Teaching Academic Literacy in English for Multiple Objectives at a University of Technology

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore student experiences resulting from collaborative teaching and learning of academic literacy and content knowledge, for multiple objectives at a South African University of Technology. Using the qualitative research approach, undergraduate students who attended the Communication Skills course were randomly selected. Data were collected using in-depth interviews and questionnaires. The data were thematically coded to make sense of the experiences shared by the participants. The results indicated that academic literacy courses in the Faculty of Applied Sciences at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) were often regarded as peripheral, until we the lecturers in the present study collaborated to align disciplinary or content knowledge with academic literacy. Our alignment included the practice of decolonising the language and academic literacy curriculum, collaborative teaching, integrating content and language teaching and learning, and implementing a range of blended pedagogies, along with social media. Based on the student reflection and feedback, we are inclined to conclude that this pedagogy enhanced the overall teaching and learning experience. We further found that student learning experiences improved as the literacy course was moved from the periphery to the mainstream of the academic project by adopting various approaches in teaching and learning, guided by student needs, the language context of the class, and the learning outcomes or needs of the discipline.

Keywords: Communication, collaborative teaching, decolonisation, multilingualism, translanguaging

Introduction

Communication skills and academic literacy courses are often seen as occupying a peripheral place in the curriculum project in the sciences at Universities of Technology. Students and academics may not always attribute due value to academic literacy courses. Rather, they may see the core business of learning and teaching to equip students with disciplinary knowledge and, at a university of technology, with hard and technical skills that students require to perform a specific job for which they are being trained. It has been suggested that "language and literacy tend to only become visible institutionally when construed as a problem to be solved through additional remedial support" (Lillis & Scott, 2007, pp. 5-7). This reality dictates that academic literacy lecturers package and offer the course(s) at the Cape Peninsular University of Technology in innovative ways that may attempt to move them from the periphery to the mainstream of the academic project – in reality and symbolically.

This paper examines the various approaches adopted during the 2018 academic year, to package and teach academic literacy courses in the Faculty of Applied Sciences, at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). Some of the broad areas that are investigated in this paper include decolonising language and the academic literacy curriculum, collaborative

teaching by integrating content and language learning, and blended learning through computer assistive tools and social media.

Background

Language is one of the key elements that influences the way humans experience and engage with their world. For example, viewed from the theoretical frame of linguistic determinism, "the language one speaks determines the way s/he interprets the world ... language ... influences one's thoughts about the world" (Reis, 2010, p. 1014). Considered from all perspectives, the language question is an important one and even more so, in the higher education sector. At CPUT as at other higher education institutions in South Africa, English is the default language of learning, teaching and of administration. However, a large majority of students are mother tongue speakers of languages other than English. The language landscape of students at CPUT in 2018 percentage wise was Afrikaans 14.5%, English 23.9%, other 12.7% and isiXhosa 48.9% (Management Information Services – MIS Portal Cape Peninsula University of Technology, 2019). This illustrated language landscape and dynamics at CPUT allow for several interpretations. CPUT is a truly multilingual institution with indigenous African languages spoken as first language by most students. The incongruity of this situation is that students are learning in an unfamiliar language, that has various implications on how they may experience learning, teaching, and social engagement, and this may consequently affect academic performance and throughput. Faced with this situation, and in response to prescriptions of institutional and national language policies, an array of approaches has been adopted in an attempt to make the teaching and learning space linguistically decolonised and more inclusive through the multilingual practices and initiatives.

The CPUT Language Policy (2019) among many other laudable claims, states as its intent: "By 2025, to advance CPUT towards an inclusive multilingual environment using regional languages and South African Sign Language (SASL), while promoting other national and regional languages" (Cape Peninsula University of Technology Language Policy, 2019, p. 2). To achieve this, the Policy states as one of its main procedures and principles that:

> while English is the current Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT), teaching practices using other languages should also be adopted to facilitate epistemological access. ... Academic literacy practices in English, as well as in isiXhosa and Afrikaans, should continue to ensure successful teaching and learning. (CPUT, 2019, p. 5)

Drawing from the principles and ideals of the South African Constitution, and the relationship between language and cognition in the learning process, the Revised Language Policy Framework in Higher Education seeks to promote multilingualism as a strategy to facilitate meaningful access and participation by everyone in various university activities and in cognitive and intellectual development (Language Policy for Higher Education, South Africa, 2017, p. 2).

