

Practices of Disciplinary Literacy for ESL Higher Educational students in Sri Lanka: In between access and Transformation

Arivarasy Thanushan
Western Sydney University, Sydney, Australia
Department of English Language Teaching, University of Jaffna
marivarasy@univ.jfn.ac.lk

The language intervention strategies in Sri Lanka have evolved from ESL and EAP approaches to Academic Literacies and now increasingly emphasize disciplinary literacies — a concept that Moje (2015) describes as helping students engage in the specific ways of thinking, reading, writing, and communicating required by each discipline. This involves four core instructional practices: engaging students in disciplinary inquiry, guiding and shaping student learning, examining language and representations, and assessing discourse within the discipline. Jacobs (2006), emphasizes integrating disciplinary literacy instruction into mainstream subjects through collaboration between content lecturers and language lecturers. However, according to Mahawatta and Rasool (2009), the main challenge in the collaboration between language and content teachers in Sri Lanka is a structural and cultural disconnect, as language teachers are expected to contribute to subject-specific literacy without adequate training, institutional backing or recognition of their role as equal collaborators. This disconnect is further complicated by perceptions of status, expertise, and the perceived purpose of English language instruction in higher education.

Despite this growing body of knowledge, there has been little attention given to disciplinary academic literacy within Sri Lankan Higher Education (SLHE). I envisage that this study can contribute to new knowledge and practice because it investigates a hitherto under-researched context: tertiary level ESL learners in the higher educational institutions. Further, this is the first study to investigate the disciplinary literacy practices in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore, this study, fills a gap in the research into disciplinary literacy practices at tertiary level, particularly in an L2 learning context. This research aims to explore factors influencing disciplinary literacy practices at University of Jaffna and how institutional and learner factors impact individuals' competencies. The following research questions have been formulated:

1. How are discipline specific academic literacy practices currently implemented in the Sri Lankan Higher Education Institution?
2. What challenges are faced in the Sri Lankan Higher Educational Institution in implementing discipline specific academic literacy?

3. What solutions are considered as possible for minimizing these challenges?

This study uses an exploratory nested case study design at the University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka, drawing on the researcher's experience in relevant disciplines. The university is the main case, with three faculties (Management, Science, Arts) as sub-units, allowing comparison of literacy practices across disciplines (Thomas, 2011). Six lecturers (one English language and one subject lecturer from each faculty) and six students from a single discipline will participate through interviews, classroom observations, document analysis, reflective journals, and focus groups over one semester. Data will be analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic framework, including micro-level discourse analysis and cross-case comparison. Discourse Theory and Systemic Functional Linguistics will serve as the theoretical framework for this study.

This research aims to develop a context-specific model for interdisciplinary collaboration at the University of Jaffna, offering insights relevant to similar contexts in Sri Lanka. It will provide empirical evidence to refine frameworks for disciplinary literacy and inform institutional and national policies on integrating discipline-specific literacy instruction, especially in English-medium settings. By addressing diverse student proficiency levels and promoting structured collaboration between language and content lecturers, the study seeks to strengthen disciplinary literacy practices and support equitable academic success.