THE EFFECT OF SKINNY COW CONDITION ON FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS OF ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK

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ABSTRACT

De Beer and Gravett (2016: 46) sound the alarm that most first-year students who report for teacher training at tertiary institutions in South Africa emerge from an examination-driven system and are unable to engage with self-directed learning (SDL). This is disconcerting since students of the 21st century who enrol for university studies across the world are expected to be self-directed, taking responsibility for their own academic progress while focusing on active rather than passive learning (Nasri, 2017: 1). The English for Education course at the North-West University in South Africa requires students to be critically engaged as they direct their own learning. However, the high dropout rate (North-West University, 2018) of the first-year English for Education students (around 25% per annum over the last three years) and the average drop in their English marks from high school to university suggest that students find it difficult to adapt to the demands of tertiary studies. This paper reports on a study that focused on the teaching, learning and assessment gaps between secondary and tertiary education and which aimed at developing a framework to promote SDL in first-year English for Education studies. The findings illustrated that students felt frustrated by lecturer feedback on assignments that demanded active engagement and critical thinking. It became clear that students were unable to interpret feedback and that they felt unsupported if the lecturer did not show and tell them exactly what to write or would not supply them with detailed answers to memorise and reproduce.

Keywords**:** assessment, feedback, self-directed learning, higher education, first-year students

INTRODUCTION

It is common knowledge that any cow requires a rich, well-balanced diet in order to build muscle and bone, which will enable it to sustain its weight and survive during periods of disease or extreme weather conditions. In contrast to the animal of show quality, there is the cow that suffers from skinny cow condition: a condition where the farmer manages to bulk up the cow on measured quantities of food and water to ensure that it reaches a certain weight, regardless of bone and muscle quality. Once this ideal weight has been reached, all stakeholders are happy, and the animal is marketed. Because of a lack of strong bone and muscle, this skinny, albeit bulked-up cow, soon loses its condition when it has to battle any form of disease or bad weather. This analogy of the well-fed cow and the skinny cow can be used in reference to what is expected of first-year university students in terms of their ability

to perform academically and what they are actually capable of as products of an examination-driven basic education system.

Professor Jonathan Jansen, internationally known scholar and researcher in the field of education, over recent years continuously called out the detrimental effects of high-stakes assessment, particularly the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examination in public schooling in South Africa (Jansen, 2017; 2018; Qukula, 2020). In an open letter to learners from the 2016 cohort who obtained the NSC, exiting basic education, Jansen (2017) congratulated those who passed well, but stated that passing grade 12 in South Africa was actually quite easy and meant very little. He blamed low standards and the upward adjustment of marks for jeopardising the credibility of these high-stakes examinations. Jansen (2017) furthermore warned learners who obtained six or more distinctions and would possibly soon take up tertiary studies that they might be vulnerable to self-deception since 'smart' meant more than 'conquering the rules of the examination game'. In 2018, Jansen called the release of the 2017 NSC results a 'freak show', stating that the quality of the NSC examination was so weak in the intellectual demands of pupils that any fool could pass and even access university (Jansen, 2018). On the release of the 2019 NSC results, Jansen again highlighted the fact that South Africa suffers from a culture of low expectations that has been built into its education system (Qukula, 2020). In the same vein, Chetty (2015: 6) warns that South Africa experiences a threat of completely returning to rote learning. Author (2016: 1) furthermore asserts that school-based assessment, which is supposed to be formative in nature and thus enhance opportunities for SDL, amounts to frequent summative testing, encouraging learners once again to engage in rote learning. At each level of the Further Education and Training phase (grades 10-12), school-based assessment in South Africa focuses on stringently preparing learners to provide the correct answers in the end-of-year examinations (Kapp & Arend, 2011: 8; Author, 2016: 5). Thus, meaningful, lifelong learning is depreciated due to an examination-driven system with the result that school-based assessment does not fulfil its purpose of providing evidence of engagement and continuous learning (Author, 2016: 5).

