

ASSESSING AND DEVELOPING ACADEMIC LITERACY

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This paper argues that there is much to learn from an external, peer or expert evaluation by a department that concerns itself with the assessment and development of academic literacy. Such an evaluation provides an opportunity to step back and reflect on the foundations of one's work, and redefine its operational focuses. Taking the response to one such evaluation as an example, the paper shows how the external input led to the alignment of the two main aims of our work: (1) testing academic literacy levels, and (2) course design and teaching. The paper concludes by highlighting the numerous opportunities that are now opening up for inter-institutional co-operation on a national scale. Sharing the results and insights gained from an evaluation is not normally done outside of the institution that was evaluated. We hope that by making our information about this more freely available, it will further stimulate such co-operation.

PURPOSE

Quality assurance processes in the higher education sector are now the order of the day. While the focus has so far been on institutional self-evaluation, an important additional component of any such evaluation remains external, peer or expert evaluation, which in many cases had been procedurally institutionalised long before the current formalisation of quality management processes. How much do we learn from such external evaluations? The aim of this paper is to examine, first, how a recent external evaluation of our department has positively contributed to defining our work more sharply, and, second, how our response to this has led to a number of new developments that have had, and will continue to have, a critical effect on how we operate. It also seeks to share the insights gained from and as a result of the evaluation, something that is not normally done, to the detriment of good practice nationally.

In defining the work of our unit, the evaluation report (Cliff, Crandall, De Kadt & Hubbard 2003), in our view correctly, identifies the two focuses of the department as that of (1) testing academic literacy, and (2) instituting a means of developing academic literacy. These two are linked: if the assessment of academic literacy shows that the candidate has risk, there is an institutional requirement to enrol for a set of four compulsory academic language proficiency modules.

Most of the recommendations made by the external evaluation that relate to administrative and managerial matters have now been successfully implemented. These include rectifying some anomalies in the personnel position, and confirming the location of the unit within the

academic context, mainly as a consequence of its research agenda and output. Amongst the recommendations that deal with the academic content of the work of the unit, the one that stands out is that of developing a new test of academic literacy. In responding to this last issue, we have had the opportunity of defining our work anew. In short, the evaluation has afforded us the chance of standing still for a while in order to reflect on what we do, and where we should be headed. It has likewise given us an opportunity to bring the academic content of our work into sharper focus. The specific aim of this discussion is to articulate some of that internal debate. This paper will therefore principally review

- why and how we intervene in respect of academic literacy levels
- what we test (i.e. the construct that drives our test specifications)
- how, through our teaching, we align testing and the development of academic literacy

In the internal discussion of these issues, we have discovered a number of new ways in which we could deal with another vexed question that always concerns us: the measure of stigmatisation that is attached to failing the test. Especially at the beginning of the academic year, when the test results are still fresh, we receive a dozen or so complaints from parents who question the reliability of the result. This is not a large proportion (less than 0,2% of the population of students that are tested), but if dealt with in an unsatisfactory manner, such complaints may lead to all kinds of myths spreading about the test and what it can do. While these complainants constitute a very small portion of those tested, we do deal with larger numbers of administrative enquiries in the weeks after the test. These are mostly from students who, for example, made errors in putting down their student numbers on the answer sheets, and whose results get lost as a consequence. But we also investigate some 200 (= 3%) cases that are defined as borderline. In all, we answer almost double that number of queries. None of these issues, however, is as potentially damaging as the stigmatisation that attaches to being assessed as having academic literacy levels that constitute a risk to one's studies. Below, we will offer suggestions of how we may further curb potential complaints especially in this category, and how we may overcome the measure of stigmatisation that for some still attach to the results of the test and the institutional arrangements that follow.

WHY DO WE ASSESS ACADEMIC LITERACY?

