Foundation English at the University of Venda: How responsive is it?

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Abstract
This article, first, identifies the reading characteristics of students enrolled in the foundation provision of the extended degree; then determines the responsiveness of the English curriculum to these characteristics and thinking on literacy development. Using both qualitative and quantitative research methods, and the language ability framework of Bachman and Palmer (1996), a placement test was given to these students and their reading characteristics were isolated. Next, these characteristics were compared to the English curriculum to determine how responsive its contents are to these attributes and literacy development. The results show that students are competent in certain types of comprehension activities, vocabulary manipulation but have difficulties interacting with texts particularly determining relationships between sentences and sections of texts. The results of the second part indicate that the curriculum follows an autonomous concept of language support and only parts of the English curriculum are responsive to the students’ reading characteristics.

INTRODUCTION

The investigation centred on the students’ reading characteristics as research has demonstrated that there is a direct correlation between reading levels and general language literacy levels (Pretorius 2000; Sengupta 2002). It is this same reasoning which underpins the international use of reading literacy as an indicator of the general level of academic literacy and students’ potential performance at tertiary, ‘Reading literacy achievement at senior secondary level contributes to preparation for successful participation in tertiary education and training’ (PISA 2009).

Similarly, research has identified a reasonable level of academic literacy as one of the predictors or contributors to academic preparedness and success (Leibowitz 2004). Academic literacy is a broad term and its levels are dependent on both academic and societal factors such as students’ content knowledge, motivation, intelligence levels, a reasonable level of socio-economic status and support as well as a certain level of sophistication in the language of instruction, and in the South African context, English (Kern 2000). When students lack these factors, they are deemed to be under-prepared for tertiary studies.
Responding to the high levels of student under-preparedness at tertiary levels has seen the introduction of various internal support initiatives by institutions, however the extended degree with foundation provision is a nationally recognized and government-funded intervention programme. Central to this intervention, in most institutions, are the English support modules. Support in these English modules is not targeted at enhancing students’ knowledge of English *per se* but their ability to manipulate and apply this knowledge in performing varying academic tasks.

More than main-stream courses, foundation English needs to be responsive to the profile of the students it is attempting to support, as it is a facilitating module aimed at assisting students’ performance in all aspects of their academic life. The University of Venda (Univen), like most tertiary institutions in the country, attracts a diversity of students who are of diverse ability and achievement levels; come from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and display different aptitudes, interests and previous learning experiences (Hornberger 2002; Cliff 2003). All these features create different cognitive and linguistic categories of students in the classroom. For mainstream interaction, such a picture would mean that the lecturer would employ different strategies and expect the students to make the necessary cognitive adjustments. For foundation level interaction, the situation is not that simple. For foundation level students with higher levels of under-preparedness, competence in English is vital since it is the medium of instruction, discourse creation and basically, survival in a tertiary context. There are, of course, tertiary institutions valiantly trying to promote multilingualism in the language of instruction, and here the South Africa Norway Tertiary Education Development Programme’s (SANTED) multilingual initiatives at the universities of Cape Town, Rhodes, KwaZulu-Natal and Durban University of Technology come to mind. Although universities, like Pretoria, Stellenbosh have a bilingual instruction policy this initiative has yet to find general acceptance and application. Until then, the language of instruction in most tertiary institutions is English, and students need to be proficient in it, more so for those at the foundation level. For that to happen, foundation English calls for a needs-driven curriculum underpinned by theories in language and academic literacy development.

In a student-centred classroom students are at the centre of the teaching and learning process and their potential is maximised when their individual profiles are taken into account during the engagement process. The type of curriculum designed should also have some theoretical framework, and for foundation English, theories of literacy and language development.

