The design of a postgraduate test of academic literacy: Accommodating student and supervisor perceptions

Gustav Butler

Unit for Academic Literacy, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0002, South Africa

e-mail: gustav.butler@up.ac.za

Abstract: As a consideration in the design of a test of academic literacy, the face validity of such a test is determined by its perceived suitability and usefulness in addressing the literacy requirements of specific academic contexts. This article focuses on one such a literacy context: that of postgraduate academic literacy at a university. In this context, supervisors of postgraduate students will probably expose their students to a postgraduate academic literacy test only if they perceive the testing instrument to be relevant to the needs of their students as well as to the requirements they have for academic literacy in their disciplines. Consequently, one has to take into consideration the academic literacy expectations of both students and supervisors in a process of test development. The article reports on the results of a survey that was conducted at the University of Pretoria that investigated the perceptions and expectations of both supervisors and students regarding academic literacy abilities and requirements for postgraduate study. It also highlights specifically the implications of the results of the survey for the design of a postgraduate test of academic literacy.

Introduction

A wealth of literature is available about students' difficulties to write successfully in a tertiary academic environment (cf. Bizzel, 1992; Cantor, 1993; Orr, 1995; Radloff, 1994; Zamel and Spack, 1998). One may, however, be tempted to believe that such difficulties are restricted to undergraduate students as a result of their assumed inexperience in this academic context, and that postgraduate students are mostly experienced, proficient writers in their specific disciplines. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Focusing on this issue at a specific university in South Africa, a recent study by Butler (2007) has highlighted the writing difficulties of a specific group of postgraduate students at the University of Pretoria (based on the textual analysis of a typical academic text these students produced). Although the latter stages of the research focused on the design of a writing intervention based on the needs of this group of postgraduate students, a campus wide survey was conducted initially in order to understand better what supervisor perceptions were in general about their postgraduate students' academic literacy abilities.

In part, this specific study was conceptualised as a result of a number of postgraduate supervisors at the University of Pretoria who confirmed that many postgraduate students still struggle with academic writing (and to a lesser extent, with reading academic texts in English). The Unit for Academic Literacy (UAL) has further been receiving a growing number of requests from academic members of staff concerning the reliable measurement of their postgraduate students' academic literacy abilities in English. Although we have been offering the use of our academic literacy test for first year students (the Test of Academic Literacy Levels [TALL]) for assessing the academic literacy levels of postgraduate students in selected cases, we decided that, given the availability of adequate resources, it was necessary to develop a test of academic literacy levels for postgraduate students specifically. Financial resources became available to us in the form of winning a competitive grant (from the SA – Finland Cooperative Agreement) to be utilised specifically in the development of such a test.

As TALL has already been established as a viable commercial enterprise (some 20000 first year students are tested annually at three different universities in South Africa), we argued that a postgraduate test may have similar value in the sense that it may be utilised initially at institutional level and eventually perhaps at a national and international level as well. Keeping in mind the considerable resources

that are invested in the development of such a test, making it available more widely may ensure the long-term viability thereof through a process of continuous refinement and improvement of several versions of the test. We further accepted that whereas an already established test (such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language [TOEFL]) would probably be used as a result of its reputed relevance in testing what it is supposed to test, a new test would have to earn its status over time as being a relevant measure of postgraduate academic literacy levels specifically, and in the specific context of tertiary education in the developing world.

Considering the potential use of such a new postgraduate academic literacy test, it is obvious that such a decision would be made by supervisors of postgraduate students. Surely, supervisors would only utilise such a test if they perceived it to identify what they experienced as prominent academic literacy difficulties of their students. An important consideration in the development of such a test is, therefore, what we could possibly learn from supervisors about their students' academic literacy problems. Taking into account what supervisors believe to be major difficulties for students has the potential in contributing positively towards the face validity of the test for supervisors. The argument is thus that the successful development of such a testing instrument for one's own institution and possibly for a wider audience as a potential commercial enterprise will depend to a large extent on its optimal face validity for its prospective users. The problem is, however, that although face validity is discussed in the literature as an important component of test design, it is typically something that is determined after a test has been in use for some time. The main question this paper will attempt to answer is whether we could learn anything useful about the potential face validity of TALPS from two surveys that were conducted on perceptions about academic literacy. The paper is therefore speculative in nature in the sense that it is an attempt to determine in advance how supervisors and postgraduate students may perceive such a test.