Another important policy document is the Western Cape Language policy, which has as some of its goals to:

> ensure that the Western Cape is a caring home for all by promoting multilingualism and to give increasing effect to the equal constitutional status of the three official languages of the Western Cape. (Western Cape Provincial Government, 2001, p. 2)

All three policies – the CPUT Language Policy, the Language Policy for Higher Education and the Western Cape Language Policy speak directly to the continued marginalisation (coloniality) of indigenous languages and make resounding calls for redress.

The practices adopted in the design and teaching of the Communication Skills module in Biotechnology and in other academic programmes in the Faculty of Applied Sciences at CPUT (where we the researchers are based) try to some of the issues highlighted in the policy documents. This study examined students' responses to these interventions.

Purpose of study

The study set out to answer the question, how does an approach that teaches academic literacy in English for multiple objectives contribute to improving the learning experience of students and move the course from the periphery to the mainstream of the academic project?

More specifically, the study examined how a collaborative and integrated pedagogy to teaching academic literacy, using disciplinary content, and through the agency of multilingualism, grant access to the LoLT, contribute to learning experiences, and shift literacy from the periphery to the mainstream of the academic project?

To address this, the study undertook a general survey of the student perceptions of the communication skills subject in a selected academic programme in the Faculty of Applied Sciences at CPUT.

The study is grounded in the theoretical positions of New Literacy Studies as elucidated by Barton (1994), Cazden et al., (1996), Street & Street (1984) and Street 2003), These scholars have argued for a new approach to understanding literacy that challenges the dominant "deficit" model. They conceptualised academic literacy through the use of three overlapping perspectives or models. The first of these is the study skills model which sees writing and literacy as primarily an individual and cognitive skill. It presumes that students can transfer their knowledge of writing and literacy unproblematically from one context to another. The second model is termed academic socialization and is concerned with students' acculturation into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres. Students acquire the ways of talking, writing, thinking, and using literacy that typified members of a disciplinary or subject area community. The third model, termed academic literacies is concerned with meaning making, identity, power and authority and foregrounds the institutional nature of what "counts" as knowledge in any particular academic context. It views the processes involved in acquiring appropriate and effective uses of literacy as more complex, dynamic, nuanced, situated, and involving both epistemological issues and social processes which include power relations among people and institutions, and social identities (Lea & Street, 2006, pp. 227-228). The theory is relevant here as the teaching and learning approaches adopted in the course under study target multiple objectives that cut across all three models of this theory, some more than others. Considering this theoretical paradigm and the scholarly positions advanced in the literature discussed below, the paper covered the following aspects:

Decolonising the language and academic literacies curriculum

There have been growing calls for the decolonisation of higher education, especially in the South African context. Similar calls have been echoed in most of the previously colonised world, which still experiences various degrees and forms of coloniality. Language remains a key component of the de-coloniality project. For any effort at decoloniality to have an impact, it should direct significant attention at rectifying the hegemonic impact of colonial languages. In light of this, a concerted effort should be made in the design of both curricula and pedagogy of communication and literacy skills subjects, to align with the values and objectives of the decolonisation project.

The decoloniality project in general and in language in education is universal, taking different forms in different postcolonial societies. Martin (2005) offers a comprehensive overview of the decolonisation project in a book that is appropriately titled, "Decolonisation, globalisation:

language-in-education policy and practice". Interestingly, English as is the case in the context under study emerges as the default language in most of the postcolonial contexts discussed in the volume. The value of the volume lies in its evocative depiction of how several postcolonial societies grapple with the language issue. For example, considering the case of India, it argues that the colonial disposition towards the language of education was fractured and multiple. It notes that approaches to dealing with the language issue included offering prominent European works to the indigenous elite in translation, in order to avoid disruption and imparting European knowledge to a majority of the population through indigenous languages. It further claims that efforts toward national linguistic cohesion in India have to a certain extent been undermined through the training of students in multiple languages. In the case of Singapore, the text explores measures that have been instrumental in reproducing a class of elites who share proficiency in English, but also working-class Cantonese-speaking subalterns who have ambivalent feelings toward English and its usefulness. In the case of Malaysia, the text explores how teachers use Malay and English to the exclusion of Sa´ben, a language used outside of the classroom by teacher and student alike. Framing the discussion on Turkey around the language medium policy of a major state university, the text captures the dilemma faced by institutions of higher education in the 'developing world' in balancing the teaching of a world language with the teaching of an indigenous one. The book characterises the language medium policy measures and efforts of Istanbul Technical University as an alternative based on the institution's desire to combat "the challenge of English linguistic imperialism", However, it explains that neither the faculty nor students emerge from the institution with an awareness of the goal. In the case of Kenya, the book reveals that for children to improve their English and Kiswahili, Gikuyu, the language spoken in the school's environs, is banned from Standard four on. This is in spite of the fact that that all three languages are found to have specific pragmatic effects and enable 'hidden messages' in classrooms such as the tediousness of reading and its decontextualized irrelevance to life outside the interaction. Turning attention to South Africa, the text explores the intersection of classroom realities, language policy, neo-colonial, and globalisation discourses in schools. It notes that the South African Language in Education Policy of 1997 values cultural diversity, and multilingualism as a means to intercultural communication and nation-building, and national and international communication. Further to this, it outlines some ways in which the apartheid legacy has made English, the language associated with various forces of globalization in South Africa, both desirable and problematic for most South African schools (Lin & Martin, 2005, pp. 318-321). The book offers a very useful universal perspective that serves as a valuable lens through which to examine students' responses to various teaching and learning approaches, directed at decolonising the curriculum, through the teaching of communication and academic literacy skills in an undergraduate Biotechnology qualification.

