How South African undergraduate first-generation university students choose an elective academic literacy module in the absence of comparative information: A case study of one comprehensive university in Johannesburg[1]

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ABSTRACT

Entering university entails programme and module choices that can foster or hinder a student's academic success and future career. This paper argues that, in the absence of adequate information, South African undergraduate first-generation university students' (FGSs) choice of an elective academic literacy (AL) module is strongly influenced by its perceived relevance to their field of study. This article was theoretically grounded in the disciplinary literacy perspectives of Moje (2008) and Shanahan and Shanahan (2008). The research assumed a qualitative perspective. The study entailed a single case study design because the aim was to gain insights into FGSs' AL module selection strategies at the selected university. The methodology used pre-module semi-structured individual interviews as a data collection technique. The thematic analysis of interview transcripts and the document analysis of the case-study module, English for Law (EFL), constituted the data scrutiny procedures. The research generated significant findings. The interviewees indicated that the university administration did not provide sufficient comparative information on elective AL modules to empower FGSs to make an informed decision. Some FGSs did not exercise agency in their AL module selection because their registration process was completed by a third party. Law FGSs did not want to do general academic literacy modules. In the absence of sufficient comparative information, FGSs made an intuitive AL module selection. FGSs' choice of English for Law over other elective academic literacy modules was motivated by the relevance and usefulness suggested by the name. It is recommended that the university administration create pop-ups containing short descriptions of the purposes of the various AL modules from which FGSs must choose. It is further proposed that a Toll-Free registration assistance line be created to assist with the selection of elective modules.

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INTRODUCTION

The decision to pursue higher education involves programmes and module choices that influence student success or failure. This is because students' university entry is linked to specific academic disciplines. These disciplines have unique worldviews, knowledge, approaches or procedures, formats, norms, conventions, and practices that students need to internalise and demonstrate to succeed (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; 2012). First-generation students (FGSs), who generally lack university guidance and knowledge, are expected to make such important choices. These disciplinary choices occur in a plural academic literacy (AL) context that Lea and Street (2006) have described through the evocative concept of academic literacies. The plurality characterising this context presents multivariate and multi-level challenges for many FGSs who enter and must navigate the university without the necessary AL toolkit. Yet AL is crucial for epistemological access and academic success (Khumalo & Reddy, 2021; Merisi & Mgqwashu, 2022). It suffices to note that the academic literacies model includes and recognises the importance of disciplinary literacy in developing students' AL. However, due to its all-inclusiveness, this model does not elaborate on relevant approaches to the integration of AL within the disciplines. Such AL embedment strategies are central to the effectiveness of AL modules (Kim, 2020; Botha, 2025; Green, Davis; Harmes & Judith, 2025). Thus, this paper explores the factors that influence South African undergraduate FGSs' choice of an elective AL module.

Using the lens of disciplinary literacy foregrounding the works of Moje (2008) as well as Shanahan and Shanahan (2008), this paper contends that, in the absence of guidance and information, South African undergraduate FGSs possess the ability to make an intuitive AL module choice based on name cues and disciplinary resonance. Disciplinary literacy entails the specific processes of understanding texts, elaborating manuscripts, conceptualising knowledge, and elucidating ideas and perspectives in academic fields (Moje 2007; Shanahan and Shanahan 2008; Shanahan and Shanahan, 2012). Thus, when students enrol at university, they enter academic disciplines with identifiable perspectives, epistemologies, procedures, writing types, standards, conventions, and ways that must be mastered. Disciplinary literacy encompasses specific ways of generating knowledge and documents, understanding transcripts, and elucidating perspectives in specific academic fields (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). It entails the activation of unique epistemological processes, practices, and abilities, as well as languages in reading, writing, and oral activities within academic fields (Moje 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012).

This research paper seeks to answer the following three questions.

> Is the university administration providing sufficient information to enable FGSs to make informed decisions regarding elective modules?
>
> What are the factors prompting FGSs to select disciplinary literacy modules over other options?

> What can university administration do to empower FGSs to make informed decisions regarding their academic literacy modules?

Thus, the paper endeavours to determine whether university administration provides FGSs with choice-empowering information. The investigation also seeks to unearth the factors that contribute to FGSs' preference for a disciplinary literacy module. Finally, the study strives to recommend ways in which the university administration can guide FGSs to make informed decisions concerning their AL modules. The data were collected through semi-structured individual interviews and the collection of the case-study module's study guide. Thematic analysis was used to make sense of the interview-related data, and document analysis was applied to the study. The next section surveys relevant theoretical and empirical literature on disciplinary literacy and the status of the information that universities provide to FGSs regarding elective AL modules.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Disciplinary literacy plays a fundamental role in a university student's disciplinary assimilation, epistemological access, participation, and academic success. Disciplinary literacy is defined as 'the use of reading, reasoning, investigating, speaking, and writing required to learn and form complex content knowledge appropriate to a particular discipline' (McConachie & Petrosky, 2010: 16). While general AL expertise remains vital, students' capacity to achieve in their chosen disciplines is boosted when they understand and can successfully utilise the literacy strategies of their disciplines (Shanahan, 2015). Hence, academics must supplement their facilitation of academic literacies with functional activities that give students opportunities to practise their disciplinary literacies. Disciplinary literacy has five key objectives: (i) implement instruction approaches that develop 21st century aptitudes in students; (ii) elaborate applicable hands-on activities and evaluations that improve student experiences; (iii) ground student learning using a method that foregrounds practice over theory; (iv) foster students' examination of the communicative and epistemological practices of their academic fields; (v) enable professional development and collaboration prospects for students (Darling-Hammond et al. 2017).

