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Perceptions of academic literacy courses in a postgraduate programme in Israel

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This study reflects on students' and instructors' evaluations of an embedded literacies course in a Master's program in Teaching & Education in Israel. The main goal of the study was to explore the academic justification for embedding a compulsory academic literacies course, taught in the mother tongue (Hebrew), at the outset of the M.Teach. Using questionnaires and interviews, students and instructors' perceptions were sought with reference to the necessity, contribution and suitability of the course in a Master's degree. Unlike their instructors, students were not persuaded of the need or utility of the course they had completed. The interviews suggested that they saw it as irrelevant, at their level of study, and irrelevant to their work in the M.Teach. While implementing such a course is complicated, involving many considerations, the main conclusion is the need to share with students the course' aims – beyond study skills and language proficiency – of acculturating students to the academic discourse in general and to Education as a discipline in particular. This should diminish the gaps between students' and instructors' perceptions and motivate the students towards the course. Although the study took place in the local context of Hebrew-speaking students, it has wider applicability wherever students – including local students – need a better understanding of the demands of writing for their higher degree.

Key words: academic literacies, academic disciplines, Master's degree, course perceptions.

1. Introduction

Until recently, most research on academic writing in higher education was situated within English for Academic Purposes (EAP) (Stierer, 1998) which is designated for non-native speakers of English. Previous and current studies indicate the need for academic literacy support (Laurillard, 1979; Palmer, Levett-Jones, Smith & McMillan, 2014). The current study focuses on academic literacy courses in Hebrew for native speakers of Hebrew who study in a Master's programme. The main motivation for this study was that the author of this paper, who is the head of a postgraduate programme (M. Teach) in the biggest college of teacher education in Israel, wanted to find out whether there is an academic justification for a literacy course in the students' mother tongue (Hebrew) within the framework of a Master degree. A detailed description of the context of the study is offered in the designated section.

What underpins the issue of whether literacy courses should be embedded in a Master's degree is the question of who is responsible for students' academic writing. Should academic administrators assume that Master's students are equipped with literacy skills in their mother tongue, and even if not, it is within their own responsibility to 'fix' their own writing? This issue seems to be

universal and relevant to any academic institute/programme, beyond geographical and language considerations. This question was addressed in previous studies. For example, Rose and McClafferty (2001) raise the issue of whether writing instruction bears the elements of remedial intervention while addressing topics that students should have mastered in previous schooling, and list some of the problems that students may tackle.

Previous experience with the M.Teach. students revealed that while some of the students who are admitted to the programme demonstrate good academic writing skills, most students' skills are judged as wanting at different levels. During the admission committees, the students are required to write a paragraph of 10 lines on the following topic: "Describe a meaningful experience from your school days". This short composition allows the admission committee an initial screening of the student's writing skills, and if the writing is poor the student is not admitted to the programme. Naturally, one paragraph on a non-academic topic cannot indicate problems with producing longer texts on an academic topic, but it certainly allows the committee to identify the student's motivation towards Education as the main discipline in the programme, and to evaluate basic features of language such as syntax, vocabulary, and grammar in Hebrew. It is assumed that academic writing will eventually develop as part of the course. During staff meetings, the issue of literacies is constantly discussed in order to enhance the awareness of the lecturers in the disciplinary courses to take responsibility and to embed a criterion of academic writing as part of their grading/evaluation. Apart from the admission policy of the programme, students whose mother tongue is not Hebrew are required, according to the policy of the College, to take a yearlong course in Hebrew before the commencement of their studies.

The academic literacies course in the M.Teach. is not the first course our students take that focuses on language skills. A third of the students had taken a literacy/writing course in Hebrew in their B.A, and most of them come from text-based discipline backgrounds. In addition, in Israel EAP courses in B.A./B.Sc. degrees in all academic institutes are compulsory, in order to enhance reading comprehension skills in English, which is the prevailing language in the academic literature. However, whereas the EAP course the students had taken in their first degree focussed on language skills and writing conventions, the current course presents a double challenge: improvement of writing skills but mainly socialization into the academic discourse and culture. The decision to include another literacies course in Hebrew in a Master's degree draws on the belief that the students will gain understanding of academic culture and academic discourse more easily if they did it this time in their mother tongue.

2. Review of the literature

2.1. Academic literacies in tertiary education

Issues relating to academic literacy in higher education emerged in the 1980s (e.g. Laurillard, 1979). Palmer et al. (2014) proved in their study that nearly half of the cohort of students had problems with academic writing and therefore suggest embedding of academic literacy support into disciplinary courses beyond the first semester (Gunn, Hearne, & Sibthorpe, 2011).

The change of university policies with regards to entry criteria which became more inclusive and the increase in demand for higher education had a negative impact on the level of academic writing too (Palmer et al, 2014). In addition, the pressure on academic staff as being responsible for the completion of the students' degrees and the fact that students are viewed as customers, create a tension between the wish to maintain the academic challenges, and the need to accommodate those challenges to students' abilities and expectations (Devereux et al., 2006). Embedded literacy support has been adopted in many bachelor degree courses to address this tension, and is likely needed in some higher degree courses as well. The research interests of faculty members who teach academic literacies courses to graduate students are language and literacy, the sociology of knowledge, professional development, developing and teaching graduate level writing courses (Rose & McClafferty, 2001).

2.2. Understanding academic literacy versus academic literacies

The concept of academic literacies is used much more often in the plural than academic literacy (in the singular). Whereas the latter refers to a particular set of practices (Henderson & Hirst, 2007), the concept of academic literacies (in the plural) relates to making meaning within an academic context, and covers a range of topics such as critical thinking, database searching, academic conventions of writing, academic genres, and use of formal register (McWilliams & Allan, 2014). The multiplicity of identities, practices and meanings as reflected in 'literacies' indicates a shift from the 'study skills' model (Lea & Street, 1998). The emphasis lies in exploring disciplinary practices and their related rhetorical conventions and curriculum design (Lea, 2004).

