

COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS: PERIPHERAL CURRENT OR MAINSTREAM FLOW

EKUA TEKYIWA AMUA-SEKYI*

Abstract

This study investigates the impact of the Communicative Skills course at the University of Cape Coast on students' academic literacy. It employs a mixed methods approach to data collection involving focus group discussions with students and semi-structured interviews with lecturers. Issues raised in these qualitative methods informed items in a questionnaire administered to students. The findings suggest that though students find the Communicative Skills course useful and beneficial, they were not appropriating it in their programmes of study because they saw it more of a gate keeper, another course to be passed in order to move on to the next level. Suggestions are made as to how Communicative Skills can be integrated into other academic courses to impact on students' performance.

Introduction

Biggs (1999) notes an extraordinary and worldwide change in the university system in his book on 'Teaching for Quality Learning at University'. Amongst the factors he highlights as impacting upon university teaching is the greater proportion of school leavers entering higher education, the increased diversity within the student body, and increased class sizes. These problems are perceived to be compounded by the nature of secondary education in particular which, lecturers argued, does not adequately prepare students for independent learning and critical thinking. The teaching and assessment styles in many secondary schools lend themselves to the development of a particular set of study skills and learning strategies. These are, however, no longer entirely relevant to the more independent styles of learning expected in higher education but have nevertheless been shown to persist (Cook & Leckey, 1999). Drury & Webb (1997) note that students from secondary schools are likely to come to the tertiary level with a baggage of experiences, attitudes, and

* Lecturer, Department of Arts & Social Science Education, University of Cape Coast.

skills that are not properly suited to university work. The problem of inadequate preparation for higher education provided by previous educational backgrounds over the previous 12 or more years presents a false start and the problems students can experience do not lend themselves to quick fixes. Despite remediation efforts for students, these can be carried over into the regular undergraduate curriculum.

Communicative Skills (CS), mandatory English for academic purposes (EAP) course in tertiary institutions in Ghana, assumes a preparatory, facilitative role for students entering higher education, ensuring their smooth transition from the pre-university stage to the university level. Unfortunately, this crucial role of CS is often treated in reductionist terms as “remedial”, “study skills”.

EAP is literally located in English-medium universities and universities worldwide.

Given the international nature of universities, instituting EAP programmes in Africa, Latin America, and Europe is inevitable. Even more important as a reason for the widespread institutionalization of EAP programmes and similar programmes is the increasing role of English as an “academic lingua franca” (Duszak, 1997: 21). Regardless of the region where EAP or similar writing programmes are found, there is one fundamental assumption earlier suggested: that reading and writing at pre-university level is different from the reading and writing required at the tertiary level (Alfers & Dison, 2000).

Ghana has had more than three hundred years of contact with several European countries – Portugal, the Netherlands, Denmark and the United Kingdom. It is, however, the English language that has exerted much influence over Ghana. It is an important means of inter-ethnic communication internally and a source of communication with the international community – the business of politics, trade, and science is conducted in this language. In terms of education, English is used as a medium of instruction in Ghanaian educational institutions, including the universities.

University of Cape Coast (UCC), the setting for this study is one of six public universities in Ghana. Established in 1962, UCC conducts its teaching, learning, and research through four faculties (Education, Humanities, Sciences, and Social Sciences), enabling it to provide several

academic programmes to over 20,000 local and international students. A pass grade or credit in English, together with passes in Mathematics and Science, remains a major requirement for entry into UCC as in other Ghanaian public universities. Prospective university students in Ghana are expected to have been exposed to at least 12 years of English from the primary school level to the secondary school level. In addition, on entry into Ghanaian universities, all students are required to take a mandatory EAP course. The aims of the CS programme in UCC are to:

- * improve commencing university students' reading and writing skills to meet the demands of university work.
- * teach commencing students skills in note-taking to increase their efficiency in processing information acquired from lectures and books.