Disciplinary literacy exhibits the understanding that, to operate efficiently, new university students must be socialised into the technical lexicon and particular practices that distinguish their selected academic fields from others. Various academic difficulties faced by undergraduate students are related to their inability to deconstruct and engage effectively with the technical processes of disciplinary interaction (Vienni-Batista, van Goch, van Lambalgen & Lindvig, 2024). Students' lack of command of their subject literacies hampers their understanding of the disciplinary content. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017: 2) postulate that

> The heart of disciplinary literacy is an understanding of the ways in which knowledge is constructed in each content area and how literacy (reading, writing, viewing, reasoning, and communicating) supports that knowledge in discipline-specific ways.

Thus, subject literacy is a catalytic agent of the epistemic access that is fundamental to the students' capacity to achieve at university. This research explores the enactment of these linked methods in the legal discipline with the AL module English for Law.

Disciplinary literacy is a way of inducting students into the communication means and practices of their academic fields. It also assists in training them to acquire their subject identity and proficiency (Wolesey & Lapp, 2024; Ting, Rieder-Marschallinger & Dalton-Puffer, 2024). Subject literacy forefronts 'the ways of thinking, the skills, and the tools that are used by experts in the disciplines' (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2012). Hence, the command of disciplinary literacy should empower students to contribute to knowledge review and production in their disciplines. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017: 30) state that 'One important aspect of disciplinary literacy is its tendency to motivate students toward becoming active participants …because it encourages students to challenge and question texts, norms, and traditional understandings'. This happens when students have attained a degree of assurance that can only be achieved through having an adequate grasp of their disciplines. Subject literacy expansion is crucial to the teaching of multilingual students who must adjust their communication procedures to the various academic and professional circumstances in which they function (Oliinyk et al., 2024).

The importance of disciplinary literacy in student accomplishment is indicated by '[t]he focus on disciplines as cultures of distinct literacy practice' (Howell, Barlow & Dyches, 2021: 1). The researcher contends that some of the AL difficulties of South African undergraduate FGSs spring from their lack of disciplinary literacy proficiency. This could be partly due to these students' concurrently grappling with broad literacy and subject literacy. A probable source of this challenge is a widespread centring on broad literacy, which entails an indirect teaching of subject literacy. Yet, disciplinary literacy represents a crucial zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978), especially since it constitutes the convergence point of subject content and discipline-specific AL procedures and proficiencies. The reason for subject literacy is that

> [e]ach field of study has its own special ways of using text to create, communicate, and evaluate knowledge, and if students are to advance academically within these disciplines they must become acquainted with these unique or specialised ways of reading and writing (Shanahan, 2014: 1).

As literacy requirements differ from one discipline to another, they demand that students endeavour to develop expertise.

Disciplinary literacy is crucial to students' attainment of the required thinking and knowledge aptitudes. These attributes would foster students' knowledge access and significant contributions to the development of knowledge in their disciplines. Subject literacy allows students to engage with their disciplinary content. They endeavour to attain set goals in a way that displays the distinctiveness of their disciplinary procedures (Fang & Patrick, 2024). For Shanahan and Shanahan (2012: 7), '[a] disciplinary literacy approach emphasizes the specialized knowledge and abilities possessed by those who create, communicate, and use knowledge within each of the disciplines'. This perspective has profound ramifications for students who lack the essential 'specialized knowledge and abilities' (Shanahan, 2012: 7). This is the reality of various new students generally and South African FGSs particularly.

A subject literacy approach is critical in understanding the discipline-specific AL struggles of South African FGSs and recommending appropriate interventions. This reflection is crucial since the

> [l]iteracy demands increase as students progress … from decoding and fluency in early elementary grades to discipline-specific vocabulary and comprehension of informational texts in intermediate grades to disciplinary reading in secondary school and beyond. (Spires et al., 2018: 1402).

The direct idea of the subject literacy perspective is that general literacy abilities cannot absolutely teach students to master the specificities of the different academic fields (Kane, 2025). Hence, the ILA (2017: 3) notes that 'An exclusive focus on common literacy strategies, without a concurrent emphasis on discipline-specific content and practices, does not produce optimal results in student's learning'. This remark partially explains the restricted success of numerous existing literacy mediations built on 'one-size-fits-all' or 'umbrella' perspectives (Tan, 2024). Consequently, Moje (2015: 254) argues that

> educators can make radical change in student learning and well-being if they reframe teachers' work … as less about meeting standards and more about teaching youth to navigate the multiple literacy contexts in which they live, learn, and work.

Therefore, it becomes necessary to incorporate literacy into the disciplinary context to guarantee students' efficient internalisation of subject literacy.

Integrating literacy into the subject would assist '…to supplement the core content resources with additional components that support students' academic literacy development, rather than sacrificing content to create this space' (Willans et al., 2019: i). Nonetheless, accomplishing this amalgamation continues to be a major difficulty. The researcher argues that, to some degree, the present subject literacy dilemma is further complicated by time constraints. Lecturers have disciplinary programmes or curricula that need to be completed in specific times. Such timeframes are tightly linked to the university's academic calendar. The latter sets teaching and learning, assessments, and examination periods to which lecturers must adhere. These limitations cause a situation in which students are hardly given opportunities to complete formative activities. These tasks would have offered students the opportunity to practise the application of their knowledge and skills before submitting summative assessments. This illustrates the misalignment between tutorials and evaluations (Park et al., 2024). Tutorials generally fail to promote the formative aspect of education, as less unmarked and feedback-centred tasks are given to students. Sufficient preparation and demonstrating occasions central to developing disciplinary practices, knowledge, and aptitudes (Rahman, Chowdhury & McCray, 2024) are frequently missing from the existing AL improvement programmes. Yet learnership-related enhancement of cultural capital happens progressively (Bourdieu, 1986). Hence, not assigning adequate time to preparation by means of formative activities compounds the predicament of numerous South African first-generation students (FGSs). Yet, these students, who lack literacy assistance from their families (Moodley & Cloete, 2024; Mkhize & Idahosa, 2025), rely on their tertiary institutions to help them close their epistemological and literacy gaps through relevant disciplinary content and academic literacy modules. The centrality of academic literacy in students' assimilation and academic success reinforces the imperative for

South African FGSs to be equipped to make informed decisions regarding their elective AL modules.