Lea and Street (2006) argued a new approach to understanding student writing and academic literacies through thee overlapping models: (a) a study skills model; (b) an academic socialization model; (c) an academic literacies model. The study skills model concentrates upon teaching the formal features of language (such as sentence structure), and views writing as an individual and cognitive skill which can be easily transferred by students from one context to another. The academic socialization model acknowledges that each subject area and discipline use different genres and discourses to construct knowledge and is, therefore, concerned with acquisition of specific aspects of language that students might need for specific subjects and disciplines. The academic literacies model is similar to the academic socialization model, although it focuses on the dynamic, situational, complex features of the uses of literacy. The academic literacies approach dwells on historical discourse (Turner, 2004), social theories of learning (Wenger, 1998), and theories of communication (Kress, 2000). Lea and Street (2006) advocated in their study the academic literacies model because it indicates differences and specificity of institutional practices.

2.3. The shift in approaches to instruction of academic literacies

2.3.1. From the 'deficit model' to anthropological-sociocultural approaches

Until recently, most research on academic writing in higher education was situated within English for Academic Purposes (EAP) with the 'deficit model' as the prevailing model for understanding. This model focuses on students' knowledge, and a skill-based, utilitarian and practical view of academic writing, which adheres to universal rules of writing and students' ability to transfer their knowledge from one discipline to another (Stierer, 1998). This normative model is also called "identify and induct": identify writing conventions, and explore how to teach students to implement them in writing (Swales & Feak, 2004). This approach to academic literacies prefers text over practices. This means that writing is treated as a linguistic problem, and consequently the text becomes the main object of study. In contrast, the transformative approach to academic writing is socially-oriented, and focuses not only on the ability to identify the writing conventions, but also on the transfer to students' interests and experiences (Lillis & Scott, 2007). It shifts the emphasis from texts towards practices, and adopts an anthropological-sociocultural stance to student academic writing. The focus of this approach is the social practices surrounding the text, rather than the text itself, and how language is linked to social and situational factors (Street, 2004, 2005), as language does not stand in isolation but is linked to what people do (social practices) (Malinowski, 1994). This approach also challenges the writing conventions which are expected in academic writing (Lillis & Ramsey, 2005). Palmer et al. (2014) conclude that academic literacies is an operational dimension which focuses on language and grammatical competence; enculturation of students into discipline-specific discourses; and the critical social perspective (New Literacy Studies) which critically examines institutional practices (Coffin & Donohue, 2012). Lea (2004) argues that the relationship of students to the dominant literacy practices and discourses of the academy is more complex than suggested by other work on understanding student learning, because it involves a variety of aspects such as meaning-making, language, and culture, and students are not acculturated automatically into the academic culture.

Petric (2002) suggests that awareness-raising activities could focus on writing, and proposes the 'reflection-in-writing' approach, which encourages students to express themselves freely in a

written form, and the 'reflection-on-writing' approach, which follows a writing activity and encourages critical thinking on a suggested writing technique. Rose and McClafferty (2001), too, assert the importance of the reflective aspect of writing, and claim that while reflecting on their writing, the writers also reflect about themselves.

2.3.2. Generic versus discipline-related literacies instruction

In spite of the shift in the last decade towards the conviction that academic literacies should be taught in discipline subjects (Wingate, 2011), the generic format is still prevailing (Harris & Ashton, 2011; Wingate, Andon, & Cogo, 2011). In contrast, the "not-one-size fits all approach" (Friedrich, 2008) argues in favour of embedding literacy skills in disciplinary courses. Early and current studies have identified the benefits of embedding generic academic skills into subject-focused learning rather than teaching the skills separately (Gunn, Hearner, & Sibthorpe, 2011; Nisbet, 1993; Laurillard, 1979; Martin & Ramsden, 1987; Herrington & Oliver, 2000), especially where collaboration between subject (disciplinary) lecturers and academic writing specialists has been implemented (Thies, 2012; Salamonson et al., 2009; Elton, 2010). Chanock (2013) describes online collaboration between academic language learning staff and discipline subject lecturers in a wide-scale, first-year, first-semester sociology subject across five campuses in Australia which she found cost-effective, because it does not require discipline teachers to take time from content or from face-to-face teaching. She reports that 75% of the students described the tool that was used for language and learning as good or very good.

2.4. Practices and challenges in embedding academic literacies

A Best-Practice Model for embedding literacy academic skills within different disciplines in tertiary education is offered by McWilliams and Allan who describe institution-wide support (2014). The model demonstrates collaboration between the student in a central position, with the learning advisor (academic expert) and subject lecturer who team-teach after assessing the learner's needs, while the departure point is the task around which the literacy support is developed and revised. The model was implemented in a compulsory methodological course at Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand and emphasized skills such as paragraph structure, APA, and grammar. Previous studies support compulsory attendance in such courses (Morris, 2008). This model highlights a double challenge: meeting individual needs of a learner in the framework of a literacy course, and negotiating collaborative work between 2 lecturers.

Moreover, the literature highlights the complexity in devising academic literacies support both from the teachers' and learner's aspects. The development of academic competence is associated with many factors. Some of these factors are related to the *individual*, such as motivation and help-seeking behavior (Donohue & Erling, 2012); the student's personality, cultural and educational background and level of proficiency (Petric, 2002); the students' maturity, socio-economic background, tasks, and degree sought (Hill et al., 2010; Pocock, 2010; Leach et al., 2010). Other factors relate to the *management* of the process that, according to Gunn et al. (2011), is becoming unmanageable with the increasing flexibility and student diversity at tertiary level.

Other factors relate to the *professional process*, such as the difficulty to make the transfer of the writing experiences from disciplinary courses that incorporate literacy skills implicitly or explicitly to other courses (Weinberger, 2017). In addition, studies yielded that students' attitudes towards academic writing courses develop over time and do not occur instantly (Siragusa, 2011; Petric, 2002). *Attitudes* are yet another factor: Studies focusing on EAP courses uncover a complex relationship between attitudes, beliefs, writing experience and writing development. Positive attitudes do not automatically translate into behaviors, particularly if students perceive lack of control over the situation, such as pressing deadlines and external factors (Ajzen (1991).

2.6. Summary

The literature review indicates a shift from generic literacy courses to a recognition of the need for a gradual transfer across disciplines; a shift from study skills models to socially-oriented models which acknowledge students' need to enculturate into their specific disciplines; a shift from 'one-size-fits-all' approach to a discipline-related approach; a shift from the belief that writing is a decontextualized skill to acknowledgement of the importance of a learning context. This overall tendency underpins the goals of the study as presented below.

