Academic literacy program implementation in an Ecuadorian University: a multinomial logit approach

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ABSTRACT
The ‘FCSHlee’ program proposed by ESPOL Polytechnic University’s School of Social and Humanistic Sciences (FCSH, acronym in Spanish), consisted in the implementation of a reading requirement of culturally enriching book by subject. This study shares the experience of an academic literacy initiative in the Ecuadorian university, ESPOL’s case. The program aimed to enhance undergraduate students’ cultural level as well as oral and written communication skills. We develop a significant sample (N = 387) of the students that were part of the program and collected the data through surveys after its completion. The study describes details of the program, its scope, implementation, statistics, and conditions. Among the careers studied at the FCSH, Economics was the one that had a bigger margin of appreciation towards the program, which is a factor that could indicate that these groups of students possess reading orientation given the analytical characteristics of their study program.

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Introduction
Reading literacy is an important transversal competence for private, professional and public life. It is considered as a means of development of personality and society as a whole. We perceive it as a broad and varied set of knowledge, skills and attitudes in the area of work with text information. It becomes a means of education and an important mediator of education in the lifelong learning concept.

At a global level, undergraduate students need to produce and interpret the texts related to their fields of study. This fact demands a change in their identity as thinkers and analyzers of texts (Carlino, 2003a, Carlino, 2013; Graham, Coholic, & Groen, 2013; Russell, 1990; Street, 2010). Hence, higher education institutions (HEIs) implement programs based on ‘academic literacy.’ Having adequate reading skills is a prerequisite for text comprehension and hence for success in higher education, at work and in everyday life (Walgermo, Frijters, & Solheim, 2018). Given that students often need extensive time on task in order to acquire adequate reading skills, being interested in literacy and having high levels of self-efficacy might be especially important for the reading development of these students. One major limitation of research specifically addressing interest in and motivation for reading is a relative lack of studies carried out to understand how students react to mandatory reading programs: at higher education students’ careers. Previous research has shown that college starters generally have a strong interest in reading, however, several studies
also show that, only a few months into the first year, the poorest readers already have a weaker reader self-concept than their peers (Morgan, Fuchs, Compton, Cordray, & Fuchs, 2008).

To address the vacuum in the previously detailed literature, from the second academic semester of 2011 and for ten semesters, the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (FCSH, acronym in Spanish) implemented the FCSHlee [‘FCSH reads’] program called to promote reading and writing literacy tasks, expand the cultural background of students and improve their written and oral communication. For this purpose, FSC teachers of six subjects in each career selected culturally enriching books that the undergraduate students had to read. The aim was to rise from 3.8 books per person, according to reading indicators of books in Spanish in Latin American, to 10.30 books. (CERLALC, 2012). Hence, the objective of the program was to assure that the students read approximately seven books every semester.

Having information about students’ level of interest and appreciation to our program at this developmental stage may make teachers better able to adapt their reading instruction to the individual student. To our knowledge, no previous study has specifically investigated both interest in reading-related to the number of years of study and the type of study career.

In Ecuador, after analyzing the results of the study ‘Habits of reading in Ecuador’ (INEC, 2012) prepared by the National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INEC, by its acronym in Spanish) in 2012, the government started the National Reading Plan. Thus, the implementation of the FCSHlee program became a visionary initiative in HEIs and a national benchmark proposed by ESPOL. In the second semester of 2016, a satisfaction survey about the FCSHlee program was applied to get a measure of the students’ level of appreciation at all undergraduate levels in FCSH. The results revealed that increasing the cultural background was not a priority and the time devoted to read books is considered to be detrimental for the compliance of activities related to subjects.

This paper is structured as follows: Section 2 refers to studies in the area of academic literacy which support the approach of this research. Section 3 details the construction of the sample used for our multinomial logistic analysis. Section 4, shows the results of our estimation and finally the last section presents the conclusions and implications of our study.

**Review of literature**

Academic competence refers to a cluster of related abilities, skills, knowledge and dispositions of cognitive and non-cognitive nature that allow university students to perform the necessary activities as required, and thus to graduate and be successful in their career (Delgadova, 2015).

As far as relevant changes in the academic education are concerned, those have taken place mostly in the sphere of application of information technologies into academic education, what enabled establishment of different forms of distance education, such as e-learning, online education, virtual education, network education and others (Bieber & Worley, 2006).

In addition to professional, technical and other academic competences, reading literacy ranks among the key competences. It is the core academic competence for processing the information gained, innovating it and consequently creating new knowledge. The definition of reading literacy changes to reflect changes in society, the economy, culture and education. Therefore, it cannot be regarded as a simple skill of reading, decoding and comprehension. The current perception of reading literacy involves understanding of not only explicit but also implicit meanings of the read text.