Warranting that the knowledge and literacy competencies of South African FGSs are suitable is vital. It enhances their academic experience and attainment, minimising their dropout potential (Seroka & Sepeng, 2023; Modiba, 2025). Moje (2010) thinks that, in a context of numerous subject literacies, the rejection of umbrella methodologies in favour of a disciplinary literacy approach may enhance students' proficiency. This proficiency may be attained by aiding them to internalise the literacies of their relevant disciplines. Students' attainment in their study areas can be improved by their effective utilisation of applicable disciplinary literacy means in numerous evaluation situations (Shanahan, 2015). Subject literacy has five primary goals. The first is implementing instructional strategies that advance students' 21st-century qualities. The second is developing appropriate formative and summative activities that enhance students' academic experiences. The third is grounding student education on approaches that forefront active participation. The fourth is enhancing the students' questioning of subject content and standards. The fifth is establishing cooperative spaces that foster student growth (Darling-Hammond et al. 2017).

Subject literacy acknowledges the imperative for new university students to be socialised into the peculiar language and practices of their disciplines. This approach seeks to guarantee that these students achieve optimally. Several academic challenges experienced by undergraduate students stem from their inability to display the specific disciplinary communication procedures to which they were not formerly introduced (Anson, 2024). Students battle with their disciplinary content. Thus, subject literacy fosters epistemic access to enhance students' ability to achieve at university (Collett, Dison & Du Plooy, 2024). The construction of subject knowledge is tightly related to a field's literacy values. The incorporation of subject content and literacy practices offers students the opportunity to crystallise the cognitive processes followed by subject specialists. Constructing disciplinary knowledge through a subject literacy perspective may assist students in assimilating the content and approaches of their fields (Moje, 2008). The actual application of this grouping in the module English for Law, which justifies the obtention and analysis of the module's study guide, is of value to this research.

Elective modules allow students to contribute to their curriculum. 'These electives provide crucial hands-on experience across various specialties, allowing students to tailor their education according to their interests' (Devi et al., 2025: 149). In addition to the student agency opportunity offered, electives are also '…appealing to a self-selecting cohort with either interest in an alternative direction…, or individuals with an aim of creating an impact' (Watts & Hetherington, 2024: 105). Module choice enables students to create personalised academic profiles and career paths that may set them apart. However, an information gap exists between continuing-generation students (CGSs) and first-generation students (FGSs) (LeMire, Xu & Hahn, 2025). Indeed, because of their status, first-generation students (FGSs) experience a myriad of academic challenges. One of these challenges is their lack of information regarding the university in general and the contents of elective academic literacy modules, before and during registration. This situation compounds their intergenerational academic disadvantage and predisposes them to further complications and challenges. Thus, for FGSs, the 'Motivation to seek help affects understanding academic needs, problem-solving urgency, and confidence' (Ruihua, Che Hassan & Saharuddin, 2025: 1). FGSs must develop mechanisms to overcome

the absence of empowering information from the university. As Grim et al. (2024: 194) indicates, 'FGCS develop complex ways of finding information even with minimal support and those information sources that are most helpful are often connected to pre-existing and informal relationships'. The implication of this is that universities must establish formal institutional information channels where academic advisors will guide students (Azpeitia et al., 2025). FGSs' failure to register appropriately has serious implications for their academic success and career trajectory (Larroucau et al., 2024). This is corroborated by Kearon Hogan (2025: 2) assertion that FGSs '…often face unique challenges related to navigating the college environment, accessing resources, and preparing for the workforce'. The academic challenges experienced by FGSs may not only hinder their university journey but also their professional career paths. Academic reading and writing are some of the areas where such challenges may become manifest.

Thus, Grim, Bausch and Lonn (2021) as well as Nkansah, Khai and Rose (2025) highlight the imperative for universities to elaborate strategies to resolve FGSs' unique challenges linked to their poor educational backgrounds. This responds to Thesatus' (2024) call for universities that are cognisant of the module selection and career decision difficulties of FGSs. Promoting these students' agency in the selection of their elective academic literacy modules is essential to ensuring their interest and active participation in the learning process, which may enhance their academic attainment (Kivimäki, 2024). In the case of reading, Follmer et al. (2024: 102471) emphasise that elaborating '…specific mechanisms by which deeper learning strategies may promote positive…postsecondary outcomes for first-generation students' is essential in alleviating the academic difficulties of these students. This paper seeks to contribute to the elaboration of the above envisaged palliative strategies. The next section describes the research methodology used.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used a case-study design based on an interpretive paradigm, a constructivist ontological approach, and a critical epistemological perspective. A qualitative research methodology encompassing a single, descriptive case study was deemed suitable. The population of this study comprised a sample of South African FGSs from the Faculty of Law enrolled in the case study module English for Law (EFL). The research site was a South African public, all-inclusive higher education institution (HEI) situated in Johannesburg, Gauteng Province. Before commencing the investigation, the researcher secured ethical clearance from the university's Faculty of Education Ethics Committee. The researcher also obtained institutional permission to conduct the study from the university's Social Research Ethics Committee (SREC). Approval to interview the FGSs enrolled in EFL was given by the Executive Dean of the Faculty of Law. The EFL module coordinator granted the researcher access to the class to establish initial communication with FGSs. This enabled the researcher to state the research aim and solicit commitment from relevant students. Subsequently, informed consent letters were signed by the participants as an indication of informed decision (Crano & Brewer, 2002). The study zoomed in on first-year students because their AL expectations and experiences best demonstrate the divide between high school and university (Collett, Dison & Du Plooy, 2024; Hadingham & Thompson, 2024). Furthermore, first-year students who represent the biggest student population also have the highest dropout numbers (Madlingozi, 2024; Cele & Pietersen, 2025). Semi-structured, individual interviews constituted the data collection instruments.