While there is an international expectation for higher education to focus on active instead of passive learning (Nasri, 2017: 1), De Beer and Gravett (2016: 46) claim that most first-year student teachers who report for training at South African institutions are not self-directed learners. They explain that these students prefer 'spoon-feeding' to approaches that encourage critical engagement and deep learning. Brenner (2016: 155) states that most first-year students in her Life Sciences classes at the University of the Witwatersrand are used to memorising facts, which they believe to be the most important aspect of their tertiary learning. Guglielmino (2013: 10) adds that students who are used to being spoon-fed will likely resist taking responsibility for their own learning. Moreover, students are often not prepared to engage in SDL practices because they are used to being dependent and associate learning with preparing for a test to receive a grade or value (Guglielmino, 2013: 6). This is corroborated by Garí and Iputo (2015: 17) who, after conducting a study on medical students' perceptions on interactive tutorials at the Walter Sisulu University, suggest that students receive more in-depth training in SDL strategies. An increase in SDL skills is necessary to bridge the considerable gap between cognitive abilities expected in previous educational experiences (high school) and at university (Guglielmino, 2013: 6). Also, Rantsi (2016) writes that South African learners experience trouble with the progression from one educational phase (secondary school) to the next (tertiary education) and that this gap could be attributed to the weak schooling system in South Africa. For these reasons, it is imperative that tertiary education students, especially first-year students, be trained and encouraged to

cope with the academic and linguistic demands of higher education. The development of students' SDL skills plays a vital role not only in ensuring academic success but also in preparing students for lifelong learning in an extremely dynamic global society. In an attempt to curb the previously identified problem, this study investigated the following research question: *How can first-year English for Education students be encouraged to engage in SDL?*

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualising self-directed learning

Knowles (1975: 18) conceptualises the term SDL and describes it as a process in which the student takes initiative, with or without help, in identifying learning needs, formulating learning objectives, finding resources for achieving these objectives, selecting and employing suitable learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. Additionally, Manning (2007: 107) explains that SDL occurs when a student or group of students accept the primary responsibility for planning a learning project and executing that project. Similarly, Wilcox (1996: 165) defines SDL as a process of learning in which learners function autonomously to plan, conduct and evaluate their study efforts. Pertinent to the context of this study, Arndt (2017: 38) states that SDL requires language learners to become proprietors of their language acquisition by deciding how to proceed with their language education outside the traditional teacher-centred classroom. All of these definitions necessitate the active involvement of the students in learning. Being self-directed is particularly important for English for Education students in South Africa.

The importance of self-directed learning for English for Education students

Harmse and Evans (2017: 141) assert that, despite the fact that most South African learners are not English mother tongue speakers, most schools use English as the language of learning and teaching. This means that most South African learners are faced with the challenge of mastering academic content in a language other than their home language. Proficiency in English thus becomes vital for achieving success in any academic subject. While it might be enough for learners at school level to be able to perform in traditional pen and paper assessments, Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges and Hayek (2006: 5) state that university students need to be proficient writers and speakers in order to maintain meaningful communication in various situations. Du (2013: 1) mentions that certain acquired proficiencies, including second language and foreign language learning, need constant maintenance outside the formal classroom setting. This is confirmed when Brewer (2016: 27) explains that, when one is learning a language, there are nuances that cannot be taught in the classroom. Therefore, when learning a second or foreign language, learners need to be equipped to learn from a variety of complex social and intercultural experiences (Brewer, 2016: 27). Brown (2007: 1) moreover states that one would be unlikely to become proficient in a non-native language if one were exposed to the language solely in the formal classroom setting. Consequently, SDL forms an important part of the learning process. Gan, Humphreys and Hamp-Lyons (2004: 17) state that, in the classroom, the use of SDL in English language learning can help students use that language more effectively in their everyday lives. Thus, it is important for English language learners to be taught and apply SDL skills to transfer language knowledge and skills from the classroom to different situations. In a study conducted among Chinese university students, qualitative data revealed that successful English students had the ability to effortlessly use the right language at the right time – 'a

language sense' that was developed by using the language independently (Gan et al., 2004: 234). Moreover, applying SDL skills to English language learning encourages effective communication in the language, which is pivotal in ensuring meaningful discourse in real-life situations.