**BACKGROUND TO THE PROBLEM**

Univen offers two distinct foundation provisions: a stream for those enrolled in extended science degrees and the other for students hoping for careers in the Schools of Humanities, Management and Law (HMLF). This article focuses on students enrolled in HMLF. In 2004, the HMLF programme was established and was a stand-alone programme, in the sense that it offered general support of a bridging nature. During that time Univen operated on a more liberal system of entrance requirements.
Those with matriculation exemption enrolled directly into their degree programme and those without exemption could, on passing a senate discretion test, be enrolled into the foundation programme. Such students on successfully completing the one year foundation could then apply for degree studies. However, in 2008 when Univen introduced the extended degree, the alternate entrance into tertiary studies was discontinued and qualification for enrolment into the University was only through a matriculation (matric) exemption. Between 2004 and 2007, when the foundation programme was a stand-alone provision for students with no matric exemption, the autonomous remedial type of academic support was deemed appropriate and offered (Street 1985). The English curriculum designed from this approach had closer resemblance to high school work in terms of content, teaching strategies and assessment.

In 2008 the extended degree with a one year foundation provision was introduced in Univen and replaced the stand-alone foundation programmes. This meant that the first year was an integral part of a degree and all first-entering students were required to have matric exemption. This means a better calibre of students were now enrolling for the foundation provision and their needs were now more specialised in terms of the degrees that they were enrolled in.

**STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The English curriculum was designed in 2004 for students with no matric exemption who entered the University through the senate discretion tests. However in 2008, on the introduction of the extended degrees, the profile of the students changed as all first entering students had matric exemption. Despite the changes in the academic profile of students entering the extended degrees, the same language support curriculum is being used. In 2009 it was felt that the English curriculum needs to be revised to reflect the new profile of the students and trends in academic support if the curriculum is to be relevant. Basically, the lecturers were concerned that the English curriculum which was based on the autonomous model of academic literacy was too narrow and remedial in scope and tended to focus more on study skills. The autonomous model when applied to English language teaching, emphasises aspects of ‘organisational knowledge’ without a corresponding attention to an ideological model of literacy which would result in a socially-responsive, broader and more holistic English curriculum (Street 1984; 1993; 1995; Bachman and Palmer 1996). The problem therefore is conceptualising a curriculum which would be responsive to the language profile of the current students and also, thinking on literacy development.

**HYPOTHESIS**

That the foundation English curriculum is not responsive to the language characteristics of current students enrolled in extended degrees in the Schools of Human Sciences, Management and Law.
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A curriculum is a collaborative plan of what is to be learnt between instructors and learners. The content of and the method for teaching a curriculum is determined by issues, like the philosophical drive of the programme, the instructor’s views on teaching and learning and the profile of the learners. The curriculum for foundation English as discussed earlier should be responsive to the identified linguistic characteristics of the students, in other words, it should be learner-centred. An essential factor in learner-centred learning is placing the characteristics of the learners under a microscope to determine a learner’s heredity, experiences, perspectives, background, talents, interests, capabilities and needs (McCombs 1997). She adds that a learner-centred approach acts as a foundation for clarifying what is needed to create positive learning contexts to increase the likelihood that more students will experience academic success (ibid). In language learning contextual factors, by necessity will impact on the connection instructors must make to build on existing competences (Milambiling 2001). A similar point is made by Eskey (1997) who writes that if a language programme is to meet the immediate needs of a group of learners, then it is necessary to determine the skills, or competences of the learners and then to decide which teaching approach to design either to enhance existing skills or to inculcate needed ones. As far back as 1985, Krashen in psycholinguistic literature has identified the role of comprehensible input in language learning with ‘comprehensible’ defined in the broadest terms to refer to relevant input to the external and internal conditions of the student. That is to say, any English curriculum, particularly for students in the extended degrees should ensure that students are equipped with the criteria for discourse creation within an academic context by attending to what the students do not know about such criteria. A responsive curriculum therefore is one which is negotiated by various variables, including features of the students (for example, personal, educational) the demands of the students’ chosen careers and the nature and demands of academic literacy.