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants with applicable, rich information concerning the topic investigated. A sample size of 30%, representing 36 South African FGSs from the EFL module, was considered adequate for this qualitative study. This sample was considered adequate because the research reached data saturation at this point. Thematic analysis was used to make sense of the interview transcripts. Three main themes emerged from this investigation. The first relates to the inadequacy of the information provided by the university administration. The second theme pertains to the factors influencing FGSs' preference for a disciplinary literacy module. The third and last theme entails recommendations to empower FGSs to make informed AL module decisions. The findings of the research are presented and discussed in the next section.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Most South African first-generation university students enter university without adequate knowledge of this new learning environment. Family educational and school preparation factors mainly contribute to this situation. Regarding the impact of the family's poor educational background, one participant explains that

> …our family was not academically equipped. Coming here, I can't say I had any knowledge that I acquired about varsity life through other people. I never had an opportunity of someone in my home telling me how varsity is and how I had to go acquire knowledge. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

Thus, FGSs enter university without any knowledge of the university and navigation guidance from their families (Chiramba & Nyoni, 2024). This is a barrier that they must surmount to increase their success prospects. FGSs' lack of university induction at home is compounded by the lack of empowerment by the school. The latter did not also empower FGSs with adequate, relevant university knowledge. In this regard, FGS3 stated that

> [t]here weren't any programmes that prepared us for university. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

The school's inability to prepare FGSs adequately for the university requirements (Moodley & Cloete, 2024; Tessendorf, 2024; Brown-Massey, 2024) is corroborated by FGS9, who emphasises that

> …we are not equipped because someone has not given me [us] all the tools. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

This significant responsibility of providing FGSs with the required toolkit shifts to the university, which is these students' next academic destination. Thus, these FGSs would rely on the university administration to provide them with the necessary information that would empower them to make informed academic and career decisions. It became important to investigate the case-study university's information provision concerning elective AL modules and the strategies used by FGSs in choosing. Two main themes emerged: the paucity of empowering comparative information on the existing alternatives, and the intuitive procedures employed by FGSs to decide.

Lack of information on the different elective academic literacy modules

The lack of information regarding the distinctions between the three elective academic literacy modules for undergraduate Law students at the research-site university emerged as the first theme of the study. Almost all participating South African undergraduate first-generation university students deplored the lack of information on the offerings of the three modules from which they had to choose. These three AL elective modules are English 1A/B, English 1C/D, and English for Law. The research reveals that

> There's nothing specific that drew my attention. So, I had to register the modules for myself. I didn't know which module contained what. (FGS31 Pre-module interview, 2022)

This statement evokes a lack of a general picture of the purposes, values, and contents of the three modules. FGS15 affirms that

> I wasn't provided any introduction. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

This is supported by FGS17, who declares that

> I didn't get the description of what the modules were about. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

These two categorical statements are further endorsed by other FGSs who stressed the inadequacy of available information. FGS23 notes that

> I didn't have much information about those different English modules. (Pre-module interview, 2022).

This is reinforced by FGS16 who indicates:

> For starters, I didn't have much knowledge of the differences between the different types of English. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

This finding is congruent with Nkansah, Khai and Rose's (2025) urge that tertiary institutions develop mechanisms to address the unique difficulties of FGSs. This is against the backdrop of their lack of university preparation by their families and schools. The call also responds to Thesatus' (2024) plea that FGSs' challenges regarding module selection and career guidance are not forgotten by university administrations.

Possessing relevant information about university programmes and modules enables students to make informed decisions. These choices influence not only their academic journeys but also their career paths (Devi et al., 2025). Faced with the lack of the necessary information or distinguishing descriptions of the different AL elective modules, some South African undergraduate FGSs use their intuition. This intuition is strongly guided by the expectation of disciplinary literacy usefulness. This is expressed by FGS16 thus:

> I didn't have knowledge of the differences between the different types of English. But I just kind of told myself that with the degree that I'm pursuing, it'll be best if I do the English which works for what I want to do. So, I thought that English for Law would help me; and it'll also connect to what I'll be doing in other modules, making it easier. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

FGS16 focused on the promise of English language development as well as disciplinary knowledge and literacy suggested by the name of the module, 'English for Law'. The absence of information on the three elective AL modules leaves some South African undergraduate FGSs to their own devices. These FGSs are forced to make guess-based decisions that could result in an inappropriate choice. FGS21 confides that

> When I was registering, I did not know all these English modules. There was nowhere where they were talking about what are the things that are involved. I worked it out just because I was doing Law, it's just a case in which we chose the things that I'm involved in. (Pre-module interview, 2022).

Although choosing English for Law seems a natural choice for a Law student, the choice between English 1A/B and English 1C/D would be challenging in the absence of distinguishing descriptions. Some FGSs sought external assistance to make their AL module choice. The finding conveyed through the above quotes is a general sense of dissatisfaction with the university administration regarding existing comparative information. This is in stark contrast to the 'high satisfaction with faculty guidance' (Devi et al., 2025: 149) that emerged in these authors' study.

Lacking the necessary information on the AL module options, other South African undergraduate FGSs used their student networks. These FGSs resorted to senior students whom they knew for assistance with their selection of the elective module. FGS2 emphasised the role played by former learners thus:

> [n]o, the people who told us were former learners from the school that I was attending…. During the preparatory and final examinations, they told us how the university is, the challenges and the differences between high school and university. (Pre-module interview, 2022).

