MULTIPLE METAPHORS IN AN UNDERSTANDING
OF ACADEMIC LITERACY

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ABSTRACT

This article describes understandings derived from work in a first year Systematic Philosophy class at a historically black South African university which challenge the assumptions on which the writer has based her practice as a teacher of English as a second language for many years. These assumptions focus on the perception of problems related to the production and reception of academic texts as solely, or even mainly, linguistic in origin. Analysis of writing and interviews with students suggests that the problems in the writing stem mainly from their unfamiliarity with academic discourses in spite of the fact that all are speakers of English as an additional language.

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Introduction

It is late February and, in northern Kwa Zulu Natal, the temperatures are soaring into the 30Cs. At the University of Zululand, a class of newly matriculated students sit waiting expectantly for their first lecture in a Systematic Philosophy course. They wait, not in a lecture hall, but in the university chapel, the only venue on the campus with sufficient seats for everyone in the large class. In the chapel, facilities are minimal. Students sit in the pews, there are no fans and the only teaching aid is a small blackboard on an old-fashioned easel.

I have begun by describing the scene in the chapel in order to give some sort of idea of what higher education involves at a historically black South African institution. I describe poor facilities in order to contrast the physical surroundings with the expectancy clearly visible on those first year students' faces. This expectancy is important as it leads me to writing about an understanding which stems from my own journey as a teacher of English as a second language in places as diverse as a private language teaching school in south west England and a university in an impoverished state in the Middle East, to the role in which I now find myself: that of a 'language specialist' charged with contributing to the development of academic literacy of students who are all speakers of English as another language. This understanding concerns the power of what I will call *second language discourses* to explain away the learning

histories of students such as those who sit in the chapel as Asecond language problems@. Through my work, I have come to understand that the students in the chapel do not have Alanguage problems@ in the way, for example, a French or German student coming to do postgraduate work at a British university would. Their situation is qualitatively different and, if I persist in doing my professional best and teaching them Alanguage@ in the way I have been trained and in the way the teaching of language is popularly perceived, I will collude in denying the mass of students in the chapel access to much of what they hope and expect from a university. Over the past three years I have attempted to work alongside the mainstream lecturer teaching the class in the chapel in a way which resists an explanation of students= Aproblems@ as Asecond language problems@.   This paper is written to provides an outline of the theoretical rationale which underpins that resistance.

Biker bars and Ayuppie@ drinkers

In recent years, an increasing number of linguists have come to work from what has become known as a *socio-cultural* understanding of language and language use. James Paul Gee (1990:xv), one of the principal exponents of such a view explains:

> *Imagine that I park my motorcycle, enter my neighbourhood `biker' bar, and say to my leather-jacketed and tattooed drinking buddy , as I sit down: `May I have a match for my cigarette please?' What I have said is perfectly grammatical English, but it is `wrong' nonetheless (unless I have used a heavily ironic tone of voice).  It is not just what you say , but how you say it.  In this bar, I haven't said it in the `right' way. I should have said something like `Gotta match?' or `Give me a light, would'ya?'*

Now imagine that I say the `right' thing (`Gotta match?' or `Give me a light, would'ya?'), but while saying it, I carefully wipe off the bar stool with a napkin to avoid getting my newly pressed designer jeans dirty.  In this case, I've still got it wrong.  In this bar, they just don't do that sort of thing:  I have said the right thing, but my `saying-doing' combination is nonetheless wrong. It's not just what you say or even just how you say it. It's also what you are and do while you say it. It is not enough just to say the right `lines' , one needs to get the whole `role' right (like a role in a play or movie). In this bar, the biker bar, I need to play the role of a `tough' guy, not a young urban professional (a `yuppie') relaxing on the weekend. Other bars cater to different roles, and if I want to, I can go to many bars so long as I play many different roles.

In this extract, Gee uses the metaphor of a bar to explain the concept of a *discourse* (see, also, Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1980). The members of the discourse are the regular drinkers at the bar: people who are welcomed there because other regular drinkers see that they share the same values, feelings and ways of acting and speaking as themselves. In order to be accepted as a regular drinkers, newcomers have to demonstrate that they know how to act and speak like the people who are already there and that they share the same feelings and values.

