Academic and digital literacies in a Self-Access Center

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Abstract

The newly established Self-Access Learning Center of the Faculty of English Studies, aims to address the needs of tertiary level students for advanced English language proficiency and for the development of academic, professional and digital literacies. The paper briefly presents the aims of the Center and the ways it differs from other on-line writing centers and self-access learning centres which operate in various European universities. It then reports on two surveys which explore students' views on language needs and problems they face during the first semester of their studies as well as incoming students' knowledge of new technologies. It is expected that the findings of these surveys will provide useful insights in the design of the Center's activities.

An analysis of the findings is also attempted in the context of existing literacy models and an academic literacies approach is suggested which takes account of the conflicting and contested nature of language and allows for a deeper understanding of digital and academic discourse practices.

1. Introduction

The Faculty of English Studies, one of the nine Faculties of the School of Philosophy, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, has over 2000 students and a total of 31 Faculty members. It consists of two Departments, the Department of Language and Linguistics and the Department of Literature and Culture which offer an interdisciplinary programme of studies. The development of English proficiency for all students of the Faculty is considered of utmost importance by Faculty members since English is both the language of instruction for all courses offered by the Faculty and at the same time English itself constitutes the main object of study. It is thus considered essential that students, the future professionals in the field of English Studies in Greece, reach a high level of language competence and cultivate their linguistic awareness. During the first two years of their studies, all students attend an intensive language programme which offers a variety of opportunities to enhance their knowledge of English.

In addition to this programme, the establishment of the Self-Access Learning Center was considered an essential step in the overall language development programme offered by the Faculty mainly due to certain facts such as the big number of incoming students per year, the small number of teaching staff, the need to reinforce language instruction for a great number of students at least during the first two years of studies and, finally, the different linguistic weaknesses, with regard to both their extent and type, which individual students and groups of students face. Concerning language development, the Self-Access Learning Center aims:
   – to provide individualized instruction of the English language at an advanced level, within the framework of in-depth analysis of the language,
   – to reinforce instruction in language and other courses offered in the Faculty,
   – to encourage autonomous work and to prepare students to become independent learners, a prerequisite for continuous, life-long education in a learning society,
   – to promote continuous and self-evaluation by enhancing students' critical abilities and

reflective skills.

In addition, taking into account the opportunities offered today by Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) for independent learning and acknowledging the fact that today's students will live and develop professionally in a learning society in which they must also be equipped with technological literacy, the Self-Access Learning Center also aims:

- to familiarize students with ICT,
- to provide a physical space in which students will have access to Internet and computer use,
- to use the potential offered today by ICT in order to develop language materials for independent study,
- to provide opportunities for all students to develop ICT knowledge related to academic research, within the scope of promoting social inclusion thus eliminating disparities between different socioeconomic groups and disparities between women and men (given that women study at the Faculty at a percentage ranging approximately at 88-89% per year).

Moreover, concerning materials development, the Center aims in the future:

- to develop multimedia and on-line materials for the research and instruction of the English language at tertiary level,
- to create multimedia educational materials for the research and instruction of the subjects of the Undergraduate Programme of Studies,
- to encourage both Faculty members and students to use existing e-learning opportunities, such as e-class, the platform of asynchronous e-learning of the University of Athens.

The Center will therefore provide support materials of different kinds for the various courses offered by the Faculty, while at the same time it will develop independent materials for language and ICT development. In the fully equipped Center, students will have access to computer and Internet use and will also have the opportunity to enhance their ICT knowledge by attending web tutorials and other ICT seminars offered by the Center throughout the academic year. The aim of these seminars is to enable students become competent users of the new media in order to fulfil present course requirements and future professional needs. In fact, recent literature has suggested that it is rather effective to support the development of subject specific academic language skills and related ICT skills in a Language Center equipped with independent study tools (Wyburn, 2001).

Organised in order to serve the particular needs of the Faculty, the Center presents similarities and differences from both on-line writing centers and other self-access centers operating in European and US universities. On the one hand, the Center differs from on-line writing centers in that it does not only provide a web-side with on-line materials but it is also a place in which students may use a variety of language materials (magazines and newspapers, satellite TV, videos and DVDs, CD ROMs, books and specially prepared worksheets). The Center has also a computer lab function since it allows students to use its computers for their own work, e.g. type their coursework, research topics on the Internet, use on-line language materials prepared for them, etc. A further difference refers to educational materials. Instead of focusing only on writing development, as is the case with on-line writing centers, the Self-Access Learning Center adopts a broader perspective of academic discourse.