Students’ academic literacy standards are declining, whether at school or in HEIs. Many teachers claim that students are no longer able to write (Lillis & Turner, 2010). The ability to express competently in written form is one of the most valued skills by employers (Blair, 2016; Chen & Myhill, 2016; Danielsson, 2016; Lea, 1994). However, undergraduate students often referred to literacy as one of the most difficult academic demands in HEIs, particularly in the first year (Krause, 2010).
Interest in reading is important for reading acquisition, because students who are interest driven tend to spend more time reading for leisure, are likely to devote more effort to literacy tasks and are, for this reason, more likely to become skilled readers than their peers who are less interested in reading activities (Ecalle, Magnan, & Gibert, 2006). In studies on older students, the development of interest has been claimed to provide a basis for students’ feeling of competence in relation to different subjects in higher education, and there is evidence that the initial development of interest precedes the development of students’ feelings of competence, and that once both have developed, there is a reciprocal association between them (Renninger, Hidi, Krapp, & Renninger, 1992).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognizes that literacy goes beyond reading and writing. It is ongoing learning that allows the development of skills which contribute to the society (UNESCO, 2006; Grant, 2013). Thus, the term academic literacy is at the forefront of professional education (Carlino, 2003b) and it is defined as ‘the set of notions and strategies necessary to participate in the discursive culture of the disciplines as well as in the activities of production and analysis of texts required at university.’

Despite the importance of the topic at the global level, there are few studies in which critical pedagogy has been applied in higher education in Latin America. While basic knowledge meets the teaching of reading and writing, academic texts of a specific topic or complex literary works in higher education require reading and critical thinking and represent a challenge (Wilson, 2016).

From the students’ perspective, the academic writing process and reading skills embody new challenges and demands that require acculturation. New conventions and literacy skills should be learned and acquired. Often, the writing task demands addressing an audience that students vaguely understand. (Briggs, Clark, & Hall, 2012; Diezmann, 2006). Hence, students experience significant pressures as they need to adjust their expectations and get used to new forms of assessment. Therefore, HEIs must provide an anchor for the students during the difficult adaptation to the academic writing process and reading.

Contemporary academic literacy taught to undergraduate students has been classified in different types, in the digital age. Hence, Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) literacy is essential (Esmaeil Pounaki, Esmaili Givi, & Fahimnia, 2017; Cisco, 2016; Ruzycki, 2015). The benefits of academic literacy are the enhancement of undergraduate students’ capabilities to read and write analytically. Thus, its development in the technological, social and professional context is conducive. Besides, in the process of learning a foreign language, it is essential for students to perform reading and critical writing (Ataç, 2015), as demonstrated by Marzec-Stawiarśka (2016) through a quasi-experimental study in which students reading of the abstracts of texts had a positive influence on the progress of extensive reading.

Furthermore, in the United States, undergraduate and graduate students reported readings in the newspaper and in verbal discussions of the Literacy Bag program that was implemented to promote professional reading and critical thinking, i.e., performing professional literacy. The test students reported that it was a rewarding experience (Greene & Serro, 2015).

Undergraduate students report numerous advantages of receiving critical pedagogy at university. However, there is a controversy among university teachers about the inclusion of academic literacy in higher education (Waigandt et al., 2016). Through in-depth interviews Colombo, Prior, Colombo, and Prior (2016) found that a group of teachers is aware of the importance of academic literacy and has a positive attitude to their teaching while the other group argues that students of these education level must already perform critical reading and writing skills.

The present study aims to contribute to the literature in the academic literacy field with the identification of possible increases in reading appreciation in the context of higher education through a quantitative method. The objective is to specify how this growth occurs through the analysis of our respondents.
FCSH academic literacy experience

With a reading assignment of a culturally enriching book in six subjects per semester, the aim was to level the standard and reading appreciation indicators of FCSH undergraduate students. The plan was that each student would read between five and seven books every semester. The selected book could be related or not to the subject, best seller or of general recognition in rankings of international readings.

Initially, the books were chosen by the academic management and the subjects in the quantitative areas did not participate. The subject coordinators selected and communicated both the administration and students the titles of the books. Also, the students received instructions for handing in an essay about the book on a specific agreed date. In some cases, the teachers decided other reading assessment evidence.

To ensure that students have a new book experience each year, faculty management requested that the selected titles could not be repeated in the following semesters or subjects. This also contributed to a broader and more updated selection of topics. According to statistics from the quality department of the FCSH, 86.6% of the titles were not repeated (see Table 1). Besides, the class portfolio of the teacher included a copy of the students’ essays as evidence.