3. Methods

3.1. The goals of the study

The overall aim of the study was to investigate the academic justification for embedding a course on academic literacy in a Master's degree in the students' mother tongue. In order to obtain the full picture, the students' and instructors' experience of the course were explored by the head of the programme who initiated the academic literacy course and designed it with the instructors in its present format. The exploration was conducted with reference to the necessity, contribution and suitability of the academic literacy course as a compulsory course in a Master's degree, and to understand the factors that might affect these perceptions. In addition, it aimed to detect gaps between the perceptions of the students and the instructors.

The research questions (RQ) are:

1. How do the students perceive the necessity, contribution, and suitability of a compulsory academic writing course in a Master's degree?
2. Do the following factors affect the students' perceptions:
   a. The academic discipline/background from the student's B.A./B.Sc.;
   b. Previous courses on academic writing in the student's B.A./B.Sc.;
   c. Differences between the 3 groups (each with a different instructor)
3. How do the instructors perceive the necessity and contribution of a compulsory academic writing course in a Master's degree?
4. What are the main gaps between the perceptions of the students and the instructors?

The three factors that appear in RQ 2 were relevant in order to obtain a full picture of the course perceptions with regard to RQ 1. The students came from 10 academic disciplines and while considering the 'future' of this course in the programme, it was necessary to explore whether their academic background and their background in writing courses in their B.A./B.Sc. would affect their perceptions. For example, if the findings suggested that either of the first two factors were significant to the students' perceptions of the course, then the following options of formatting the course would be considered: dividing the students into groups according to text-based discipline backgrounds and science-based backgrounds, or according to those who had taken a writing/literacy course in Hebrew (not the compulsory EAP), as opposed to students who had not taken such a course. The factor of the differences in the course perceptions between the groups, each with a different instructor, was included to ensure that we did not overlook the possibility of problems stemming from classroom dynamics, from instructor-students relations, or from the instructor's personality and attitude, rather than design of the programme or prior experiences of the learners.

3.2. The context of the study

The idea of incorporating a writing course in a Master's degree was part of a system-wide pedagogical agenda initiated by the Dean of Faculty in the biggest College of Education in Israel, to develop students' reading, written and oral proficiencies in a faculty of education (Weinberger, 2016). The clear statement of the initiative was that academic literacy is a key component in all

levels of education, including academic teacher education. The process was a 3-year plan with gradual implementation of a pilot programme, and a follow-up evaluation study. The current study depicts a small-scale change in a postgraduate programme as part of the large-scale initiative in the Faculty of Education. Yet, this change was quite revolutionary for two reasons: (1) No other postgraduate programme in the faculty or in the whole college has adopted the idea of offering a writing course for university graduates in their mother tongue. (2) This initiative challenges the assumption that being a native speaker of a language and that having a B.A. or B.Sc. guarantees a good level of academic writing in the student's mother tongue. In addition, the format of the course was compulsory in the programme.

The 60 participants in the study were first-year students in the Teacher Education Programme (M.Teach.), where they obtain a Master's degree in Teaching and Education and a teaching certificate for secondary schools in a variety of subjects which are congruent with their academic degrees. In their main study day, most of the courses are generic and focus on teaching, pedagogy and education. The second study day is a practicum day and the students spend their time in schools with the disciplinary instructor. The students are admitted to the programme on the basis of a B.A./B.Sc. degree in designated subjects with a minimum average of 80/100, as well as a high level of motivation to become teachers/educators. The disciplines (subjects) which are offered in the programme are English, Mathematics, Literature, Civil Studies, History, Business Management, Biology, Communication Studies, Film Studies, Art & Design Studies. The study was conducted in the first semester of the programme within the framework of an academic course entitled 'Academic Literacy'.

3.3. The course design

The design of the course which is situated in the M.Teach. programme results from the vision of the programme:

> The programme aims to enhance students' curiosity and motivation to engage in education as a profession, and explore its multi-facets during the period of their studies and as life-long learners in the rest of their teaching career. In the course of their studies the students in the programme will develop an educational agenda as homeroom teachers, and will acquire the necessary tools to become subject teachers in secondary schools in an academic discipline parallel to their B.A./B.Sc.

The course aims at the enhancement of writing skills in the students' mother tongue, Hebrew, through emphasis on readings of education-related academic texts rather than their specific discipline-related texts. The specific goals that appear in the course syllabus are the development of presentation skills (how to present arguments), of oral and written expression, of peer review skills, and of writing conventions. The class format is designed as a series of workshops rather than lectures. The workshops involve plenary discussions, group work, and two individual tutoring sessions with the instructor.

The course abstract (translated from the syllabus in Hebrew) states:

> This is an advanced course in a workshop format for students in the M.Teach. programme. The course aims at the enhancement of academic writing skills of the student with relevance to education. The skills acquired during the course will help the students broaden their horizons, express their opinions in the public area of the Israeli society, and develop skills and interest in conducting research as students in the programme and in their future teaching career.

The course abstract seems to be in line with the definition of 'academic literacies' more than with the definition of 'academic literacy' because its foci are beyond the development of writing and linguistic skills, and they focus on understanding how academic writing works, and on the social

and political context of education as a discipline. The course design is congruent with previous studies that aim to highlight the social context of education, to enhance critical thinking and making meaning, to engage students in situational challenges such as peer reviews (McWilliams & Allan, 2014). It exposes the students to the dynamic, situational, and complex features of the uses of literacy (Turner, 2004). The examples below show how the course tasks invite the students to critically consider the social context of education:

> Write a short paragraph in which you introduce the principles which underpin education in two of the following sectors of the Israeli society: Arab, Druze, Jewish Haredi.
>
> Write a short paragraph which addresses the discrepancies in the Israeli society as reflected in study books in your disciplines, and present the political considerations which underpin the choice of books.

The two examples above require the students to take a position and write their opinion while referring to the politics of education in social contexts. In addition, the course encourages students' socialization into the academic culture as can be seen in the following tasks:

> The introduction: Write a short introduction to your composition (one paragraph). State the problem, and explain how you intend to solve it. What you write in the introduction is a "promise" to the reader of your composition which you will develop in the next paragraphs.
>
> The 'body' of the composition: 'I can argue and convince!' In the Introduction you stated the problem with a possible solution. Now you need to expand on this and provide evidence (case studies, previous studies, etc.).