FGSs had to rely on other students who had done one of the three optional modules to know what they entailed and choose accordingly. This strategy is expounded by FGS8 who shared:

> I asked people the difference between these types of English. They said that this one is based on terms that we did in high school…. There were no descriptions that you used, the difference between those modules. But you have to ask people when you are about to go to the university. You must know someone who is doing the course that you want to do. So, you ask them what is going on with the module, stuff like that. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

FGSs' previous connections are central to their information-seeking endeavour. This finding regarding FGSs' reliance on their student networks for information corroborates research by Grim et al. (2024). Nevertheless, expecting South African FGSs to make decisions on their elective modules based on information acquired from their social relations is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, not all FGSs know someone who has been to university, let alone one who has done Law. Secondly, some of the students who have pursued Law studies may not have full knowledge of all the AL options. Consequently, they may influence a new FGS to choose the option that these senior students selected. This was the case with FGS13 whose choice was guided by senior students' experience of EFL. These students emphasised

> [h]ow awesome it was in English for Law, they said English 1A is poetry, novels and reading books. (FGS13 Pre-module interview 2022)

Yet a different module may be more suitable for this new entrant. Nonetheless, in a context where what South African FGSs know about the alternative AL modules is insufficient or unhelpful, who they know becomes paramount (Grim et al., 2024).

The absence of comprehensive, comparative information on English 1A/B, English 1C/D, and English for Law resulted in some FGSs choosing modules for which they did not qualify. This can have a psychologically damaging effect on students who are reminded that they did not perform at high levels. FGS11 confides that

> …at first, I didn't know how this English was. So, I first chose English 1A. But I couldn't be registered for English 1A because of my marks. So, they opted me for English for Law. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

For FGSs in this position, this reorientation may be stigmatising and may make them feel like frauds who tried to join a higher standard module for which they lack the necessary capacities. The situation was even worse for FGS31 who shared that

> Initially, I chose English 1C. So, I started with English 1C, only to find out that I didn't qualify. I had to go for English for Law….The criterion of 75 or more is needed, I think, for one to do English 1C. He or she must have a pass mark of 75 and perfect English. (Pre-module interview 2022)

The significance of this extract is that FGS31 spent some precious time attending the wrong module. When he was eventually redirected to the appropriate option, he was already behind and needed to catch up in a fast-paced university environment. This could contribute to increased stress and underperformance. This finding confirms the conclusion of Larroucau et al. (2024) that application mistakes have significant consequences for students.

However, one participant indicated that a summary of what each module entailed was provided; this enabled her to realise that two of the three options offered content like what was covered in high school. Thus, she based her choice on the need to do something different. FGS14 responds positively and explains:

> Yes, they did. But my main concern was that I wanted A challenging module. I saw that English 1C/D It's mostly things I did in high school. So, at this level, I wanted to change and do something different. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

A similar reasoning is used regarding English 1A/B. FGS34:

> Realistically speaking, I chose English for Law since I felt that English 1A/B is more of the English that I did in high school. It's not the academic literacy that I need to have for Law. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

The finding in these two excerpts is congruent with students' needs for novel curricular directions and desire for more academically impactful modules (Watts & Hetherington, 2024). These controversial responses may suggest that many other participants did not pay attention to the distinction between the three academic literacy module options. Nevertheless, this suggestion does not seem to hold in the face of the overwhelming number of FGSs who affirm that the

administration did not provide visible, helpful descriptions of the electives. FGSs' choice of EFL as their preferred AL module option is generally signaled by FGS22, thus:

> I would go with English for Law because I think it's generally going with Law. I don't know about the other English modules, but I feel like English for Law is specific for Law students, not for other students. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

The imperative to acquire disciplinary literacy, which justifies the relevance of the English for Law module to many of the interviewed FGSs, is a significant consideration (Moje, 2008; Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008, 2012). The next section explores various factors influencing participating South African undergraduate FGSs' choice of EFL.

Factors motivating FGSs' choice of an elective academic literacy module

South African undergraduate FGSs have clear but somehow unrealistic expectations of their AL module. These expectations are generally linked to their AL needs and career aspirations. Most of the participating FGSs had a penchant for the English for Law module, which they regarded as tailored to their academic and professional needs. FGS34 summarised FGSs' expectations of EFL thus:

> English for Law aims to equip us as Law students with the required knowledge and vocabulary to use as we will be dealing with the drafting of legal documents. It also aims to help us improve our English in terms of speaking and critical thinking. And it also teaches us argumentative writings… (Pre-module interview, 2022).

FGS34 has outlined the perceived aims of EFL based on the two parts of the module's name. It becomes important to establish the extensive range of considerations involved in South African FGSs' choice of their AL module. This would help make recommendations aimed at ensuring relevant and efficient orientation.

In the absence of adequate comparative information on the optional academic literacy modules, South African undergraduate FGSs considered various factors linked to their (academic) literacy and professional needs. These expectations relate to language and disciplinary literacy. The names of the various modules served as focal points, helping FGSs in making their decisions. FGSs chose the module whose name contained a promise of addressing their general English language proficiency gap but also equipping them with Law jargon. FGS27 explained that

> I chose English for Law because I thought why not do something that relates to the law since its name means that it is English for Law….I would expect it to teach me Law-related English, like terminologies and all the necessary English that will help me with Low-related things. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

In the context of this extract, the selection of EFL is strongly related to the imperative to acquire the necessary language and disciplinary literacy competence. This finding confirms that of a study by Devi et al. (2025) and Archana (2025), that students perceive elective modules as significant contributors to the development of their academic abilities and comfort.