The institutional arrangements made some three or four years ago by the University of Pretoria may perhaps have put it ahead of other comparable institutions. Today it is no longer alone in its concern about the academic literacy levels of the students it enrolls every year: most SA institutions of higher education now share that concern. They see a lack of proficiency in academic discourse as a risk (a) for students, who fail to complete their courses in time; (b) for parents (who have to foot the bill for additional years of study); (c) for themselves in the loss of subsidy; and (d) for the higher education system as a whole. Their arguments find increasing support in the literature, where academic language proficiency is linked closely to academic performance (for an overview, cf. Van Rensburg & Weideman 2002; Cliff *et al.* 2003).

Their concern appears to be well founded, for the size of the problem indeed appears to be considerable: almost a third of our students are identified as being at risk. Over the past four years the percentage of students with language proficiency at Grade 10 level and lower (in bold, below) has ranged between 27% and 33%, an average failure rate across the four years of 31%.

2000		2001		2002		2003	
N = 4661*		N = 5215		N = 5788		N = 6472	
≥Gr.11	≤Gr.10	≥Gr.11	≤Gr.10	≥Gr.11	≤Gr.10	≥Gr.11	≤Gr.10
N =	N =	N =	N =	N =	N =	N =	N =
3356	1305	3495	1720	4212	1576	4615	1857
(72%)	(28%)	(67%)	(33%)	(73%)	(27%)	(71%)	(29%)

Table 1: Summary of test results since 2000

These results have been obtained by using an adaptation of a commercially available norm referenced test that calibrates its results in terms of school grades.

Overcoming the problem is not an insurmountable task, however. Of those who are compelled to take the prescribed academic literacy classes, two-thirds eventually pass the course as a whole. The testing of these candidates includes showing an appropriate improvement in a proficiency test similar to the initial one. While we still do not have the longitudinal data on how these students progress through their studies until graduation, early indications of the investigations being undertaken are that the results are positive. As is no doubt the case elsewhere, budget constraints have prevented us this year from implementing the recommendation of the evaluation panel that we appoint a special researcher to undertake such longitudinal studies. As regards the one third who do not pass the academic literacy courses, the anecdotal evidence stretching back over several years, which suggests that they probably never reach graduation, is most likely correct.

Our intervention has considerable cost implications. The information at our disposal, however, suggests that it would cost us many times more in terms of lost subsidy if we did not do it: a calculation made at one university in the Western Cape concluded that a similar intervention there costs R4 million annually, but indirectly earns R18 million in subsidy. Similarly, research done by the Alternative Admissions Research Project (AARP) at UCT found that the only interfering factor that could improve initially negative predictions of academic performance, was an intervention such as ours that supported the development of academic potential. The downside of our own institutional arrangements is that we lose more than R12 million in subsidy annually since in most cases we have opted for adding the obligatory academic literacy classes into the normal curriculum (though as foundational courses).

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO INTERVENE?

The evaluation has given us a chance to review again what constitutes best practice in our field. Since the field is defined by the concept of academic literacy, this was also the concept that required our most serious attention. Recent arguments in the literature conceive of the development of academic language proficiency as the acquisition of a secondary discourse (Gee 1998). Becoming academically literate, as Blanton (1994: 230) notes, happens when

... individuals whom we consider academically proficient speak and write with something we call *authority*; that is one characteristic — perhaps the major characteristic — of the voice of an academic reader and writer. The absence of authority is viewed as powerlessness ...

There is agreement (cf. Weideman 2003b, Weideman & van Dyk 2004a for a survey, and Yeld *et al.* 2000) that the best interventions today proceed from a rich, open perspective on language. In our case the development of such a perspective within the context of academic work now underlies both the teaching and the testing component of our intervention. Such a contextual view of language in fact enhances both the face and construct validity of the test.