The rich literature on academic literacy testifies to the broadness of the term and its definitions demonstrate various conceptual framework adopted by scholars on the topic (Ballard and Clancy 1988; Baynham 1995). Street (1985) for example, introduces two models of literacy, the autonomous and the ideological models. Street (ibid) explains autonomous model of literacy as an approach which regards literacy as essentially a neutral universal technical ability involving the encoding and decoding of academic discourse. Providing academic support within this paradigm presupposes that such assistance will have influence on students’ other social and cognitive practices regardless of the variables which produced the under-preparedness in the first place. The autonomous approach saw the offering of academic support in the form of study skills and English modules based on structural codes on the assumption that under-prepared students needed to learn a set of skills that would enhance their academic readiness. The study skills type of intervention, also regarded as the ‘deficit’ or ‘remedial’ model has its roots in behavioural psychology with its
objective being to supply students with necessary codes so they can function in the academic context in which they find themselves (Street 1985).

Dissatisfaction with the autonomous approach to literacy as abstract contextless knowledge of a particular area of a discipline or activity or event saw the conception of literacy as ideological, as not only knowing but also the ability to establish a ‘relationship’ or interact socially with that discipline or activity or event (Street 1985). This was a culturally inclusive model which asserts that literacy has its roots in academic socialization and is not simply a neutral technical encoding and decoding exercise. Bourdieu et al. (1994) also question the degree to which the study skills model or the autonomous model of literacy addresses under-preparedness of students. They questioned the model’s whole notion of learning and its definition of academic literacy. Bourdieu et al. (ibid) established that knowledge of the codes facilitated only a part of the successful interaction in the class, the sophistication of the students’ linguistic and social background, the ability of the student to decipher lecturer expectations, being an essayist were some of the other variables that aided in literacy development. The academic socialization approach saw students immersed into a ‘new’ culture of academia and has its roots in social psychology, anthropology and in constructivist education (Jones, Turner and Street 1999).

The academic socialization concept had its critics who were unhappy with the assumption that students operated in one homogenous context without looking at the broader academic institution. An extension of the model saw the recognition of multiple literacies varying according to contexts and social practices. This has come to be termed ‘new literacy studies’. The approach is embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles. It is about knowledge: the way people address reading and writing are rooted in conceptions of knowledge, identity and being. These in turn are underpinned by social practices such as those demanded by job markets, certain social events, certain academic contexts (Lea and Street 1998; Street 2003). Tertiary institutions were seen as ‘sites of discourse and power’ where different discourses are created based on genres, fields, disciplines within different power and identity structures. Literacy is recognized as dynamic, responsive to the students’ changing internal and external profile. Inspiration for the approach is usually acknowledged as cultural / social anthropology and discourse analysis. New literacies is a critical reflective approach introducing the element of power relations in academic interaction. It embodies a power-sharing text creation in which students and lecturers negotiate discourse.

Apart from the various conceptualizations of academic literacy, another difficulty in coming to grips with the term stems from the fact that discussions of the term also centre on its acquisition and its interpretation, in relation to various academic contexts. Kern (2000, 23) notes that ‘literacy is an elastic concept: its meaning varies according to the disciplinary lens through which one examines it’. So for example, we can talk of literacy in multiple contexts such as, academic, linguistic, mathematical, language of instruction, computer and others. Discussions on academic literacy usually also explore how it can be enhanced and how it can be demonstrated. In
academic contexts the usual way of showing one's literacy levels is through one's reading and writing abilities or language abilities (Kern 2000; Gee 2003; Leibowitz 2004). Other language skills include listening, speaking, critical thinking, use of technology and habits of mind that foster academic success (ICAS 2002).