The interviews with participating South African FGSs revealed that they selected the AL module option that signalled relevance to their field of study, Law. This relevance to the field of study contains the promise of disciplinary literacy acquisition and development. FGS16 confided:

> I just kind of told myself that with the degree that I'm pursuing, it'll be best if I do the English which works for what I want to do. So, I thought that English for Law would help me; and it'll also connect to what I'll be doing in other modules, making it easier. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

FGS16 not only based her choice of elective AL module on relevance to Law but also foregrounded the usefulness of EFL to her other modules. The imperative for the AL module to be strongly related to the student's field of study was essential for many FGSs. FGS3 emphasised that

> I chose English for Law because I only wanted to go for anything that included Law. So, I didn't want English to be an addition to my courses. I just wanted English for Law. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

FGS3 would not consider a module that is unrelated to Law. This fixation on the Law aspect is explained by FGS2 thus:

> Seeing the word 'Law', I think English for Law is going to teach me how to present my work as a lawyer; things that are needed. How to speak as a lawyer, how to punctuate as a lawyer, how to categorise things, and how to get information. How to summarise general entries, how to write them, and how to paraphrase in terms of the law. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

FGS10:

> English for Law will teach me how to write like a lawyer, how to read like a lawyer, and how to use English as a lawyer. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

This excerpt clearly outlines the expectations that motivate FGSs' unequivocal penchant for EFL. Disciplinary literacy is the overarching concept summarising the reasons provided by FGS2. The interest in EFL is based on its promise of teaching FGS2 and other FGSs how to do things according to their requirements of the Legal field. One participant based his elective module choice on the imperative for change. FGS19:

> If I recall correctly, English 1A/B specifically deals with more content like novels, poems, and books. I wanted something that would also help me with my other modules. So, if we are taught paraphrasing, summarising, and dealing with real contexts, I think those will also be able to help me with my other modules. That's why I chose English for Law because I didn't want anything that was gonna be like the English that I did in high school. We did stories. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

FGS19 displays a good knowledge of the focus in English 1A/B. He wanted to avoid any module whose content resembled what he had done in school but was helpful and applicable to his other modules. The consolidated finding conveyed in all the above excerpts is that the choice of the AL module is guided by its affinity to FGSs' academic discipline. This is because of the acculturation that such a module presages. This is congruent with the perspectives of Moje (2008) as well as Shanahan and Shanahan (2008; 2012).

EFL's relevance to South African undergraduate FGSs was one of the major determinants of their choice. These students made a strategic choice that foregrounds the transfer of knowledge and skills. FGS15:

> So, I chose English for Law because I felt it would come in handy; it would be the foundation, and it would also help me in other modules. I feel I made the right choice because people would do English 1A leave later. So, in English for Law, we use the data applicable to all my modules. So, I feel English for Law is a great English that you can use for Law modules because it gives you a certain advantage, it's relevant, it's relevant to other law modules. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

FGS15 views EFL as a foundational module that has a significant role to play in the academic literacy integration of FGSs. Some of the foundational aspects associated with EFL are detailed by other FGSs. For instance, FGS17 explains that

> I felt that English for Law related to my other modules. Cause in the other law modules, we do reference using the TSAR. And with English for Law, the writing there must be law-related essays…. That's why I chose English for Law over the other English modules. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

The choice of EFL proved beneficial in other modules, through the principle of knowledge-and-skills transfer. This became evident in the post-interview phase. One participant emphasised that EFL

> was very much related [because] [i]n two of my modules, I was required to summarise cases sometimes. So, the information and skills I get in English for Law, I apply…in summarising those long cases as well as understanding the Law vocabulary based on the Latin words that were provided in English for Law. (FGS31, Post-module interview, 2022)

EFL assists FGSs with summarising and understanding cases and Latin terminology that would otherwise become an obstacle. EFL also helped FGSs with other general academic writing style aspects, including the impersonal mode. In FGSs' other modules, students are simply instructed to

> [g]o draft heads of arguments and all of that. But if you have English for Law. You know that in terms of academic writing you don't use emotive language, and you don't use first-person pronouns. So those things are already dealt with. (FGS7, Pre-module interview, 2022)

Thus, EFL instructs FGSs to avoid the first-person narrative in their academic writing, including work submitted in their other modules, where such important stylistic elements and skills are not taught explicitly.

It suffices to note that FGSs' choice of a literacy module was also regulated by their matric mark for English. The requirement for EFL was lowest, compared to those of English 1A/B and English 1C/D. The requirement for English 1A/B is the highest, followed by that of English 1C/D. FGS13 explains that

> …to do English 1C and English 1A, we must have certain factors. But for English for Law, we must have a 65% score for the language, which is something that I qualified for. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

This means that a student with 65% would not be allowed to take any of the other two options. Although it may seem like EFL is a lowest standard literacy module, in relation to the other two alternatives, it was most impactful for South African FGSs. The latter, in the post-module interviews, noted that some of their peers who did one of the other two options wished that they had done EFL, because of its positive impact and link to Law. Thus, beyond the qualifying criteria, enrolling for EFL is strongly influenced by FGSs' awareness of the gap between high school and university. FGS1 admitted that

> I need to improve my writing skills, improve my reading skills and how I speak, how I evaluate, how I summarise. This is because the offers of the university and high school are different. So, if I don't adapt my ways of doing from my high school level, I don't think I'll be able to survive. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

EFL is expected to mediate FGSs' knowledge, skills, and attitudes gap and thus facilitate their transition and integration into the university (English for Law Study Guide 2022). These expectations relate mainly to listening, speaking, reading with understanding, and writing. Presentations and debates in EFL constitute practical ways of developing the oral English competency of FGSs. FGS9 noted that

> I'm expecting us to…do presentations. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

Choosing EFL entails significant expectations that indirectly place the EFL teaching team under pressure. This burden is heightened by the simultaneous need to address general literacy issues, adapt to academic literacy requirements, and uphold disciplinary literacy standards. FGS3 indicated that

> [w]hat I would expect from English for Law is to help me to get a better understanding of certain texts and give me an understanding of how I should break it down to write it in my way since university expects us to do that. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

These expectations are amplified and reinforced by FGS4, who emphasised that

> [a]s a Lawyer, I need to know how to write, how to read, how to understand, listen, and to be able to summarise information using my brains and to capture information faster…. So, I need those skills. They're very important, as a Lawyer. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

It becomes evident that a lawyer deploys all aspects of literacy. All the expectations unveiled by the above extracts confirm Azpeitia, Lazaro, Ruvalcaba, and Bacio's (2025) contention that university administration should ensure that available academic literacy modules can address the multidimensional challenges experienced by first-generation students.