Similarly, we now know how *not* to go about designing such an intervention. If language is defined (as it was fifty years ago: cf. Weideman 1988: 6-8) as being merely a combination of sound, form, and meaning or, in technical linguistic terms, phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic elements, and language use is considered to be the employment of certain discrete ‘skills’, such as listening, reading and writing, we have probably not allowed our design to be informed by recent insights. In line with socially enriched views of language, we are more aware today of the need for a broader framework that maintains that language is not only expressive, but communicative, intended to mediate and negotiate human interaction. One may summarise the differences between a restrictive and an open view of language, and its implications for learning and testing as follows (Weideman 2003b):

Restrictive	Open
Language is composed of elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sound • form, grammar • meaning 	Language is a social instrument to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mediate and • negotiate human interaction • in specific contexts
<i>Main function</i> : expression	<i>Main function</i> : communication
<i>Language learning</i> = mastery of structure	<i>Language learning</i> = becoming competent in communication
<i>Focus</i> : language	<i>Focus</i> : process of using language

Table 2: Two perspectives on language

This section has dealt with the **foundation** of the design of an intervention to develop academic literacy. We return below to the specifics of this design.

WHY A NEW CONSTRUCT AND TEST?

The evaluation recommendations strongly supported the development of a new test, based on a new construct or blueprint. It did so, firstly, because the logistical constraints of the old test were becoming ever more apparent. It needed elaborate and sophisticated equipment, and it required an extended marking period. Increasing limitations on the time available during the orientation and registration period mean that we no longer have the luxury, as we did initially, of hand-marking the test, and stretching this process out over eight days before the marks become available. The question of maintaining inter-marker reliability was another complicating factor, and the experience of those who tried, often in vain, to achieve this, has been a contributing factor towards developing a more efficient and economical approach.

Secondly, as we noted above, we needed a new construct for both our test and the teaching component of the intervention because the outdated perspective that formed the foundation of the previous test undermined its face and construct validity.

Finally, there is currently widespread criticism of a skills-based approach, which in the minds of many formed the basis of our test and the rest of our work. The name of the unit, in fact, still reflects this approach, and one of the as yet unimplemented recommendations of the external evaluation panel is to change its name to reflect the concept of academic literacy. Again, we believe that the findings set out in the evaluation report are correct: there is no doubt that the inadequacies of a skills-based approach are widely noted today. Here, for example, is the opinion of two fairly mild critics:

We would thus 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 (Bachman & Palmer 1996: 75f.).

Such criticism of a skills-based approach generally also points out, no doubt with some validity, that it fosters a deficit view of language. While this is intuitively an acceptable view (we all have gaps in our proficiency), the fairly naïve pedagogical solution that often flows from this is not acceptable. In this view, teaching and learning are essentially unproblematic: if there is a deficit, it can be remedied by simply 'giving' the deficient person the skill. We all know — ironically, again from our own, pre-scientific, everyday experience — that this is not the way learning takes place, and that acquiring a language, or a new type of discourse in which you are not yet proficient, does not happen by 'receiving' something from an authority. If this were so, we would all be out queuing patiently somewhere to 'receive' those languages we have always wanted to learn.

WHAT IS IT THAT WE TEST?

What does a construct based on a theory of academic literacy, i.e. a robust characterisation of the latter concept, look like? There were four stages in the development of our new construct.

Blanton's (1994: 226) definition, which we considered first, is important because it breaks with the notion that learning to become competent in academic language is merely learning some vocabulary and grammar. If academic discourse is viewed as communicative, interactional and contextual, then a test of academic literacy will test more than vocabulary and grammar. Such a test would show that it values other kinds of knowledge and competences as well, by requiring some indication that students are capable also to do the following set of actions:

1. Interpret texts in light of their own experience and their own experience in light of texts;
2. Agree or disagree with texts in light of that experience;
3. Link texts to each other;
4. Synthesize texts, and use their synthesis to build new assertions;
5. Extrapolate from texts;

6. Create their own texts, doing any or all of the above;
7. Talk and write about doing any or all of the above;
8. Do numbers 6 and 7 in such a way to meet the expectations of their audience (Blanton 1994: 226).

In the work of Bachman & Palmer (1996) we find a more detailed definition still, and one that is widely used in the field of language testing. They define language ability (or the measuring of language ability) as one standing on two pillars: language knowledge, and strategic competence (1996: 67), as in Figure 1 below. The most prominent objections to this definition are technical, and will not be discussed here. For us, there was the difficulty of contextualising it, i.e. giving content to the various categories in a way that made sense for academic work and study. This we attempted first by considering how UCT's AARP worked with it, and then by developing our own 'streamlined' version (cf. discussion below).