The aim of CS is, therefore, three-pronged; emphasizing remediation, study skills, and writing skills. Students are required to pass it in order to move on to the next level.

The rationale for the CS course, which started in 1985 (Gogovi, 2003), was partly to stem the downward trend in the quality of students' writing in various discipline-specific contexts. This focus of CS at the time was well conceived. However, the underlying premise of CS then is that language skills can be decontextualized from content and that academic language is unvarying across disciplines. This acontextual notion presupposed the transferability of a generalizable set of skills and abilities from the CS classroom to a disciplinary context (Hyland, 2002). While it is acknowledged that certain skills are generalizable across all disciplines (Johns, 1997; Sutton, 1997; Kaldor & Rochecouste, 2002), it is simplistic to argue that one can transfer the same linguistic structures operative in one disciplinary community to another.

In contrast with common understandings about what it means to learn to speak, read, write and think in academic language, developing academic literacy has been defined in recent times to encompass a complex set of skills and accomplishments required at 'entry' into tertiary institutions as well as skills required for an advanced learner to make an effective 'departure' from universities (Johns & Swales, 2002) as an independent researcher. This involves a much more complex process of entering new linguistic and academic communities which touches upon issues of

students' identities and roles in study, work, and life (Lea and Street, 1998).

The shift in the notion of academic literacy as a homogeneous or univariant set of skills which students are supposed to demonstrate to the current notion of academic literacy which takes cognizance of diversity, multifacetedness, and contextualism (Dillon, 1991; Samraj, 2002) implies the need for universities to regularly evaluate their curricula, including CS, to make it functional to society's needs.

The CS course at UCC, however, has not witnessed any systematic evaluation since it became a university-wide programme in 1987. A formative evaluation (evaluation conducted during the development and implementation of a programme) could have been carried out in the early years of its introduction to provide valuable details about the programme's strengths and weaknesses. This would have addressed questions such as: what is working or not working well? What are the perceptions of programme participants? What are the perceptions of programme staff? Such an evaluation would have given feedback about the programme's processes and effects on programme participants. It would have exposed the programme to scrutiny and might have led to decisions about programme modification or revision (Rossi et al., 2004).

In lieu of a formative evaluation, and in the wake of doubts expressed by lecturers about the usefulness of the programme in remedying students' weaknesses in language and study skills, a summative evaluation (evaluation conducted after a portion of a programme has been completed) ought to have been conducted to determine programme effectiveness and value to guide decisions concerning programme continuation, modification or termination. The widespread perception that something is remiss with the programme serves to highlight a key deficit in the programme – a lack of programme evaluation.

Stufflebeam (2000:35) suggests that evaluation is "a study designed and conducted to assist some audience to assess an object's merit and worth". Hall & Hall (2004:6) point out that evaluation usually focuses on the aims of a programme and investigates to what extent the intentions of the programme providers are being realized. An evaluation report consequently comments on the effects of programme provision on those

involved and indicates potential future directions. Clarke (1999) notes that evaluation is primarily concerned with determining the merit, worth or value of an established policy or planned intervention.

This study is a small scale evaluation of the CS programme at the University of Cape Coast. The trust of the evaluation was to find out from students and lecturers the extent to which the objectives of the CS programme are being realized in their courses.

Methodology

A mixed-method design for an objective-based evaluation was used to exploit the functions of triangulation and complementarity which occur when specific features of each method are explored leading to multiple inferences that confirm and complement each other. The use of a focus group discussion and interviews gave greater depth, while the questionnaire survey gave greater breadth. Integrating these methods, gave results from which one makes better and more accurate inferences (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003).

The perceptions, concerns and desires raised by the focus group of students and in interviews with lecturers served as variables of interest and were used as question items in the questionnaire. The focus group which was made up of two students each from the Faculties of Arts, Education, Science and Social Science sought to find out from students, their experiences on the CS programme and the impact of the programme on their courses. Since the aim of the focus group was to learn as much as possible about the range and variety of participants' experiences with the CS programme, sampling was purposive rather than representative. Twenty lecturers who teach second year students were randomly sampled. Five lecturers from each faculty were interviewed to find out about the impact of CS on their students' performance. That is, note-taking patterns of students during their lectures, and evidence of skills in students' reading and writing.