On the other hand, the Center differs from other self-access language centers operating in various European universities in that it is clearly oriented to the study of English only, not on the study of many languages as is the case with other language centers. Specifically, its focus on advanced language study addresses the needs of a specific student population, that of the Faculty of English Studies, and its aim is also to provide subject specific knowledge support for the offered courses. However, in similar lines with other self-access centers, the Center provides a variety of on-line and on-site materials for language development as well as an ICT component to

promote academic research.

2. Research with Faculty students

Earlier studies by Faculty members have systematically analyzed students' writing, by identifying problematic areas and by developing relevant educational materials distributed to students in the context of the language courses they take during the first two years of their studies. Other studies aimed at identifying incoming students' ICT skills and their ability to use electronic educational materials (Mitsikopoulou & Tzanne, forthcoming). Taking however into account students' own views on their perceived needs has been considered as an important parameter in the process of selecting and developing appropriate language materials for them. It is in this context that this paper reports on the findings of two surveys which foreground what the students of the Faculty actually say about their language and ICT skills, their strengths and weaknesses. We have particularly focused on the first year students, the difficulties and problems they experience and would like to suggest that what the students' views constitute valuable data to be taken into account when setting up a Self-Access Learning Center for them.

2.1 Beginning-of-the-semester survey

The first of the reported surveys took place in November 2004. A questionnaire was distributed and anonymously completed by 136 first semester students who were randomly selected out of approximately 300 students. Taking into account that the survey took place relatively early in the first semester, it is assumed that what is reported reflects the incoming students' knowledge of English, that is the knowledge they had before they entered the Faculty, rather than skills and competences developed after university entrance. The questionnaire aimed to identify students' language proficiency and digital skills (to be presented in 2.3 below) and its findings are to be analyzed taking always into account that they reflect students' attitudes on their language and digital skills.

   The first part of the questionnaire aimed to collect some demographic data concerning the specific student population of the Faculty, and its findings are summarized in Table 1.

Population profile	*Research Assistant: Doriana*
	Nikaki
• Sex: Female 87%, Male 13%	
• Average student age: 18 years old	
• Mother tongue: Greek 97%, Italian 1%, Russian 1%, English 1%	
• The Faculty was: first priority (80%), not first priority (20%) of the students	

Table 1

   Over the last few years the entrance grade (vathmos prosvasis), the average grade of all courses examined at a national level, of the last student who enters the Faculty of English Studies has dropped significantly from 17.4 to 14.6. This downward tendency, which is clearly reflected in Table 2 is part of a wider tendency which has also affected other Faculties of the School of Philosophy in Greek universities and has recently been the subject of discussion in the media by both political and educational authorities.

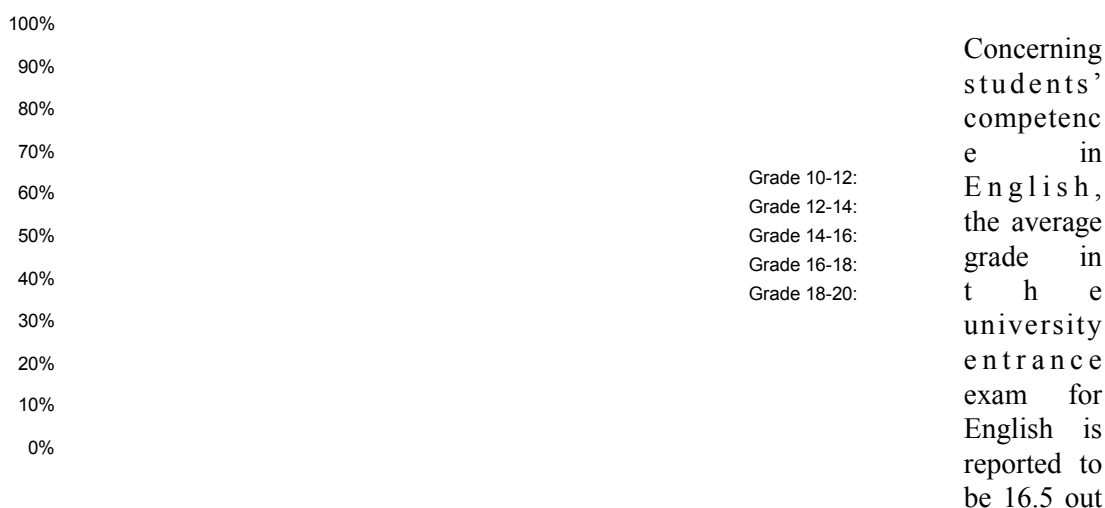| **Statistics from the Greek Ministry of Education and Religious Affairs** |
| --- |