It is also important to note, however, that although one would wish to ensure as far as possible the optimal face validity of such a test, this article recognises that other crucial considerations in test design (such as its construct validity, content validity, reliability, utility, etc.) should not be compromised in the process. Messick (1988; 1989) advances a 'unitary' view of validity that includes multiple sources of evidence. Even though, on closer inspection, Messick privileges construct validity as

a kind of *primus inter pares*, this nonetheless implies that one should not rely exclusively on only one kind of validity in making design decisions about tests.

The concept of face validity

Davies, Brown, Elder, Hill, Lumley and McNamara (1999:59) define face validity as:

> The degree to which a test appears to measure the knowledge or abilities it claims to measure, as judged by an untrained observer (such as the candidate taking the test or the institution which plans to administer it).

According to McNamara (2000:133), face validity could be explained as the "… extent to which a test meets the expectations of those involved in its use …; the acceptability of a test to its stakeholders." Although face validity is often mooted as impressionistic in nature because of its emphasis on appearances, it may be one of the most important types of validity in the determination of whether a test is utilised by its intended users. Davies *et al*. (1999:59) argue that "… failure to take issues of face validity into account may jeopardize the public credibility of a test … and that the notion of test appeal is a practical consideration which test designers cannot afford to overlook." In our context, I wish to argue that because the new postgraduate test is aimed at a primarily non-expert audience (in the sense of people not being language/literacy testing experts *per se*), face validity becomes of central importance in whether the test will be used or not. In short, such a test should, therefore, test what supervisors see as relevant regarding academic literacy.

From another perspective, a postgraduate academic literacy test should also be viewed as relevant by those students who write the test in order to create an awareness of their own academic literacy difficulties. According to Bachman and Palmer (1996:24), a further consequence of students' perceived relevance of a test is that it may promote a positive affective response to the test that may help test takers perform at their best. Furthermore, the success of a subsequent academic literacy intervention will, in part, depend on whether students see their test scores as a true reflection of their academic literacy abilities and whether they see an intervention as addressing specifically those problem areas accentuated by the test. A related concept that may be useful in a discussion of face validity is content validity. For a test to have content validity, the test items should contain key indicators of the domain being tested (McNamara, 2000). In this case, the domain being tested is postgraduate academic literacy – the test should therefore contain key elements of what we believe

constitutes academic literacy on a postgraduate level. If one relates content validity to the face validity of the test, an important consideration will be whether the question types are transparent to such an extent that, when evaluating its potential usefulness, postgraduate supervisors will be able to recognise the relevance of what is being tested. Another quality that is used in relation to the more traditional content validity is what Bachman and Palmer (1996) refer to as the "authenticity" of tests. For them, this quality forms part of a group of characteristics (viz. reliability, construct validity, authenticity, interactiveness, impact and practicality) that make up the "usefulness of a test". According to them, the authenticity of a test refers to "the degree of correspondence of the characteristics of a given language test task to those of a TLU [target language use] task". In other words, test authenticity relates to how closely test items mirror the target language use domain claimed to be assessed by the test. Regarding the relationship between authenticity and face validity, one may assume that the closer the test is to testing the target language use domain, the stronger face validity it should have for supervisors and their postgraduate students.

The preceding discussion clearly illustrates the reciprocal relationship between supervisor and student expectations of such a test and expert knowledge about the nature of academic literacy on a postgraduate level. Although supervisors in disciplines other than language may not be expert judges with regard to the construction of academic literacy tests, their experience in noticing their students' academic literacy difficulties may be particularly valuable in aligning such a test with the expectations of prospective users.

