for Bheki, would be to bridge the disconnect by allowing the use of isiZulu in lectures but he acknowledges that not all of the lecturers are able to speak isiZulu. Although Thandeka agrees that communicating in isiZulu in the lecture halls could assist in addressing the disconnect, she makes insightful comments relating to language attitudes. Thandeka offers an interesting perspective as she identifies isiZulu (as language) and students' attitudes towards using isiZulu instead of English in class as a possible hindrance to students improving their English language proficiencies: "We have this attitude that English is just so difficult, just tell me in Zulu […] but how are we going to become proficient in English if we have that type of attitude about it? […] we are not giving ourselves time to try". Bheki identifies the teachers at school as the main problem and states that they lacked confidence. Teachers write down notes on the board in English and then learners have to copy them down. At university, students are expected to critique, analyse and interpret. He is of the opinion that the disconnect between

English at school and English at university is formed because these skills are not taught at school – "[at] university lecturers assume/expect that […] students would have prior knowledge of concepts as they were supposed to be taught these concepts at school". Ntuli, elaborates on the teaching methods used at school by saying that: "they [teachers] explain to students using the CPF method – CRAM, PASS AND FORGET You have to cram the knowledge into your head because you don't understand it, you then have to transfer the knowledge to your exam, after which you forget it because you never really understood it. How can I remember something that I don't even understand?".

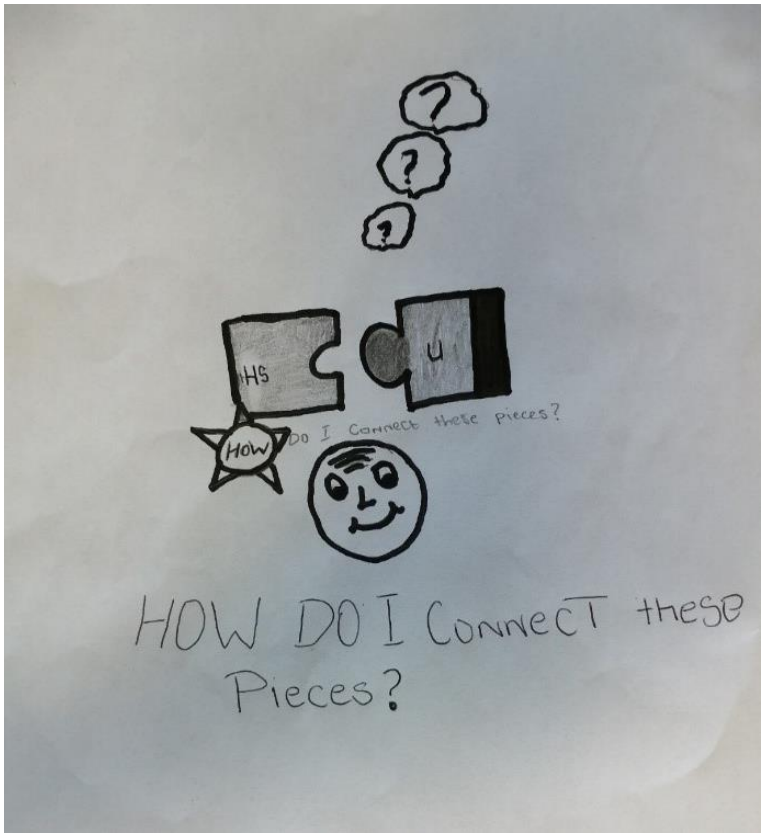
*Main perceptions*

The following main perceptions were deduced from Dumisani's description of his image and the participants' comments. Language is a key factor in the disconnect students are experiencing between secondary school and university in terms of their academic language proficiencies. A solution could be to use isiZulu in lecture halls at university to bridge the gap but there was acknowledgement that this move could also act as a barrier to students developing their English language proficiencies, which the participants seems to equate with the development of their Academic Literacy competencies.

**Participant 3: Ntuli**

*Background*

Ntuli is an African male, fourth year student and isiZulu mother-tongue speaker. He attended a rural school from Grade 1 to Grade 12. He has always wanted to succeed in English and he watched cartoons on television which he feels helped him to understand English. He notes that when it comes to speaking in English, he lacks confidence. He attributes this lack in confidence to not having much exposure to English outside the classroom. He expected his schooling to help him to develop his English speaking skills, but is of the opinion that it did not.




How do I connect the pieces?