The entrance grade (vathmos prosvasis) of the last student who enters the Faculty of English Studies. Source: http://www.ypepth.gr	YEAR	GRADE (/20)
	2000	17.4
	2001	15.36
	2002	15.55
	2003	14.84
	2004	14.79
	2005	14.67

Table 2

Despite though this drop, an analysis of the students' overall grade in the Apolyterion Lykeion, the secondary school leaving certificate, has revealed that at least for the 2004-05 academic year, 89% of the students who entered the Faculty reported to have graduated with an overall grade which is higher than 16 out of 20, and only 11% of the students actually reported to have scored lower than 16 (Table 3). This finding may not be directly related to students' foreign language competence, it is however indicative of a relatively homogenous and generally high level student population.

Overall Grade in the Apolyterion Lykeion (136

Table 3

100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%

Grade 10-12:
Grade 12-14:
Grade 14-16:
Grade 16-18:
Grade 18-20:

Concerning students' competence in English, the average grade in the university entrance exam for English is reported to be 16.5 out of 20. Moreover, 86% of the subjects reported that they have taken an English language certificate at the B2 level of Common European Framework, 15% at the C1 level and 53% at the C2 level. Assuming that language certificates are indicative of students' general language proficiency, we would not be in the position to identify a major change, since similar findings were reported in the survey conducted in 200-01 by Mitsikopoulou & Tzanne (2001). However, further systematic research and statistical analysis is needed before any conclusions are drawn. At this stage, the aim in this survey has only been to trace some data concerning students' performance in official exams, i.e. university entrance exams, and in standardized language tests.

The second part of the questionnaire dealt with how students see their English language proficiency, their strengths and weaknesses, at the particular period they start their university studies. A summary of the most important findings are summarized in Table 4 below.

Identified strengths in English		Identified weaknesses in English	
Skill	*%*	*Skill*	*%*
Writing	61%	Vocabulary	70%
Reading	47%	Writing	55%

Speaking	39%	Speaking	43%
Listening	33%	Listening	34%
		Grammar	21%

Table 4

When students were asked to identify the three most important areas they will need to work in order to improve their general proficiency in English, their answers fully agreed with the identified weaknesses in Table 3. In all three instances, vocabulary seemed to be the first priority with writing coming next and speaking following in the third position.

When, however, they were asked to rate a list language use situations in terms of difficulty, their answers varied significantly. Table 5 presents students' responses and the average rating of each language use situation in terms of difficulty using a scale ranging from 1 (for the areas creating the least difficulty) to 4 (the areas creating the most difficulty).

Academic language use situations	*Average*	*1 (low) - 4 (high) difficulty*			
Writing academic English	**2.66**	1	2	3	4
Reading extensive course material (e.g. long chapters from textbook)	**2.35**	1	2	3	4
Speaking English in the classroom	**2.32**	1	2	3	4
Extracting relevant information from long texts	**2.28**	1	2	3	4
Completing course assignments	**2.25**	1	2	3	4
Understanding course material (due to jargon, new areas of study, etc)	**2.06**	1	2	3	4
Addressing the instructor on issues concerning the course	**2.03**	1	2	3	4
Identifying the main points in a text	**1.88**	1	2	3	4
Keeping notes while listening to lectures	**1.78**	1	2	3	4
Working in pairs and in groups with other colleagues	**1.78**	1	2	3	4
Understanding lectures	**1.28**	1	2	3	4