Multilingualism

This is the ability of societies, institutions, and groups to engage with more than one language in their day-to-day lives (European Union Commission, 2007, p. 6 in Cenoz, 2013, p. 5). It is different from plurilingualism which is the ability of a speaker to express himself or herself in several languages with equal and native-like proficiency (Bussmann, 1996). According to Lyons (1981), multilingual societies are characterised by the co-existence of several languages. These languages may be official or unofficial, native, or foreign and national or international. An aspect of the present study examined the value of multilingualism in teaching and learning interventions adopted in the communication skills subject. These included the use of multilingual glossaries, the use of home or mother tongue languages to complete projects, such as a digital storytelling project, code switching and translanguaging. This study engaged with students' responses and their experiences of these interventions.

Translanguaging

García and Wei (2014) define translanguaging as a language practice of bilinguals where bilingualism acts not as two autonomous language systems, but as one linguistic repertoire with features that have been socially constructed as belonging to two separate languages. The epistemological changes that are taking place as global interactions, real and virtual, define our language exchanges, and create a transformational nature of language in new configurations of practices and education. Several authors (e.g., García, 2009; García & Wei, 2014; Heugh, 2015; Probyn, 2015) have promoted translanguaging as a systematic and pedagogically sound means of connecting the language of teaching and the languages of Learning. The study would engage with the view that translanguaging enhances communication and classroom learning amongst multilingual students (Charamba, 2020).

Collaborative teaching

There is vibrant debate on the best approach to teaching communication skills, academic literacies and language in higher education. Some favour an approach where these skills are integrated and embedded in disciplinary content and where there is close collaboration between the content lecturer and the language and literacies specialist. Yet others advocate the generic teaching of these skills outside of a disciplinary context. In the case presently under study, the communication skills, and academic literacy module was embedded in the content subject of "Immunology" and there was close collaboration between the content lecturer and the communication skills lecturer to ensure integration and alignment of the types of teaching material selected, the mode of engagement with content, and the forms of assessment.

Content language integrated learning (CLIL) is either "soft" where the "content of the subject is subordinate to the language and higher emphasis is put on learning the language" or, "hard" where "the main lesson objective is the content objective not the language" (Šulistová, 2013, p. 47). The qualities of Soft CLIL primarily apply to this study, since the objective of the Communication Skills course that formed the context for this study was not the content knowledge, but the communication and literacy skills covered. However, it is believed that teaching the skills in the disciplinary context may contribute to making the content knowledge more explicit.

CLIL is advantageous in that it enhances the critical thinking ability of students, the learning process may be based on real life situations, learning may be conducted in groups or teams and it can be peer-led, thereby raising intercultural awareness among students and teachers, thus breaking prejudices, and facilitating the acquisition of communicative skills (Šulistová, 2013, p. 50).

Blended learning, digital technology and social media

Students in our current first year classes comprise the demographic cohort born around the mid to late 1990s, referred to as "Generation Z". This is a generation of students that shows a strong leaning towards using digital technology, the internet and social media. As such, these students can be engaged in a variety of innovative ways, in addition to the traditional face-to-face lecture format. The use of digital technology has enhanced students' abilities to draw on the benefits of a range of resources, pedagogies, and tools to improve the overall learning experience. For example, in a review of 34 published, empirical evaluations of computer-based instruction involving more than 10,000 students, Fletcher (2003, p. 6) reported that the technology enhanced learning in 30 out of the 34 studies investigated. Results like these may attest to the value of computer assistive learning and teaching in improving student involvement in their

learning. But there are several other formats through which students may now be engaged. The present study considered the use of social media as a learning and teaching platform. An increasing number of studies have observed that the use of social media in the classroom has added value to the learning experience, and thus justified its wider implementation. For example, Mason (2008) cited in Alabdulkareem (2015, p. 214) suggests that "using social media in the classroom allows the teacher not only to incorporate multimedia and multimodal texts but also to share these quickly and easily, providing a collaborative learning environment where students can communicate at any time".