Although proficiency in the language of instruction, as mentioned earlier, is not the sole predictor of academic success (Leibowitz 2004), research has shown that a certain minimum level of linguistic sophistication is essential for survival in academic pursuits (Bourdieu et al. 1994). Elder et al. 2004 also talk of a ‘threshold’ of linguistic competence below which academic success is elusive. The need, therefore, for a certain level of language competence, both in basic interpersonal communication (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Cummins 1979) in academia has worldwide acceptance. Whether the rationale for and the implication of Cummins (ibid) differentiation is questioned (Edelsky et al. 1990; Wiley 1996) there is little disagreement that general language proficiency (BICS) is insufficient for the intricacies of academic discourse. Academic language in dealing with context-reduced tasks (Cummins 1981b) is correspondingly discipline and cognitively more demanding. Tertiary students need to interact using a certain type of analytical language appropriate to their chosen careers and the general academic culture. English as the medium of instruction, discourse creation and survival in a tertiary institution in South Africa has a pivotal role and hence competence in it is most desirable. Academic literacy literature has identified the close correlation between language competence, cognition and success rate of students, hence any discussion on academic literacy support, by necessity, must touch on the language of instruction.

Ballard and Clancy (1988) in situating their discussions on literacy in a tertiary context, make reference to specific linguistic conventions that would be appropriate in that context. Their list, the language ability construct of Buchman and Palmer (1996) and competencies tested in the placements tests of certain universities in South Africa concretises the linguistic abilities for tertiary discourse creation (Van Dyk and Weideman 2004b). This list of competencies also forms the framework for this investigation. Although the list is applicable to all the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) this research focuses on the reading characteristics of the students sampled, for as discussed above, reading ability is a fair indicator of the levels in other areas of academic literacy.

Reading is a process of identifying with a writer; thinking her thoughts and sharing her experiences. It is interactive since you need to react to the information being communicated to you; you may choose to be at one with the writer and either replace or enlarge your own experiences with the facts being presented to you or totally reject it as incompatible with your existing knowledge. Reading is sense-making of others’ experiences or internalizing new content (Suleiman and Crossman 1980). Reading is also a psycholinguistic process involving the interaction of language and thought as language is decoded and meaning is reconstructed. Academic reading is complex, multi-level and different from other types of reading; it is purposeful, critical and involved. Academic literature requires a reader’s interaction, intensively,
with discipline-specific texts and careful synthesizing of multi-sourced material. It is a mind-enlarging activity which improves an individual’s social and academic progress, internationalises one’s experiences and cognitive behaviours, providing a ‘polished’ attitude in all manner of discourse. A definite relation, therefore, exists between critical reading ability and scholastic success.

The above discussions translate into a reading programme which would be derived from a blend of the skills approach of the autonomous model, the contextualized approach of the academic socialization and the new literacies offered within the ideological model. This is because academic reading is reading of texts varying in language and structural complexity, contexts and disciplines. These different fields and genres will require synthesizing of the content so as to critically engage with authorial intentions and purposes. Ability to read lengthy pieces of different academic texts is only half of the skill of reading; it is also the ability to use the information obtained to address the different academic tasks, like comprehension of specialized topics, writing assignments, research and write research reports, case studies and presenting argued view points. Reading should enable students to bridge the power gap which otherwise exists between a lecturer with information and a student without it.

**RESEARCH METHOD**

This research used a quantitative approach to determine the characteristics of the students reading ability but also employed a qualitative approach in the evaluation of the reading contents of the curriculum. As mentioned earlier, one of the aims of this research was to isolate the reading characteristics of first–entering students enrolled for extended degrees in Human Sciences, Management and Law Foundation. This was done using three diagnostic tests taken by all the 80 students enrolled on HMLF in 2009. The tests were similar to other placement tests such as, Alternative Admission Research Project (AARP) offered by University of Cape Town; the Admissions and Placement Assessment Programme (APAP) of the University of Port Elizabeth and Placement Tests in English for Educational Purpose (PTEEP) of the universities of Wits and Pretoria (Charlton, Yeld and Visser 2001; Weideman 2003).