Table 5

2.1.1   Possible readings of the findings

Interestingly, in the above findings, writing rates first both in the perceived strengths and weaknesses. Different readings of this preoccupation with writing may be attributed to the students' immediate institutional context as well to the wider cultural context: these students come from an educational setting whose assessment criteria for university entrance exams depend a great deal on writing performance; then, they enter an academic community in which they will be primarily assessed on the basis of their writing performance and in this case in a language which is not their mother tongue (Jones, Turner, & Street, 1999). Finding their own voice in writing and construing their discursive identities (Ivanič, 1998; Lillis, 2001) becomes, therefore, for them a much needed priority. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, they have been brought up in a western culture which highly values the written world (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Halliday, 1996; Clark & Ivanič, 1997) and its associated literacy practices.

Reading, on the other hand, rates first in identified strengths, but is totally absent from the perceived weaknesses. However, when asked to identify specific language situations in terms of difficulty, students rated extensive reading second. An explanation for this could be that despite their intensive practice in reading English texts, EFL students are exposed to relatively short texts (usually not exceeding a page) and, as a result, they lack practice in extensive reading (e.g. chapter long) in English. Moreover, in Greek lyceum, students' readings are most often limited to

a few pages each time. As a result, when they first enter university, students have difficulties both with the skills required for extensive reading and with extensive reading in English in particular, a language which is not their mother tongue, not to mention the difficulties associated with reading new subjects, such as literature and linguistics.

Moreover, as previous research with Faculty students has shown, students do not only face difficulties with extensive reading but they also lack basic reading comprehension skills. An analysis of a reading comprehension assignment revealed that students present serious weaknesses in understanding short academic texts and in identifying their main points (Mitsikopoulou & Tzanne, 2001). This finding actually guided the researchers to suggest that it is imperative for the university language courses to focus on all language skills, especially in university settings where English is not the mother tongue, and abandon the model of an 'academic writing' course which places emphasis only on students' written production. It also revealed the need to include an 'academic study skills' component in such courses. The imperative becomes even stronger when designing materials for students who are trained to become professionals in English Studies.

Overall, the present survey has shown that new types of language and study skills are required for the Faculty students and that a whole language approach is needed with speaking and listening as well as reading and writing skills to be systematically addressed in the language development programme. Moreover, vocabulary is the most reported weakness, an element to be considered in the preparation of language materials for the Self Access Learning Centre.

2.2   End-of-the-semester survey: Academic transition and reported difficulties

The second survey, which took place in December 2004, started as an informal in-class discussion and developed out of the students' need to have their voices heard. Towards the end of the semester, students were asked to anonymously record in writing the three most important difficulties they faced concerning their studies at the Faculty during their first semester. This survey aimed to foreground students' voices on the difficulties they experience and to cross-check the findings of the previous survey. The answers from 56 students were grouped according to a list of academic skills for language learning originally taken from Orsini-Jones (2003) and adjusted to the needs of the particular student population. This list eventually served a double function: it provided an organised way to summarize the findings of the survey and a helpful checklist of areas that need to be considered in the designing of materials for the Self-Access Learning Center. A summary of the reported weaknesses and difficulties is presented below together with samples of student responses.

SUBJECT SPECIFIC ACADEMIC SKILLS (48 answers)

Understanding course material in literature and linguistics *(26 answers)*
'I think that linguistics is a very difficult subject especially because it is taught in English'
'It is difficult to understand lectures in linguistics'
Understanding concepts in linguistics and literature *(22 answers)*

COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY (31 answers)

Written communication *(9 answers)*
Difficulty in writing using academic conventions (style, tentativeness, formality)
Enrich vocabulary *(9 answers)*

'poor vocabulary', *'choosing the right words to express what I think'*, *'learn more English instead of using the words we already know'*, *'the advanced vocabulary we may need in all subjects'*
Oral communication *(6 answers)*
'difficulty in producing academic speech' , *'expressing myself in English orally'*, *'difficulty in expressing what I have understood in Linguistics'*
Understanding the professor *(5 answers)*
e.g. accent, speak too quickly, listening to English for six hours a day

RETRIEVE AND MANAGE INFORMATION (21 answers)