The Test of Academic Literacy for Postgraduate Students (TALPS)

In the development of TALPS, we have relied on the well-established construct of our first year test (TALL). The blueprint for the test construct is based on Weideman's (2003b:xi) definition of functional academic literacy. In this definition, a student in tertiary education should be able to:

- understand a range of academic vocabulary in context;
- interpret the use of metaphor and idiom in academic usage, and perceive connotation, word play and ambiguity;
- understand relations between different parts of a text, via introductions to conclusions, and know how to use language that serves to make the different parts of a text hang together;

- interpret different kinds of text type (genre), and have a sensitivity for the meaning they convey, as well as the audience they are aimed at;

- interpret, use and produce information presented in graphic or visual format;

- distinguish between essential and non-essential information, fact and opinion, propositions and arguments, cause and effect, and classify, categorise and handle data that make comparisons;

- see sequence and order, and do simple numerical estimations and computations that are relevant to academic information, that allow comparisons to be made, and can be applied for the purposes of an argument;

- know what counts as evidence for an argument, extrapolate from information by making inferences, and apply the information or its implications to other cases than the one at hand;

- understand the communicative function of various ways of expression in academic language (such as defining, providing examples, arguing); and

- make meaning (e.g. of an academic text) beyond the level of the sentence.

This definition is substantially similar to the operational definition of academic literacy that was employed in the two surveys in my doctorate to probe the perceptions of supervisors and postgraduate students about academic literacy. The definition is functional to the extent that it defines academic literacy as an ability that is directly related to what students can practically do with academic texts in both receptive and productive modes. In the development of TALPS we have also considered the importance of testing students' productive writing ability specifically (in the production of an authentic academic text), as well as their editing ability. Although less emphasis is placed on writing in TALL (with specific reference to the writing of longer academic texts) because of practical constraints in administering the test, all the abilities contained in the definition above are necessary preconditions for successful academic writing.

With regard to the format and the specific question or task types included in TALPS, we have used all the question types in TALL (Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004b; Weideman, 2006a), but added the two question types referred to above (viz. a section on writing and another on editing).

Section 1 of TALPS is a scrambled text in which sentences in a paragraph have been scrambled, and students have to rearrange the sentences so that the paragraph forms a cohesive whole. It therefore tests not only students' ability in recognising text relations, drawing on their interpretative abilities regarding the

context, but also their ability to recognise lexical clues contained in the sentences. Put differently: it assesses students' command of various grammatical features of the text.

In **Section 2**, students' knowledge of general academic vocabulary is assessed. The context created for this section is specifically that of the postgraduate academic environment, and the words tested are a selection of items from the different levels of the Coxhead academic word list (Coxhead, 2000).

Section 3 deals with visual and graphic literacy. Students are asked to interpret graphic information augmented by a short text discussion. This section mainly involves simple numerical computations and making inferences based on such calculations.

The **fourth section** emphasises the importance of students being able to recognise different written text types. Students are requested to match two groups of sentences with regard to similarity in text type.

Section 5 includes a longer text that students have to read and subsequently answer comprehension type questions on the content of the text. Questions focus on students' abilities to classify and compare information, make inferences, recognise metaphorical language, recognise text relations and distinguish between essential and non-essential information.

Section 6 of the test assesses a number of academic literacy abilities. This question on grammar and text relations firstly provides students with a text they have to read where specific words have been omitted. Students then have to choose between 4 options regarding the place where these words have been left out in the sentences. The second part of the question requires that students, having been provided with the specific place where a word has been left out, choose between 4 options as to what is the correct word. The third part combines the formats of the first two in the sense that students are required to integrate the two tasks and do both simultaneously. They therefore have to find both the position where a word has been left out and the most suitable word that would fit that position. This section of the test assesses students' functional knowledge of sentence construction, word order, vocabulary, punctuation and at times communicative function (cf. Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004b), with the main focus on the former, i.e. on grammatical or structural features of the language.

In **Section 7**, students' grammatical knowledge of English is assessed in the sense that they have to edit a short paragraph in which a number of typical language errors occur.

