04-Jun-2015

Dear Mr Sibomana:

Your manuscript entitled "‘We know what to say, we know what to write, but we don’t know how’: the challenges of becoming academically literate in a new linguistic and socio-cultural space", which you submitted to Education as Change, has been reviewed. The reviewer and editor comments are included at the bottom of this letter.

The reviewer(s) and editor would like to see some revisions made to your manuscript before publication. Therefore, I invite you to respond to the reviewer(s)' and editor's comments and revise your manuscript.

When you revise your manuscript please highlight the changes you make in the manuscript by using the track changes mode in MS Word or by using bold or coloured text.

To submit the revision, log into https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/redc and enter your Author Centre, where you will find your manuscript title listed under "Manuscripts with Decisions." Under "Actions," click on "Create a Revision." Your manuscript number has been appended to denote a revision. PLEASE DO NOT SUBMIT YOUR REVISED DOCUMENT AS A NEW MANUSCRIPT AS THIS WILL CONSIDERABLY DELAY THE PROCESS. Please enter your responses to the comments made by the reviewer(s) and editor in the space provided. You can use this space to document any changes you made to the original manuscript. Please be as specific as possible in your response to the reviewer(s).

IMPORTANT: Your original files are available to you when you upload your revised manuscript. Please delete any redundant files before completing the submission.

Because we are trying to facilitate timely publication of manuscripts submitted to Education as Change, your revised manuscript should be uploaded as soon as possible. If it is not possible for you to submit your revision within 120 days, we may have to consider your manuscript as a new submission.

Once again, thank you for submitting your manuscript to Education as Change and I look forward to receiving your revision.

Sincerely,

Editor:
Both reviewers would like to see the article published but recommend major revisions, giving clear guidance on issues that need to be addressed in revising the paper and strengthening the argument. Following major revision, this paper will make a welcome contribution to the journal.

Revisions need to be made both in terms of the literature drawn upon: the need to position the paper in critical studies of the 'global politics of knowledge-making' in English as reviewer 2 puts it (drawing e.g. on Canagarajah and Lillis & Curry) as well as within the South African literature on academic literacies. Both reviewers also point to the need in relation to data analysis to strengthen the argument around 'academic border guards' and to include more data as evidence for claims made.

Reviewer(s)' Comments to Author:

Reviewer: 1

Comments to the Author
I think this promises to be an interesting and useful contribution to the literature. There has been insufficient consideration of how international students take on the academic literacy practices of target disciplines in their universities. This study, tracing the experiences of Rwandan PG students in a South African university, has enormous potential and I really hope the author will develop it further in readiness for publication. I think before it gets published, there is a need for a bit more development. I hope the comments that follow will be useful to the author as s/he does so. (The comments are as they arise in the article and not in order of importance. Some are of a very minor nature, whereas others require a strengthening of the argument).

There are two references in the abstract. I’m not sure of the journal’s guidelines in this regard? In particular I do not think the reference to Heath (1983) is needed as she was not writing about an academic context and the phrase ‘ways with words’ has become common use (and the reference is very dated, though the text remains admittedly a seminal one).

Todd 1997 - So dated and surely this point has been made more recently in the literature?

Crystal (1997), in Altbach (2004) - So dated and do you need such an old reference to make such a common point.

Leki & Carson 1994 - Very dated reference for a fairly simple point that has been repeatedly made in far more recent publications.

'academic discourse is a particular type of English' - The recent research on this by SA authors is extensive and there is now a whole body of literature on the ways in which academic literacy expectations constrain the success of NNES students. It seems a pity that only one SA author’s work, Rollnick, is being referred to here. The academic literacies research undertaken by Thesen, Van Pletzen, Jacobs, Boughey, McKenna, Thomson and many others seems to be a gap in this discussion. (A few such references surface later in the article but are not used to engage with the key conceptualisation of the article.)

Paxton 2007 - At last, another SA reference but actually in order to secondary cite another international text. Also, given that this particular quote is so well used, it seems a pity the author didn’t refer to the original text directly.

'Evans and Green’s (2007) study of Hong Kong’s tertiary students’ difficulties with English for Academic Purposes (EAP) suggest that the students experienced greater difficulty with language, rather than content or structure...' - This ignores the context of prior schooling. In China students may well have acquired academic literacy practices in their first language and so acquisition of these practices in a new language requires focus on language over meaning. The reader is unlikely to know the extent to which students have academic literacy in any language in a context such as Rwanda. There seems to be a rather superficial understanding of the relationship between language and learning here that fails to take the nuances of context into account.