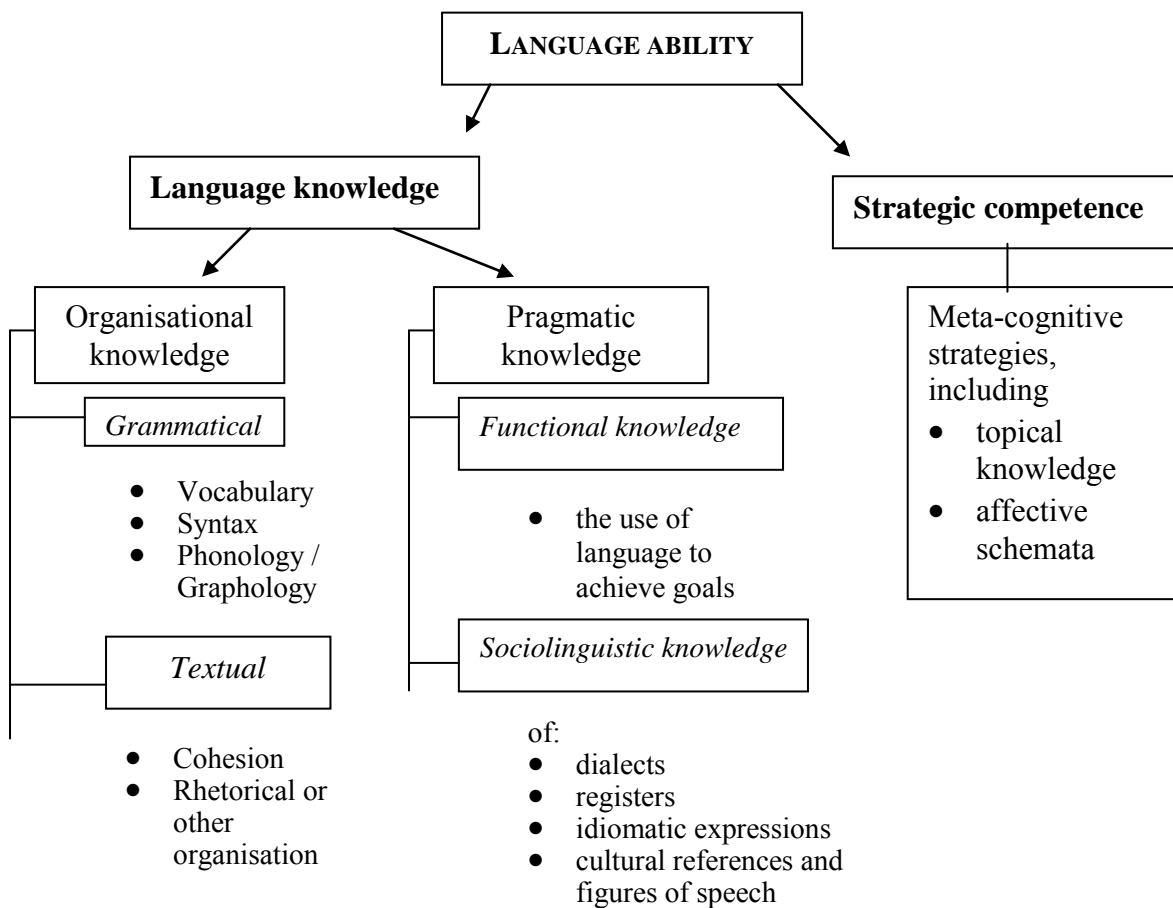


Figure 1: The Bachman & Palmer construct

In the work of the AARP at UCT (Yeld *et al.* 2000) we thus find a specific contextualisation of the original Bachman & Palmer construct for higher education. In this reinterpretation of the construct they have, importantly, added 'understandings of typical academic tasks based largely on inputs from expert panels' (Yeld *et al.* 2000). The construct is therefore enriched by the identification, amongst other things, of quite a number of language functions and academic literacy tasks. These include: understanding information, paraphrasing,

summarising, describing, arguing, classifying, categorising, comparing, contrasting, and so forth.

