

Factors that Impede on Undergraduate Students' Ability to Adequately Communicate for Academic Success at Tshwane University of Technology (TUT)

Selina Serole Ramapela¹⁺

¹Tshwane University of Technology (TUT)

Abstract. It is due to the ongoing nature of the students' demographics at universities that students need insurmountable continuous academic supports to be able communicate effectively and successfully for academic purposes.

Keywords: Undergraduate Students, Communicate Adequately, Academic Success, Academic Achievement, Communicative Ability

1. Introduction

The changes in political dispensation in South Africa have provided formal access to universities to many thousands of students (Boughey, 2000). This contributes to inherently commonsense idea that the academic difficulties experienced by students as they engage with tertiary study are attributed to their status as speakers of English as an additional language. They are expected to display their ability to communicate, as part of the linguistic competency which is required for their day-to-day academic life. Educators therefore face a huge challenge of providing both academic support and to act as remedial language experts to improve students' communicative skills.

2. Background

The media outcry about low matriculation marks and poor pass rates of our secondary school learners countrywide, particularly those who have to study through the medium of a second language tend to be a national crisis (Pretorius, 2001). It was reported by the same source that there is also a high failure rate among students in higher education. It is therefore apparent to make well informed decisions about normalization, remediation and preventative measures of academic underperformance in general.

A transition from industrial to knowledge and a communication-based society has positioned countries in world-economy that demands on academic institutions to change (Heath, 1995). Successful graduates are therefore expected and required to have high levels of literacy, be able to generate, use and transfer knowledge for various academic and life purposes.

3. Preliminary Literature

3.1. Introduction

Language, knowledge and skills are considered today to be jointly constructed by human beings (Walqui, 1999). They are perceived, noticed, used and elaborated on as part of the activity of the student/ learner in tasks, projects and interpersonal relationships that are meaningful, challenging, interesting and well scaffolded.

3.2. The Role of Bilingualism

August, Hakuta & Pompa (1994:6) suggest that bilingualism among students enhances cognitive, social growth, competitiveness within a global marketplace, national security and understanding of diverse people cultures. It is in this regard important to consider the importance of bilingualism among students/ learners as

⁺ S.S. Ramapela. Tel.: (012 3829420) ; Fax: (012 3829445)
E-mail address: ramapelass@tut.ac.za.

a tool to communicate effectively and appropriately to cope with the challenges related to diverse situations (Melendez 1993).

3.3. Students Reading Skills

The South African (SA) higher education institutions experience a high failure rate, particularly among students who have to study through the medium of second language (L2) (Pretorius 2000). It is therefore important to understand the causes of such widespread low academic performance at primary, secondary and tertiary levels due to the lower language proficiencies.

Given the SA context, Pretorius (2000) proclaims that among the characteristic features of academic underperformance, is poor reading ability. Among other similar studies conducted by Pretorius, results of the reading tests at University of Natal, University of South Africa (UNISA) and University of Transkei and the National Reading Strategy (2008) revealed very low levels of reading among black second language (L2) students and average reading rates among white first language (L1) students.

3.4. The impact of Using Home Language in Classrooms

In a study conducted by Swain and Lapkin (2000), it was confirmed that the use of home language establishes a joint understanding of texts while allowing the management of tasks. They further maintain that students are able to focus their attention on vocabulary and grammar items for language improvement. The interpersonal interaction of students with low language proficiency is enhanced.

Thoms, Liao & Szustak (2005:77) examined the use of home language interchangeably in a computer chat environment which positively established effective task management strategies. Interaction became more efficient and effective hence was beneficial for certain linguistic or communicative functions

3.5. Critical Problems Related to Students' Lack of Communicative Ability

Some of the critical problems that are linked to underachievement of second language (L2) students are (Alexander, Heaviside & Farris 1999):

- Shortage of adequately qualified teachers
- Lack of appropriate preparation for credentialed teachers
- Many teachers of English language learners and culturally diverse students do not feel that they are well prepared to meet the needs of their students
- Teachers' inappropriate expectations of learners in terms of English oral proficiency

It is alleged that students in the middle schools are typically involved in whole-class instruction and not interacting with either their teacher or other students (Waxman, Huang & Padron 1995). Parrila (1995:169) in the same vein is of the opinion that language enables students to interact with more capable peers and adults and later with written material hence allowing sharing of accumulated knowledge of their environment.

Cole and Chan (1994:30) argue that good communication enhances the educator's task of information organization and control, class management, motivation and reinforcement and encouragement of independent learning. Mwamwenda (1995:167) reports that a good communicator is fluent with words and communication in the classroom is based on the meanings of thousand of words exchanged between educators and students.

4. Grand-Tour Question

Which are the critical factors that impede on undergraduate students' ability to adequately communicate for academic success?

Sub-questions:

- Does bilingualism help students to communicate effectively and appropriately?
- What is the role of home language in the interaction and execution of classroom tasks?
- What are the critical problems that relate to students levels of academic achievements in terms of their language competency?

Objectives of the study

- To identify the critical factors that impede on undergraduate students' ability to communicate adequately for academic success.
- To determine if bilingualism help students to communicate effectively and appropriately.
- To establish the role of home language in interaction and execution of classroom tasks.
- To describe and discuss the critical problems that relate to students' language competency for academic underachievement

5. Research Methodology

5.1. Research Design

The multiple or triangulation method of data collection will be employed in order to increase the reliability of observations made by the researcher (De Vos 2002:365). Triangulation design allows the researcher simultaneously collects both qualitative and quantitative data in order to compare results of which the findings will be used to see whether they validate each other (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2003:443)

5.2. Qualitative Approach

Qualitative approach refers to research that involves the meanings, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphor, symbols and description of things (Bieger and Gerlach 1996:35; Hopkins 2000). Creswell (1998:15) defines qualitative research as an enquiry of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of enquiry that explore a social or human problem.

5.3. Population and Sampling

Bless and Higson-Smith (2000:85) define "population as a set of elements that the research focuses on and to which obtained results should be generated.

This study will consist of all the first year students that are registered for the Bachelor of Education (BEd): FET Specialisation at the Department of Educational Studies. The researcher will target this department due to their diverse and sizable composition of aspects related to languages, cultures, races and gender and because of the students' prior exposure to the higher education system.

Sampling refers to a process of selecting the sample individuals (Fraenkel and Wallen 2003:96). All the first year students registered for the BEd at the Departments of Educational Studies for 2012 will be selected to partake in the study. Probability sample will be drawn from a wider student population to enable the researcher to make generalization while achieving representative of the wider population (Cohen, Manion and Morrison 2000:99). This will reduce the risk of biasness. The stratified sampling will be chosen to obtain a sample representative of the students' population in terms of field of study, communication subject, race, gender, place of residence; home language, language proficiency and academic performance aid various subjects.

6. Data Collection

A comprehensive literature study will be conducted in order to explore factors that impede on the undergraduates' ability to adequately communicate for academic success. The main focus of the literature will be to determine the extent to which bilingualism, home language and critical problems that relates to the students' language competence and academic achievement. A questionnaire will be compiled and distributed to the research participants with items that include the relevant variables that will be investigated.

7. Data Analysis

The research qualitative data will be presented in the form of logical chain of evidence by noting causality and making inferences (Miles and Huberman 1994). A conceptual or theoretical coherence of data will be made through moving from metaphors to constructs to theories to explain the phenomena. For the purpose of this study, relational data analysis which focuses on the identification of how changes in one characteristic or variable changes or not correspond to changes in another characteristic or variable will be applicable and useful.

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