Similar to the above silence on the role of schooling background in the acquisition of academic language practices, there is no reflection in this article on the relationship between social class and academic practice acquisition. This has been well documented internationally and in SA. (The very brief reference to this in the Bourdieu ‘cultivated class’ quote is left unexamined.) Who is privileged by our higher education academic practices?

'academic literacy skills' - The literature on academic literacy is quite explicit in its rejection of the term ‘skills’ so this seems odd here. The use of the term ‘academic literacies’ or ‘academic literacy practices’ has been used to indicate that these are socio-cultural, discipline and context specific practices expected of students and they are not generic, transferable skills.

'Wits' - I’m not sure about the levels of formality expected by this journal but the use of the institution’s nickname seems odd here.

'I noted that some of them still had problems in writing good English' - This seems an oddly everyday conceptualisation of the issue.

'This is probably because these can be transferred from one language to another (from French to English in this case), which suggests that they used the skills acquired in French as resources to deal with texts in English...' - Again, reference to some of the academic literacies literature would allow a more nuanced account of this data.

'...according to Gee (1996), students use the discourses at their disposal (those in French in this case) in writing and traces of these are evident in the texts that they produce' - Yes, but important to explain to the reader that this is about discourses, rather than language per se, and what this then means.

'...Paxton’s (2007) concept of interim literacies discussed earlier' - I do not recall such a discussion.

'Thus, one way of helping these students would be to help them to use their ‘old discourses’ in acquiring the new ones' - Yes, provided there is overlap. There needs to be some explanation here that this would entail establishing the extent to which these students have access to the relevant literacy practices in their mother tongue. There is no clarification here about how this is discourses (rather than languages).

'They said that, instead, they expected a course which introduced them to the academic discourses of their respective areas of specialization' - And this is where the help would be most effective, according to the academic literacies research.

'some lecturers publicly ridiculed the students with language difficulties' - This is surely a highly important and controversial issue. I would think a direct data quote to substantiate this would be useful. The affective issues in the use of academic English should not be underestimated.

'In fact, the students could not acquire and/or adapt to the new discourses successfully' This is unclear. Do you mean that none of these students graduated?

'Gee (2001), cited in Klaus (2001' - I think the original Gee text should be read and referred to here as this seems a fairly significant point.

'Deem and Brehony (2000), in Ferenz (2005), ' - There are too many secondary citations throughout this article, especially as these are all readily available texts and the points being referred to are often fairly significant to the article’s argument.

'some lecturers worked as academic border guards' - This argument was promised from the start but was not actually directly made within this article (only referred to from another of the author’s publications). I think either the argument must be made within this article, substantiated by study data, or it should only be mentioned in passing in reference to that other publication and not foregrounded in the abstract and introduction.

Reviewer: 2

Comments to the Author
This paper speaks to a crucial issue in higher education - the writing-related experiences of international students in 'Anglocentric' universities in southern context. There is a lot of literature on international students in the UK and Australia, but less on the relatively new phenomenon of 'NNES' students in southern African universities. I would like to see it published and make the following suggestions:

- The article should be more clearly framed in the critical literature on the global politics of knowledge-making in English eg Lillis and Curry, Canagarajah. So a comment like 'too many students lack this fluency because English is still a second language' is a deficit statement , which could be framed more as difference.

- There should be more data throughout - more quotes from interviews to enrich the article.

- The phrase 'academic border guards' is interesting - needs to be more fully developed.

- The 'Results' section seems to go straight into data. It needs a lead in.

- It takes a while to get to the interesting point about spoken and written English (p 7). Foreground the way perceptions seem to 'contradict available literature'

- Is it necessary to name the institution? (an ethics question)

- On p 9, the selection from the essay is not well connected to the analysis

- On p 11, 'If these informants were honest...' - please discuss this more. Why might they not have been 'honest'? What was the interviewer's relationship to them?

- Page 11 -Say more (briefly) about the other levels (Freebody and Luke)

- 'French influence' - can we see an example?

- More knowledgeable peers, rather than colleagues?

- The section on different kinds of support is interesting - why the informal didn't work, and why the formal support on offer was 'reactive rather than proactive'. Please explain. There is more to be said about why the students' didn't want to move out of their comfort zone' (p 13)

- I like the questions on p 14, but they're not really answered. What would supportive structures look like?

- Say more about 'English becoming more and more dominant' - as in my first comment above.

- There is too much secondary citing - x in y.

Good luck with working on this article.