The examples above encourage the student to integrate into the academic culture by understanding that academic writing involves more than literacies skills and that there is a lot to learn in order to become part of the academic culture and community. In addition, these tasks invited the students to develop metacognition on the tasks they perform, such as analyse how they had approached a given dilemma in education in their writing, and what other options they might have used. The rationale for these tasks is situated within the epistemology of education and academic writing.

The 60 students were divided randomly into three heterogeneous classes, each with a different instructor, regardless of their academic background and previous academic writing courses they had taken. The instructors developed and used the same syllabus, and collaborated on different aspects of the course. The academic background of the instructors was Humanities (History, Philosophy, Literature).

The course grade is composed of 70% for the final submissions of the two compositions on education-related topics, and 30% for a portfolio which contains the drafts of the two submissions and week-to-week submissions on relevant topics, such as integrating academic resources, writing conventions, opening and closing paragraphs. The 30% were supposed to make a formative assessment that reflects the writing process the students went through in the first half of the course. The students are assessed on the drafts of their compositions, their active participation and involvement in the course, the reading of the course materials, and their week-to-week submissions and drafts. The week-to-week submissions are assessed and returned to the students with the instructor's detailed comments and suggestions without a grade. The grade on the 30% was revealed at the end of the semester, at which point the students were also notified of the 70% summative assessment of the final compositions and the course grade. The course views writing as a process, in line with Rose and McClafferty (2001) who assert that writing is an opportunity for the students not only to form their scholarly identities and reflect on their writing, but also to reflect on themselves.

3.4. Research design and data analysis

The research population consisted of 60 students and the three course instructors. The mixed approach in the study combined qualitative and quantitative methods and aimed at obtaining a full picture of the students and staff perceptions of the academic literacy course.

Towards the end of the first semester, questionnaires were administered to the students (Appendix 1), and to the three instructors (Appendix 3). Then, interviews were conducted with the three instructors in order to get clarifications and in-depth comments. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four students (Appendix 2), including two students from text-based discipline backgrounds (Civil Studies and Communications), and two students from science-based disciplines (Mathematics and Biology). As the interviews were semi-structured, the question order differed according to the issues that were brought up by the interviewees.

The quantitative method was applied to responses to the students' questionnaire. For research question 1, descriptive statistics were used and the findings are introduced by percentages and means based on the responses on Likert scales. For research question 2, a one-way ANOVA and *t*-tests were applied. For the purpose of the statistical analysis, the students were divided into two groups: the first group included the text-based discipline backgrounds: Communications, Film Studies, History, English, Literature, Art & Design Studies, and Civil Studies. The second group included science-based disciplines: Mathematics, Biology, and Business Management. The first group consisted of 39 students whereas the second group consisted of 21 students.

Below is a detailed explanation of the analysis, referring to tables in Section 4.2 below.

RQ 2a (Table 1): A *t*-test was used in order to determine the statistical significance of the differences in the perceptions of students about course necessity, course contribution, and course suitability for a Master's degree *between samples from two populations*: students who come from text-based discipline backgrounds, and those who come from science-based disciplines.

RQ 2b (Table 2): A *t*-test was used in order to determine the differences in the perceptions of students of the course necessity, course contribution and suitability for a Master's degree *between samples from two populations*: students who took previous courses on academic writing and those who did not take such courses.

RQ 2c (Table 3): A one-way ANOVA was used in order to determine differences in the perceptions of students of the course necessity, course contribution, and course suitability for a Master's degree *between samples from three populations* – students studying the same course with each of the three different instructors.

The qualitative approach was applied on RQ 3 on responses to the open questions on the questionnaire with the course instructors, as well as the explanatory comments they provided in subsequent interviews, which were recorded by means of a cellular phone and then transcribed. The views of the three course instructors were examined with regard to three variables: course necessity, course contribution, and course suitability for a Master's degree.

The qualitative approach was also applied on the semi-structured interviews with the students. The study adopted a thematic analysis approach for content analysis of the interviews. The questions asked were guidelines and the interviewees were encouraged to provide more data of their own, which were later on analysed and clustered with no predetermined categories.

4. Findings

4.1. Research Question 1: How do the students perceive the necessity, contribution, and suitability of a compulsory academic writing course in a Master's degree?

The overall statistical findings indicated lack of satisfaction with the course, with the mean scores for all three factors being low as will be elaborated on below.

The score for 'necessity of an academic writing course' was low (M = 1.88). On the scale of 1–5, no participant chose the high levels (4–5), whereas 66.4% chose the low levels (1–2) and 33.3% chose the middle score on the scale (3).

The qualitative findings were congruent with the quantitative findings. In the semi-structured interviews, the students argued that the course is unnecessary for them. Indeed, all of them graded their level of writing as 'high' or 'very high'. Two of them had not taken a course on academic writing in their previous studies, whereas two students had taken such a course. The students argued that the course should not be a compulsory course, especially "for those who took a writing course in previous studies". One of them agreed that "we needed a touch of literacy skills to refresh our memory", but at the same time he said, "I would remove the course in its present format from the programme." Another student argued: "I'm certain that it should not be made compulsory. Moreover, I would not have chosen the course from a given choice list. I don't think that I'll ever look at the course notes again."

The score for 'course contribution' was also low (M = 2.35). On the scale of 1–5, 54.9% chose the low levels (1–2), 19.5% chose the high levels (4–5), and 25.7% chose the middle score on the scale (3).

In the semi-structured interviews, the students were asked about the course contribution. Their answers indicated more positive perceptions of the course contribution than what the statistical findings indicated. They mentioned the knowledge they acquired during the course on the following themes: integrating of academic resources, choosing relevant materials, composition structure, writing conventions. One student admitted that during the course she learnt how to 'cook her ideas' slowly and refer to writing as a process of introspection rather than as a product-based activity. Another student agreed that the course contributed to the seminar paper that the students were writing in the first year of their studies. Two students concluded: "Some of the students are totally unmotivated in class, while others demonstrated some motivation." One student distinguished between "the course that was helpful as opposed to the course structure which was bad."

