Covert language assessment in academic writing

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In this article 'covert' language assessment refers to the implicit assessment of non-native speaking and writing that takes place when the focus of the assessment is on an examinee's understanding of an academic subject such as geography, history, biology or physics, and not on the examinee's language proficiency as such. Drawing on a larger study of assessment practices at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, the authors demonstrate that there was in some cases a lack of clarity in the extent to which proficiency in written English was taken into account in the assessment of the academic writing of second language students at the university. They argue that if universities are to be accountable to students, the criteria used in the assessment of assignments and examinations should be made explicit. More specifically, second language students need to know to what extent their performance on academic writing tasks is determined by the quality of their ideas and to what extent it is determined by the quality of their written expression – notwithstanding the complex relationship between them. Recommendations are made for the assessment of students in tertiary institutions with multilingual student populations.

I Introduction

In this article we examine the extent to which proficiency in written English is perceived to be assessed in academic writing. The research was carried out at the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) in Johannesburg, South Africa, in the academic year 1993–94. Our approach differed somewhat from previous studies that address the assessment of academic writing (see Vann, Meyer and Lorenz, 1984; Mohan, 1986; Santos, 1988; Brinton, Snow and Wesche, 1989; Educational Testing Service, 1989; Hughes, 1989; Hamp-Lyons, 1991; Short, 1993; Mohan and Low, 1995 and Starfield, 1995). Our objective was not only to investigate what criteria were used in the assessment of academic writing by second language (L2) students at the university, but also to consider what kinds of departmental practices might promote equitable assessment of both L1 and L2 students. In section II we give the background to our study. Section III addresses the methodology used in the study. In sections IV and V, we describe

the results of the two questionnaires we administered to students and faculty. In section VI we present our results and recommendations.

II Background to the study

The latter part of 1993 was a tumultuous period on the campus of historically white, anglophone Wits University. Strident calls for change in the university's administrative and curricular structures were spearheaded by the predominantly black South African Students Congress (SASCO). It was against this backdrop that the researchers, both of whom were affiliated with the Wits Academic Support Programme (ASP) at the time, initiated a research project to investigate students and faculty perceptions of assessment practices at the university. The mandate of the ASP is to promote both faculty and student development. The particular emphasis of the ASP is on the needs of black students, most of whom speak English as an additional language, and by virtue of the apartheid legacy, have not had the same opportunities to learn as their fellow white students.

There were two parts to the research project. In part 1, conducted between September 1993 and March 1994, the researchers investigated ASP students' perceptions of assessment practices at the university. This part of the study addressed the following broad questions: 1) what are ASP student perceptions of assessment practices at Wits? 2) To what extent do ASP students think that competence in English should factor into student assessment? 3) What suggestions do ASP students have for improving forms of assessment in the interests of enhanced learning and teaching? In part 2, conducted between April 1994 and July 1994, we approached faculty at the university to inform them of the results of part 1 of our study, and to elicit their comments and suggestions on the issues raised by the students. Questions in this part of the study included the following: 1) how do departments make their assessment practices transparent to students? 2) Do faculty within individual departments have a consistent approach to the assessment of ESL students? 3) To what extent do departments support the language development of ESL students?

These questions have important implications in the South African context. In a situation in which many students have already borne the brunt of highly unethical apartheid policies, fair assessment practices are deemed particularly important, not only for individual students but also for the health of the institution as a whole.

The ethical issues are made more complex by the fact that South Africa is now officially multilingual, with English being only one of 11 official languages (Peirce and Ridge, 1997). Furthermore, as Ramphele (1993), a noted South African scholar, argues, if academic

institutions are to be accountable to students, methods of assessment and feedback need to be rigorous:

> Unambiguous measures of excellence in standards must be established and communicated. What constitutes a good essay or an excellent teacher must be able to be measured reliably. Feedback encourages the attainment and raising of standards, thus ensuring excellence at all levels (Ramphele, 1993: 9).

III Methodology

Our primary method of data collection was through the use of detailed questionnaires, developed in collaboration with ASP subject specialist tutors based in academic disciplines. There were two questionnaires, one for students and one for faculty. The researchers developed a draft of the student questionnaire in early September 1993, dividing it into six sections – biographical information; examinations; assignments; forms of assessment; self-assessment in English; and assessment of written English expression. The questionnaire was piloted on 58 students in the Arts and Commerce faculties, 40 in Arts and 18 in Commerce, and modifications were made. ASP tutors in all the faculties across the university were invited to participate in the research project and comment on the draft questionnaire. Some 19 ASP tutors in the faculties of Arts, Commerce, Engineering, Medicine and Science agreed to participate in the project.