At the beginning of the program did not consider the quantitative subjects. Therefore, only from the first semester 2012 all the subjects were in the program. In the second semester of 2015, the participation of the subjects was more flexible. Hence, the program was in force but there was no tracking of the assigned book report. Throughout the program, the most frequent topics of the books were business management representing an average of 54.88% each semester, social sciences 43.63% and computer science 1.49%. This shows that more than 50% of texts that are read by students are related to their careers (see Figure 1).

Therefore, to consolidate the program and attain success, data reveals that 48% of the teachers joined the initiative in the second semester of 2016 whereas 60% of the teachers participated at the beginning. (See Table 2).

Furthermore, the teacher requested a book report of every semester to verify the reading task. On average, according to the information obtained from the breakdown of scores in each academic term, 83.8 % of the students handed in the book essay in each subject. This figure was not less than

| Number of times a book was sent | Number of books | Percentage of books % |
|--------------------------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| 1                              | 502            | 86,6%                 |
| 2                              | 62             | 10,7%                 |
| 3                              | 11             | 1,9%                  |
| 4                              | 4              | 0,7%                  |
| 8                              | 1              | 0,2%                  |
| Total                          | 580            | 100%                  |

Figure 1. Classification of book titles in FCSHlee program.
Source: Author’s Survey.
the average 80% of the ten semesters analyzed, except for the 76.9% obtained in first semester 2014, probably due to the change in academic direction. (See Table 3).

The program had idiosyncratic resistance. For some students and teachers, the increase in cultural baggage was not a priority and the time devoted to it is considered to be detrimental to the development of activities related to the area, so in the first semester 2016, it was decided to make it more flexible by not divulging the requirement biannual.

There are other factors that may influence the performance of teachers’ adherence to the FCSHlee program. For example, the rotation of teachers affected the program because an important number of teachers were no longer in the institution. This affected the degree of acceptance that may have, not only by affinity but because novice teachers did not know about the assignment of the book FCSHlee, which possibly reduced the favorable statistics to the program.

In the first semester 2016, 26 of 67 (39%) of the subject coordinators were ‘novice.’ In our context, ‘novice’ means that the teacher started to work in the last two years. Despite this situation, there was a high proportion of novice teachers who were immersed in the program, in fact, 54% of the ‘novice’ and 46% of the ‘former’ were participating on this initiative.

The aim of FCSH’s academic management at the implementation time of the FCSHlee program was less ambitious. Specifically, the aim was to raise the general culture levels of the polytechnic community in the long term. Hence, the authorities knew that the transformation would take time and generate resistance. Additionally, the academic authorities were aware of the essay services on the web. However, the objective was that a student would read at least one of the 7 books assigned and that it would provide more information of general culture than it would have occurred without the FCSHlee program.

**Methods**

**Data collection**

In this study, the data set was collected from a survey which gathered demographic and descriptive information from students of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities (FCSH). The objective was to evaluate the level of satisfaction and appreciation of students regarding the academic literacy program. Surveys were carried out in the second half of 2016.
through a random probability sampling of the FCSH students’ levels of the different careers. It was decided to capture the information in the different levels of study due the need to collect a measure that illustrated the perception of the program in students whose reading level would be evidently different due to the reading requirement to which they had been subjected in the different years of study that would have experienced. Each level represents a calendar year of academic study.

**Empirical model**

We estimate two multinomial logit models to investigate the academic literacy perception in Ecuadorian higher education students. The first model captures this perception from different study level and the second from academic literacy appreciation to our program. The theoretical framework of the multinomial logit model has each educational level i faced with j different academic literacy appreciation measured with a Likert scale; the second model has each educational career in the FCSH i faced with j different academic literacy appreciation measured with a Likert scale. The educational level of higher education receives a certain level of utility from each academic literacy appreciation from study level and academic literacy appreciation from study career which chooses the alternative that maximizes its efficiency. We assume that each academic literacy recognition could be measured between the format of a typical five-level Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree).

Our empirical models are specified as follows:

$$V_{ij} = X_i'\beta_j + \epsilon_{ij}$$  \hspace{1cm} (1)

Where $X_i'$ a vector of explanatory variables such as Likert scale items is, $\epsilon_{ij}$ are the error terms that are independently and identically distributed. The vector $\beta_j$ represents the coefficients for the vector of explanatory variables. With the assumption that $\epsilon_{ij}$ follows a Type I extreme value distribution, the probability of choosing Likert scale items i or j in conditional on $X_i$ takes the multinomial logit form:

$$P_j(X_i) = \frac{\exp(x_i'\beta_j)}{\sum_{s=0}^{2}\exp(x_i'\beta_s)}$$  \hspace{1cm} (2)

For identification $\beta_{j1}$ is normalized to zero, we make Level 100 and Economics the base cases. For convenience, it is also assumed that $\beta$ is identically and independently distributed across the sample and follows a multivariate normal distribution with mean a and variance-covariance matrix $W \sim (a, W)$.