Teachers of English, whether they are teachers of English Home Language, English First Additional Language in the multilingual South African context, or teachers who teach subject content through the medium of English, need to be able to model self-direction in language learning, especially since the South African context demands that learners perform academically in a language often unfamiliar to and unexplored by them. Thus, student teachers need to know how to direct their own learning in terms of language so as to inform the self-direction of their own teaching practices and model expected self-directed behaviour to their future language learners. It is clear that the development of SDL is significant for students in education, especially in the case of English for Education students, as emphasised by Lazar (1993: 1): 'every teaching situation is different, every literary text is different and every theory explaining literature itself or how to use it in the classroom is different'. Therefore, it is essential that South African teachers of English acquire the necessary SDL skills to adapt to any classroom situation, as well as to facilitate learners to become self-directed in their own language learning. Acquiring SDL skills requires effective assessment, reflection and feedback, which are fundamental for English for Education student teachers.

Assessment and feedback as integral facets of self-directed learning

Greenstein (2012: 2) emphasises that the ever-changing educational environment increases the importance not only of introducing new learning and teaching methods, but also of focussing on how assessment should be adapted in the 21st century. She continues to aver that educators should make use of alternative and authentic assessments that require students to perform real-world tasks (Greenstein, 2012: 51). With this in mind, Greenstein (2012: 188) critiques the majority of current school systems that, despite complex societal changes such as rapid technological advancement, population growth and environmental changes, continue to use standardised assessment in which every student in every grade takes the same test at the same time. This approach, which has remained exceedingly prevalent in South African classrooms, does not encourage SDL, where learners take responsibility for their academic development. Greenstein (2012: 188) proposes that future assessment move away from numerical grading and be replaced by reports that comment on the skills acquired by each individual learner. This should subsequently be promoted at university level.

Winstone and Carless (2019: 8) emphasise that effective feedback should exist as an amalgamation of receiving valuable input and interacting with that input. Thus, merely receiving comments could not be considered feedback, unless the receiver interprets and interacts with the feedback for it to inform future learning. This highlights the importance of feedback as part of the SDL process, where the student has to take action to improve his or her learning. In connection with this, Embo, Driessen, Valcke and Van der Vleuten (2010: 266) discovered that students felt that rereading feedback was valuable, as it allowed them to develop effective strategies for learning improvement. This indicates that engaging with feedback provides insight into the most effective plan of action to achieve one's learning goals. Feedback not only informs the SDL plan of action but also forms a fundamental part of identifying the learning gaps before the plan of action can be decided on. Koenen, Dochy and Berghmans (2015: 3) explain that feedback is necessary to aid students in determining their learning gaps and, consequently, their learning goals. For this reason, it is important for

students who are self-directed to understand how feedback should be interpreted and used to improve learning (Winstone & Carless, 2019: 3). Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006: 211) suggest that multiple formative tasks be used to generate feedback, which will accustom students to rely on qualitative feedback rather than focusing merely on grades as a source of feedback. Moreover, Narciss (2017: 184) states that feedback is required for students to assess to which extent their performance meets their learning objectives and to decide on actions to improve learning. With this being said, it should be taken into account that educators do not necessarily provide sufficient or constructive feedback and that students do not necessarily have the skills to utilise the feedback successfully. In the study reported on in this paper, the findings highlighted the necessity for effective feedback, as discussed in the next section.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In an attempt to answer the research question *How can first-year English for Education students be encouraged to engage in SDL?*, a qualitative study was conducted. The aim of this qualitative study was twofold: firstly, this study aimed to gauge how first-year English for Education students at the North-West University in South Africa could be encouraged to engage with SDL more frequently and effectively, and secondly, this study aimed to develop an SDL framework that would assist students to become more self-directed. The study was set within a constructivist-interpretive paradigm, seeing that the first-year English for Education students' experiences and perspectives served as co-constructions of knowledge and were interpreted by the researcher to develop the framework. The constructivist-interpretive paradigm assumes that there are multiple realities and that the participants and researcher co-construct meaning (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013: 27).