Considering the scholarly perspectives advanced on the value of social media as a learning and teaching platform, the study examined social media platforms such as WhatsApp that are used to support learning and teaching in the context of the course under study here, especially in fragile times such as prolonged student protests when learning and teaching can only happen remotely.

Method of study

We have adopted a qualitative case study design in this paper. This method is particularly suited to the study as the intention is partly to give voice to the experiences of students for whom the learning interventions are designed, besides giving them space to offer an evaluative perspective. Additionally, a qualitative method of research, we believed was better suited as it opened space for participants to offer deep, detailed, and complex engagements that are rooted in their individual learning experiences.

The population for this study were students in the Faculty of Applied Sciences, at the District Six Campus of CPUT, Cape Town, South Africa. The study took place primarily in the Biotechnology Programme, within the core subject "Immunology", where Communication Skills as a module is embedded. The Immunology subject has as a formal learning outcome, the ability of students to be proficient in academic literacy, and to be fluent in communication, for both formal and informal objectives. As a result, Communication Skills form a significant teaching and learning component of the subject and incorporates a range of teaching and learning pedagogies. Assessments also take various forms, such as reflective assignments, digital storytelling incorporating multilingual narratives and subtitles, as well as engagement with published articles in the discipline (Biotechnology in this case). Presently, a sample of 10 students was randomly selected for interviews and questionnaires from a cohort of 80 students who took Communication Skills in the 2018 academic year.

The primary data collection instruments for this paper were interviews and questionnaires. Using semi-structured interviews allowed an in depth and a detailed engagement with the issues highlighted in this paper. In addition, interviews provided scope for broad information on the topics covered and allowed the respondents to share their opinions, feelings and perceptions and created space for the interviewer to seek clarity on any ambiguities. Open-ended questions in the questionnaire held similar value as interviews but also allowed the respondents more free-thinking time that resulted in even more detailed and well thought out responses as the respondents were not pressured by the formal context of a face-to-face interview. The questionnaire was piloted with a different set of students not involved in this study. Amendments were made following the piloting to ensure that it was reliable, valid and credible and aligned with the aims of the research question. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at scheduled times. We believed that this format has the advantage of allowing the researcher the ability to read body language and facial expressions, prompting clarification by the interviewer, should this be necessary (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 9).

In coding the data, Tesch's (1992) steps of data analysis approach cited in Cresswell (2017)

was used as a guide. The analysis of the data was comprehensive and employed a wide range of procedures commonly used in educational research. The content analysis unlike statistical/numerical analysis does not measure or quantify patterns. It is based on interpreting opinions and perspectives of various subjects. Common themes and concepts from both sources of data were identified. The data were analysed using the content analysis approach of Tesch (1992), thus:

1) Read all transcripts and handwritten notes carefully.
2) Pick a response and think about the underlying meaning in the information.
3) Make a list of all topics and put them in groups.
4) The topics should be abbreviated and coded.
5) Pick out themes and categorise them.
6) Assign abbreviations to the codes to avoid confusion and error.
7) Cluster similar categories to harmonise categories.
8) Recode existing data where necessary.

Content analysis has been described as "a research method that provides a systematic and objective means to make valid inferences from verbal, visual, or written data in order to describe and quantify specific phenomena" (Bengtsson, 2016, p. 9).

Results

The first section deals with the demographic characteristics of the respondents who participated in the study. Ten students were selected to participate in both the interviews and the questionnaires. All of them indicated that they were pursuing their degree/diploma programme while two of them did not specify the qualification. The respondents were all from the Biotechnology Programme in the Faculty of Applied Sciences attended the Communication Skills module which was a component of the Immunology subject in the first-year level of study.

Home languages spoken by students

The responses show that the students spoke various home languages. It emerged from the students' responses that a majority of them spoke isiXhosa while others spoke Afrikaans, English, French, Luganda Portuguese, IsiZulu, Sepedi, Siswati and Tshivenda.

Apart from the home languages, some of the respondents also speak other languages. Some of them were bi- or even plurilingual, with one respondent speaking up to six languages, that is, English, Afrikaans, Setswana, Sepedi, Zulu and Xitsonga. Many respondents, besides English spoke a combination of other languages which included Kiswahili, Lingali, Ndebele and Sesotho.