The further challenge, however, was to operationalise this construct, in order to make it useful for the assessment of a population of more than 6000 students who have to be tested in a single day. Eventually, we came up with a streamlined version that might make it easier to test academic literacy levels reliably within tight time constraints.

The final version of the construct that evolved during our enquiries constitutes a **definition of academic literacy**. Since this is the blueprint, this is also what we test. The proposed blueprint (Weideman, 2003a: xi) for the placement test of academic literacy requires that students should be able to

- understand a range of academic vocabulary in context;
- interpret and use metaphor and idiom, and perceive connotation, word play and ambiguity;
- understand relations between different parts of a text, be aware of the logical development of (an academic) text, via introductions to conclusions, and know how to use language that serves to make the different parts of a text hang together;
- interpret different kinds of text type (genre), and show sensitivity for the meaning that they convey, and the audience that they are aimed at;
- interpret, use and produce information presented in graphic or visual format;
- make distinctions between essential and non-essential information, fact and opinion, propositions and arguments; distinguish between cause and effect, classify, categorise and handle data that make comparisons;
- see sequence and order, do simple numerical estimations and computations that are relevant to academic information, that allow comparisons to be made, and can be applied for the purposes of an argument;
- know what counts as evidence for an argument, extrapolate from information by making inferences, and apply the information or its implications to other cases than the one at hand;
- understand the communicative function of various ways of expression in academic language (such as defining, providing examples, arguing); and
- make meaning (e.g. of an academic text) beyond the level of the sentence.

These abilities and components echo strongly, we believe, what it is that students are required to do at tertiary level. In a handful of seminars and conference presentations where we have offered this view of academic literacy for scrutiny, there has been wide and positive reaction. In light of the history of the development of the construct, a development that entailed consultation with trans-disciplinary panels of academics, this should not be surprising. The general response from our audiences has confirmed those of the initial consultations. This response has been that the elements identified above indeed constitute a number of essential components of what academic literacy entails. The blueprint presented therefore resonates very strongly with the experience of academics across the disciplinary spectrum, which indicates to us that we are indeed on the right track. Further confirmation of this comes from the handful of other institutions that have either indicated that they wish to become partners in developing or using the new test, or have shown interest in assisting students in the same way as we do.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF THE NEW TEST?

A distinct advantage of working with a construct as described above is the positive effect of wash-back (Brindley 2002: 467). In this case, the test already indicates what will eventually be taught, and the course reflects the construct of the test. This in turn improves the face validity of the test. Since the construct of the test is formulated in terms of a range of outcomes, in line with the outcomes-based approach that is now the convention within higher education in South Africa, it moreover shares with such approaches a number of advantages, such as a 'closer alignment between assessment and learning, greater transparency of reporting, and improved communication between stakeholders' (Brindley 2002: 465). The issue of greater transparency is also the foundation of attempts aimed at making the test accountable, a concern that is now widely echoed in the testing literature (Shohamy 2001, Davidson & Lynch 2002). We are taking the current concern about accountability seriously, and are preparing a number of conference presentations for that purpose. We have also submitted for publication two articles that deal with the development of the test (Weideman & Van Dyk 2004a, 2004b).

In order to deal more openly with, and so minimize complaints about the result of the test, we are planning to do a number of things: (1) make available the blueprint of the test to all candidates beforehand; (2) provide a sample test on our website and on application; (3) offer as much information as possible, through brochures, pamphlets, and our departmental website, at open days, recruitment visits to schools and on other appropriate occasions, about the reasons why the test is compulsory, and why the remedies that are prescribed are obligatory. Since complaints, especially from parents, often proceed from an assumption that doing well in languages at school, or having as your mother tongue the medium of the test, should render an automatic pass, we have to pay special attention in the information material that we put out to clarifying the difference between a general language proficiency and the specifics of academic discourse.