The last section of the test (**Section 8**) provides students with the opportunity to produce a written academic text. Similar to TALL, the reading texts selected for use in TALPS are topical in the sense that they all relate to the same topic. Students are then required to make use of any information in the test on the topic and write an argumentative text of approximately 300 words in which they present a structured argument. The argument focuses on the context of Africa. They also need to ensure that they give due recognition to the sources used in the test that they choose to include in their argument (they have to include a short list of at least 2 sources at the end of their texts). They further have to ensure that the text adheres to generally accepted academic writing conventions (such as formality of register, logical structure, acknowledging sources, etc.).

Several academic members of staff at the UAL were involved in writing items for the test, based on the item types discussed above. We initially started with a draft test that contained 170 multiple-choice items. This number was reduced to 76 in the final draft of the test. Test items were discarded based on the analysis of items in terms of discrimination and facility values, in two piloting phases that were conducted on two draft versions of the test.

Supervisor perceptions of their students' academic literacy abilities

This part of the paper provides a summary of supervisor perspectives on the postgraduate writing environment and discusses their perceptions on how this context is affected by academic literacy issues. As indicated above, I wish to argue that the degree of alignment of our postgraduate test (TALPS) with supervisor perceptions and requirements would impact on its face validity. It is important to note, however, that one of the trade-offs in the development of a test such as TALPS is how much weight could possibly be awarded to 'non-expert' perceptions in the face of expert knowledge about academic literacy as well as the development of language tests.

In the original doctoral study by Butler (2007), a campus wide supervisor survey was done in order to gain a general impression of their perceptions, expectations and requirements regarding the academic literacy and writing levels of their postgraduate students. This study provides a description of the context in which

postgraduate academic writing takes place (a context in which the postgraduate student as writer of academic texts plays a central part) from the point of view of supervisors at the University of Pretoria.

The data were collected through the distribution of a lengthy questionnaire to all supervisors on campus. In the construction of the questionnaire, I focused on the following issues:

- the **level of experience** of postgraduate supervisors;
- supervisor **awareness** about the **language preference and use** of their postgraduate students;
- the **formal language background** of supervisors;
- supervisor **awareness** about the **academic literacy levels** of their postgraduate students;
- supervisor **awareness** about the specific **literacy and writing difficulties** of postgraduate students;
- the **importance** that supervisors award to **writing regarded as a process**;
- the **importance** that supervisors assign to **language usage** in the writing of students;
- what **strategies** supervisors use to ensure **final language correctness** of written texts;
- specific **requirements** of supervisors with regard to **academic writing issues** (e.g. referencing systems; use of evidence; other stylistic requirements); and
- the **willingness** on the part of postgraduate supervisors to **accept support from the UAL on writing matters** (towards a possible closer working relationship between the UAL and specific faculties/departments).

I will now present the main findings of the survey, highlighting those issues that may ultimately have bearing on firstly, requesting the use of TALPS, but also then on the issues supervisors may possibly take into account when judging the relevance of the test for their students:

[1]   Although the majority of supervisors have not been exposed to formal tertiary language training, most supervisors **feel confident in their own language ability to ensure the final correctness of student writing**. The majority of supervisors also make use of additional resources (such as colleagues) to

ensure such correctness. Professional language editing is, however, a formal requirement only for approximately 50% of respondents.

[2]   Supervisors appear to be aware of the general language status of their postgraduate students in the sense that additional language users of English outnumber mother tongue Afrikaans and English users respectively at the university. A large number of comments by respondents were also directed at the **literacy problems of additional language users specifically**.

[3]   Supervisors generally believe that **an adequate level of academic literacy is crucial in the successful completion of postgraduate studies**.

[4]   A large majority of respondents believe that their **postgraduate students' academic literacy levels range from average to poor**.

[5]   Almost all respondents feel that **students should already be academically literate when they are admitted to postgraduate studies**.

[6]   There is general agreement that **measures and strategies to select academically literate students are not always successful**. Less than 50% of these supervisors indicate that the academic literacy of their postgraduate students is formally assessed.

[7]   Supervisors indicate that they believe that **writing specifically is the most important literacy difficulty for students**.

[8]   Supervisors believe that their **students experience literacy problems over a wide spectrum of functional literacy abilities**, but more notably in the areas of writing in an academic style and making use of academic genres, as well as making use of academic language in the construction of arguments.