The score for 'suitability of a compulsory writing course in a Master's degree' was also low (M = 2.57). On the scale of 1–5, 51.3% chose the low levels (1–2), 28.3% chose the high levels (4–5), and 20.4% chose the middle score on the scale (3).

In contrast to the statistical findings which indicated a widely-held view that the course is unsuitable in a Master's degree, the interviewees did not express a clear-cut opinion with regards to embedding a writing course in a Master's degree. Most of the students did not like the idea of being 'made' to take such a course: "I do not see the point of making us take such a course in a Master's degree. This is simply disrespect on the part of the College. We are not doing our B.A. now. We have enough experience from our first degree of how to write and how to submit assignments." Another student argued: "It is simply discouraging that we need to pay for an academic course from which we do not benefit at all." Another poignant statement was, "This course seems to come out-of-the-blue for me. This is an obsolete course whose goals are unclear."

Other students did not completely reject the possibility of a writing course and came up with suggestions how to make the course fit into the programme in a better way. One student suggested to embed the literacy goals into the seminar paper that they were writing:

> In the seminar course we spend the first semester on texts that were related to the course topic 'Philosophy in Education', a topic that we are not at all familiar with. Instead of some of the texts, the course instructor could have included elements of practical writing to help us write the seminar paper. Alternatively, the compositions that we write in the writing course could serve as a basis for the seminar paper on the same topic.

Another student suggested to embed rhetoric and oral expression skills in addition to written expression. One student suggested to teach writing 'through the back door' in the framework of a

disciplinary course in order to increase the students' motivation. Another suggestion was to turn the course into an online course, because "anyway there were too many power point presentations that were sent to us and whose goals were not clear". One student argued that "a writing course is about writing and too much talking in class does not enhance writing skills".

During the interviews the students expressed a number of critical comments which relate to the course format, assignments, methodology, level and content. For example, one student said: "The course was technical and 'dry' with no real challenge. Our greatest challenge was to choose a topic/article from a given list …". Another student complained that the students did not have the liberty to choose a topic. Three students referred to the fact that "students were sitting in class not really knowing what they were expected to be doing. Most of them felt that they were wasting their time"; "There is no justification to spend 90 minutes every week on a course with so little content and knowledge acquired". Two students commented on the course structure and methodology: "The teaching methodology and the order of topics were chaotic"; "the course was amorphous and I could not see the point of the excessive use of power point presentations in a writing course". One student expressed criticism towards lack of clear expectations: "I began to understand the tasks and requirements at the end of the course when the instructor exposed the rubric page of the final assignment. The expectations were vague and led to frustration". Three students expressed strong criticism with regard to the relevance of the course for them. One of them complained: "At the age of 42 I finally decided to enroll to this programme and to gain tools that will help me in my discipline – History. Instead what I get in this course is more and more articles on education".

The assignments seemed to be a big concern in the students' criticisms. In terms of relevance: "At the beginning, we had to present an argument in writing. It felt like an elementary-school assignment. Something you can do on your own with written guidelines or via email, with almost no face-to-face meetings." Two students commented on "the strict timetable, with little flexibility and on-going tasks that were too structured". Two students commented on the nature of the assignment: "We had to write the first composition gradually starting with 300 words, which expanded to 600, and then to 900 words. This type of assignment did not work for me. I would much prefer to write the assignment according to sections, such as Introduction, Discussion, etc, rather than by word limit". The second student concluded:

> The difficulty was not in the academic writing but in the excessive intensity and over-load of week-to-week submissions which did not lead to a writing product but seemed detached from one another. I would recommend that the tasks be theme-based rather than length-based.

4.2. Research Question 2: Do the following factors affect the students' perceptions?

2a. The academic discipline of the students B.A./B.Sc.

The differences between the perceptions of the two groups of academic disciplines – text-based discipline backgrounds versus science-based discipline backgrounds – were insignificant with regard to the three factors as shown in Table 1, indicating that the students' disciplinary backgrounds did not alter their perceptions.

The issue of the academic disciplines was considered relevant only by a student who demonstrated exceptional writing skills. He claimed that the main problem of the course results from the heterogeneity in the writing levels of students who came from a variety of disciplines:

> In one of the lessons the instructor asked to peer review each other's writing. I received a paragraph which was so low content-wise and language-wise, and I could see that my peer could not understand my detailed comments. It was quite frustrating for me and for him. Similarly, the comments that he wrote on my paragraph were limited in scope and ideas. The heterogeneity was demonstrated in every lesson in the questions that were asked in class, such as "What

> is an argument?" A group of students, including myself, felt that the course was not necessary for them, and showed resistance in class. Even the instructor felt, at times, helpless in her attempts to bridge the gaps. The way I handled these frustrations was to help students who experienced difficulty in writing throughout the course.

The other 3 students did not bring up the issue of disciplinary heterogeneity as relevant to the success or lack thereof of the course. Two of them suggested to embed the writing course in the first-year seminar course, which is a subject-related course with three 'umbrella topics' they need to choose from: educational philosophy, globalization in education, the Bible and education.

Table 1. Comparison of perceptions based on students' academic disciplines. Means are reported for a 5 point scale with 1 = 'to a limited extent' and 5 = 'to a major extent'. The reported *p*-value is for a two-sided *t*-test assuming equal variances.

	Text-based disciplines *M* (*SD*)	Science-based disciplines *M* (*SD*)	*t*	*p*
Course necessity	1.70 (0.91)	2.00 (0.84)	-1.193	0.239
Course contribution	2.30 (1.24)	2.40 (1.09)	-0.293	0.771
Course suitability	2.38 (1.26)	2.62 (1.40)	-0.633	0.530

2b. Previous courses on academic writing in the student's B.A./B.Sc.

The differences between the two groups, the group that had taken a previous course on academic writing and the group that had not, were found to be not statistically significantly different as shown in Table 2. However, on the question of 'the suitability of a writing course in a Master degree', the group that had not taken a writing course previously was slightly less negative than the group that had, and the difference was approaching significance at the 0.05 level. The average scores of the two groups regarding all questions were low, indicating that prior exposure to a writing course or not did not alter perceptions significantly.