Methodology

The present qualitative study used an explanatory case study methodology. Yin (2014: 16) describes case study research not only as an analysis of a phenomenon set within its real-world context but also as research that is constrained by a boundary. In this study, the boundary was the specific context of the research – first-year English for Education students and a lecturer at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University. According to Hancock and Algozzine (2006: 33), an explanatory case study aims to establish cause-and-effect relationships among events or phenomena. Thus, the primary purpose of this methodology is to inspect what causes a certain outcome and to explore how different actions may influence the outcome (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006: 33). However, Hancock and Algozzine (2006: 16) make the important claim that case study research seeks to find themes of behaviour and actions rather than proving relationships among them. This means that explanatory case study research is defined by its in-depth analysis and investigation of cause-and-effect relationships and not by proving or disproving them. Yin (2014: 238) explains that explanatory case studies have the purpose of expounding how or why some sequence of events occurred. In the case of the present study, however, the purpose was slightly reversed, where the aim of the case study was not to establish how a sequence of events occurred but rather how one could ensure that a certain sequence of events (SDL) would occur.

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of two different groups – one lecturer and six students. Since the aim of the study was to develop a framework for SDL for first-year English for Education students, the lecturer of these students and the students themselves were able to make valuable contributions to the development of the framework to ensure that the framework was context-appropriate. Since only one lecturer was responsible for the planning and presentation of the first-year English for Education module in the first semester, there was only one lecturer participant. The second participant group consisted of six first-year English for Education students. Thus, altogether, there were seven participants who voluntarily took part in the study. Although six appears to be an insufficient number of students from which to generate findings, these students formed 10-12% of the total number of first-year students who still studied English by the end of the first year. The students who formed part of the study also represented a range of performance areas, including students who performed poorly, students who performed averagely and students who were among the top five in the first-year group. Thus, the students represented various perspectives and experiences.

Data collection methods

Firstly, data were gathered by means of document analysis. The two documents analysed were the English for Education Evidence of Performance, a workbook which included activities that required students to engage with SDL, and eFundi, the online learning management system for this module, which was often used for communication, scaffolding and enrichment. These texts provided valuable information regarding what was expected from students in terms of SDL and how they were guided and facilitated to improve their SDL practices. Even though one or two prominent themes clearly emerged from the document analysis, the main contribution of this data collection method occurred around its concurrences with and contradictions of the interviews.

Secondly, the researcher observed the current first-year English for Education students' SDL practices during the lectures. Two first-year English for Education lectures of 1 hour and 15 minutes and 1 hour and 45 minutes, respectively, were observed in the allocated lecturing hall at the North-West University in Potchefstroom during May 2019. The classroom observations provided important background information prior to conducting the interviews with the student participants. The observations also allowed the researcher to link certain claims made by the participants during the interviews to what was observed in the classroom setting.

Semi-structured individual and focus group interviews were used to arrive at the key findings of the study. The first interview (30 minutes), which was conducted with the first-year English for Education lecturer in an office on the campus, was an individual, semi-structured interview. The interview with the lecturer participant was aimed at gaining insight into the lecturer's views on student engagement with SDL. Moreover, this interview also illuminated the practices and structures that were in place to encourage first-year English for Education students to engage in SDL. The two interviews with the student participants were in the form of focus group interviews. These interviews were conducted in the same lecturing hall where classes took place. To develop an effective SDL framework for first-year English for Education students, it was necessary to gain insight into these students' preferences, needs, experiences and views surrounding SDL, which was encouraged by the interaction yielded by focus group interviews. The use of multiple data collection methods allowed the researcher to ask important questions about noticeable discrepancies and confirm certain claims made by the participants. Although the interviews were the main source of information for this study,

document analysis and observations enhanced the interpretation of the data gathered during the interviews.

Data analysis

The researcher did not formally document the interpretation of the documents and observations that were analysed. The researcher made notes about their interpretations so as to link these interpretations to the interviews, which served as the main source of data collection. The researcher transcribed each interview, after which the interviews were analysed by making use of Atlas.ti. Self-made codes were created, and the data were categorised according to code groups. The researcher was responsible for identifying codes in accordance with the literature review and categorising those codes into code groups. After working through each interview and assigning specific quotes to specific groups, the researcher created *Networks* on Atlas.ti. These *Networks* provided summaries of the main codes that appeared in a specific code group, as well as the frequency of each code. In this way, the researcher could clearly see which themes were less prominent and which themes conveyed the key findings of the study. Thereafter, the SDL framework was developed based on the findings that emerged from the data collection. Merely the themes relevant to this paper are discussed next.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Meaningful feedback emerged as one of the most prominent themes from the interviews. The interviews indicated that feedback served as the key catalyst for students' engagement with SDL. The student participants identified various resources as sources of feedback. They mentioned that they would have liked to have received feedback from peers, facilitators, previous assignments and the lecturer. During the course of the semester, the main source of feedback was the lecturer. However, students expressed that the feedback they received was not sufficient to assist them to improve their learning:

> *…you won't always get the feedback that you got in school, like the speeches or assignments or something like that, the teacher isn't there, like, to go through every little step….* [Amy]

> *I think the problem is, we don't get a lot of feedback, especially on our assignments – we give it in, you get your mark back and we leave it.* [Riana]

> *You're gonna be like 'Oh I thought this was a good point,' but then they didn't think it was a good point and then you don't understand why. And then also … with getting our essays back, they told my friend, 'You're almost there, you just need a push.' So, what am I pushing?* [Lebo]

Despite the fact that the observations and document analysis proved that students were provided with practice opportunities, scaffolding and sufficient explanations about the completion of tasks requiring specific skills, such as essay writing, the student participants mainly expressed frustration about the fact that the feedback they received from the lecturer was not detailed or descriptive enough. They frequently felt that the feedback, though consistent and regular, was meaningless and did not provide enough guidance for improvement. For example, the lecturer would write: *There is no thesis statement*. This type of feedback left students confused as to how they should have gone about improving that

aspect of their essay writing. The student participants critically commented on the fact that they did not want to be merely informed about what was wrong with the assignment, but rather be shown exactly how they could improve it. They accentuated that they usually knew what needed improvement, but they were confused as to how they should instigate this improvement:

> *I understand where I need to go. Like, I understand what the end product is, but how to get there, like I don't even know how to start.* [Melissa]

> *Miss Mouton actually did give us a framework before our first essay, but she gave us like, the technique, but it doesn't help you explain it to us and you don't actually show us, because she did go into depth with us with the first essay. But it doesn't help you give us examples and examples and examples and tell us, 'Okay, if you write something you have to reflect about it,' and everything, but we don't even know how the thing looks.* [Riana]

> *It's like, okay, you have to do this, you have to do this, you have to do this, but at the same time, we don't really know how to go about it and how to start each one.* [Amy]

One student also mentioned that, when students approached the lecturer while working on an assignment, the lecturer would tell them that they were on the right track. When they received their feedback, however, there were errors that they could not initially identify by themselves. This gap between the lecturer's view on feedback and students' needs regarding feedback could be ascribed to the gap between secondary and tertiary education in South Africa. One of the students compared the feedback she received at tertiary level to the feedback she received at secondary level. The student referred to feedback at secondary level as detailed and providing a step-by-step task analysis:

> *… especially the teachers, they focus so much on how to write a good exam, how to get the best marks. So they tell you exactly what to do and you do nothing on your own. You only, like, study everything they tell you for the best marks to get into university.* [Amy]

In contrast, feedback in tertiary education was imprecise and generalised:

> *If you go to them and you have an idea about a thesis statement and they're like, 'Okay, that's good,' and then you get your essay mark and they're like, 'Your thesis statement was wrong.' So, they don't really help you either way with anything and I think that they maybe think that if they, like, help you a little bit, that's spoon-feeding you, but it's just guiding you a little bit more, because it's so vague, you don't even know where to start in the first place ….* [Amy]

> *And for example, like, every time with an essay it's like Miss Mouton would circle something and just say, 'The resource was incorrectly used,' or with a thesis statement, for example, she would like underline everything and say, 'Thesis,' but what about the thesis? Because for me, or in my opinion, it was a good thesis and now she's like, 'There was no thesis …'. Okay, but I don't really understand. Rather say, 'Okay maybe try this', rather than just, 'Thesis.'* [Amy]