[9]   Supervisors point out that writing ability is crucial in the successful completion of postgraduate studies. They do, however, generally **rate their additional language students as being average to poor regarding their academic writing ability specifically**.

[10]   All supervisors confirm that **making use of suitable evidence is crucial in the construction of an academically sound argument**. What counts as suitable evidence can differ across disciplines but generally, empirical evidence and evidence from the literature are acceptable.

[11]   Regarding a specific referencing system, the majority of supervisors indicate **the use of the Harvard method**.

[12]   Supervisors are generally prepared **to accept support from the UAL** in the development of their students' writing ability. The majority of supervisors also indicate that they share this responsibility with language and writing experts.

Possible alignment with TALPS

Finding [1] indicates that supervisors are well aware of the importance of language correctness in what their students write. In both the questionnaire as well as the interviews held with supervisors, their frustration in having to cope with student writing riddled with language errors was evident. It stands to reason that one has to take the language knowledge of students into account in the development of such a test. This specific issue is addressed in the test in Section 7, 'Text editing', which focuses on students' ability to see typical grammatical mistakes in an academic text.

Findings [2] to [6] as well as [12] emphasise the fact that supervisors are suitably aware of the central role of academic literacy in the completion of postgraduate degrees. These findings further show a general concern with the academic literacy levels of postgraduate students, but also more particularly those of students who use English as an additional language. The findings indicate that supervisors in general see academic literacy levels of students as a potential risk, which creates a context in which there is a high probability that they would make use of a literacy test that they believe test relevant literacy issues. Finding [12] specifically indicates that supervisors will accept support from the UAL in addressing the literacy difficulties their students experience. In such a context it should not be too difficult to successfully promote the use of a postgraduate literacy test (it has been indicated in the interviews with the supervisors of the specific target group that they would most definitely make use of such a test should it become available), on condition that supervisors see its relevance.

Findings [7] and [9] highlight the fact that supervisors believe their students to experience the most serious problems with academic writing. Having been given a choice between different literacy abilities in the questionnaire, a large majority of supervisors selected writing as the most prominent problem. Some supervisors did, however, indicate that reading and interpreting academic texts is a problem as well. This is perhaps the most telling finding to consider regarding the face validity of the test – if it does not contain a section on writing, supervisors will probably see this as a crucial shortcoming of such a test.

The section of the questionnaire that informed Finding [8] is based on the definition of academic literacy referred to under 3 above. Supervisors were asked to rate their students' literacy ability with regard to the functional literacy abilities contained in the definition. Almost without exception, they rated their students' ability as being average to low on all the functional abilities. Some supervisors did point out, however, that it was difficult for them to generalise about these abilities, and that mother tongue users of English generally rated high on such abilities. The implication for the face validity of the test is that although supervisors were sensitised about these functional literacy issues by their inclusion in the questionnaire, these are probably also some of the issues that they would like to see included in a postgraduate test. As discussed under 3 above, TALPS has been developed using the same construct as TALL, both based on our functional definition of academic literacy.

Supervisors further agreed that academic argumentation is the most important type of text that postgraduate students should be able to interpret as well as produce. They further emphasised the importance of making use of relevant evidence in academic argumentation, and that specific referencing systems should be used in a consistent way by their students to give due recognition to the sources they use [Findings 10 and 11]. Concerning its possible effect on the face validity of the test, the texts used in the test have been supplied with all the necessary referencing details so that when students write the argumentative academic text at the end of the test, they could make proper reference to such sources, both as part of their texts and also in the short list of references they should provide at the end. Argumentation and the cognitive processes associated with it are tested especially in sections 1, 3, 5 and 8.