**Results**

**Descriptive statistics**

Table 4 shows the characteristics of the sample through the descriptive data analysis. Specifically, our sample concentrates a more significant proportion of female respondents with 54.26% and also the ages are concentrated in 81.91% between 20 and 23 years. We have a higher concentration of information of students of level 300, who experienced the challenges of the program FCSHlee from the beginning of its university life. In addition, we have a more significant number of economics students.
Empirical results

Regression results for determinants of academic literacy appreciation from study and career level are presented in Tables 5 and 7. The regression results from the multinomial logit models in Tables 5 and 7 show the estimated coefficients. Also Tables 6 and 8 present the marginal effects of results from the multinomial logit models. We use the results from these models to analyze the degree of acceptance and appreciation towards the literacy program in the FCSH.

As we can see from the estimation results in Table 5, the degree of acceptance of our literacy program increase according to the students’ career level. As expected, the degree of preparation of

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of the sample.

| Variables                  | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Age                        |           |         |
| From 16 to 19               | 23        | 5.94    |
| From 20 to 23               | 317       | 81.91   |
| From 24 to 27               | 39        | 10.08   |
| More than 27                | 8         | 2.07    |
| Gender                      |           |         |
| Male                        | 177       | 45.74   |
| Female                      | 210       | 54.26   |
| Career Level                |           |         |
| Level 100                   | 12        | 3.10    |
| Level 200                   | 65        | 16.80   |
| Level 300                   | 170       | 43.93   |
| Level 400                   | 67        | 17.31   |
| Level 500                   | 73        | 18.86   |
| Career                      |           |         |
| Commercial Engineering      | 129       | 33.33   |
| Economics                   | 163       | 42.12   |
| International Business Engineering | 95     | 24.54   |
| Total                       | 387       | 100.00  |

Table 5. Multinomial logit estimates of academic literacy appreciation from level of study.

| Level 200 (Strongly disagree) | Coefficient  | Standard Error |
|--------------------------------|--------------|----------------|
| Disagree                       | 1.9160151**  | 1.21430        |
| Neither agree nor disagree     | 1.9160782**  | 1.30589        |
| Agree                          | 2.162867**   | 1.50634        |
| Strongly agree                 | 2.824254**   | 1.24451        |
| Intercept                      | 2.609713**   | 1.09719        |
| Level 300 (Strongly disagree)  |              |                |
| Disagree                       | 14.21207***  | 1.30279        |
| Neither agree nor disagree     | 16.12141***  | 1.49217        |
| Agree                          | 15.83374***  | 1.18162        |
| Strongly agree                 | 16.04443***  | 1.21767        |
| Intercept                      | 13.92418***  | 1.05307        |
| Level 400 (Strongly disagree)  |              |                |
| Disagree                       | 15.09845***  | 1.18498        |
| Neither agree nor disagree     | 15.34080***  | 1.12876        |
| Agree                          | 15.97331***  | 1.44406        |
| Strongly agree                 | 16.26098***  | 1.15325        |
| Intercept                      | 13.89388***  | 0.98464        |
| Level 500 (Strongly disagree)  |              |                |
| Disagree                       | 1.5881970**  | 1.36834        |
| Neither agree nor disagree     | 1.6499943**  | 1.27733        |
| Agree                          | 1.9802247**  | 1.57010        |
| Strongly agree                 | 2.328520**   | 1.30422        |
| Intercept                      | 2.099205**   | 1.15643        |
| Log-likelihood                | −522.63749   |                |
| Observations                   | 387          |                |

Notes: Level 100 is base category; ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.
### Table 6. Marginal Effects (computed from Table 5).

| Level of Study          | Academic Literacy Appreciation |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
|                         | Strongly disagree               |
|                         | Disagree                        | −0.083* |
|                         | Neither agree nor disagree      | −0.000*** |
|                         | Agree                           | 0.043** |
|                         | Strongly agree                  | 0.026** |
| Level 300 (Strongly disagree) | Disagree                       | −0.000*** |
|                         | Neither agree nor disagree      | −0.014** |
|                         | Agree                           | −0.000*** |
|                         | Strongly agree                  | 0.029** |
| Level 400 (Strongly disagree) | Disagree                       | −0.054* |
|                         | Neither agree nor disagree      | −0.001*** |
|                         | Agree                           | 0.038** |
|                         | Strongly agree                  | 0.047** |
| Level 500 (Strongly disagree) | Disagree                       | −0.045** |
|                         | Neither agree nor disagree      | −0.024** |
|                         | Agree                           | 0.015** |
|                         | Strongly agree                  | 0.000*** |

Notes: ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.