Cluster sampling was used for the administration of questionnaires. Students reading various programmes take core courses. This made it possible to access samples of students whose views and experiences are representative. To encourage questionnaire return and to make up for lack of time, permission was sought from the lecturers concerned to administer and collect questionnaires during lectures.

Data analysis followed what Marquart, Li and Zercher (2000) referred to as “parallel tracks”. Each set of data was analyzed separately and comparisons and connections made at the stage of drawing conclusions and inferences.

Findings

Focus group discussion with students

Discussions among participants in the focus group indicated that students have difficulty taking notes and processing information from lectures efficiently and economically. While students claimed improvement in their ability to read and make meaning out of texts, they were not so sure about their ability to write fluent and meaningful English. Discussions among participants led to the conclusion that while many students think/feel the programme is worthwhile, they have not translated knowledge gained and attitude change into changes in behaviour. Participants noted that “some students find the course difficult ... too much is covered in too short a time that lecturers gloss over topics ... there is no opportunity to communicate in the communicative skills class”. Participants agreed that “we just learn to pass and move on. Application of knowledge and skills do not come in”

Interviews with lecturers

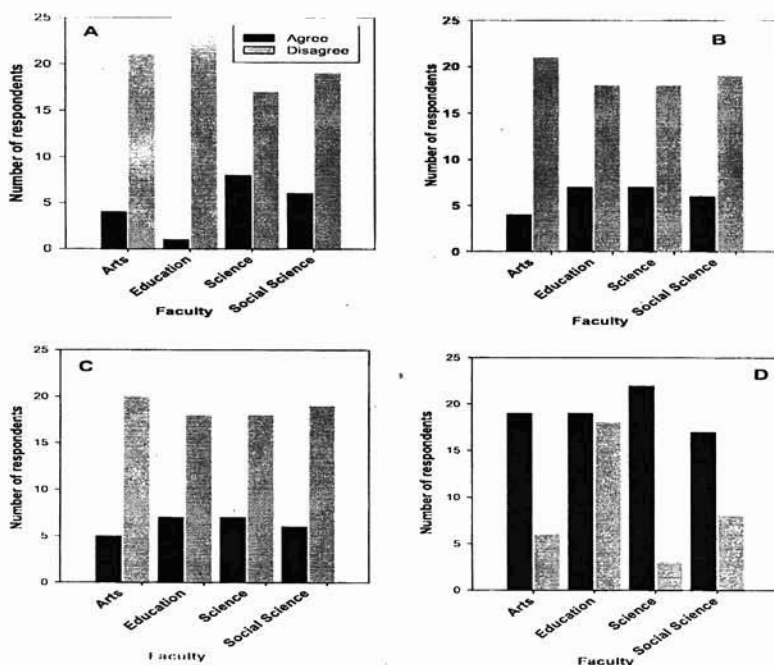
Lecturers noted that “students do not take notes and process information efficiently from lectures ... they start writing as soon as lecturers start talking”. This confirms observations by the focus group that this objective is the least met. Lecturers observed that “students have difficulty in their reading and writing ... majority have problems with writing fluent grammatical and meaningful English.” A lecturer-participant argued that “students don’t seem to be able to select important information from text ... they reproduce what they read which indicate that they are not skillful readers”. Indeed, this was confirmed by the focus group. A lecturer-participant reiterated “we in the Faculty of Science have always said we want to take the 3 credit hours and teach our students how we want them to communicate”. There were two dissenting voices among lecturer-participants. However, they were lecturers who teach CS. They were hesitant though in giving a positive response. “I always refer students to what they are supposed to have learned in Communicative Skills”, they both commented. The issue, however, is not what lecturers remind

students about. It is what students are able to do.