Language of instruction

Almost all the respondents reported that in the context of the District Six Campus at CPUT, the lecturers primarily use English, sometimes use isiXhosa, occasionally use other languages, but never use Afrikaans. The students were asked to explain how the language of instruction at CPUT affected their ability to study. Almost all the students who participated reported that they could not express themselves very well in English. The respondents reported that this affected their understanding of some scientific terms and concepts. The following are some of the responses from the respondents concerning how the exclusive use of English as a language of instruction in a context where there is a weak mastery of the language of instruction

(English) and where some accents are unintelligible. This affected their learning abilities, as shown in these excerpts:

> Student 1: I went to public schools where most of the time I was taught subjects in my own home language. And at high school we used to communicate with our home language with our teachers. Coming to university was a childhood dream till I had to speak English all the time. English has badly affected my ability to study. I was not used to it. I couldn't even ask the lecturer questions.
> Student 2: As a native English speaker, the language of instruction did not have any negative impacts on my ability to study. I was able to effectively understand the course material and lectures.
> Student 3: As I am Xhosa speaking, I do not understand some of the English terms so sometimes it does affect my ability to study negatively.
> Student 4: At times, it's hard to follow since it is my first additional language. This results in poor answering.
> Student 5: Communication remains a problem here at CPUT. It's not really the language that affects [the] ability to study. Rather the accents, which is understandable. But it would be helpful of the lecturers at least try to consider other learners.
> Student 6: CPUT uses English in all the modules, in the courses that I am taking. And it is sometimes difficult to understand because in some modules the English that is used is very dense and it is not simple and easy to understand.
> Student 7: This affects my ability to study because I do not understand some texts or words in English but I can understand them in my own language.

Only a few students reported along the lines of, “It does help because most if not all modules are taught in English. That aids the vocabulary.”

Language other than English used to converse in the classroom

The respondents were also asked how often they used a language other than English to converse in the classroom with their peers. More than half of the students reported that they sometimes use languages other than English in informal conversations but also, when they did group work and discussions in class. When asked about the lecturers, tutors, mentors and other facilitators of knowledge and their use of other languages in the classroom, the respondents said that they never do, and they never encourage them to use any language other than English to converse in the classroom. The respondents gave reasons why the lecturers did that as presented below:

> Student 1: As we are not all familiar with our different home languages, we were advised to use English as our medium of communication so as to accommodate everyone.
> Student 2: Because everyone has different home languages. It was instructed that one speaks English as it is a common language most of us can understand.
> Student 3: In my class, we speak different languages and English was the medium language that accommodates us all.
> Student 4: Lecturers, tutors and mentors prefer the use of English in the classroom to accommodate everyone in the lecture room.
> Student 5: When discussing school-related stuff, he does allow us to use our home languages for better understanding.
> Student 6: We work as a group most of the time. We are from different places and speak different languages so we need a language that will suit us all to effectively make a better collaboration.

We asked the respondents how often they used a language other than English to converse in the classroom with their lecturers at first year. A majority of the students responded "Never", with less than one tenth of the respondents indicating that they occasionally do. The use of the home language to guide peer-led discussions does appear to offer an advantage in terms of content knowledge acquisition, which students can then use to transition into the language of the discipline.

Multilingual practices

The results show that there are some multilingual practices in the classroom, which impact on the students' learning experience. Key among these is the use of the multilingual glossary that has relevant terms in three languages – English, isiXhosa and Afrikaans. The respondents were asked how useful/helpful the multilingual glossary was in helping them understand important terminology. Some of the students reported that they used the glossary and that it was helpful. Some also mentioned that they did not know about the glossary until they were given a task to complete that required them to use the multilingual glossary as expressed by them below:

> Student 1: Because I was able to understand each word definition in both English and isiXhosa. That helped for better understanding.
> Student 2: I have come to understand some words I thought I understood in English. But the glossary explained them in a way [that] I could thoroughly understand, in my own language.
> Student 3: I managed to have a better understanding of other terms as they were expressed or defined in Xhosa.
> Student 4: I never knew about the glossary until our last assignment. It should be included and offered to us in our study guides.
> Student 5: I was able to understand terms which I did not understand before. I read the multilingual glossary because the terms are explained correctly in my home language.
> Student 6: It allowed exposure to the generally accepted explanation of terminology of the content in various languages. It allowed for an analogy of the definition in both English and native languages.
> Student 7: They were very useful because I learned some new words and also definitions. The words that I thought I knew their definitions, I was wrong. So the multilingual glossary helped me understand thoroughly even in my own language.
> Student 8: Useful in the manner that English sometimes has ambiguous, bombastic words. So with the help of an African language, it was easy to understand because I was able to relate it to something I was familiar with.