Notetaking *(18 answers)*
'Insecurity with my notes', *'would prefer detailed and clear notes to be given by the professor'*
Understand main points in a lecture or a text *(3 answers)*

LEARN TO LEARN (19 answers)
e.g. reflecting upon language, move from book dependent to independent learning, develop new study habits etc

Transfer old study habits (6 answers)
'the instructor to refer directly to the book examples to understand the 'lesson''
'In linguistics it is not easy to follow the professor as we don't know what we have to learn by heart or what our exam will be like and on what material we will be examined. Actually we don't know what to read.'
'difficulty in memorizing course material I could not understand'
'Difficult to memorize 400 pages of course material'

Develop new study habits *(13 answers)*
'I don't have any instructions about how to study for every class'
'to find a way to study for the exams'
'In literature courses read the poems/texts themselves and also read material about the texts'
Deal with a lot of course material
'too much material to be studied, a lot of new information in every lecture'
Understand overall course organization and course requirements
'To understand how each course is organised and how we can participate in it.'
Connect lectures with reading material
'the professor does not include in his lecture what is written in the books we should study for the final exam'

REVISION AND EXAMS (16 answers)
'we haven't got exam material early enough to study for the exam so we will have a time problem'
'what exams will be like and how to study for them'
'know exactly the pages upon which we will be examined'
'too much material to be studied for the exams'

MANAGE TASKS AND SOLVE PROBLEMS (12 answers)

__Difficulty with course assignments__ (9 answers)
__Time management__ (3 answers)

Students' reports of the problems they face in making the transition to university have been found to be quite similar with the difficulties encountered in other university settings. For instance, Kantanis (2001) records Australian students' assumptions and false perceptions about university, i.e. that teaching and learning at university will be similar to that at school; that academics will perform the same role as secondary school teachers; or that the most difficult part, that of intensive study for university entrance exams, is behind them and now they can be more relaxed. These false assumptions are true of the Greek student population as well; a student's response on an encountered 'problem' is characteristic: *'The class was early in the morning and did not attend regularly'*.

On the other end of the spectrum, the most common expectation of the academic staff is that students become self-directed learners, responsible adults who have motivation, interest and desire to learn. This, however, is for Kantanis (2001) far from realistic at the beginning of university studies since it requires "a quantum leap for school-leaver students coming from an education system that fosters high dependency". And she continues that while students need to go through an enculturation process which takes place gradually over a period of time, they are required to simultaneously adjust to the new tertiary environment, teaching and learning styles, procedures, practices and culture of the university.

Acknowledging all these difficulties, the Self-Access Learning Center may play an important role in the enculturation process, enabling students in their first steps to become members (even only temporary, according to Ivanič, 1998) of the academic discourse community. In addition to its other functions, it is suggested that the Center help students develop the strategies they need and guide them utilize resources in order to manage the various difficulties they face.

2.3 ICT knowledge and the Self-Access Learning Center

Having a clear picture of what the students already know about ICT when they enter the Faculty is another important parameter to be considered when designing the Center's activities. Wider changes during the last few years have affected ICT use in Greece in the context of home computer and Internet use, formal education and employment thus creating a constantly changing situation: the number of households with a home computer steadily increases every year, certified knowledge of computers has become a prerequisite when applying for a public position and a new ICT curriculum has been implemented in both lower and upper secondary education sector.

The third part of the questionnaire given to students at the beginning of the Fall semester 2004 (see 2.1 above) aimed at collecting some basic but useful data on ICT use. According to the findings of the survey, before they enter the Faculty, 54% of the students report that they used the computer regularly (33% on an everyday basis, 21% once a week), 39% report not regular use and 7% no use at all. Word processing is the most popular program followed by spreadsheets, drawing and presentation programs. 72% of the students report that they have a computer at home, an increased percentage compared to 52% in 2002 and 34% in 2000 surveys (cf. Mitsikopoulou & Tzanne, forthcoming). Moreover, 77% of the students report to have some typing skills, yet 43% rarely type. School is identified as number one source of information concerning ICT (63%). However, students also report that they have learned a lot of things by themselves (at a rate of 46%), from friends (at a rate of 35%) and from other family members (at a rate of 27%).