Questionnaire survey of students

Ninety percent (90%) of students surveyed claimed that they could take notes and process information efficiently from lectures. This contradicts responses from the focus group and lecturers. Seventy-eight percent (78%) of students indicated that they have no difficulty reading and making notes from textbooks. This concurs with responses from the focus group, but contradicts observations of lecturers. Seventy-seven (77%) percent of students said they write fluent, grammatical and meaningful English. This contradicts responses from the focus group, lecturers, and students' own responses when an overwhelming 82%, 83% and 73% of student-respondents acknowledged having problems with grammar, spelling and punctuation respectively, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Responses of students from various faculties on their ability to write without (A) grammatical errors, (B) spelling errors, (C) punctuation errors; and (D) write fluent and meaningful English.



In Figure 2, student-respondents debunked the idea from the focus group that they just learn to pass the course to move on to the next level (E). They expressed interest in the course and acknowledged its relevance to their programmes of study (F).

Summary of findings

The Communicative Skills course does not seem to make much impact on students' academic performance. This is because on the whole there is no significant improvement in students' note taking, reading and writing skills after they have gone through the programme. Students' claims that they can take notes efficiently and economically during lectures and read and make notes from textbooks may well have proved to be distortions if their responses had been cross-checked as was their ability to write fluently and meaningfully (Figure 1). Student-respondents in the survey did not come across as being honest in their responses as these differed from contrasted responses of the focus group and lecturers.

Students said they found the programme useful and beneficial. They unanimously agreed that the topics covered were important to them and the course was relevant to their programme of study irrespective of their entry grade in English or their programme of study. The implementation strategies, perhaps, might have led to unintended outcomes.

Discussion

The result of the evaluation indicated that the CS programme is not impacting on students' academic literacy skills, although students found the programme useful and relevant irrespective of their entry grade in English or their programme of study. CS is more of a gatekeeper, another course students need to pass to move on to second year. The primary impetus is to pass the examination. Students acknowledged its worth, but did not seem to appreciate its intrinsic value. These findings were confirmed by lecturers who said they did not see any significant improvement in students' reading, thinking and writing skills after they had gone through CS. Students, the lecturers observed, were not appropriating those skills learnt in CS in their courses. CS is a peripheral current, not a mainstream flow. Some lecturer-participants, however, argued that students are not appropriating those skills partly because faculty members are not reinforcing those skills learnt in CS in their

disciplines. An integrative and a holistic approach will be useful to students rather than an approach that is isolationist. Moreover, teaching CS as an integral part of undergraduate programmes has the advantage of getting students to practice those skills, including criticality, throughout their studies instead of focusing on passing examinations.

Invariably, one might agree with North (2003); if disciplinary skills are learnt through participation in a situated activity within a discipline, it would appear to be difficult to see how CS alone can foster this. This resonates the views of Zhu (2004) and Adika and Owusu-Sekyere (1997) about the centrality of discipline-specific teachers in students' enculturation into the various disciplines considering the relationship between discipline-specific skills and study skills with regards to students' acquisition of the epistemology and rhetoric in their respective disciplines.

Prior (1998) and Hyland (2002) argued that content makes a significant contribution in how discourse differs from one discipline to another, emphasizing the inextricable link between language and content. Language is inextricably linked with the epistemology of a discipline and the role of language in reflecting and constituting epistemology is not in question. However, one cannot ignore the issue of language skills, often highlighted in the remedial aspect of most EAP programmes in general, and CS in particular.

While language skills, such as the practice of critiquing one's assumptions, arguing with detachment, posing questions, providing evidence and referencing, engaging in processes of selection and organization which indeed cut across the disciplines, therefore, have the potential in assisting a greater number of students to acquire the relevant language skills needed for university work, one cannot ignore the context-dependent nature of academic discourse. This begs the question "should CS be a foundational or remedial course?" A pragmatic stance will be to embrace fully the foundational viewpoint, while taking cognizance of the remediation and study skills aspects. If we agree that university work is different from secondary school work and requires some general as well as specific skills, then it is necessary for students to be helped to appreciate and adapt to the new university culture (Alfers & Dison, 2000).