Student perceptions of their academic literacy abilities

Although the student survey was conducted on a relatively small number of students, it still gives one a good idea of student perceptions about their own academic literacy abilities and the importance of academic literacy for their studies. It may therefore be helpful to also relate the main findings of the student survey to the possible face validity of the test for students. This may further have important implications for how 'at risk' students approach a possible intervention aimed at improving their academic writing ability. In other words, if students find the test to be a true reflection of their academic literacy abilities, it may be easier for them to accept that they could be supported to develop their level of academic literacy. A potentially important

difference between supervisor and student perceptions about the relevance of the test is the level of engagement with it. Where supervisors may only look at the test superficially in trying to judge its relevance, students will engage with the literacy issues included in the test on a totally different level, that of actually completing the test.

Similar to the supervisor questionnaire, the student questionnaire was designed with a number of pertinent issues in mind. Firstly, in order to collect general background information, relevant **institutional and professional issues** had to be addressed. Section 2 of the questionnaire focuses on students' **language background**.

The third section addresses student **perceptions** about the **literacy demands** of their courses, as well as their perceptions about their own level of **academic literacy**. In other words, what awareness do they have, for example, about academic discourse, discipline-specific language, the importance of academic language and types of writing tasks? The following section deals with students' personal **writing needs**. It focuses mainly on difficulties that they experience with academic writing, as well as their perceptions on whether writing support could be beneficial to them.

Whereas the first four sections of the questionnaire are general in nature with regard to level of study (the questionnaire was designed to collect information from students at any level of study), the final section focuses on postgraduate students specifically. This section addresses issues such as where these students obtained their previous degrees, in which language(s) they have studied until now, whether they have previously attended any extra, developmental type of language/literacy courses, as well as what specific strategies/activities they engage in when doing academic writing. Furthermore, it attempts to determine their general perception on the feedback they received on their writing in past writing encounters with lecturers/supervisors. It also determines their levels of awareness about the importance of issues such as the revision and editing of their writing, as well as their perceptions of their own abilities to use these strategies productively.

The following issues represent the main findings of the student survey:

[1]   The study group is extremely diverse with regard to students' nationalities as well as native language use (all students are additional language users of English).

[2]   Some students (20%) have never received any formal education in English.

[3]   A large group of students (30% for their first degree and 44% for honours) did not use English as a language of learning for their previous degrees.

[4]   In a self-assessment of their academic literacy levels, students generally rate themselves high on most functional literacy abilities.

[5]   Respondents give priority to the importance of the quality of content and argument in the production of quality written texts over issues such as correctness of language and register and style.

[6]   All respondents believe that it is possible to improve one's academic writing and the majority consider the best strategy for such development to be exposure to a process of writing as well as receiving the input of a language editor.

[7]   The majority of respondents believe that academic language is a distinct way of using language towards a specific purpose in a tertiary context.

[8]   Students appear to be acutely aware of the important role of quality writing in the unambiguous communication of their ideas to supervisors. They also appear to have a distinct sense of the importance of audience in the writing transaction, indicating that muddled writing could lead to miscommunication and, as a result, more time and effort will be required from supervisors.

[9]   Students' diverse reactions on specific problematic issues in the writing process indicate that, for this group, equal exposure to all steps in such a process would probably be the most productive option.

[10]   A large majority of respondents believe that they would benefit greatly by attending a writing support course.

[11]   It appears as if respondents generally feel positive about the possible benefits of language-type support courses (a number of students indicate previous involvement in such courses).

[12]   Most of the respondents already see the value in producing more than one draft of a written text. They do, however, have diverse opinions about the logical progression of different steps in a writing process.

[13]   Respondents feel that they have benefited considerably from both feedback on the quality of their ideas (content) as well as their language use in written texts they have produced in the past.

[14]   The majority of respondents believe that it is their own responsibility to ensure the language correctness of their written texts. Most do, however, believe that the supervisor also has some responsibility regarding this issue.

[15]   A considerable percentage of the respondents believe that they are capable of editing their own written texts for language correctness.

Possible alignment with TALPS

Regarding findings [1] to [3], it is to be expected that some students may experience academic literacy difficulties in English. While all students are additional language users of English, some students have never used English as a language of learning before. Since English is one of the languages of learning at the UP, it may therefore not be unexpected for students if they are required to write an English academic literacy test.