We can extend Gee=s metaphor to the university and imagine that the university is a bar. The regular drinkers at the university bar are the academics: the professors, the lecturers and the postgraduate students. New students come and stand at the bar and

drink there but, unless they can show themselves to be Athe same@ as the regular drinkers, they will not be accepted. In order to be Athe same@, they have to speak in the same way as the regular drinkers, act in the same way as the regular drinkers and, importantly, share the same feelings and values as the regular drinkers. It is important that they share the same feelings and values as the regular drinkers because, unless they do, they will not really be able to speak and act in the same way as they do. They might be able to pretend to speak and act in the same way but, sooner or later, their pretence will be exposed. In the university Abar@, they actually award pieces of paper to show that newcomers have been accepted.   These pieces of paper are called degrees and, the higher the degree, the greater the level of acceptance.

The concept called *literacy* involves knowing how to speak and act in a discourse (or Abar@).   *Academic literacy* involves knowing how to speak and act in academic discourses. Literacy is not something which can be overtly taught in a convenient introductory series of lectures. People become literate by observing and interacting with other members of the discourse until the ways of speaking, acting, thinking, feeling and valuing common to that discourse become natural to them. Such an understanding of the acquisition of literacy has led other writers, such as Hanne Bock (1988), to claim that the idea the academic literacy should be a starting point for a university career is erroneous. Rather, they claim, the development of academic literacy should be viewed as the goal or endpoint of a degree course.

The massification of tertiary education, particularly where that massification involves the establishment of a multicultural, multilingual student body in place of one which is

monocultural and monolingual, has tended to cloud the issues involved in understanding the achievement of academic literacy as the goal of a university career. In the past, a university education was reserved for an educated élite who had been prepared for the experience in schools which did not differ too much from the university itself and in homes which did not differ from those of their lecturers and professors. To return to the metaphor of the bar: in the past, most students had at least been drinking in bars in the same neighbourhood as the university bar. With the massification of education, however, they now arrive at university bringing ways of speaking and acting and systems of thinking and valuing which underpin that speaking and acting which would only be Aat home@ in bars which are Aacross town@.

South African universities, with their iniquitous history of apartheid, are places where the massification of tertiary education, brought about by the 1994 democratic elections, has brought different ways of thinking, acting, valuing and speaking most clearly into confrontation with each other. Although the University of Zululand is a historically black institution, and has therefore had more experience of dealing with different ways of thinking, acting, valuing and speaking than many other institutions in the country, the disruption in education caused by the struggle of the late apartheid years means that many of the young people currently seeking access to the institution arrive with ways of thinking and being which are even more different to those staff are accustomed to meeting. The fact that the overwhelming majority of those students are speakers of English as an additional language supports the tendency, within the institution, to name the problems students encounter as they begin working at tertiary level Alanguage problems.@ Solutions to these Aproblems@ then centre on providing remedial

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instruction in English language and the language related skills of reading and writing in special compulsory courses run by Alanguage specialists@. Low student attendance rates on these courses raises the question of their perceived value to the very people they are intended to serve. Complaints from academic staff that students *still* cannot write and read even after they have completed language courses further emphasises the need for their evaluation. Although understandings of the concepts of discourse and literacy such as Gee=s are not new, they are important in the current South African context as they facilitate richer appreciations of students= Aproblems@. If the aim of redressing historical inequality is to be achieved in the new dispensation, such understandings are of crucial importance not only because they do not distinguish between students along old racial lines but also because they hold the promise of providing epistemological as well as formal access to the academy to those who were long denied any access.

New ways of thinking, acting, valuing and speaking

What are the differences between the ways of thinking, acting, valuing and speaking which students bring from home and school discourses and those which they must acquire in order to gain membership of academic discourses? My work in the philosophy class in the chapel has revealed differences which fall into the following areas.