What is needed is a change in the CS curriculum based on the current theory of academic literacy, which foregrounds a multivariate position.

This multivariate view flags multiliteracies, discipline-specificity, and context. The teaching of CS as an integral part of subject matter has the following advantages:

- * Lecturers know the registers, skills and mode of communication in their field and, therefore, CS will assume a practical relevance.
- * Students will be grouped according to their courses and this is more practical compared with the arbitrary grouping that now exists.
- * The issue of whether examination is the best way to assess skills will be resolved when CS becomes an important component of all subjects of study that needs to be practiced throughout students' studies.

This, however, implies practical considerations. These include staff training as well as innovation in curriculum, institutional capacity and pedagogy. Tentatively, without disrupting the CS programme, a professional development course that flags academic literacy as a multivariate set of accomplishments and skills should be offered to CS staff. In the long term, however, the relationship between CS lecturers and discipline-specific lecturers regarding students' acquisition of the epistemology and rhetoric in their respective disciplines should be a matter of concern.

Conclusion and recommendations

Students acknowledge the relevance and usefulness of CS but they are not appropriating it in their courses. Lecturers do not see the impact of CS on their students' academic literacy skills and want to teach the communicative needs of their disciplines themselves. However, the context-dependent nature of academic discourse (foundational) does not relegate the relevance of language skills (remedial). As discussed earlier, a pragmatic stance will be to embrace fully the foundational viewpoint, while taking cognizance of the remediation and study skills aspects.

The literature on academic literacy identifies three ways in which this can be done. The first is by team teaching (Jones, 2004, and Dudley-Evans, 2001, 1995). Here, both the discipline-specific teacher and the CS teacher collaborate in teaching various aspects of writing valued and privileged in specific disciplines. Another approach suggests the centrality

of the discipline-specific teachers in EAP courses (Zhu, 2004). Such a position is in consonance with a study conducted at the University of Ghana discussed earlier in which Adika and Owusu-Sekyere (1997) suggested a greater role for the discipline-specific teacher in students' enculturation in a department-based writing programme which was to replace a general academic writing programme. The third approach is the interactive approach that marries the generalist approach and the discipline-specific approach (North, 2003; Johns, 1992; and Carter, 1990). While maintaining the centrality of CS lecturers, their efforts have to be complemented by the subject teacher in the discipline-specific context in this approach. In this light, the more central role envisaged for the discipline-specific lecturer discussed earlier (Zhu, 2004; Adika and Owusu-Sekyere, 1997; and Johns, 1992) should hold sway once UCC is ready to provide the necessary logistics.

With the continued dwindling financial resources of most public universities in Ghana, the implementation of a change in the CS curriculum rests largely on the institutional capacity of the universities. In view of the research findings, it is recommended that all lecturers should be given orientation and periodic seminars on how to include CS in their subject areas. When necessary, subject lecturers can make use of CS lecturers as resource persons.

Overall then, while this study achieved the aim of evaluating the impact of the CS programme on students' academic performance, there were limitations, which may have affected the findings. As discussed, the study employed a mixed method design. Integrating these methods yielded results from which one could make better and more accurate inferences (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003). Although this may be seen as a limitation in some respects, it is argued here that the use of a mixed method design provided a holistic picture of students' and lecturers' perception of the impact of CS on their courses.

The study is limited by the small sample size and the use of a single University. While these findings will need further investigation and validation in future, and more rigorous research, the issues raised by participants resonate with many of the informal discussions that occur around higher educational institutions in the country. For this reason, the study begins to make a formal contribution to exploring teaching and learning in higher education, despite its limitations.

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