HOW? How do I connect pieces of a puzzle that don't even fit? How do I deal with the unanswered questions about the English language I have from school? I am happy that I have learnt English but I am confused. I need to know how this language works so that I am able to use it properly. I need to know how to use the language so that I can teach it properly. Why is it that I know things in my own language but when it is in English, I don't always understand it? Has school failed me and is this why I now as a fourth year student feel that I

> am failing at university? I have many questions and this affects my confidence as future English teacher.
>
> Once I figure out how, everything will become clear to me, I will be able to be a good English teacher. I have little time left at university but my hope is in figuring the "how", so that I can show my students 'how'.

*Ntuli's description*

Ntuli's visual represents two pieces of a puzzle, which he finds difficult to connect because of their varying sizes – the one is bigger and represents university and the smaller piece represents his secondary schooling. The question marks relate to his many unanswered questions about how English was taught as additional language in secondary school. He expresses his desire to be able to use the language so that he can teach English at school and therefore expresses his need to know "how" the language works. His perceptions of school are that it failed to adequately prepare him for the English Literacy proficiencies needed to succeed in university. He seems not to have realised that his problems are two-fold as he is battling with his general English proficiencies and with Academic Literacy. Upon entering university, he was mostly familiar with use of his home language in a learning environment. At university he had to adapt to using English which is his L2 as well as Academic Literacy. Although he is in his fourth year of study he is concerned that he does not know enough to become a good teacher of English, as depicted by the many frowns on the face drawn in his visual representation. The smile indicates that he is happy: "because I have learnt English and I love the language". He reiterates his passion and desire to be a good English teacher: "I want to do my job perfectly […] I want to close this gap of confusion, because now I have seen where it starts. So, the big issue for me is how will I go about doing that?". Ntuli stresses that he does not want to perpetuate the cycle of confusion. Concerning his comment on "where it starts" – he is of the opinion that the problem of students' insufficient English literacy skills, to cope with the

English competencies needed at university, must already start to be addressed at Early Childhood Development level. As a teacher of English, he wants to close the gap between school and university. Ntuli's comments indicate that his need for better English proficiencies is two-fold – he wants to improve his English proficiencies so that he can cope better as a university student and be a more proficient and confident teacher of English, which are two very different competencies. He perceives that it is not impossible to connect the two pieces of the puzzle represented in his visual depiction, but that the challenge lies with "how" it can be done.

*Comments and discussion*

The discussion about Ntuli's visual was mostly between himself and Bheki. Thandeka and Dumisani often nodded in agreement and would signal their agreement by saying "Yes, yes". Bheki's perception of students' academic language proficiencies is that students struggle with writing in English and they often use the excuse that they are not English teachers. They expect the English major students to assist them with their writing and to edit their assignments. When he reads their work, he notices the mistakes and has realised how weak their English language proficiencies are. He says: "They are not taught properly at school which contributes to them experiencing language problems at university". Ntuli emphasises that English language proficiencies are vital as English is the LOLT in all subjects at university. Therefore, students' English should be developed by creating a compulsory English module for each year, where the emphasis is on the development of English language proficiencies which indicates that he is of the opinion that well-honed English skills automatically relate to coping with the demands of Academic Literacy. Hurst (2015:3) states that "many higher education institutions and educators in South Africa currently provide support across a spectrum of 'academic literacies'". What is concerning is that in the new curriculum for pre-service teachers which began in 2019 in the university wherein this study was conducted, the Academic Literacy module that was housed in the English Discipline no longer exists. It is expected that all disciplines will weave academic literacy

proficiencies into their modules. The English Language Course, which was an elective module designed to improve students' grammar and general English proficiencies, has also been eliminated from the new curriculum. Ntuli justifies his suggestion that the university offer a compulsory language module by sharing his perception that peers often use "bombastic words" to respond to questions raised in the lecture to indicate that they understand what has been said. When they use these "bombastic words" other students cheer although they don't understand these words, because when he asks them what it means they are not able to explain these terms. Ntuli notes that: "This is happening in schools. In schools the teacher will use the term photosynthesis. Then the learner will ask, 'Ok Sir what is the photosynthesis?', then they will say 'a photosynthesis is a photosynthesis' in other words they won't explain properly, they will also just use the handbook definition". The perception is thus that the teachers place the emphasis on learners learning what is in the textbook, so that they can "cram, pass and forget". This indicates that the teachers' English competencies are not always well-honed. Ntuli wants to link what he is teaching to real life examples, "I want to put it into context for learners". This links with his image of connecting two pieces of a puzzle. He criticises the rigidity of teachers and their teaching approaches and is of the opinion that teachers do not allow learners to explore whilst learning, which, he says, "kills creativity and knowledge development".