Conceptions of Learning

At the beginning of each year, I ask students why they have come to university. The answers they give me tend to cluster around a generic Ato get knowledge@:

> *I have come to university to be educated, to get more knowledge. To*
>
> *improve my studies.* (Anonymous)

For the majority of students, knowledge is a commodity which is Asold@ by the university (the ability to pay fees rather than meet formal admission requirements playing a major gatekeeping function for those who seek to gain entry to the institution) and which, when acquired, will allow the holder to progress in society. During apartheid, the deliberate process of denying the black majority access to the development of certain kinds of skills means that education is often sought as a means of material advancement which will benefit not only the learner but also the entire families who often support him/her.   Thus one student writes:

> *I have come to the University to further my education so that I can be*
>
> *someone tomorrow. People need to be educated so that they can find*
>
> *better jobs in the future.*   (Anonymous)

My reading of researchers and theorists in the field of learning such as Marton *et al* (1993) and Entwistle (1987) leads me to understand that understandings of knowledge as a Acommodity@ are typical of what are termed Areproductive@ conceptions of learning.   Such conceptions involve valuing learning which reproduces or gives back what the lecturer has Agiven out@ to the student. In contrast to students, I understand academic discourses to value what Van Rossum *et al* (1985) term Aconstructive@ conceptions of learning. This involves applying what the teacher has said to existing knowledge so that that knowledge is transformed in some way. This transformation of

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personal knowledge then affects the way in which an individual perceives the world outside the lecture room. These very different ways of conceiving knowledge underpin very different ways of acting in the pursuit of knowledge. For example, a student who understands knowledge as a commodity and who understands his/her role as someone who must remember and repeat what the lecturer says is likely to ask very different sort of questions and seek very different sorts of interactions with the lecturer than a peer who values the need to assimilate new knowledge with existing knowledge at a personal level. Underpinning the form of a question, then, are very different values. For the question to have an Aacceptable@ form in an academic discourse, it must also be underpinned by Aacceptable@ values. Beyond a very simple level, therefore, attempts of language teachers to teach the forms of language which will, for example, allow speakers of other languages to ask questions, are likely to be unsuccessful. What is needed is a change at a deeper, affective level which is more difficult to achieve than change at a grammatical level since it requires the student to feel in some way Aat home@ or comfortable within the academic discourse. The irony, of course, is that students are unlikely to be shown that they are accepted within the discourse unless they can indicate that they understand its values and Arules@.

Negotiating Avoice@

Reproductive conceptions of learning manifest themselves in many other difficulties which students appear to experience in gaining access to academic discourses. One difficulty which I see frequently in my work in the philosophy class concerns the negotiation of Avoices@ in both spoken and written academic texts. An academic text contains many voices. It contains the voices of the authorities the author cites and it

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also contains the voice of the author which appears in relation to these other voices as a soloist backed by a choir. The author / soloist conducts and musters these other voices to back her or him in the song *s/he* is singing. In the philosophy class, the students have to negotiate a song sung by another soloist (their mainstream lecturer) who conducts the voices of other philosophers and, when the time comes to produce their own academic text, sing their own song. In order to sing their song, they not only have to conduct the voices of other philosophers but also the voice of their lecturer who has already done some conducting of his own. In their writing, the difficulty in doing this frequently manifests itself in an apparent inability to distinguish between the different voices.

The philosophy course begins with an examination of the political philosophies of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke who both attempt to answer the question "What is a legitimate government?" by using a method which I have come to know is called *resolutivo compositivo.* This involves breaking the larger question down into a series of smaller questions. Hobbes and Locke both begin, therefore, by asking the question "What is the nature of man?". Their answer to this question then allows them to answer another question namely "If man is like this, what would life be like in a State of Nature (or a state without any government)?". In his lectures, the mainstream lecturer cites what Hobbes and Locke both say as evidence for the parallels and contrasts he draws between them. Students therefore not only have to identify what Hobbes says and what Locke says, but also what their lecturer says. The problem in doing this is compounded by the hypotheticity of the whole discourse. The following text, written in answer to the question "According to Hobbes, why would a State of Nature be a state of war?@,

typifies these difficulties:

> *State of Nature - is whereby there is no police, no government, no law.*
> *The people will be nasty, poor, brutish and life will be short. Imagine in*
> *the boxing ring with two fighters without referee. It will be nasty people*
> *will do what they like sometimes the supporters will get into the ring and*
> *fight the one they do not support.* (Patricia)