The respondents were asked how they came to use the multilingual glossary and what made them use it. A majority of the students said their communication lecturer asked them to use the multilingual glossary while some said the Immunology lecturer encouraged them to use it. Some said,

> Student 1: I was given a task to complete that required me to use the glossary.
> Student 2: I decided to use the glossary on my own.

The general view from most of the respondents is that the multilingual glossary could be improved. The respondents had this to say:

> Student 1: The glossary should be developed as a software with a search engine, whereby users can search the terms or any word across all the faculties.

Student 2: A survey of the top 3 majority languages spoken in the Varsity should be conducted before its construction, as well as provision of the pronunciation.
Student 3: Add more languages as not all of us are Xhosa and Afrikaans speaking.
Student 4: Addition of more words in a particular subject, e.g. Biotechnology
Student 5: For me, it was very helpful, but it can be improved by breaking down and pointing out some examples to make it crystal clear for others to understand.
Student 6: More words could be added especially from the Immunology module.
Student 7: Since I was only exposed to the Biotechnology multilingual glossary, it uses three languages: English, Xhosa and Afrikaans. I think it would be best if it would international languages too like French because we also have international students. Hence, it would be helpful to them as well.

The respondents strongly believe that a multilingual teaching and learning environment is very important to them.

Social media used in communication skills course

It emerged strongly that social media was used to support teaching and to communicate with the students. The social media commonly used were Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp. Others that were used were: Twitter, YouTube, Blackboard, Email, Google and Photo story.

When asked how they felt about the use of social media in teaching and learning, it came out strongly that the respondents are more comfortable communicating with the lecturer by social media (WhatsApp) than through formal modes of communication e.g. email. They believe that the use of social media allows for easy communication between lecturer and students. The following responses appear to support what they said:

Student 1: A common calendar updated by the lecturers themselves would be better e.g. Blackboard calendar.
Student 2: During the student protest WhatsApp was the easy way to connect with everyone. Students lack internet access for Black Board and Email.
Student 3: I was able to go back to the information written on social media when I was doing my assignment.
Student 4: It is affordable and almost everyone has access to it.
Student 5: Students can ask something they don't understand through WhatsApp.
Student 6: Students have the ability to interact with lecturers in an informal, less stressful manner.

Some respondents reported on challenges like:

Student 1: Social media is not really reliable. If there's no network, [then] that would leave a wide communication gap.
Student 2: Some people do not have enough data and WhatsApp is fairly affordable as a message is charged at a small rate.

They said that the use of social media allows for close collaboration among students. These are some of their responses:

Student 1: Because some of us are introverts and shy in front of people, it is easy on social media.
Student 2: Communicating via email is boring and the messages are sometimes not

received early. WhatsApp is much better with instant texts.
Student 3: Fellow students are able to help each other through social media.
Student 4: For the communication science class, we had a WhatsApp group. It was a mix of first years and second year ECP. We started communication there.
Student 5: It allows more bonding among students, because in the WhatsApp group, we as students state things that we are not happy about and inform the class rep, rather than fight in class with the lecturer. So it creates more and better understanding and a healthy relationship.
Student 6: Students who would never speak would come into contact on WhatsApp and bond.

They also said that the use of social media ensured that guidance on projects could continue when classes were disrupted (e.g. by protest action) and ensured that work that was not completed in class could be completed as can be seen in the following responses:

Student 1: During the time of disruption and disturbances, social media was the medium of communication for updates.
Student 2: Especially during the strike/protest that took place. Work and assessments were done and completed.
Student 3: Instead of coming in and risking our lives. Yes.
Student 4: This came in handy. Very convenient.
Student 5: Whenever there is a shutdown on campus, the lecturer could still communicate through WhatsApp messages.
Student 6: We were given some explanations of work we didn't understand so that we can continue with our work.

More than half of the respondents strongly agree that, the use of social media improved the quality of teaching and learning, and they have these to say:

Student 1: Announcements are broadcasted through social media, and it is not time-consuming.
Student 2: I cannot say this was helping in terms of teaching, but it was helpful in terms of communicating.
Student 3: The use of social media was quite helpful to engage with the lecturer, should there be no chance to do so in class.