The law-related AL fears and concerns of FGSs strongly influenced their expectations and therefore their preference for EFL over English 1A/1B and English 1C/1D. This is particularly true in the absence of information on the offerings of these three options, and when excluding

the matric English score requirements. Many FGSs chose their AL module based on its name. This is the case for FGS2, FGS3, FGS4, FGS8 and FGS9, for instance. FGS2 noted that

> …seeing the word 'law', I think English for Law is going to teach me how to present my work as a lawyer, things that are needed…how to speak as a lawyer, how to punctuate as a lawyer, how to categorise things, and how to get information. How to summarise journal entries, how to write them, how to paraphrase, in terms of the law. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

The relevance of the module to the law field, as signalled by the name 'English for Law', was the deciding factor. FGS2 expected EFL to teach him the required disciplinary literacy. The name of the module 'English for Law' creates high expectations of its ability to socialise FGSs into the practices of their chosen law field. As FGS6 indicated,

> English for Law works better with law because most of their articles are law-related…. They're motivational to us as law students, which English 1A/1B doesn't usually do as it involves many students…not just specifically law students…. English for Law is way better because it relates more to our…other law modules. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

According to FGS6, EFL's motivating dimension is linked to its exclusiveness and the relevance of its outcomes to other law modules. This validates Moje's (2007) as well as Shanahan and Shanahan's (2008; 2012) understanding of disciplinary literacy as specific approaches to knowledge building, text formatting, meaning making, and viewpoint clarifying in peculiar academic domains. Thus, many FGSs' subsequent trust in EFL requires an examination of the aims of this module, to determine their alignment with the expectations of these students.

Many FGSs viewed EFL as the most appropriate AL module to address their limitations concerning the English language. This is based on the English part of the name of the module. These students believe that this module would be able to equip them for the English communication related to their field by clearing the language barriers that they face. FGS11 described the challenge regarding language and communication thus:

> …English, which is used as a language of communication, created some barriers between me and lecturers. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

FGS11 attributes this language issue to the fact that

> …when we are communicating, we speak our home language. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

This highlights the importance of practice in the development and mastery of a language. Speaking their mother tongue hinders these students' prospects of attaining and enhancing their English proficiency. The fact that FGSs generally communicate in their mother tongues compounds the limitations caused by their mother-tongue instruction. It must be emphasised that the use of the mother tongue also applies to the teaching of English itself. FGS6 confided:

> English was very difficult to learn because in 'Kasi schools' [township schools], they teach us English and explain math problems in Zulu. So, when going to university lectures, when they speak English, it's quite difficult to understand. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

This has significant implications for FGSs once they enter university, where code-switching becomes less likely. FGS11 noted that in

> English for Law, there are some students who are first-generation and who are coming from schools which are dominated by other languages, not English…. I believe the lecturers may be mistaken that every student is coming from a school whereby English is the home language. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

The university's expectation that entering students should be conversant in English means that lecturers do not endeavour to establish proficiency. Yet English becomes a significant challenge that may cause FGSs to underperform and possibly drop out. FGS7 confessed that

> …some of us are…struggling with some English words. We had to read books a lot [of times]. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

This situation is risky for FGSs, given that university studies entail a significant workload that does not provide time for multiple readings. Moreover, these multiple readings may still be ineffective because students are not using the suitable strategies for the various reading purposes. This corroborates Follmer, et al.'s (2024) observation that the deployment of appropriate reading strategies fosters comprehension and academic achievement.

A few FGSs consulted senior students who had taken EFL to determine the difference in the contents of the three options. This provided them with insights that guided their choices. Such a wise approach was adopted by FGS20, who confided that

> I chose English for Law because I checked out, I asked some second years what do we get in English for Law and English 1C. They told me that in English 1C you get stories and then realise that in this thing, I can only learn how to read. But in English for Law, I learn how to write, how to think fast, and how to memorise something. So that's why I chose English for Law. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

For FGS20, the EFL curriculum is more beneficial than that of English 1C. The TSAR referencing system is one of the central aspects for law students in South Africa, which only EFL can teach them. The peculiarity of the TSAR is consistent with Moje's (2008) as well as Shanahan and Shanahan's (2008; 2012) view of disciplinary literacy. They conceive disciplinary literacy as involving the employment of specific intellectual procedures, ways of doing, abilities, and communication codes in the endeavours of the various and unique academic fields.

Most FGSs selected EFL because of its potential contribution to their professional development. These FGSs perceive the significance of EFL beyond the academic sphere. EFL's usefulness in FGSs' future professional efficiency is articulated by FGS8 thus:

> I chose English for Law just because it was in the context of the law and the skills that I learned I'm going to apply in future. Like referring to a law case in future, I will be quoting some sort of relevant information sources. So, that is the main reason I chose English for Law, just because it helps me in developing legal skills. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

FGS8's choice of EFL hinges mainly on its ability to equip students in terms of legal abilities. This finding is congruent with the aims of this module communicated to students (EFL Study

Guide, 2022). The finding also echoes Kearon Hogan's (2025) view that supporting FGSs must entail equipping them for the world of work.