In this text we see two voices: Hobbes' (who says life in a State of Nature will be "nasty, brutish and short@) and the mainstream lecturer's (who used the analogy of the boxing ring to explain Hobbes' claims about life in a State of Nature). Patricia, the author of the text, does not acknowledge the voices. She does not tell us that "*According to Hobbes*, life in a State of Nature will be ....". Neither does she acknowledge the boxing ring analogy as an attempt to explain Hobbes' claims by writing something like "Life in a State of Nature could be compared to ....". Rather, she writes her text in one voice which is not even her own. After I had read Patricia's text, I asked her to show me the notes she had taken in the lecture in which the boxing ring analogy had been discussed. The notes were very similar to the final text. Further probing revealed that Patricia had simply "written up" her lecture notes which she perceived as a single voiced "truth". She then reproduced this "truth" as this is the sort of learning she had been taught to value.

This sort of understanding of students' texts has led me to question much of what I have done in my career as a language teacher.   In the past, I have taught "listening skills" and "note taking skills" yet must now acknowledge that nothing of what I have taught

can have equipped many of my students with the ability to understand and record the multi-voiced text of a philosophy lecture. Teaching students to listen for "key" words and look for paralinguistic clues to aid comprehension or to abbreviate words and sentences can be of little use to someone who does not understand the rules of constructing knowledge which operate in academic discourses. Similarly, teaching students the conventions of introducing a reference (for example, "according to") or the correct way to note that reference either in the body of the text or in a bibliography, does not teach the significance of those references in the academic eisteddfod.

Conceptions of writing

Conceptions of writing flow out of conceptions of learning. Students tell me that the sort of writing they did at school (and which was therefore valued at school) mostly involved writing down and repeating what the teacher had told them or what they had read in some authority:

> *Our teachers ask us to write about things that they teach us. To write*
> *what they are saying when they are teaching us.* (Anonymous)

Another student, Lindani, reports:

> *Well, in fact, they used to give us a sort of homework. Maybe you find the*
> *teacher doesn=t pay much attention to how to write the homework. They*
> *just stand in front of you and ask for the answer to Question 1 and you*
> *raise up your hand and then you answer him and he says AMark it right@*

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> *or A Mark it wrong@ which means that they don=t have the time to look at your writing. They just want to know whether you answered it or you didn=t.*

Given such experiences, it is little wonder that texts such as Patricia's text (see above) exemplify understandings of writing as Arepeating knowledge.@

In contrast to their students, and probably because of their own experience of writing at postgraduate level, most academics have an understanding (even if this is not articulated) of writing as a process which generates new learning rather than one which reproduces someone else=s old learning. What many academics perceive as an intuitive understanding of writing is confirmed by research which shows that the act of writing is indeed an act of generating or creating learning (see, for example, Emig, 1983; Murray, 1980).

Conceptions of writing do not only range along a generative - reproductive continuum however.   Other differences involve understandings of writing as a mode of communication. Much of the writing produced by the students in the philosophy class characterises what, in western discourses, would be called "spoken" rather than "written" language. This difference is not necessarily manifest in grammar or register, but in a lack of contextualisation and a failure to make propositions follow on from each other in a linear fashion.

The following first sentence of a piece of writing is typical in its failure to contextualise, leaving the reader asking the question AWhich theory?@:

According to this theory all men are equal to have the same worth and value because we are all sent into the world by God to do his business. (Patience)

In beginning her writing in this way, Patience assumes that the context of talking about John Locke=s theory, which was created in the class, will automatically be carried over into her writing. In a three-paragraph, page-long piece of writing, Patience nowhere mentions Locke=s name as she assumes her readers will know who she is writing about. When I asked Patience about her writing, she was able to tell me she was writing about Locke and told me she thought AI would just know@ who she was writing about as I had asked her to write about Locke=s theory. In speaking, she would not have to provide such contextualisation as, to a large extent, a context defining the sort of things which could be spoken about would already exist before a single word was spoken. In writing, however, Patience has not internalised the rule which says that even though I defined the topic of her writing, she must still contextualise it for me on her written page.