For each test there were 50 multiple questions divided into three sections. The first section comprised of 20 questions testing the relationship between pairs of statements or sections of a paragraph. Types of relationships that existed included elaboration, contradiction, cause and effect, problem and solution as well as others. With these questions the tests were assessing students’ analytical and critical reasoning. Ability in these areas ensures that students critically engage with discourse both in their reading and writing. In the second section, students were required to answer various types of questions on passages on various topics. Attempts were made to select passages from discipline-specific literature hence there were passages from literature, human resource management, law, media, politics and others. Types of questions were literal recall, interpretation, application, vocabulary manipulation,
working out the main idea and other questions establishing relationship between different parts and aspects of the texts. Some of the questions had a similar focus to those in the first section with the main difference being the length of the passages. The final section was a cloze exercise where structural codes at a more micro level were tested as well as students’ ability to predict and work within a confined context.

The results obtained enabled a profile of the students’ reading characteristics to be isolated. The profile was then discussed and compared to the English curriculum to determine how responsive the contents are to the students’ reading profile and theories of academic literacy. The theoretical framework for the evaluation was Street’s 1993 work on academic literacy as well as Buchman and Palmer’s 1996 construct on language ability.

RESULTS

Table 1 reports on the first section of the aim, that is, identifying the reading characteristics of the sampled students.

Table 1: Test questions and percentages of correct answers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Main point</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1–20</td>
<td>Relationships: elaboration (45%), contradiction (43%), cause and effect (60%), problem and solution (59), expansion (40%), confirmation (40%), fact and opinion (45%), repetition (44%), paraphrase (50%), logical sequencing of information (40%), inferring (38%), restatement (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–35</td>
<td>Comprehension Exercises (short passages followed by questions on): literal recall (70%), interpretation (58%) application (50%); main idea (55%); vocabulary manipulation (60%); various relational types (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36–50</td>
<td>Cloze exercise(65%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The results indicated that, relatively, the students had fewer problems with the comprehension and the cloze exercises but had difficulties with the questions on relationships existing between individual sentences or sections within texts. The results also showed that the skills of sequencing, elaboration/ expansion, differentiating between opinions and supporting evidence, inferring new information from given, restatement and contradiction of sentiments and differentiating between facts and opinions posed some difficulties. Each of these is now discussed in detail below:

Relationships (Section 1)

*Elaboration, restatement, expansion, contradiction* all have a lot to do with the lexical wealth of an individual as well as the ability to critically think through issues. Knowledge of words plus their full semantic and pragmatic properties is necessary to appropriately expand, restate or contradict a word, sentence or text. This is in addition to an awareness of modification and complementation within texts. Topics
in semantics such as denotative and connotative meaning are areas which can assist in establishing relationships of this nature.

**Sequencing** is a general term used to refer to logical organisation of ideas using criteria such as time, place, events, nature of arguments and procedures ensuring that a cohesive text is created. Sequencing can be achieved by a number of grammatical and semantic strategies. For example, basic adverbial and prepositional elements can assist in sequencing at sentence and paragraph levels. For the bigger units of text, semantic and pragmatic knowledge, strength of arguments, intended effect (climax or anticlimax) are some of the main sequencing strategies.

**Differentiating between facts and opinions** is a vital skill in most academic disciplines. An analytical frame of mind, an ability to be objective and exploitative of everyday experiences should enable a student to present an issue academically, scientifically and convincingly. A tendency to present personal views as world ones is one of the outcomes if students cannot differentiate fact from opinion. Lack of research skills resulting in paucity of facts also has a similar outcome. General exposure to different life contexts fosters the ability to know and state facts.

**Inferring** beyond or seeing the extra implication of given information is a difficult language usage skill for even senior students of English. Hence students would fail to see that an utterance like ‘I like this outfit you are wearing today’ can be both a compliment as well as a criticism. Non-literal meaning is an area focused upon not only in semantics but also extensively in pragmatics under theories such as speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969) and implicature, differentiation between sentences and utterances (Grice 1967). Experience has shown that language usage beyond the sentence and into utterances poses problems for students.

**Comprehension (Section 2)**

Understanding of longer passages is a skill the students had. This could bear testimony to students’ ability to summarise and use other context clues to deduce the central issue being discussed in a text and from there be able to use that understanding to perform various language tasks. Although, conceptually various types of questions were asked in this section, they more or less called for similar skills such as differentiating between and categorising central points (main idea and fact) and non-essential supporting details and information, interpreting and applying information in the passages.