In early October 1993, the student questionnaire, revised in the light of ASP tutors' recommendations, was distributed to a total of 318 ASP students: 144 in Arts, 41 in Commerce, 72 in Engineering, 29 in Medicine and 32 in Science. A total of 127 students responded to the questionnaire – a response rate of 40%. The breakdown of the responses in each faculty is as follows: 52 (36%) in Arts; 10 (24%) in Commerce; 33 (46%) in Engineering; 7 (24%) in Medicine; and 25 (78%) in Science. Of the 127 respondents, 27 (21%) spoke English as their mother tongue (L1), while the remaining 100 (79%) had a mother tongue other than English (L2).

After the data had been collected and analysed (Peirce *et al.*, 1994), we developed a second questionnaire for the faculty, which was distributed in May 1994. We explained that our purpose was to investigate what initiatives departments had made to maintain fair assessment practices, given the increasing number of students for whom English was not their mother tongue.

The questionnaire was sent to 35 heads of department, 26 in the Arts Faculty and 9 in the Science Faculty. Of the 26 departments in Arts, 19 responded to the questionnaire (73%) while there was a 100% response rate in Science.

In drawing on this larger study, we focus in this article on those

sections of the questionnaire that address written English proficiency and academic performance. We have focused on written English proficiency because the primary method of assessment at the university is through written assignments and examinations. Relevant questions in the student questionnaire (which have been renumbered) are as follows:

1) Assess your ability to express ideas in written English:

[Good   Fair   Weak]

2) Has your ability to express ideas in written English improved since you came to Wits?

[Yes   No]

3) How many lecturers do you think assess students on their written expression as well as on their ideas?

[None   A few   Some   Most   All]

4) Do you think that lecturers *should* assess students on their written expression as well as on their ideas?

[Yes   No   Sometimes]

Please explain ....

5) In your assignments, would you like feedback on your ideas only, or on your ideas and your written expression?

[Yes   No]

Please explain ....

6) Do you think that the expression of ideas under exam conditions should be assessed differently from the expression of ideas in written assignments?

[Yes   No]

Please explain ....

7) Have your ever felt well-prepared for a test or exam at Wits but didn't understand the questions that were asked in the exam? ....

8) Did you know how you were going to be assessed in the exams?

[Yes   No]

Relevant questions to the faculty arose from responses to the student questionnaire, and will be discussed under section V below.

Table 1 Assess your ability to express ideas in written English

Response	L1	L2	Total
Good	17 (65%)	35 (37%)	52 (43%)
Fair	9 (35%)	48 (51%)	57 (47%)
Weak		12 (13%)	12 (10%)
Total	26	95	121

IV Responses to the student questionnaire

In presenting the data from the student questionnaire, we have consistently compared the responses of the L2 students to the responses of the L1 students.

1 Assess your ability to express ideas in written English

The purpose of this question was to determine, at least with reference to self-assessment, whether the L2 students did indeed have greater difficulty in expressing ideas in written English than did the L1 students. We found that while 65% of the L1 students assessed their written proficiency in English as 'good', only 37% of the L2 students had an equivalent self-assessment (see Table 1). The difference between the two groups was statistically significant at the 0.016 level.

2 Has your ability to express ideas in written English improved since you came to Wits?

The purpose of this question was to determine whether L2 students' command of written English improved over time. We found that while 76% of L2 students indicated that their ability to express ideas in written English improved over time, only 40% of L1 students had a similar self-assessment (see Table 2). The difference between the two groups was statistically significant at the 0.000 level.

Table 2 Has your ability to express ideas in written English improved?

Response	L1	L2	Total
Yes	10 (40%)	71 (76%)	81 (68%)
No	15 (60%)	23 (25%)	38 (32%)
Total	25	94	119

Table 3 How many lecturers do you think assess students on their written expression as well as on their ideas?

Response	L1	L2	Total
None	—	7 (8%)	7 (6%)
A few	8 (35%)	23 (26%)	31 (28%)
Some	8 (35%)	26 (30%)	34 (31%)
Most	6 (26%)	21 (24%)	27 (25%)
All	1 (4%)	10 (12%)	11 (10%)
Total	23	87	110

3 How many lecturers do you think assess students on their written expression as well as on their ideas?

Some 110 students responded to this question (see Table 3): 7 (6%) answered 'none', 31 (28%) answered 'a few', 34 (31%) answered 'some', 27 (25%) answered 'most' and 11 (10%) answered 'all'. There were no statistically significant differences between the L1 and L2 groups.