*Main perceptions*

The discussion and description of Ntuli's image highlighted key perceptions relating to how the participants feel about their English language and Academic Literacy proficiencies. The main problems identified are that school has failed to adequately prepare students for the English language proficiencies needed to succeed in university – how English is used at school is in contrast to how English is used in university. Rigid teaching approaches at school negatively influenced the development of the participants' English language proficiencies which has negatively influenced their Academic Literacy development at university. Teachers expect learners to cram and then

write what they memorised from the textbook in the exam which hinders critical thinking. Learners are not encouraged to ask questions when they don't understand and there are very few links between content and real-life experiences. The pedagogic practices students have been exposed to at school influences the institutional cultural capital they bring to university, where they are asked to engage in critical thinking as part of their Academic Literacy development.

In general, students struggle with writing in English in all other modules at university, because of not only poor Academic Literacy development but also poor English proficiencies. Peers often use the excuse that they are not English teachers and they then expect the participants, as English major students, to help them with their writing/to edit their assignments.

Of special interest is the participants' awareness of the challenges they face in developing their Academic Literacy competencies as well as their English proficiencies. Because they are going to be teachers of English, they are interested in finding ways to address these challenges so as to break the "cycle of confusion" for those entering higher education.

**Participant 4: Bheki**

*Background*

Bheki is an African male, fourth year student and a mother-tongue isiZulu speaker. He attended a multiracial secondary school and an isiZulu primary school.

> Here I am. A fourth year B.Ed student. I started my journey from secondary school to varsity thinking that the road ahead would be clear. Oh boy, was I wrong. Here at varsity, there is an obstacle. It's like a tree in the road, a river I need to cross and it's standing in my way of becoming a good English teacher. This tree, this barrier, is English, academic English. It's not that English at varsity is that difficult […] it's just

more tricky and different. I mean, I go to class and I write the assignment and the test and I pass, but I don't pass well like I did at school. I don't get the marks I thought I would get. My teachers at school did their jobs well, but at university, English is standing in the way of my success. I want to progress. I often consult my lecturers and feel that I understand everything, but my marks don't reflect this. I am moving forward, but the obstacles remain, making my journey so much more difficult. It's like I am drowning whilst trying to cross the river. Academic Literacy keeps on challenging me and it makes me question the way forward and whether I will I ever reach my destination. This road has definitely not been clear.

*Bheki's description*

Bheki's image commences from where he is walking away from secondary school *en route* to higher education. At this point, he describes the journey as clear. He points out that as he reached university, he faced many obstacles, and this is represented by the tree and rivers obstructing the road. The tree is a barrier and symbolises English at university. He wants to become an English teacher to improve his own English and help equip learners to develop their English proficiencies. However, he describes the academic English discourse used at university as blocking him from achieving his goals. He indicates that his teachers taught him well at school, but despite this, he does not feel prepared for university and often consults with his lecturers. He notes that: "[…] at university, English is standing in the way of my success […] Academic Literacy keeps on challenging me", thus revealing his perception that his English proficiency impacts his Academic Literacy development. He chose to specifically depict his Academic Literacy development as a river that becomes too difficult to cross, which leaves him feeling that "there is no way forward". He perceives his progress as slow and disappointing, but thinks that he is moving forward. When he receives his results, he is often disappointed. The many challenges he faces with the use of English at University makes him feel as if he is drowning. He believes that he is not getting sufficient assistance in the development of his English to enable him to cope better with Academic Literacy. As he nears the end of his journey at university the road narrows and darkens – he does not see the light at the end of his journey and questions whether he has developed his English skills sufficiently to be a good teacher. This leaves him feeling concerned about his perceived lack of development and how this might impact the learners he will teach.

*Comments and discussion*

Ntuli points out the link between his own visual depiction of his academic language proficiencies and Bheki's depiction: "We are sharing the same challenges, in terms of the language". He also

expresses disappointment in his Academic Literacy development and the lack of support from the university. To some extent, he blames himself for not putting in enough effort. Like Ntuli, Bheki notes that he feels responsible for not having developed his English language proficiencies as well as he would have like to: "cause all of these years, if I realised, if I realised this thing earlier, maybe I would have gotten, found some ways to actually improve and find a solution to the problem I'm facing". Bheki reiterates that he still lacks confidence in his academic writing, "because of the academic language – it has made me not trust what I have written […] not only in English but in other modules as well".

