


Chapter 7

Increasing Retention of Linguistically– Disadvantaged College Students in South Africa

Denise Carpenter Mussman

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9186-7990>
University of Missouri, St. Louis, USA

Venicia F. McGhie

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0581-3089>
University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses a two-week pre-semester course in English academic language skills to improve learning outcomes of second and additional English language speaking students at a historically Black university in South Africa, a country that faces tremendous challenges with educational inequities. Prof. Venicia McGhie created and organized the program, and Dr. Denise C. Mussman taught the course content. This chapter reports on and discusses the challenges that cause many students to fail or dropout of higher education studies, the curriculum of the pilot course, assessment results, and written feedback from students on which lessons helped them most. The smaller class size, speaking activities, and explicit lessons on grammar and writing all contributed positively to the self-efficacy of the students.

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INTRODUCTION

South Africa is a multi-racial, multi-cultural country that has eleven official languages (Department of Basic Education, 2013; Republic of South Africa, 1996). Notwithstanding the eleven languages, the English language dominates the education, trade and economic spheres, as well as the digital age in South Africa and globally (Hurst & Mona, 2017; Pennycook, 1998; Xue & Zuo, 2013). “English is not only a language of wider communication in the modern world, it is far more than that – it is, in a singularly powerful sense, ‘the global language’ of commerce, trade, culture, and research in the contemporary world” (Lin & Martin, 2005, p. 116-117). English, however, is only the fourth most spoken language in South Africa. According to the 2011 South African Census, IsiZulu (one of the eleven official languages) is the most spoken language with 11.58 million speakers, followed by IsiXhosa (8.15 million) and Afrikaans (6.85 million). English is spoken by 4.89 million people, followed by Sepedi with 4.62 million, and Setswana with 4.07 million people (Statistics South Africa, 2012).

In the Western Cape Province, where the university pilot course for English language support took place, the three dominant languages are Afrikaans (spoken by 49.7% of the population), IsiXhosa (spoken by 24.7% of the population) and English (spoken by 20.2% of the population) (Western Cape Government, n.d.). As such, one might expect that the dominant languages would be advanced and adhered to in educating the learners in the province, but the opposite holds true. English (as the least spoken language in the province) is used as the language of communication and the medium of instruction in schools (from Grade 4 to Grade 12) and at public universities (Council on Higher Education, 2014; Department of Education, 2013). This means that the majority of learners acquires new knowledge and must learn the academic content of their different subjects in their second and or additional language, instead of their first language. Cummins (2000, 2002) explains that a minimum of five to seven years is needed for second and additional language learners to acquire the language proficiency needed in English to succeed academically at the tertiary level. As such, second and additional language-speaking students of English require language support at the college level.

This chapter discusses academic support that was provided through a two-week academic English language support pilot course during the July 2019 Winter break at one of the four public universities in the Western Cape Province in South Africa. Similar to many students at the university and elsewhere, these scholars face linguistic and academic challenges as well as feelings of personal inadequacies during the course of their respective study programs (Council on Higher Education, 2017; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2011; McGhie, 2012; Strydom & Mentz, 2010).

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