4 Do you think that lecturers should assess students on their written expression as well as on their ideas?

Some 111 students responded to the first part of the question (see Table 4): 53 (47%) answered 'yes', 29 (18%) answered 'no' and 38 (33%) answered 'sometimes'. There were no statistically significant differences between the L1 and L2 groups.

Of the students, 85 then gave an explanation for their answers – 15 L1 students and 70 L2 students. While the explanation for the L1 responses varied considerably, there were a number of important trends in the explanations offered by the L2 students, reflecting an ambivalence that is evident in other parts of the questionnaire. Of the L2 respondents, 24 (34%) indicated that unless lecturers assess students on their written expression, mistakes will be perpetuated, and

Table 4 *Should* lecturers assess students on their written expression as well as on their ideas?

Response	L1	L2	Total
Yes	8 (35%)	45 (50%)	53 (48%)
No	5 (22%)	15 (17%)	20 (18%)
Sometimes	10 (44%)	28 (31%)	38 (34%)
Total	23	88	111

students will not improve their written expression. Some 23 (33%) of the respondents, however, indicated that lecturers should be sensitive to the educational and linguistic backgrounds of the L2 students. This position was expressed by arguing that L2 students had not had sufficient exposure to the English language (10 of the 23), had difficulty in expressing themselves in English (9 of the 23) and should not be penalized for their written expression (4 of the 23). Both L1 and L2 students (10 in total) indicated that the extent to which written expression is assessed depends on the course, and 6 indicated that while written expression should be assessed, there should be leniency under examination conditions.

5 *In your assignments, would you like feedback on your ideas only, or on your ideas and your written expression?*

Of the students, 110 responded to this question (see Table 5). Some 10 of the respondents (9%) said they wanted feedback on ideas only, while 100 (91%) said they wanted feedback on ideas and written expression. There were no statistically significant differences between the L1 and L2 groups. Some 46 (54%) said that feedback on ideas and written expression leads to improvement of written expression. Two respondents indicated that while written expression should be assessed, students should not be penalized for their expression.

6 *Do you think that the expression of ideas under exam conditions should be assessed differently from the expression of ideas in written assignments?*

Some 108 students responded to this question (see Table 6): 81 (75%) answered 'yes' to this question, and 27 (25%) answered 'no'. There were no statistically significant differences between the L1 and L2 groups.

Of the 83 respondents who gave an explanation for their answer, 51 (67%) indicated that stress and time limits are particularly problematic in examinations. What was particularly interesting about the

Table 5   Would you like feedback on ideas only or on ideas and written expression?

Response	L1	L2	Total
Ideas only	3 (12%)	7 (8%)	10 (9%)
Ideas and expression	22 (88%)	78 (92%)	100 (91%)
Total	25	85	110

Table 6 Should the expression of ideas under exam conditions be assessed differently from the expression of ideas in written assignments?

Response	L1	L2	Total
Yes	16 (70%)	65 (76%)	81 (75%)
No	7 (30%)	20 (23%)	27 (25%)
Total	23	85	108

students' responses is that the L2 students were far more likely than the L1 students to focus on the problems posed by time limits in examinations. Of the 12 L1 students who gave an explanation for answering 'yes' to this question, only 1 (8%) mentioned time limits in examinations as a specific problem. In contrast, 22 (39%) of the 56 L2 students who gave an explanation for answering 'yes' to this question stated that time limits in examinations were particularly problematic. In fact, L2 students cited time limits more frequently than any other problem associated with examinations. Interestingly, however, and this is another contradiction that requires further research, 10 of the L2 students who answered 'no' to this question argued that students had to get used to the pressure of examinations, and that no allowances should be made for writing under examination conditions.

7 Have you ever felt well-prepared for a test or exam at Wits but didn't understand the questions that were asked in the exam?

Some 119 students responded to this question (see Table 7): 60 (50%) of respondents answered 'yes' to this question, 59 (50%) answered 'no'. There were no statistically significant differences between the L1 and L2 groups. Of the respondents, 67% indicated that the reason why they did not understand the question was because it was ambiguous; 15% said there was one difficult word that made the question incomprehensible.

Table 7 Have you had difficulty in understanding questions in exams?