### Table 7. Multinomial logit estimates of academic literacy appreciation from career of study.

| Career of Study                        | Coefficient  | Standard Error |
|----------------------------------------|--------------|----------------|
| International Business Engineering     |              |                |
| (Strongly disagree)                    |              |                |
| Disagree                               | −0.5500463***| 0.0435897      |
| Neither agree nor disagree             | −0.2876821***| 0.0333333      |
| Agree                                  | −0.1541507***| 0.0180272      |
| Strongly agree                         | −0.0447359***| 0.0192647      |
| Intercept                              | −0.4054651***| 0.0333333      |
| Commercial engineering                 |              |                |
| (Strongly disagree)                    |              |                |
| Disagree                               | −0.644357*** | 0.1630952      |
| Neither agree nor disagree             | −0.5500463***| 0.0435897      |
| Agree                                  | −0.4700036***| 0.2111111      |
| Strongly agree                         | −0.3953127***| 0.0378169      |
| Intercept                              | 0.2876821*   | 0.1666667      |
| Log-likelihood                         | −414.48948   |                |
| Observations                           | 387          |                |

Notes: Economics is base category; ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.
Source: Author’s Survey.

### Table 8. Marginal effects (computed from Table 4).

| Career of Study                        | Academic Literacy Appreciation |
|----------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| International Business Engineering     |                                |
| (Strongly disagree)                    |                                |
| Disagree                               | 0.444***                       |
| Neither agree nor disagree             | 0.357***                       |
| Agree                                  | 0.299***                       |
| Strongly agree                         | 0.068*                         |
| Commercial engineering                 |                                |
| (Strongly disagree)                    |                                |
| Disagree                               | 0.167***                       |
| Neither agree nor disagree             | −0.084**                       |
| Agree                                  | −0.130***                      |
| Strongly agree                         | −0.110***                      |

Notes: ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.
each individual generates a greater appreciation of reading. This aspect decreases in the last level of student career. This may occur because students focused on culminating their higher education studies. Hence, reading was not in their academic activities.

More specifically, as the student’s career progresses (measured annually), the probability of acceptance into the reading program increases between the first and second year to 2.6%, between the second and third year to 2.9%, between the third and fourth year to 4.7%, and between the fourth and fifth year does not reflect variation (considering only the individuals that responded to ‘strongly agree’, see Table 6).

The degree of disapproval of the program is a crucial point to highlight. During career years there is also evidence of growth in (focused on our multinomial logit estimates) the disapprobation of the program, which may be determined by the fact that the habits of reading in our population are not necessarily those indicated. Also, the imposition of a reading program does not significantly motivate their desire to please this activity.

In our analysis, we found essential to disaggregate the appreciation towards the literacy program for careers offered at FCSH (see Table 7). For this estimate, the Economics career was used as the base category, which, in comparison with the other two offered courses (International Business Engineering and Commercial Engineering) has a more significant appreciation towards the program. More specifically, the probability of acceptance to the reading program is lower in International Business Engineering students by 4.47%, while in the case of students of Commercial Engineering the likelihood of acceptance is lower in 39.53% (considering only individuals that responded to ‘strongly agree,’ see Table 8).

Conclusion

We have presented a program for the development of reading literacy of students. Through empirical investigation we reached a measure of the appreciation of reading literacy that students have for a mandatory program of reading related to his academic career.

From our estimates, we infer that the development of the FCSHlee program had the desired effect in the FCSH community. Explicitly, our multinomial logistical approach determined that the program increased the level of acceptance of reading of the surveyed students. There was an increase in reading appreciation until the last year of study. We consider that this occurs because the students are concentrated in the completion of their studies and because there is evidence that interest in reading decreases through the higher education years (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 2003).

Among the careers studied at the FCSH, Economics was the one that had a more significant margin of appreciation towards the program. Since our case is based on a sample of social sciences’ students, it may be possible that our findings describe the behavior of such a population, so extending the analysis to a sample with a heterogeneous group of higher education students may be a widely-needed factor.

After this experience, it should not only disseminate the polytechnic experience and review the modifications necessary for improve the program. The development of scientific measurements to analyze the impact that academic literacy can have on increasing cultural is an important point to explore.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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