In another piece of writing entitled AWeaknesses of the Marxist Idea of Justice@, Zanele launches directly into a series of bullet points after the title. The first point is:

X *People do not work hard. People are tired of working hard and at the end they get a medal instead of money. So the economy of the country will drop.*

Zanele=s writing is reminiscent of Lindani=s classroom experiences of simply having to read out the correct answers to questions the teacher had set for homework. The conventions of academic literacy require that students should contextualise an assignment on the weaknesses of the Marxist system of justice by outlining or defining that system before explicating their own understandings of those weaknesses. Zanele, however, appears to conceptualise the task almost as a question and answer Arevision@ session. One can almost imagine the dialogue:

Teacher: All right. Who can tell me about the weaknesses of the Marxist system of justice? Zanele, tell me one weakness.

Zanele: People don=t work hard. People are tired of working hard and at the end they get a medal instead of money. So the economy of the country will drop.

Teacher: That=s right! People don=t get extra money for working hard because everyone is rewarded according to his needs. People who work hard are rewarded with medals so people don=t work and then the economy suffers.

In the imagined dialogue, there is no need to contextualise as the context is created within the classroom situation. Zanele=s response to the teacher=s question is characteristic of spoken language. She repeats herself (APeople don=t work hard. People are tired of working hard@) and gives only the bare points without elaborating her own understanding. The teacher, typically, Afills in@ with more detail. Unfortunately for Zanele, what might be effective communication in the classroom does

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not work in writing and she is left with a decontextualised utterance in which propositions appear in fast and furious order without seeming to have any links between them (APeople are tired of working hard and at the end they get a medal instead of money. So the economy of the country will drop.@)

The need to make such links explicit for readers account for the claims of writing theorists of the importance of the writer having a sense of audience. If I return to the Lindani=s report of his experiences of writing at school, it is difficult to see how a sense of audience could have developed. Students= scattering of propositions on a paper like seeds in a corn field is then easier to understand. As ALanguage Specialist@ within the university, I am often called upon to give a lecture in order to teach students how to write. It is difficult to imagine, however, how any *lecture* can develop the shift in understanding necessary to move from what, in western terms, would be an oral to a literate mode of communication.

Rules for producing knowledge

I have already described the process of producing an academic text to that of singing a song with the backing of a choir of other voices. The need to have those other voices is a kind of rule about the way academic knowledge can be constructed. The academic soloist cannot sing alone but needs the voices of other singers to sing in harmony with or to sing in opposition to. The other voices provide a form of Aevidence@ for what the singer is singing. Consider now the following statement taken from the writing of another student:

State of Nature

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Is a state of which people are Ego Centric which mean what ever they do they try to promote their own interest. In ego Centric some people are clever they act as if they are helping while they are helping themselves to benefit e.g. Bishop Tutu. (Blessing)

There are several Aproblems@ with this writing, but the one I want to focus on here is the claim that Archbishop Tutu is pretending to be helping others but is actually only working to benefit himself. From conversations with students in the philosophy class, I have learned that it is common Aknowledge@ that the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which aimed to reconcile those driven apart by apartheid by making the Atruth@ known and by providing amnesties for those who told the Atruth@, did not do any Agood@, and that therefore Archbishop Tutu only worked with the commission because of the financial benefit which would accrue to him. According to the academic rule book, however, if a writer wants to make a claim about Archbishop Tutu, s/he must have some evidence to support that claim since "common" knowledge does not count as Aacademic@ knowledge.

 For many of us, this statement about Acommon@ knowledge and Aacademic@ knowledge hides a paradox. Deferring to schema theory (see, for example, Rumelhart, 1980) and the need for the instantiation of background knowledge, we encourage our students to use knowledge they already have in the construction of new knowledge. What we omit to tell them, however, is that the rules for the construction of that new, Aacademic@ knowledge differ to the rules they used to construct their "common" knowledge. If I return now to the refrain of the song *I* am singing in this piece of writing,

I have to ask if teaching the difference between "common" and Aacademic@ knowledge should fall to the lot of a language / study skills teacher charged with the task of teaching academic literacy in an introductory course, or whether the taking on of such an understanding is not a much more long-term process involving "role" change at level which is affective and not only cognitive.