Response	L1	L2	Total
Yes	15 (56%)	45 (49%)	60 (50%)
No	12 (44%)	47 (51%)	59 (50%)
Total	27	92	119

8 Did you know how you were going to be assessed in the exams?

Some 122 students responded to this question (see Table 8): 37 (30%) of the respondents said they knew how they were going to be assessed in the exams, 85 (70%) said they did not know. There were statistically significant differences between the response patterns of L2 students and L1 students at the 0.022 level.

After the responses to the student questionnaire were recorded, we turned our attention to the development of the faculty questionnaire.

V Responses to the faculty questionnaire

Five of the questions we posed to the faculty are relevant to this article. As indicated in section III above, the questionnaire was sent to heads of department on the faculties of Science and Arts. Each question was framed with a brief synopsis of data from the student questionnaire. The questions and the responses are provided below.

Question 1

> While 50% of L2 respondents indicated that lecturers should assess students on their written expression as well as on their ideas, many indicated that their training in the English language had been inadequate and that they should not be penalised for their written expression.
>
> *Do you have a departmental policy on the extent to which a student's written expression should be taken into account in the assessment of written work?*

In the Sciences there were eight responses to this question, and all suggested there was no departmental policy on this issue. There were minor differences in emphasis among the different responses, a sample of which follows:

> Not really applicable in our discipline.
>
> Students not penalised for small errors. They must be able to read and write English at a level adequate to express biological concepts and information.
>
> We believe that the expression and use of English for communication and expression is important. We don't consciously take it into account.

Table 8 Did students know how they were going to be assessed in the exams?

Response	L1	L2	Total
Yes	13 (48%)	24 (25%)	37 (30%)
No	14 (51%)	71 (74%)	85 (70%)
Total	27	95	122

In the Arts there were 16 responses to this question. The responses were less consistent than those in the Sciences, and fell into three categories: those who said they had no policy (5); those who said they had an 'unstated' policy (6); and those who said they did have a policy on this issue (5). An example of the first category of response is as follows: 'No such policy exists and in general staff overlook mechanical problems unless these are so profound they impair meaning'. Under these conditions, as one response noted, assessment depended 'to a large extent on a particular lecturer'. Most 'unstated' policies were similar to the following: 'An unstated policy is in operation. In practice we tend not to penalise when meaning is evident.' Where a departmental policy existed it was generally to 'ignore infelicities in expression, grammar etc.'.

What was particularly interesting about these responses is that whether there was no policy, or an unstated policy or an explicit policy, most departments had a primary focus on conceptual clarity rather than written expression. As the following quotations illustrate, many departments in fact saw the two as interdependent:

> No policy *per se*. However, we value structure of an argument and demonstration of understanding over pure expression. The one does depend on the other, nonetheless.

> Departmental policy is that quality of thought always takes precedence over inadequacy of expression. L2 students would be treated sympathetically in this regard. But it remains difficult to assess the quality of the incomprehensible.

> Although we are flexible in this regard, we prefer not to divorce style and content.

One department did note, however, that language and content are not necessarily interdependent:

> We do not have a policy as such, but usually a student is not penalised for weak expression *per se*. Often it's not clear how much of the weak expression is as a result of conceptual woolliness and it is this lack of conceptual clarity which is assessed. Sometimes L2 students communicate their ideas despite their weak expression which suggests that conceptual clarity and a good command of English do not necessarily go together.

Question 2

> 76% of L2 respondents and 70% of L1 respondents indicated that the expression of ideas under exam conditions should be assessed differently from the expression of ideas in written assignments.

> *In your department, do different criteria apply in the assessment of written work in examinations and assignments? If so, how do you make students aware of these different criteria?*

There were nine Science responses to this question, and they were mixed: three said that there were no differences in the criteria used; three said that different criteria did apply; one said that it 'depends on the staff member and therefore varies'; and two did not address the question directly. An example of each of the first two response categories follows:

> No. Coursework essays are a form of training/preparation for handling exams as well as contributing to yearmark.

> We try to assess them differently, e.g. a research essay/assignment done with no strict time limit would be assessed differently to an easy test assigned under a rigid time limit condition, e.g. 5 minutes.

In the Arts, there were 16 responses, 10 indicating that different criteria did apply in examinations and assignments, while the remaining 5 gave varied responses. In cases where different criteria did apply, students were generally not informed of the differences. Typical responses which illustrate this position are as follows:

> There are different criteria. We have never explicitly discussed these within our department and we do not make the students aware of different criteria.