Table 2. Impact of previous courses in academic writing on perceptions about the course. Means are reported for a 5 point scale with 1 = 'to a limited extent' and 5 = 'to a major extent'. The reported *p*-value is for a two-sided *t*-test assuming equal variances.

	Previous courses on academic writing *M* (*SD*)	No previous courses on academic writing *M* (*SD*)	*t*	*p*
Course necessity	1.73 (0.92)	2.00 (0.85)	1.172	0.246
Course contribution	2.27 (1.08)	2.45 (1.15)	0.632	0.530
Course suitability	2.23 (1.18)	2.85 (1.38)	1.826	0.073

The students' answers during the interviews did not relate to the issue of previously learnt courses on academic writing as relevant to the success of the course or lack thereof. In this sense, their answers agreed with the quantitative findings.

2c. Differences between the groups (each with a different instructor)

In contrast to the two above-mentioned factors, Table 3 shows that different instructors did appear to influence students' perceptions about the course, though no instructor managed to obtain strongly positive perceptions from their group of students.

Table 3. Comparison of the effects different instructors had on students' perceptions about the course using a one-way ANOVA.

	Group 1 *M* (*SD*)	Group 2 *M* (*SD*)	Group 3 *M* (*SD*)	*F*	*p*
Course necessity	2.10 (0.83)	1.44 (0.78)	2.00 (0.93)	3.224	0.047
Course contribution	3.00 (0.97)	2.22 (1.17)	1.86 (0.94)	6.658	0.003
Course suitability	3.29 (1.15)	2.00 (1.08)	2.33 (1.35)	6.109	0.004

In the interviews, the students referred to the instructor's attitude and personality as an important factor. One student who expressed deep criticism of the course said that "the instructor, R. was inclusive and tolerant towards the students, unlike the topic which was boring and technical". Two more students said: "In this course a lot depends on the lecturer"; "In teaching a writing course which is not substantiated by riches of materials or topics, if the instructor is not fundamentally charismatic, the course is liable to fail".

Another issue related to quality of the tutoring sessions: "Many students needed more than a 10-minute meeting which were unsatisfactory". Another student also commented on the "quick, superficial level of the personal meetings".

4.3. RQ 3: How do the instructors perceive the necessity and contribution of an academic writing course in a Master's degree?

The semi-structured interviews yielded data on the following themes.

4.3.1. The writing level of the students

Two instructors perceived the level of writing as low-mediocre, whereas one instructor perceived the level as mediocre. When asked to compare the level of the Master students in the programme to the level of students in B.Ed. programmes, two of the instructors attested that the level is the same and that "some of the good first-degree students have a higher writing ability than mediocre Master degree students". One instructor said that the level of the Master's students is "a bit higher than the level of first-degree students".

4.3.2. The course contribution

The three instructors asserted that most of the students were definitely in need of an academic writing course, and agreed that even those whose level of writing was good needed to improve their writing in order to meet the expectations of a Master's degree. When asked about whether they observed an improvement in the students' writing in the process of the course, they argued that an improvement was "noticeable and immediate" and could be seen in the portfolio which the students submitted at the end of the course. This portfolio contained the two compositions that were submitted along the course, and the drafts that preceded them. Two instructors expressed certainty that the improvement will be demonstrated later on in the process of their studies.

When asked about whether or not an academic writing course should be compulsory, two of the instructors answered positively. One of them asserted: "although offering the course as a choice is better than not offering a course at all, we should remember that there is no correlation between the students' perceived writing ability and their real writing ability". The third instructor suggested that "only the students who feel the need, should take the course".

4.3.3. The main difficulties in teaching the course

One instructor could not identify a specific difficulty. The second one mentioned lack of motivation for the course, lack of willingness to engage in writing, lack of intellectual curiosity alongside

a sense of excessive confidence on the students' part that they already possessed the required writing skills. The third instructor mentioned misbehaviours by a number of students who did not cooperate and even disrupted the lessons.

When asked about assumed reasons for the antagonism that they experienced, the instructors gave the following answers:

- the relatively mature age of the students (35–45) and the fact that many of them have families and work commitments and cannot meet the expectations of weekly written assignments;
- the fact that they have a first degree and cannot see why, at this stage, they are confronted with comments on their writing;
- their wish to obtain a degree with a minimum of effort at this stage of their lives;
- the writing assignments were tedious, intensive, and effort-consuming. (While aware of this, the instructors believed that the improvement in writing will be achieved by hard work on the part of the students and the submission of week-to-week assignments.)
- the course required independent thinking, independent academic search for materials, and independent writing which may be intimidating for inexperienced writers and researchers;
- the students received a formative assessment in mid-semester. Many students experience the feedback as traumatic and developed antagonism towards the course and the instructor;
- the students failed to see beyond the 'here and now', and could not understand the relevance of the course to their future studies. Thus, the course was perceived as a 'burden' or a 'sanction' imposed by the 'system';
- most of the students in the programme switched into teaching after experiencing another career. Part of them took up teaching due to an ideology to improve the educational system, and part of them due to employment issues.

4.4. The main gaps between the perceptions of the students and the instructors

Table 4 introduces a summary of gaps between the students' and the instructors' perceptions. It demonstrates the 'throwing of accusations' of both parties: "being dry, boring, inflexible, too strict, chaotic, vague, wasting time, and irrelevant" on the part of the students; "being unmotivated, looking for easy solutions, too confident in their writing skills with little awareness, disruptive, and superficial" on the part of the instructors.

Table 4. Gaps between students' and instructors' perceptions.

	Instructors' perceptions	Students' perceptions
Level of writing	Low-mediocre; not necessarily higher than B.Ed./B.Sc. students	High-very high
Course necessity	All students need to improve their writing to meet the degree expectations	Very low (M = 1.88)
Course contribution	An improvement was noticeable during the submission of drafts, and will be further seen in the future	Low (M = 2.35); Some students could see the practical contribution of the course
Course suitability for a Master degree	A writing course should be incorporated in a Master degree as the writing level is insufficient	Low (M = 2.57); They see the course as unsuitable in its present format. However, they had constructive suggestions for embedding academic writing.

Table 4 continued.