The Internet is not as frequently used as the computer. Only 25% of the students use the

Internet regularly, 32% use it quite often, whereas 38% use the Internet only when they have access to it, while 4% report that they have never used it. Internet use is primarily associated with information search (77%), visits to musical sites (67%), emails (36%), on-line chats (31%) and computer games (19%). Finally, despite their diverse experiences with new technologies, 92% of the students reported that they would like to attend ICT seminars offered by the Center.

Comparing the findings of the 2004 survey with those of two previous surveys conducted in 2000 and 2002 with Faculty students, we can draw the conclusion that this is a transitory period for Greece concerning computer and Internet use. On the one hand, the number of Faculty students with some knowledge on new technologies has dramatically increased within the last six years. In the past, computer use was primarily associated with having a computer at home and knowledge obtained in schools was not recorded as playing an important role in the development of ICT knowledge (Mitsikopoulou & Tzanne, forthcoming). In the present survey, school has been the most important source of information for the majority of the students and, in addition to entertainment, the use of new technologies is associated with study work as well. The role of Greek school in providing students with ICT knowledge has obviously changed and, consequently, such changes which affect students' knowledge when they enter the Faculty are to be taken seriously into account when designing in the Center ICT activities and seminars for the Faculty students.

3.   Towards a 'practices' model of literacy

The surveys presented above have revealed first semester students' difficulties of at least three different kinds: atomized language problems faced by individual students, enculturation problems and problems associated with wider cultural and institutional practices. After Lea & Street (1998), we could suggest that the first kind of problems has generally been the focus of a 'skills' approach to literacy, the second of an 'academic socialization' approach while the third of an 'academic practices' approach.

Most self-access centers deal with language as a set of skills which students have to learn and which are considered generally transferable from one context to another. Students visit language centers to 'fix' language problems –often treated as a kind of pathology– primarily related to surface features, grammar and spelling. This approach assumes a view of literacy as a set of atomized skills on which learners need to be trained at and although it offers learners with some useful language practice, it has been criticized severely over the last two decades for its narrow scope.

Moreover, as also argued in 2.2 above, the Self-Access Learning Center has also an enculturation role to play introducing students into academic culture and discourse and into new ways of learning in the academia. This 'academic socialization' approach has generally been more sensitive to the learners' needs and to addressing issues related to cultural context, yet it has often been criticized for implying the existence of a homogenous academic culture whose norms and practices have simply to be learnt to provide access to its new members, and for assuming a view of language as a transparent medium of representation in this process.

An academic literacies approach, on the other hand, views academic practices as social practices constituted in discourse and processes of meaning making (rather than skills or socialization) as the focus of instruction. It is preoccupied with knowledge and identity construction in discourse and its curriculum involves a number of communicative practices, including genres, fields and disciplines. Such curriculum aims to enable learners deploy a repertoire of appropriate linguistic practices for different settings and be in the position to handle the social meanings these evoke (Lea & Street, 1998). It is suggested that the Self-Access Learning Center adopt a literacies approach which takes account of the conflicting and contested

nature of language and allows for a deeper understanding of academic discourse practices. It is important to note that an academic literacies approach does not disregard insights from the other two approaches. It has become clear from the survey that when students enter the Faculty they need to be trained to new language and study skills; they also need to go through an academic socialization phase during which they need to be introduced to academic culture. What an academic literacies approach does in the proposed model is to successively encapsulate both the academic socialization perspective on the insights it offers and the study skills view in a more encompassing understanding of academic practices. In Lea & Street's (1998, p. 158) words:

> the academic socialization perspective takes account of study skills but includes them in the broader context of the acculturation processes and the academic literacies approach encapsulates the academic socialization model, building on the insights developed there as well as the study skills view.

However, it needs to be stressed that choosing a particular model for the Self-Access Learning Center is not merely a decision affecting materials development only but, most importantly, a constitutive element of its overall philosophy which will affect all of its activities and consequently the effects it aspires to have. Such a decision will greatly affect both language and ICT instruction and will place the development of digital literacies as well as language literaries within a broader contextual framework of institutional practices. After all, instruction, be it in-class or in the self-study mode as is the case with the Center, in language or in technological issues, will eventually take on entirely different meanings if the context is that of study skills only or if it is part of academic socialization or if it is viewed more broadly as an aspect of institutional practices.

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