The **vocabulary skills** the passages drew upon was word formation knowledge. It was obvious from the answers that students were familiar with pre- and post affixation, therefore meanings of the various affixes posed minimum challenge to the students.

**Cloze exercise (Section 3)**

Students competent handling of this exercise testifies to a certain background in grammar and cohesive devices and an ability to operate in a confined language context.
The above characteristics demonstrate that students can interact with text at a literal level, needs some context provided for comprehension but they have problems moving to the more abstract or implied levels of meaning. This point is generally even seen in students’ inability to work out jokes, enjoy sarcasms and ironical statements, innuendoes, in other words, operate with the non-literal meaning of sentences and utterances. These characteristic also show that the sampled students have, what Buchman and Palmer (1996) categorise as ‘organizational knowledge’ which consists of grammatical and textual ability. Students also showed strategic competence as they handled the comprehension exercises well, an indication of knowledge and understanding of topical issues and the employment of meta-cognitive strategies to answer the various types of questions asked (ibid). In addition, one notices the commonality of these features to all areas of language competence, in listening, speaking, reading and writing. In other words, these are skills which are required to fully comprehend an oral lecture, present a cohesive spoken presentation, enable an active engagement and understanding of academic literature and construct an academic written discourse.

ANALYSIS OF HML FOUNDATION ENGLISH CURRICULUM

The discussion now focuses on the contents of the English curriculum. The HML English curriculum for first and second semester is given as:

- Vocabulary building and word formation
- Nature of academic reading and writing
- Word classes
- Syntax
- Comprehension skills
- Dictionary skills
- Literary terminologies and textual analysis*
- Listening skills*
- Presentation for a large audience*
- Formal writing and creative writing
- Computer-aided learning

*For the purpose of this discussion the listening, speaking and literature sections will not be focused upon.

An examination of the above topics/content ideas indicate an emphasis on isolated grammatical / structural points as well as broader skills like comprehension and reading, instruction in the nature of academic writing and dictionary skills; secondly that the list is a combination of topics and sub-topics, for example, word classes is a sub-topic in syntax; similarly, academic writing would encompass formal writing and even creative writing depending on the discipline for which the students are enrolled. Dictionary skills and word formation are sub-skills in vocabulary building
as both sections are targeted at first level knowledge around isolated lexical items, their formation, meaning and usage. The other observation is that the broadness of these statements allows a lot of discretion for the lecturer.

An examination of the comprehension exercises used by the lecturers showed general passages with the routine questioning at literal, interpretative and application levels along the taxonomic outline of Bloom. The idea of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English for Specific Purpose (ESP) was not vividly demonstrated by these passages. Absence of such reading practice has not only a negative effect on comprehension of actual lecture readings and ability to research but the effect can also be visible on relevant vocabulary acquisition. The distinction between BIC and CALP made earlier is relevant here (Cummins 1979). As indicated, academic reading requires students to critically engage with authentic discipline-specific texts so that questions, insights and understanding that were once held are subject to modification, reinterpretation and sometimes even rejection. Readings that do not generate these results can be categorized as cognitively unchallenging and hardly appropriate; or such readings would fail to develop some of the characteristics of an academically literate student as outlined by writers such as Weideman (2003a). Although general topics can generate extensive challenging vocabulary, immediate relevancy of information increases the motivation levels of students thereby positively affecting performance.

Another aspect of the HML English topics which do not show responsiveness to the students’ language characteristics is the lack of attention to pragmatic use of language or functional and sociolinguistic knowledge (Bachman and Palmer 1996). Such attention would see students inferring new facts from given information and comfortably understanding implicature, rephrasing, restating, all important skills in listening to, speaking, reading and writing academic discourse. Pragmatic knowledge would equip students to follow the changes in registers in the tertiary environment and the sophistication and control of language which Bourdieu et al. (1994) speak about. A similar inclusion of some rudiments of semantics would see an improvement in understanding of the meaning of words and phrases which in turn would assist students’ handling of such tasks as elaboration, expansions, contradiction and others.