*Main perceptions*

The discussion and description of Bheki's image indicates that students are frustrated and disappointed by their slow progress in developing their Academic Literacy proficiencies. They see a direct correlation between their English competence and their Academic literacy proficiencies. In addition, they do not feel adequately prepared to teach English or to use English as medium of instruction in schools. This is because of their perceived poor English proficiency which they blame for their slow Academic Literacy development.

In addition, students want to master English, because it is seen as a barrier to their success in higher education. They would like to see adequate support structures within the university to assist their Academic Literacy development. There is a disconnect between students perceived knowledge of academic writing and the marks they obtain during assessment.

## 6. A layered analysis

The layered analysis of this arts-based narrative inquiry study revealed the benefits of inviting students to be part of the research process and the value of engaging with the group throughout the process. The visuals produced by students became a lot more meaningful to us and to them during our group discussions. The participants' drawings became our first layer of analysis and were

very telling but it was in the close scrutiny, and honest explanations of the drawings that we began to better understand their challenges, frustrations and fears related to English and Academic Literacy. The third layer, which included the other participants and the researchers was where the data became rich and more meaningful. With others providing interpretations of the images, the implicit meanings which could otherwise have gone unnoticed were revealed.

## 7. Summary of Key Findings

The discussions about the drawings revealed explicit and implicit meanings, which aided us in our reflections of what the students revealed. In addition to these reflections, the construction of vignettes, assisted us in foregrounding the participants' perceptions of their English proficiencies and how these impact on their Academic Literacy development. What was revealed through the process is that the participants, who are at the end of their undergraduate degrees and will soon graduate as teachers of English, are not confident about their English proficiencies and are disappointed with their mastery of the Academic Literacy genre.

A key finding of this study is that the participants' perceptions are influenced by experience, what they refer to as a "disconnect" (see Dumisani's description of his drawing) between their secondary schooling and their tertiary education in terms of the use of English in both domains. They expressed that their secondary schooling failed them in terms of language. One of the participants, Ntuli, summed up the general perception of the group by saying that school teachers "spoon fed" them so that they could "save themselves from going deeper into something that they don't even understand that is the reason why they are teaching us in isiZulu, any other language than English, which we are supposed to be using". His statement highlights that many teachers lack the confidence to teach English and use the language as the medium of instruction, which has negatively impacted the cultural capital students bring with them to university.

Despite the participants nearing the end of their degrees, their perceptions revealed that they still face challenges with their English and Academic Literacy proficiencies. They expect to have better

English proficiencies as well as better academic writing skills as they are about to exit the university. The blame does not lie only with the students' socio-cultural backgrounds or the way they were taught English at school. What is evident is that there is a disconnect between university and school and that "university lecturers assume/expect that […] students would have prior knowledge of concepts as they were supposed to be taught these concepts at school" (as noted by Bheki). What lecturers must take into consideration is that all students do not enter university with the same linguistic capital and that developing Academic Literacy competencies involves more than just teaching particular language conventions.

The analysis foregrounded that the participants are of the opinion that their preference to use isiZulu rather than English has played a part in their lack of English proficiencies. Thandeka expressed this in saying, "we have this attitude that English is just so difficult, just tell me in Zulu… but how are we going to become proficient in English if we have that type of attitude about it? […] we are not giving ourselves time to try". What has become quite clear in the analysis is that although at times the participants equate their English language proficiencies with Academic Literacy proficiencies they are aware that Academic Literacy development involves more than just being proficient in English.

## 8. Concluding remarks

This study's point of departure was to explore students' perceptions of their language challenges at university and how they think these impact on their Academic Literacy development. From the visuals, vignettes, descriptions and group discussion, a lot more than the participants' perceptions of their language proficiencies came to the fore. It is evident that third and fourth year students still face many challenges regarding their language transitioning from secondary school to university. These challenges are with their English language proficiencies and with their Academic Literacy development. Some participants recognise that the issue is more complex than language. The challenges not only involve how to cope with the disconnect between English used at secondary school, the level of English

expected and the Academic Literacy at university but also with acquiring a new cultural capital set. The participants all share the same perception that although their use of English as academic discourse has improved, they do not feel that they are adequately equipped or confident to teach in English or to teach English at secondary school level, which is of concern as they will soon be in the classroom as teachers. They blame not only the university, but also their secondary schooling and to some extent, themselves. What many alluded to is that they arrived at the institution without the prerequisite cultural capital which posed additional challenges.

We contend that it is up to all stakeholders within the university to get to know the needs of our students and to explore meaningful ways in which to support them. By getting to know our students and their needs and by working as a collective, lecturers will be better placed to address the language disconnect between secondary schooling and tertiary education and assist students to take on the institutionalised capital required for academic success.

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