The use of digital technology (e.g. digital storytelling) for teaching, learning and assessment

The respondents reported that digital technology like digital story telling was used for teaching, learning and assessment. More than half of the students agree that digital storytelling assessment is better than traditional modes of assessment but quite a few of them remained neutral. They pointed out that:

Student 1: Because talking in public is a bit too much. In the digital story, no one sees who is talking.
Student 2: Because we do it in our most comfort zones.
Student 3: I strongly agree because when you are recording, you are at your private space, you're more relaxed and the presenting becomes better.
Student 4: It is fun and a different way of learning but requires a lot of work and technical capabilities.
Student 5: Not all students can perform satisfactorily under pressure, but can through

digital assessments.
Student 6: Traditional modes of assessment require a lot of time and work.

These findings highlighted the fact that digital storytelling ensures better student engagement and deeper learning. Again, some chose to remain neutral. They said:

Student 1: Because it's done in multi languages.
Student 2: Here, it is where students' talents are revealed.
Student 3: More research is needed on a topic which ensures a better understanding.
Student 4: Students were interested in what other students were able to do.
Student 5: The questionnaires we conducted improved our knowledge about malaria, and also traditional medicine.
Student 6: Students cannot properly interact with the creators of the digital story to answer queries.

Some of the respondents expressed some of the difficulties they encountered with digital storytelling. They highlighted the following points:

Student 1: But a little problem I had with my laptop was with the speakers.
Student 2: Couldn't balance the recording and music firstly because I didn't know how to use the app.
Student 3: I could not download the photo story app, since I do not have internet access and the university was shut down.
Student 4: I struggled a bit in combining everything into a story.
Student 5: The process was a bit confusing as I didn't know how to do it the application was in another language (making it difficult).
Student 6: Getting information from the lecture is better than getting it from technological apps.

Collaborative teaching between communication skills and content lecturers

The Communication Skills lecturer and the content lecturer collaborated with each other to offer the Communication Skills subject. The respondents were asked how they feel about it. The general view of most of the students who participated in this study regarding the collaboration between the Communication lecturer and the Immunology lecturer was that it ensured there was content language integration. The students commented on the fact that, "the material (article) used to teach Communication Skills was taken from the content subject - Immunology." They noted that aspects of Immunology were included in the teaching of Communication Skills. The respondents made the following comments:

Student1: [It is] interesting. Much more information was learned.
Student 2: Being taught to communicate well helps a lot on the content lecture assessments as it is difficult to answer a question without having a full understanding.
Student 3: It helped in improving and better reading of articles. And how to understand words I do not know. It also helped in understanding the chapter on Malaria.
Student 4: It is a good thing as it has enabled me to write good practical reports. I just wish communications formed part of Analytical Chemistry instead. AC is a harder subject than Immunology and we could use a boost in [our] marks.
Student 5: The communication module as well as Dr [... the lecturer's name] help allowed us to understand more about technology. It allowed us to be aware of sources

like the multilingual glossary, which is a very good and effective source that many of us were not even aware of
Student 6: There was more understanding of the immunology subject.
Student 7: We had an understanding of malaria on both the Immunology and Communication [modules].
Student 8: Malaria study was part of the content studied.

The respondents strongly agreed that in the collaboration between the Communication Skills lecturer and the Immunology lecturer, the communication subject acquired more relevancy because it used content from the discipline they were studying. They went further to say that,

Student 1: It allowed us to apply communication skills whilst using content we have worked with.
Student 2: This makes us understand some concepts more and better.

Some of the respondents pointed out that the assessment of Communication covered aspects of Immunology, and aspects of Communication were covered and assessed in the Immunology subject, indicating close and cooperative alignment between the learning outcomes of the Communication Skills and Immunology components of the subject.

Discussion

The findings revealed that the teaching strategies and approaches adopted in the Communication Skills course in the Biotechnology Programme in the Faculty of Applied Sciences at CPUT contributed to moving academic literacy from the periphery to the mainstream of the academic project and this we believe is quite valuable for the learning experience of students. In the present study, the lecturers did this by: 1) attempting to decolonise the language and academic literacies curriculum; 2) collaboratively teaching Discipline content, academic literacy, and communication (content-language integration); and 3) through using blended learning, computer assistive tools and social media.