The need for some exposure to computer-aided language learning was met by students registering in an interactive and computer-based language programme, MySkillslab. The programme is designed to improve students’ handling of aspects of English academic reading literacy through the use of educational software, MySkillslab. MySkillslab consists of a series of activities for students to work through individually designed plans based on a diagnostic test. The students were involved with the interactive activities on reading, grammar skills and critical interaction with texts. Using the lecturer-monitoring tool on the software – grade-book – the students’ final mastery of the programme was at 70 per cent from a pre-MySkillslab exposure at 48 per cent (Kaburise 2010).

The conclusion one can draw after analyzing the contents is that the curriculum is designed to fit within the autonomous model of academic literacy (Street 1993).
which does not pay full attention to some aspects of language ability as outlined by Bachman and Palmer (1996).

Table 2 shows the degree of fit between the reading profile of the students and the curriculum.

Table 2: The degree of fit between the reading profile of the students and the curriculum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>English curriculum</th>
<th>Fit?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sequencing</td>
<td>Topics in the nature of academic reading and writing</td>
<td>Not fully clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaboration, restatement, expansion, contradiction</td>
<td>• Vocabulary building and word formation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Dictionary skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Syntax</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inferring</td>
<td>• Topics in the nature of academic reading and writing</td>
<td>Not fully clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Comprehension</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiating between facts and opinion</td>
<td>Topics in the nature of academic reading and writing</td>
<td>Not fully clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Comprehension</td>
<td>Comprehension</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*vocabulary</td>
<td>• Vocabulary building and word formation</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Dictionary skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Handling of Computer-aided learning</td>
<td>MySkillslab</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Indicates attributes students have, hence these will be enhanced.

CONCLUSION

Although there is some fit when one compares the attributes of the students and the curriculum of the English modules, a better fit or a higher level of responsiveness would be desirable. As can be seen from column 3 of Table 2, it was not always possible to ascertain categorically whether a fit exists or not. This is one of the challenges that have been highlighted by this research – the difficulty in identifying topics that will teach some of the needed competences. Equally challenging is translating attributes into a responsive curriculum and further translated into everyday classroom activities and strategies as is seen in Table 2.

One reason for this is the limited one-to-one correlation between possible classroom engagement and curriculum statements. It is very possible that one strategy does not address an issue rather a multiplicity of attacks is necessary. In addition, governmental policy regulations put constraints on how responsive any curriculum can be. This is a major challenge when working in the foundation and extended degree programmes. The diversity of students, brought about by the different education systems and the differences in the socio-economic composition
of the students means greater linguistic diversity and levels of competence in the language of instruction. Very few universities in South Africa have the luxury of having only two to three different languages in an average class. A survey of the language environment at Univen in 2009 reflected that 50 per cent of the students were Tshivenda speakers with the remaining 50 per cent being speakers of the other languages, as well as 2.43 per cent international students, and significantly, approximately 95 per cent Tshivenda-speaking lecturing and administrative staff.

Although such a picture may not be unique to Univen, such a picture indicates that the language of instruction could be regarded as a foreign language (EFL). English is then not seen as a facilitating tool but rather as a subject which should be mastered as an examination subject with no obvious need for its application in diverse academic contexts. Skills acquired in English language should assist students in their understanding and creation of academic text in listening, speaking, reading and writing tasks. If the English curriculum is mastered only as a content knowledge then application becomes a problem.

Finally, the broadness of the topics encourages flexibility and innovativeness so that the lecturers can individualise the teaching. But such permissiveness also requires that the lecturer be conversant with the demands of CALP, academic literacy and disciplinary requirements so as to structure appropriate assistance. In other words, such a context requires academic literacy professionals who can manipulate such curriculum to fit the different abilities in the average tertiary classroom and most importantly, engage with academic discourse.

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