> Yes, with regard to language and expression – at present students are not informed of the difference.

A typical 'mixed' response is as follows:

> The lecturers marking examination papers are aware of the time constraints under which the students write examinations, and this is taken into account both in setting and in marking. Otherwise, the criteria remain the same as for assignments.

Question 3

> While 58% of the L2 respondents indicated that they knew what to expect in their June 1993 examinations, only 25% knew how they were going to be assessed.
>
> *In your department, how are 1st year students made aware of the criteria used for assessment in examinations?*

There were nine Science responses to this question. Students are informed of the criteria during lectures; assessment criteria are posted on notice boards; students are provided with past papers; examination tutorials are provided; mock examinations are set up.

There were 16 Arts responses to this question. The responses were more tentative than Science. While students are given workshops, examination briefings, formal instructions, booklets and notices, some departments expressed reservations about the specificity of their procedures. Such comments were as follows:

There is no explicit process for making first year students aware of the criteria used for assessment in examinations, beyond comments made by lecturer/tutor in weeks prior to exams.

We have not developed this extensively but try for example to deal with particular styles of questions in lectures and go into detail on how to answer them. Our ASP tutor has also pioneered information for students on how essays are assessed and would indicate what exam assessment shares with these criteria.

One department noted that although special lectures are conducted at lunchtime where assessment criteria are discussed, 'often there are some L2 students who do not grasp these explanations'.

Question 4

While 65% of L1 respondents indicated that their ability to express ideas in written English was 'good', only 37% of L2 respondents had a similar self-assessment.

In your department, how do you help L2 students improve their written expression?

In the Sciences, there were eight responses to this question. Some departments correct on content and style; some offer special tutorials to help students with their writing skills and expression; some rely on the ASP tutor for assistance; and one indicated as follows: 'Maths does not require too much written English'.

In the Arts, there were 16 responses to this question. Most responses suggested that the ASP tutor had a central role in helping L2 students with written expression. A typical response is as follows: 'Aside from individual consultation with staff and several skills lectures, we offer a full range of ASP tutorials from two full-time ASP tutors'. One response to the question was particularly comprehensive:

1. by stressing the importance of reading, particularly within the area of study
2. by constant constructive feedback on the positive aspects of the student's expression
3. by activities in ASP tutorials when students read each other's work and give peer feedback
4. correction of grammatical errors and poorly expressed ideas in projects
5. encouraging students to express themselves in simple language
6. encouraging the student to attend the central ASP (a place where general skills such as study skills are taught)
7. encouraging students to read their own written work aloud.

The following comment, however, was a reminder of the complex relationship between conceptual knowledge and the ability to express it:

What is required from the students is mainly precision and clarity of expression. This cannot be achieved without a minimum mastering of discipline-specific vocabulary and conceptual knowledge.

Question 5

> 49% of the L2 respondents indicated that they had been in a situation in which they had felt well-prepared for an exam, but had not understood the questions they were asked in the exam.
>
> *In your department, what procedures do you adopt to ensure that questions in examinations are as unambiguous as possible?*

There were nine Science responses to this question. While in some departments the situation was *ad hoc*, many had comprehensive procedures. One that was *ad hoc* wrote as follows:

> Very *ad hoc* although we do have an external examiner who checks the papers. Some lecturers make an attempt to get their paper checked by colleagues. Others do not. Some actually feel threatened if the idea is mooted.

An example of a comprehensive procedure is as follows:

> The entire staff attend an exam meeting in which all questions are gone through in detail to ensure that the questions are fair, not too long, are not ambiguous, meet the required standard. The general meeting is held after the lecturers involved in the course have met to set the examination. The external examiner is then afforded the opportunity to voice his/her opinion.

In the Arts there were 16 responses. The procedures used to ensure clarity were generally comprehensive. Typical responses were as follows:

> We have an extensive discussion of exam papers, with particular attention paid to ambiguity, choice of words, etc.

> Firstly, examiners circulate questions among staff members in order to check for ambiguity or errors. Secondly, students are frequently reminded that in the case of the slightest doubt about the interpretation of questions the invigilators are there to assist them.

VI Discussion of results and recommendations

In our discussion, we will reiterate the purpose of this article, which is to examine, in one specific context, the extent to which proficiency in written English is perceived to be assessed in academic writing.