In order to make sense of cryptic feedback, students who are already engaged in the complexities of adjustment and academic development would need to search for and select

appropriate resources, learning methods and assessment strategies to determine whether the assignment goals have been met once they have interpreted the feedback. The interviews indicated that students expected detailed and precise feedback on exactly how they should improve certain skills and assignment performances. The lecturer, however, expected the students to employ SDL skills to make sense of and internalise the concise feedback:

> *Not necessarily mastering the content on your own, but figuring out a plan how to deal with the content, how to make sense of the content.* [Miss Mouton]

> *Uhm … to me it would be when students understand what is expected of them, so maybe understand the objectives and then can work out a plan on how to get there.* [Miss Mouton]

Due to the expectation gap between the lecturer and students, the latter party felt frustrated by the feedback they received; to them, it bordered on useless. In this regard, lecturers and students face a real challenge, as students are not fully prepared for the expectations and standards of tertiary education (Du Toit-Brits & Van Zyl, 2017: 50). The document analysis of the Evidence of Performance and the eFundi platform indicated that, for assignments such as essays and performances, the rubrics for assessment were given to students before the completion of the assignments and were returned to them afterwards with the lecturer's assessment and feedback. Winterscheid (2016: 6) states that rubrics are guides that clearly articulate the expected level of performance for an assignment. Additionally, and most importantly, rubrics are used as a source of feedback for students (Winterscheid, 2016: 6). It was startling that the student participants did not even refer to their rubrics as feedback sources. They did receive feedback but admitted that they never looked at it again:

> *… it's just there in your cupboard in the closet or something and you don't look at it again, because we don't use it, so we don't know what we did wrong for future projects.* [Riana]

This reluctance to reflect on the received feedback contrasted with the emphasis the students placed on the significance of feedback. This contradiction gave rise to another theme: students want explicit and direct instructions on every aspect of their learning, including detailed feedback. It was evident that, due to students' inability to interpret and react to the provided feedback, their SDL development was thwarted. The researcher was aware that students' inability to interpret the feedback could have resulted as a response to vague and non-descript rubrics, but after analysis of the rubrics, this was clearly shown not to be the case. The rubrics were specific and precise, confirming that these students' SDL processes were hindered by their inadequate interpretation of the rubrics.

Based on the findings of the study, it was clear that students needed feedback so that they could improve their learning; however, they found it challenging to interpret the feedback and use it to progress in their learning. In this regard, *analysing feedback* should be incorporated as an integral step in the SDL process. Wind (2018) suggests peer feedback as the best method of feedback in the 21st century. He states that, if the feedback provided by the educator is not detailed enough, peer feedback will provide support to students who might have difficulty interpreting the feedback (Wind, 2018). In addition, Worlein (2018) explains that educators have to communicate their methods of providing feedback to students prior to expecting students to interpret it. This would have been extremely helpful to the student participants, as they were clearly unaware that the rubrics were forms of feedback for their

academic essays and performances. Peer feedback and lecturer communication regarding feedback methods should be encouraged in higher education in South Africa.

CONCLUSION

The findings from the interviews were concurrent with the current literature, which states that basic education in South Africa does not successfully equip students with the SDL skills to perform at the expected levels and meet the demands of higher education. There is a considerable gap between these two educational sectors, as rote learning within an exam-driven system contrasts with the critical, independent and self-directed nature of learning required for higher education. Even though the literature emphasises that SDL skills are necessary for functioning effectively in the 21st century, most South African first-years are not equipped to apply the SDL process, as many of them are exposed to this process for the first time in their first year of tertiary studies. In addition, the complex language situation in South African education, where most learners are taught through the medium of a language which is not their mother tongue, necessitates that first-year students be scaffolded as much as possible to ease them into the process of becoming self-directed learners. The data that emerged from this study clearly indicated that the first-year students were unable to successfully interpret general feedback which required them to develop their own plan of action for improvement. Thus, lecturers of first-year students need to ensure that the students are aware of and understand the feedback methods used by the lecturer, as well as providing students with the opportunity to obtain feedback from a variety of sources. Going back to the cow analogy, the root of the problem seems to be the fact that the 'university market' expects well-fed, strong and healthy cows that have the necessary bone and muscle to excel, while the farmer, as the education system, produces animals suffering from skinny cow condition, ill-equipped for the challenges of higher education.

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