The forms of academic knowledge

In the extract which I quoted at the beginning of this article, Gee points out that in order to be accepted in a biker bar one must dress appropriately. Designer jeans are not acceptable there just as black leathers, crash helmets and tattooed biceps would not be acceptable in a "yuppie" bar. In many respects the forms of academic language are akin to the clothes we wear in that they act as a kind of academic dress code. I believe that the majority of students sitting in the chapel do own a set of formal clothes which they can wear in that they *do* know the basic rules of grammar. In academic fashion, I cite as evidence for this belief the observation that grammatical mistakes are frequently inconsistent with, for example, the 3rd person singular "s" of the present simple tense appearing and disappearing seemingly at whim in the same piece of writing. Moreover, when I point out elementary mistakes to students, they can invariably correct them with an embarrassed "Sorry!" This is not to say that I believe that students know all the grammar they need to write sophisticated academic prose, but, again following Gee (1990), I would disclaim their need to know since they can always, as Gee puts it, "mushfake" or get someone to edit their work for mistakes involving more intricate grammatical knowledge. This is what my academic peers do, after all, when they have to write in a language which is not their mother tongue.

If students do know the basic grammatical rules, why, then, do they hand in work which is full of horrifyingly simple mistakes? I believe it is because they do not realise the importance of wearing "academic dress". The problem is not merely cognitive but involves an understanding of subtle socio-cultural practices and affronts. Given what Lindani has told me about his teacher=s marking of his work, I am not surprised that he has not developed such an understanding.

Conclusion

I return now to the statement I made in my introduction that students in the chapel do not have Alanguage problems@ in the way, for example, a French or German student coming to do postgraduate work at a British university would have Alanguage problems@. A French, German or even Japanese student is likely to have been schooled in academic discourses to the extent that her problems in adapting to life in a British university truly are linguistic in that they involve the acquisition of "surface" forms of the language to express meanings and ways of knowing about and looking at the world which are already "academic". The power of language related discourses has increased considerably in the twenty or more years that I have worked in English language teaching not only because of the spread of English as a world language in a technological age, but also because of the prestige awarded to the relatively new disciplines of Linguistics and Applied Linguistics due to the enormous amount of research they have generated. The net result of this, as Pennycook (1994) points out, is that language teaching has become big business on an international scale.   This business does not only stop at the export of language teachers from the west but also

involves the production of language teaching materials at both a practical level in the form of text books and teaching aids but also at a disciplinary level. In the years I have lived in South Africa, I have witnessed a growth in the number of Masters courses in Applied Linguistics/Applied Language Studies equivalent to a growth seen in Britain in the 1980s.   The danger in all this "progress", I believe, is a naming or imposition of "problems" where that naming must at least be laid open to critique. Only then will the sort of nuanced understandings I have attempted to arrive at in this article be possible.

The construction of understandings which are other to those constructed by dominant discourses calls for a change in actual mainstream teaching. In the philosophy course which has been described in this article, I have worked alongside the mainstream lecturer in order to get students to engage with course content in a manner which is predominantly literate rather than orate. This has meant that students write in class on a regular basis and are provided with responses to their writing intended to lead them to an understanding of writing as a mode of communication which is different to that of speaking (Boughey, 1995). My role as language specialist has therefore not been to deliver separate courses but to provide support within the mainstream class to both lecturer and students. It has also involved working with the lecturer to try to make what Ballard & Clanchy (1988) call the Arules and conventions@ of academic disciplines as overt as possible by making space for discussion on what constitutes Agood@ learning and writing within the academy as a whole and within the discipline of philosophy in particular. As I have done this, I have been aware that I could be accused of colluding in assimilating students into dominant discourses, but follow Kramer-Dahl (1995:22) in believing that:

I should continue teaching the generic conventions, the ways of knowing and speaking, of academic discourse so that my students have a better chance of succeeding in the university. Yet, at the same time I should also make them aware that these conventions are not ideologically innocent, as they legitimate particular forms of knowledge which I, through my very activity of teaching, may help further entrench.

In the philosophy class, I have been fortunate to have found a colleague who was willing to work with me to construct new understandings of students Aproblems@. All too often, however, it is less troublesome to simply shunt students off into separate remedial language courses. If this article goes some little way to challenging the common place, my aim in writing it will have been more than achieved.

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