With reference to this purpose, our central findings are that in spite of the sympathetic approach to L2 students at the institution, many departments at Wits University did not have specific policies of the extent to which proficiency in written English is taken into account in the assessment of academic writing. Most departments recognized this as an important issue, however, and were struggling to formulate assessment practices that would be fair and consistent for both L1

and L2 students. From the students' perspective, the student group as a whole appeared uncertain about the extent to which proficiency in written English is assessed in academic assignments and examinations. As noted in section IV above, the responses to question 3 in the students' questionnaire were very mixed, and the differences between the L1 and L2 students were not statistically significant: 6% of students felt that 'no' lecturers assessed students on their written expression as well as their ideas; 28% said 'a few' did; 31% said 'some' did; 25% said 'most' did; while 10% said 'all' did.

At a more general level (section IV, question 8), a majority of students (70%) indicated that they did not know how they were going to be assessed in their examinations. Although departments do provide students with criteria for assessment (see section V, question 3), it appears that the criteria may not be sufficiently explicit, or that students – particularly L2 students – may have difficulty understanding what these criteria are. Students themselves are also divided as to the particular question of whether lecturers should assess students on their written expression as well as on their ideas (section IV, question 4). While some (34%) of the L2 students indicated that unless lecturers assess students on their written expression, mistakes would be perpetuated, an almost equal number (33%) wanted lecturers to be sensitive to their educational and linguistic backgrounds.

It is important to note that Wits University is not unique in this regard. There are no clear precedents that can be drawn from other multilingual tertiary institutions internationally that have successfully addressed the complex relationship between the quality of an L2 student's conceptual knowledge and the way the student has expressed it in written form. The extent to which it is possible to separate language and content, ideas and expression, remains everywhere an unresolved problem. Some recommendations, drawn from our study, may be useful not only at Wits University but also at other tertiary institutions with multilingual populations:

- We suggest that institutions develop a culture of accountability around assessment practices, particularly with reference to the assessment of L2 students. Leaving assessment up to individual lecturers will leave L2 students uncertain as to the criteria used for assessment. It is important that procedures and processes be made explicit at both the departmental and institutional level.
  Departments need to develop a public language for talking about assessment. Many faculty members may have little formal training in assessment, and may sometimes be uncertain about how to address demands for greater accountability in assessment practices. Faculty development in this regard may be useful.

- Departments could adopt a developmental approach to the assessment of the academic writing of L2 students. L2 students in this study (section IV, question 2) have indicated that their ability to express ideas in written English improves over time. It may be useful for faculty to distinguish between entrance and exit criteria in the assessment of written work.

Faculty might consider setting different criteria for the marking of academic writing under examination conditions, as compared to academic writing for the purpose of assignments. The study (section IV, question 6) indicated that L2 students found the time constraints characteristic of examinations particularly challenging. Faculty should ensure that questions posed in examinations are as unambiguous as possible. Notwithstanding rigorous procedures, half the students surveyed in this study (section IV, question 7) indicated that they had experienced difficulty in understanding the questions posed in an examination – primarily because of ambiguity.

Departments should endeavour to help students develop what is called 'academic literacy' (Taylor *et al.*, 1988). Even though second language teachers and composition instructors can provide a solid foundation in writing composition, they may not have what one respondent called the 'discipline-specific' vocabulary and conceptual knowledge necessary to help students achieve academic success (section V, question 4). In this regard, the work of Ballard and Clanchy in the university context is important:

> We have argued for a conception of literacy which includes but goes beyond surface correctness to embrace the whole context of the culture in which the language is being used. Becoming literate involves becoming acculturated: learning to read and write the culture (Ballard and Clanchy, 1988: 19).

In this spirit, faculty across the disciplines might conceive of themselves as teachers of language and literacy as well as content specialists. In our study both L1 and L2 students indicated that they would benefit from feedback on their written expression as well as on their ideas (section IV, question 5).

In conclusion, we have sought in this article to draw attention to what we think is an important but little researched area: the covert language assessment that takes place when L2 students perform academic writing tasks. We do not take the position, however, that language should not be assessed in academic writing tasks. The extent to which language proficiency is assessed may depend on many factors, such as the purpose of the assignment and the nature of the course. However, in the interests of accountability, departments and insti-

tutions need to be explicit about the extent to which language proficiency is taken into account in the assessment of academic writing by L2 students. We hope that further studies on the assessment of L2 students in multilingual educational institutions will contribute to our understanding of covert language assessment and help make assessment practices more accountable to students.

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