The students who participated in the study spoke various home languages. They explained that many of them are bilingual, a view also highlighted by Nguyen (2017), and some are plurilingual. While students acknowledged the value of using home languages as languages of learning and teaching, they also recognise that this can be challenging. They hold the perspective that for effective communication to take place among the students, it must be in a language that they commonly understand and speak, and, in most cases, this is English which is also the primary LoLT at CPUT. Karakas (2017) had voiced his support for the views of Botha (2013) and Sert (2008) who emphasized that using English as the medium of instruction other than the students' own language is instrumental, for example in career development, boosting English skills and intrinsic values like socialising via English, reading in another language. In the course of decolonising the language and academic literacies curriculum, the language of instruction as well as the language used by the lecturers was considered. It emerged that the language of instruction that the lecturers used affected the respondents' learning experience. This is because some of them are not very fluent in English, as it was not their home language. It was revealed that many of them were taught in their first language, IsiXhosa at their primary and secondary schools. This changed at the tertiary level, where all the courses are taught in English, resulting in most of the students struggling to understand and communicate effectively. As a result, we designed the Communication Skills course to include instructions from the digital story and other assignments. This enabled the students to use other languages such as isiXhosa and Afrikaans in the digital story, promoting multilingual practices

in the classroom. This resonates with the views of Heleta (2016), who contends that the decolonising of the language curriculum makes the teaching and learning environment very conducive for supporting the students. In addition to the use of multiple languages in the digital story, translanguaging was used as an approach, by providing planned and systematic use of the home language of learners with the language of the classroom, in order to foster learning and teaching. This concurs with the views of Csillik & Golubeva (2020), who state that different languages are used interchangeably, in order to overcome language constraints, to deliver verbal utterances or written statements effectively, and to ultimately achieve successful communication. Translanguaging was used as a pedagogic tool to enhance teaching and learning. The students felt more comfortable and relaxed to use home languages other than English among themselves for group discussions in class.

We believe that the findings of this study are well supported by all three policies – the CPUT Language Policy (CPUT, 2019), the Language Policy for Higher Education (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2017) and the Western Cape Language Policy (2001). These policies support the decolonising of the language used in teaching and learning thereby promoting the practice of translanguaging. It is widely acknowledged by the participants that a multilingual teaching and learning environment is very important to them. The lecturers' included the use of multilingual glossaries, used languages other than English to complete projects – particularly the digital storytelling project, code adopted switching and translanguaging. All these interventions helped the students in the studying of the Communication Skills course.

It also emerged from the findings that collaboration between the language lecturers and the content lecturers have enhanced their learning of the subject. They highlighted the fact that it made studying the course easier and it helped them in writing their reports. These findings corroborate with those of Šulistová (2015) who maintains that content language integrated learning is advantageous in that it enhances the critical thinking of students, it is significant that the learning process is based on real life situations that raise intercultural awareness of students and teachers, breaks prejudices, and facilitates the acquisition of Communicative Skills (Šulistová, 2015).

The findings also resonate with those of Mason (2008) cited in Alabdulkareem (2015, p. 214), who suggests that "using social media in the classroom allows the teacher not only to incorporate multimedia and multimodal texts but also to share these quickly and easily, providing a collaborative learning environment where students can communicate at any time". The lecturers used Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp: Twitter, YouTube, Blackboard, Email, Google and Photo story. It was widely acknowledged by the respondents that social media improved the quality of teaching and learning. The participants were able to communicate with the lecturers and their fellow students freely using social media. Although some of them highlighted some of the difficulties, they encountered like not having enough data or staying in remote areas, the majority of the participants still felt that using social media helped them to communicate among themselves especially during times of disruption and breakdown of face-to-face classes.

Conclusion

It became obvious that the Communication Skills course in the Biotechnology Programme in the Faculty of Applied Sciences, at CPUT was in some cases seen as occupying a peripheral place in the curriculum. Hence, the Communication Skills and content (Immunology) lecturers collaborated to package and offered the course in innovative ways. This was done by attempting to decolonise the language and academic literacy curriculum, and collaborative teaching using various approaches that included multilingual practices, the use of social media

and digital storytelling. The teaching and learning of Communication Skills was enhanced as evidenced by student reflections. Our paper then recommends that more innovative approaches should be explored in the teaching and learning of communication skills and literacy courses. These approaches are best guided by student feedback, allowing students the agency to recommend modes of instruction and forms of engagement that may best suit their context. Additionally, placing value on the cultural and linguistic capital that the students bring to the classroom is a valuable means of enhancing engagement and deepening understanding of the need for effective communication skills, both in the language of the discipline and in general discourse. The teaching of communication skills goes beyond the teaching of merely the language of the discipline, but through creative ways, such as social media, digital stories, and other means of drawing on student voices and experiences, communication becomes a richer part of the overall student learning experience. It is through this pedagogy that academic literacy knowledge can be co-created in the classroom, in a collaborative manner, connecting lecturers who bring disciplinary knowledge and those who bring literacy knowledge, all working together to more holistically meet the learning outcomes of undergraduate classes, and attributes of graduates.

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