Some participating South African undergraduate FGSs confused English for Law and English 1A/B because of the English component of the names of these two modules. This is evident in FGS26's explanation that

> I chose English for Law because it teaches us more about how to get good information, how to get better sources that we will use in our essays….I thought that because it's going to be English for Law, it must be limited to most English contributing factors such as novels which will help you to improve your English and your vocabulary. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

Although the module's name implies English language development, novels are not part of EFL's language development approach. Novels are relevant in English 1A/B. Expecting FGSs to make a module choice based on the name is ineffective and unreasonable because names can be misleading.

For different reasons, a few FGSs did not have a choice but to take EFL because they could not or were not allowed to exercise this choice. Regarding the lack of agency, FGS22 notes:

> To be honest, I didn't choose the English part. I just chose my language module. And then I saw English for Law in my timetable. When I asked the reception, they said that as a student, you have to have English. It's either English 1C/D or English for Law. So, they placed English for Law for me. (Pre-module interview, 2022).

Because FGS22 did not exercise her choice, the faculty had to fill in the gap. The student could have been alerted to the missing elective instead of imposing one for the sake of expediency. For another participant, the lack of agency was caused by circumstances beyond the control of both the student and the university. FGS5 confides that

> I have to be honest English for Law became the last option because the other English options were full. So, it became the last option. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

For FGS5 EFL was the only option, because of late registration. In the case of FGS32, the choice was made by a university employee who was assisting her illiterate mother with the registration process. She was only consulted by her mother regarding another elective, a non-literacy module. The university adviser assumed that FGS32 would be comfortable with EFL. My probe during the interview confirmed this. These two cases are important because such a lack of agency may result in resentment of the assigned AL module, which may translate into attitudes such as a lack of interest and absenteeism. Yet, for another FGS, the choice was made randomly from the list provided by the relative who was distantly assisting with online registration. FGS11 noted,

> My auntie was the one who was doing the registration. When she called me, telling me which English she should choose, I just chose any of the ones she mentioned. She didn't explain to me what each one is about. (Pre-module interview, 2022)

This extract reinforces the fact that FGSs are kept in the dark regarding the differing offerings of the available elective AL modules. The cumulative finding illustrated by the above quotes is

deviate from Kivimäki's (2024) perspective that students' agency fosters their learning motivation and aptitudes. All the limitations highlighted above need to be corrected to ensure that FGSs make informed decisions about their AL modules. Hence, the next section provides recommendations based on the findings of this research.

Recommendations to empower FGSs to make informed AL module decisions

Based on the findings of this research study, the researcher makes some recommendations that would help guide FGSs. This would ensure that their choices of AL modules are based on a clear understanding of what each module does, not on intuition and guessing. Firstly, South African FGSs confused the language development approach of EFL with that of English 1A/B, based on the English aspect of the names of the available literacy modules. To address this confusion, it is recommended that module designers choose names that accurately capture the essence of the purposes of elective modules. Secondly, most participating FGSs highlighted the absence of comparative information on the elective academic literacy modules. Thus, the researcher recommends that pop-ups providing summaries of the focuses, aims, and contents of the different AL modules and the English matric score qualifying students to choose them be included. These pop-ups should be placed next to the elective-selection tab of the online registration system. This would help FGSs to make well-informed decisions. Thirdly, the agency of some FGSs was removed by certain circumstances, such as being registered by someone else, and late registration limiting subject selection. The university administration should ensure that faculty advisors are available online throughout the (extended) registration period. Fourthly, the university should endeavour to create tighter collaborations with schools nationwide to ensure that FGSs receive the necessary information in Grade 11 and Grade 12. To eradicate the situation where FGSs do not select their elective AL module, the online registration system should be such that the student cannot progress until they have made a choice. This is a better alternative to unilaterally assigning a module to a student. Fifthly, the university should consider creating a Toll-Free Academic and Career Advising Line that students or parents/legal guardians can call to assist with relevant information. Sixthly, given FGSs' preference for the AL module English for Law, the university should consider creating more subject-specific modules.

CONCLUSION

Institution, qualification, and module selections are important and unavoidable aspects of university application and enrolment. All students must make informed decisions, which influence their attitudes towards the selected modules, as well as their engagement, participation, progression, and overall academic success. Students' module selection is also strongly linked to their career aspirations. Although they lack guidance and knowledge of the university, South African undergraduate FGSs cannot escape the requirement to choose. Thus, this paper explored the availability of comparative information on available elective AL modules and the factors determining FGSs' AL module selection. The theoretical underpinning of the research was the disciplinary literacy perspectives of Moje (2008) and Shanahan and Shanahan (2008). The research adopted a qualitative perspective foregrounding an interpretivist paradigm. The study involved a single case study design aimed at gaining deep insights into the strategies used by FGSs in choosing their elective AL module at the selected comprehensive South African university situated in Johannesburg. The methodology employed pre-module semi-structured individual interviews and the collection of the English for Law module learning

guide as data collection methods. The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and the document analysis of the EFL learning guide formed the data examination procedure. The research findings revealed that the university does not provide sufficient, comparative information on the existing elective AL modules to enable South African FGSs to make informed decisions. FGSs avoided general AL modules or pure literary modules. Given their lack of the necessary information, FGSs made deductive decisions based on the names of the available, elective AL modules. FGSs preferred an AL module linked to their field of study, based on its perceived significance and value. University administration should ensure that comparative information on the different elective AL modules is available to students. This can be done by including pop-ups providing summaries of the elective AL modules where a choice must be made. Moreover, the university should create a Toll-Free registration advisory line to guide FGSs in choosing their elective modules. Based on the appeal of English for Law, the university should create more subject-specific AL modules.

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