	Instructors' perceptions	Students' perceptions
Course format	It should be made compulsory or in the least be offered as a choice course	The students object to the present format. They suggest to incorporate the course in the first-year seminar course.
Difficulties in teaching/learning	Lack of students' motivation to engage in writing; Disruptions during classes; Objections on students' part;	The course is 'dry' and the materials are boring. The course structure is chaotic and the methodology is irrelevant. Overload of tasks with little flexibility.
Reasons for difficulties	Lack of understanding of the importance of a writing course alongside lack of awareness of their true writing skills; Family and work commitments and a wish to obtain a degree with minimum effort; Difficulty to receive feedback that leads to antagonism; Failure to see the benefit beyond the 'here and now';	The expectations were not clear. The assignments were not clear. The students did not see the rationale for the excessive tasks and requirements. The students felt the course was a waste of time. The personality and attitude of the instructors is an important factor in the students' satisfaction.

5. Discussion

The principal aim of the study was to investigate the academic justification for embedding a course on academic writing in a Master's degree in the students' mother tongue. The more specific aims were to explore the students' and the instructors' perceptions of courses of academic writing with reference to the necessity, contribution and suitability of the course in a Master's degree, and to understand the factors that might affect these perceptions. It is noteworthy that the course matches the definition of 'academic literacies' more than 'academic literacy' because it challenges the students to socialize into the academic culture of writing with Education as a common discipline, and focusses on academic writing as a culture rather than a set of writing skills and conventions. In addition, the course dwells on observations of educational environments and the use of academic literacies skills in their writing in a way that shows understanding of how academic knowledge is built in an academic discipline, beyond writing conventions.

The findings demonstrated gaps between the students and the instructors. The biggest gap was observed in the perceptions of the course necessity: while the instructors perceived the course as necessary for the students and their level of writing as low or mediocre, the students perceived the course necessity as very low, and their own level of writing as high or very high. This finding is significant because it indicates a dichotomy between the two groups with regards to the very basic question of whether such a course is necessary or not. The instructors expressed certainty regarding the course contribution and perceived a noticeable improvement in the students' academic writing during the course. In contrast, the students perceived the contribution as low (M = 2.35), yet in the interviews they related to some practical aspects of the contribution such as the knowledge of writing conventions for the sake of the seminar paper.

The issue of the course suitability in a Master's programme demonstrated gaps too. The students' comments on this issue were poignant and argued against including the course in the Master's

degree from many aspects: relevance, academic level, structure, and content. The statistical findings of the suitability were low ($M = 2.57$). Yet, despite the students' sharp criticism with regard to the course suitability, some of them came up with suggestions how to improve the structure, the tasks and the format of the course and were willing to reflect on the reasons for its present lack of suitability. Unlike the students, the instructors were certain that the course "belongs" in the programme. The instructors made efforts to plan the tasks around students' interests and experiences and adopted the anthropological-sociocultural stance to academic writing (Street, 2005). This was done through texts which focus on Education in different sectors of the Israeli society that allow the students to critically consider educational practices in these social contexts, such as Arab, Druze, Haredi, Orthodox.

Researchers agree about the complexity of embedding literacies courses (e.g. Lea, 2004). Researchers depict the diversity of factors that affect the process, such as cultural and educational background (Petric, 2002); the students' maturity, the tasks, the degree sought (Hill et al., 2010; Pocock, 2010; Leach et al., 2010); and the management of the process with the increasing flexibility and student diversity at tertiary level (Gunn et al., 2011). The complexity and multiplicity of factors played a part in the current study too: the tasks received (with strict timetable), and the degree sought (inasmuch as they considered a literacies course inappropriate in a Master's degree). In addition, the difficulty to transfer their writing experiences to other courses (Weinberger, 2017), and the fact that students' attitudes towards academic writing skills courses develop over time (Siragusa, 2011; Petric, 2002) were also perceived in this study mainly by the course instructors.

Before proceeding to the discussion of the course format, it is noteworthy that according to the course instructors, some students experienced the mid-semester formative assessment as traumatic. The supposedly formative assessment that was used aimed at providing the students and instructors with information about the learning process. Yet, the fact that the students received comments in the ongoing submissions and drafts but were exposed to the 'real' numeric grade of the 30% only towards the end of the course, puts a big question mark whether the interim assessment was formative or summative. This probably increased the students' frustration and antagonism towards the course instructors, because their perceptions of the critical comments did not match the numeric grade of the 30% which they received at the end of the course.

The mode of embedding the courses in the programme is yet another issue that needs reconsideration. Thies (2012) argues that piecemeal embedding is not sustainable and that there is a need for a whole-of-institution approach that supports professional development of course coordinators and academic literacies staff, as well as structures that support the collaboration between discipline subject lecturers and literacies staff. Yet, Chanock (2013) asserts that smaller-scale efforts should not be underestimated. Although being inspired by the large-scale faculty approach, it appears that the courses were introduced without taking the necessary measures to deliver the rationale of the course and its purposes, such as the process of knowledge-building in an academic discipline, and how to write an academic article. Although the students knew that the texts they will read for their writing will focus on Education, they were not aware of the fact that Education is the social context within which the course is situated and their writing is performed. Further, the fact that the course intends to socialize them into the academic culture, and show them how they can use it in their future career as potential researchers, was not presented explicitly. In this sense, the course missed the point of being an academic literacies course in the broad sense of the word. Although the course designers perceived it as an academic literacies course, it remained a "stand-alone course" in the students' perceptions,

As a result, the list of difficulties that the students and the instructors experienced demonstrates a huge gap between them. This gap showed that bridging these gaps requires deep thinking and much effort. The stance that the two parties take is almost contrary, and although the interviews reflected a "softer" and more balanced stance, at present there seems to be no common interest

between the instructors and the students. Clearly, these perceived gaps do not facilitate the search for an academic justification for embedding the course.

The course instructors is yet another issue to be discussed. During the interviews, the students argued that the attitude and personality of the instructor make a difference while at the same time they thought the course was irrelevant for them. The statistical findings yielded that the differences in the course perceptions between the three classes, each with a different instructor, are significant, despite the fact that the course syllabi were uniform among the three instructors. Although the differences might be accounted for by other factors, such as group dynamics resulting from the mix of students' personalities, these findings support the students' statements in the interviews with regard to the effect of the personality and attitude of the instructor on the course.