Regarding the face validity of the test, Finding [4] is noteworthy with regard to the dissonance that exists between supervisor perceptions and those of students. Whereas supervisors generally perceive their additional language students to experience considerable difficulty with their academic literacy ability in English, the students generally rated themselves high on most of the functional literacy abilities (again the questions were based on the definition of academic literacy discussed in Section 3) included in the questionnaire. The face validity of the test would therefore be crucial in this context since students do not perceive themselves to have any difficulty. If students do not see the test as being a true measurement of their academic literacy abilities, they would probably resent any type of intervention designed to improve such ability.

A considerable part of the questionnaire focused on specific issues in academic writing. Summarily, Findings [5] to [9] indicate that students see the central importance of their own writing in being successful with their studies. As mentioned in the previous section, the writing section in TALPS should create a sense of relevance for students with the regard to the primacy they assign to this aspect.

The positive implication of Findings [10] to [13] is that students generally feel positive towards the possible improvement of their writing ability. If they therefore see the test as assessing relevant academic literacy issues and they are identified as having some degree of risk regarding such issues, they should be relatively well

motivated to engage with an intervention at a level where they could make real progress towards developing their academic literacy.

Regarding Findings [14] and [15], students generally acknowledge the importance of correctness in writing, but believe that they could edit their own texts for language correctness. The analysis of the text they produced for the doctoral research proved differently. The extent of the language errors made by the students in this group indicates that their knowledge of English is wholly inadequate to enable them to self-correct their own texts. The important issue is, however, that students do see correctness as an important part of writing ability, and should see the relevance of the section on editing that is included in TALPS.

It may further be important to mention that one of the aims of a current doctoral study at the UAL is to investigate student perceptions about, amongst others, the relevance of TALPS. This study should provide us with concrete evidence as to how students actually experience the test – and consequently the real face validity that is assigned to it.

Conclusion

This article shows that, depending on the availability of the type of information discussed above, it is possible to some degree to 'speculate responsibly' about the potential face validity of a new test in meeting the expectations of prospective users. The alignment of such a test with the academic literacy problems identified by supervisors should also ensure to some extent that the test portrays a sense of relevance for potential users further afield. In addition, one would obviously attempt to assess continuously how users of the test perceive its relevance, and could alter the test accordingly.

References

Bachman LF & Palmer AS. 1996. *Language testing in practice: Designing and developing useful language tests.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bizzell P. 1992. *Academic discourse and critical consciousness*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Butler HG. 2007. *A framework for course design in academic writing for tertiary education.* Pretoria: University of Pretoria. Unpublished PhD thesis.

Cantor JA. 1993. *Academic writing.* Westport: Praeger.

Coxhead A. 2000. A new academic word list. *TESOL Quarterly*, **34**(2):213-238.

Davies A, Brown A, Elder C, Hill K, Lumley T & McNamara T. 1999. *Studies in language testing: Dictionary of language testing.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

McNamara T. 2000. *Language testing.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Messick S. 1988. The once and future uses of validity: assessing the meaning and consequences of measurement. In: Wainer H & Braun HI (Eds.) *Test validity*. Hillside NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, pp 33-45.

Messick S. 1989**.** Validity. In: Linn RL (Ed.) *Educational measurement*. New York: Macmillan, pp. 13-103.

Orr MH. 1995. Teaching writing at university: An academic literacy programme. *South African Journal of Higher Education,* **9**(2):189-197.

Radloff A. 1994. *Writing to learn, learning to write: helping academic staff to support student writing in their discipline.* Workshop presented at the Thirteenth International Seminar on Staff and Educational Development, Cape Town (15-18 June 1994).

Van Dyk TJ & Weideman AJ. 2004. Finding the right measure: From blueprint to specification to item type. *Journal for Language Teaching*, **38**(1):15-24.

Weideman AJ. 2003. *Academic literacy: Prepare to learn.* Pretoria: Van Schaik.

Weideman AJ. 2006. Assessing academic literacy in a task-based approach. *Language Matters*, **37**(1).

Zamel VZ & Spack R. 1998. *Negotiating academic literacies: Teaching and learning across languages and cultures.* New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.