Countering the measure of stigmatisation that attaches to not achieving the required level on the test is another challenge that was referred to above. To address this, as from 2005, we are adopting a further recommendation of the external evaluation report, namely that we will not merely pass or fail candidates, but will release the results in five categories of risk (very high, high, at risk, lower risk, low or no risk). The obligatory institutional remedies will be similarly differentiated.

Another way of countering complaints is embedded in our use of a more reliable instrument than any that we had before. The reliability measures of our new tests of academic literacy levels (TALL; TAG in Afrikaans) are as follows:

	Reliability (α)	
Language	UP	Northwest
Afrikaans	0,86	0,87
English	0,96	0,92

Table 3: Reliability measures of TALL/TAG: 2004

These measures have been calculated across some 10 000 candidates who wrote the test in 2004 at the Universities of Pretoria and two campuses of Northwest University.

WHERE ARE WE IN TERMS OF INTER-INSTITUTIONAL CO-OPERATION?

In developing both our assessment instrument, TALL/TAG, and our academic literacy course, we have gained some valuable experience. We are encouraged by the fact that other institutions regularly not only seek out our experience in this regard, but also learn from the arrangements that we have made here. The opinions of those who visit us, or whom we meet at conferences, or who review or respond to the articles we write for publication, are generally very appreciative and favourable. Similarly, in the field of course design for academic literacy development, we have learned a number of lessons that we can share, and have shared, with others.

The high regard for our new test is already evident in the firm indication that we have received from the University of Stellenbosch that it wishes to join Northwest University and us in developing and using these assessment instruments. Other institutions may follow. We have set aside the necessary resources for the further development of the tests, and have agreed with our partners on a way of keeping firm control of the cost of these. A number of doctoral theses in our own department that are either under way or nearing completion already provide an incentive to stay ahead in terms of research in this field. Our growing partnerships will benefit equally from the results of these investigations.

WHAT CHALLENGES REMAIN?

Concerning the issues identified by the evaluation report as regards the development of the tests, the challenge will be to maintain and improve their reliability, as well as to narrow the margins of some of the other statistical indicators, most notably the Standard Error of Measurement (SEM) of the tests. This will enable us to deal more effectively with borderline cases in future: if the SEM is about 3.4 or smaller, for example, we may have a measure of how big a window we could open to candidates wishing to re-sit the test at a later date. Such re-testing we will only be able to do, of course, if our item bank is big enough. To maintain and develop this item bank by feeding newly piloted test items into it is the key to the ongoing improvement of the tests. But dealing with borderline cases in a scientifically justifiable and responsible way will, we believe, go a long way towards minimising complaints still further.

The second challenge already referred to above, to acquire and build the capacity to track the study careers of students that take our mainstream academic literacy courses, needs to be attended to. Here we are nowhere near where we should responsibly be, and have much to learn, especially from some of our partners, such as the University of Stellenbosch, who have instituted student tracking systems and procedures that make much-needed data on student throughput much more freely available.

The third challenge is an institutional one: to set up a controlling board for the unit that has high-level representation (i.e. deans or their designated alternates) from each faculty.

The final challenge we have already begun to address. This is to design field or discipline-specific courses in academic literacy or related fields for each faculty. We already have a number of these for the 6000 or more students we teach in our department annually (Table 4, below), but we need to widen their scope to include more:

Type of course [number]	Faculties	Students
Academic literacy [7]	8	3526
Specialist (discipline-related) [6]	5	2636
Post-graduate [8]	1	20
Total		6182

Table 3: ULSD student enrolments: 2003

Our biggest challenge, however, remains to align, through our teaching, our assessment with the acquisition of academic literacy by students. In order to do this, we need courses that conform to a number of design standards (Weideman 2003b). A well-designed academic literacy course should, amongst other things,

- focus not on language, but on the academic process;
- enhance the learners' academic experiences; and
- elicit
 - information-seeking,
 - information-processing, and
 - information producing performance.

We strive to design our courses not only to conform to current design criteria for language courses, such as the above, but also to align them ever more closely with context-specific conditions.

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