While weighing the pros and the cons of the academic justification for the course, it is clear that the current study indicates dissatisfaction among students and staff alike and massive gaps between the instructors and the students. Yet, the students' need for academic literacies support emerged from the instructors' responses and from previous and recent studies (Laurillard, 1979; Palmer, Levett-Jones, Smith, & McMillan, 2014). The answer to the question of the academic justification for the course is positive, with two possible options that emerged with regard to the course format: (1) Embed the literacies skills in a specific discipline-related course and devise a collaborative model between subject lecturers and writing experts. This shift is widely supported by recent studies (e.g. Chanock, 2013; Elton, 2010; McWilliams and Allan, 2014; Wingate, 2011). (2) Leave the course in its present format but ensure that that the epistemology behind the need for the course and its purposes is delivered explicitly.

6. Conclusions

The main issue of this study is relevant to any academic institute/programme, beyond geographical and language considerations. The study shows that implementing courses in academic literacies is a complicated process with many factors and considerations involved. The main conclusion of the study is that although the goals of the course were explicitly stated in the syllabus, they were not delivered in a clear way to the students. The interviews indicate that the students failed to understand that the course intended to address the discipline of Education as the common discipline they are studying and the main focus of their degree, and perceived the course as a generic course, which is totally irrelevant to their specific discipline of teaching. Consequently, many of them perceived the course as a waste of time and this is probably the reason for the gaps between the students and the instructors in their perceptions of the course necessity, contribution and suitability to a Master's degree.

These gaps call for proactive measures. Therefore, it is suggested that some preliminary steps should be taken at the outset of the course, in order to match expectations between the instructors and the students and deliver the rationale of the course and its aims to acculturate the students to the academic discourse in general and to Education as a discipline in particular. This should ensure that the students will get familiar with the context of the course and its potential benefit for their future teaching and for them as potential researchers. Another link needs to be made for the students between their academic writing course in Hebrew and the fact that in their future roles they would likely be assessing the academic writing in Hebrew of their students. Such links should affect the students' attitudes towards the course that they were 'made' to take, and enhance their understanding of the potential of the course to inform their future teaching.

Suggestions regarding the course format indicate that the course requirements need to change by a decrease in task overload, and an increase in flexibility regarding submission and timetable. Further consideration is suggested of whether to initiate a shift towards a 'choice course' for students who are interested in a research or a writing career, or retain the compulsory format including, in future, a clear delivery of the course purposes and foci. Here too, there are options. Ac-

cording to the interviews and previous studies, it is possible to embed the literacies skills in discipline-related courses and devise a collaborative model between subject lecturers and writing experts. Alternatively, we could leave the course in its present format and ensure that the epistemology behind the need for the course and its purposes are delivered explicitly. It is hard to decide on practical conclusions on the basis of the differences in the course perceptions between the 3 groups of the 3 instructors, because the differences can derive from the class dynamics which is hard to predict, or from the personality and attitude of the instructor. While class dynamics are hard to control, the personality and attitude of the instructor should be considered by course designers in order to enhance a climate of tolerance and empathy in a course that may be liable to criticism.

Another suggestion is related to the summative character of the supposedly 30% formative assessment (see in Section 3.3). It seems necessary that facilitating structures be established to bridge over the gaps between the students and lecturers, as well as between the discipline subject lecturers and the literacies staff, in order to allow for collaboration. Researchers agree that there are many factors that affect the embedding of literacies skills in discipline-related courses that need to be considered (Chanock, 2013; Fenton-Smith, 2012).

The main limitation of the study is the small number of the student-interviewees. Although four in number, the interviews yielded significant data, and more interviews could certainly enrich the picture.

Although the study took place in the local context of Hebrew-speaking students, it may be applicable to wider contexts worldwide, where students are admitted to higher degrees and need to meet higher academic standards in writing in their mother tongue.

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Appendix A. Students' questionnaire

- Please detail your academic background (B.A/B.Sc - circle):
  Department _____

  Institute_____
- Have you studied a designated course on academic writing? Yes/No (circle)
  If 'yes' – how many courses? 1; 2; more than 2;
- To what extent do you see the writing course as necessary for you? (1 = to a limited extent; 5 = to a major extent)
  1 2 3 4 5
- To what extent do you think that the course has contributed to the level of your writing? (1 = to a limited extent; 5 = to a major extent)
  1 2 3 4 5
- Do you think that a writing course is suitable in a Master degree ? (1 = to a limited extent; 5 = to a major extent)
  1 2 3 4 5
- Other relevant comments
  _____
  _____

Appendix B: Guidelines for the semi-structured interviews with the students

- What is your academic discipline?
- How do you perceive your level of academic writing?
- Did you study an academic writing course before?
- Define 'proper academic writing'.
- Have you noticed a process of improvement during the course?
- What have you gained from the course?
- What can you say about the course tasks?
- What is your opinion about the methodology of teaching in the course?
- Do the personality and attitude of the instructor have any effect on the course? If so, how?
- As a student in the course, describe your main difficulties.
- Do you believe that an academic writing course should be a compulsory course in a Master degree?
- What would you expect to learn in this course?

Appendix C: Questionnaires for the course instructors

- How would you define the writing level of the students in the course?
  - Low
  - Low-mediocre
  - Mediocre
  - High
  - Very high
- Do you believe that a writing course is suitable in a Master degree?
  - Most students do not need this course
  - A small number of the students needs the course
  - Most of the students need the course
- To what extent the level of the students' writing improved as a result of the course?
  - some improvement was observed
  - a major improvement has been observed
  - The improvement is yet to be seen in the course of their studies
- Should the course be made compulsory for the following groups?
  - Graduates of science-based disciplines (Mathematics, Biology, Business Management, Economics);
  - It should be made compulsory for all students in the programme;
  - It should be offered as a 'choice course' for those who feel they need it;
- Define the level of writing of the students in the programme:
  - Similar to the level of B.Ed students;
  - A bit higher than the level of B.Ed students;
  - Lower than the level of B.Ed students;
- What difficulties have you experienced in teaching this course?
- What are the causes for these difficulties?

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