Critical Reflection on the Academic Writing Standard of First-Year English Second-Language Students in a South African University

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a critical reflection on the academic writing ability of English second-language students in a South African university. Acquiring proficiency in academic writing is one of the essential skills that students at the tertiary level are expected to acquire. One challenge that has emerged after the outbreak of Covid-19 is that universities in restructuring their curricula have not given adequate time to interact with beginning students to provide writing instructions to help them meet the standard expected; this challenge motivated this study. A qualitative research method was used and data was collected from a selection of first-year students, registered in the first semester, for a compulsory writing course. Participants were given a narrative essay and all scripts were marked and rated by two experienced lecturers, using a rubric. The findings indicated that students encounter numerous challenges in writing coherent academic essays, as they have low proficiency in English which is the medium of instruction.

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INTRODUCTION

Performance in academic writing in English as a second language (ESL) has a significant impact on the graduation rate of students in most universities in South Africa (Khumalo & Reddy, 2021; Pineteh, 2014). Academic writing proficiency, therefore, is one of the critical skills that students at tertiary levels are expected to acquire because it is a key aspect in the production and sharing of knowledge (Deane & O'Neil, 2011). Coleman and Tuck (2022) maintain that lecturers must understand students' writing developmental needs to help them plan relevant programmes that can improve students' academic writing proficiency. Additionally, students must use peer feedback as a strategy to master English writing skills that are important for their studies (Damanik, 2022). In many developing countries, like South Africa, the use of second languages as media of instruction, has had a detrimental impact on students' ability to explicitly express their ideas in written texts. This is compounded by the fact that the linguistic structure expected in academic writing is more complex compared to other forms of writing. It is, therefore, essential for tertiary institutions to have special programmes and use various strategies to help first-year students acquire appropriate levels of academic writing (Scott, Ulmer—Krol & Ribeiro (2020).

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has compelled tertiary institutions to shift from traditional face-to-face to online or blended learning (Brown, Mbewe & Forcheh, 2022). Nonetheless, fewer studies were conducted on what method is better in helping students improve academic writing. After evaluating proposals written by Master of Education Students at the University of Namibia, Joshua (2024) proposed that regular practice in academic writing can help students improve their writing standards.

The abundance of technological devices has ensured readily-available programmes that can be used to supplement the knowledge provided by lecturers, physically, in class. Pardede (2024) accentuated that technological devices have a high potential to facilitate learning to write. Henderson (2020) proposed four 'styles' that university students can utilise technology to improve their writing levels and they were effective. Additionally, meticulous training on writing strategies, coupled with providing comprehensive feedback to first-year students through, for example, a computer programme can help improve text quality (Wischgoll, 2017). Law and Baer (2020) used a technology-structured peer-review program to help students improve their revision process during essay writing and the process yielded visible results.

Numerous studies conducted globally revealed that first-year students need thorough training to help them develop effective academic writing skills (Coleman & Tuck, 2022, Wischgoll, 2011, Zhang, 2013). The challenge encountered is that universities do not allocate ample time in their programmes for teaching academic writing skills. The purpose of this study, therefore is to highlight the challenges that first-year students in a South African university encounter and propose innovative strategies that can be used to help them improve their academic writing levels.

In this context, this study, reflects on the academic writing ability of first-year ESL students in a South African university and evaluates different strategies used to improve students' writing. The study was guided by the following research questions: (1) What can be done to improve the academic writing proficiency levels of students? (2) What strategies

can be used to improve the vocabulary of students? (3) Are there any differences between the writing standards of first language (L1) and second language (L2) students? (4) Do students have the ability to evaluate the written corrective feedback given by lecturers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

ESL students at the undergraduate level have the daunting task of struggling to acquire proficiency in English and trying to present ideas in an appropriate academic style. Native English speakers usually do not experience this level of challenge as they acquire certain language skills naturally, as they grow (Hyland, 2016), and at the tertiary level, they mainly focus on arranging their ideas logically. Hyland's (2016) assertion clearly indicates that, however, ESL students need more focused training in academic writing. Purser (2012) condemns universities for focusing on ESL students' writing deficiencies and rather advocates for the teaching of academic writing as a means of liberating students' linguistic repertoires in their new courses or fields of study. This implies that lecturers responsible for teaching academic writing, therefore, have to be innovative and proactive to help the students in their particular courses.

Universities that have students who speak English as a second language should provide writing support to improve the writing standard of these students because written communication is arguably one of the most urgent and visible skills needed to boost graduate employability (Canton, Govan & Zahn, 2017). Authors like Gebril and Platkans (2016), for example, urge lecturers to facilitate textual borrowing in improving the lexical diversity of students' academic texts. Graduate students are expected to have a thorough knowledge of the use of various sources in their writing. Anderson and Cuesta-Medina (2019) studied the academic writing practices and beliefs of postgraduate language teacher trainees at a university and concluded that they experience challenges when writing in aspects where they have not received training.

Writing is an essential skill that university students are expected to master as it enables them to present their thought processes, information and abilities. It is a timeless skill that students are expected to master during their university years and thereafter apply practically in the workplace. Hinkel (2013) emphasised that teaching grammar is very important for ESL students to enable them to produce formal and academic prose, appropriate to university standards. Moreover, teaching some aspects of grammar at the tertiary level, helps ESL students to pass content across with the hope that they will improve their interactions in English during the process of learning (Pawlak, 2013). These studies confirm that there is a need to teach grammar to ESL to help them improve their academic discourse and timely completion of their studies.

Teaching academic writing is a laborious process that helps students develop essential language skills like, summarising, paraphrasing, and synthesising (Zhang, 2013). Students who internalise these skills hardly encounter difficulties when writing different tasks. Roald, Wallin, Hyberstern and Stenoien (2021) argued that academic writing can be enhanced by giving students various writing genres during the first year to help them acquire sound knowledge of academic literacy. This is due to the fact academic literacy encompasses numerous skills compared to the technical skills addressed in academic writing.

The study is underpinned by Bourdieu's habitus theory which postulates that students' writing practices can be shaped by the social and cultural factors of where they study. Bourdieu (1990) maintains that habitus is linked to resources of knowledge that are gained from a specific culture where a person lives. Blommaert (2015: 9) analysed Bourdieu's theory and concurred that the concept of habitus is extremely relevant as it "shows itself in every social activity". The habitus contributes immensely to language development as individuals actively engage with each other in exchange for symbolic power (Joseph, 2020).

Notwithstanding the numerous challenges students encounter when writing in English, since it is a second language for the majority of students, nearly all institutions in South Africa have chosen it as the medium of instruction despite the challenges students encounter. The driving force is that English is a global language that will help students, for instance, engage others across the globe, give them international status, and make them marketable. This study, therefore, seeks to provide a reflection on the academic writing standard of students in one South African university and provide strategies that can be used to improve the situation.

METHOD
Instrument
The paper used a phenomenological approach, wherein participants were randomly selected from the population of ECS students registered in 2023 and semi-structured interviews were used as data collection instruments. An interview was selected as it is an instrument that provides participants with an opportunity to share their views. Berg (2001: 66) defines interviewing as "a conversation with a purpose" as it provides participants with an opportunity to talk openly which increases the richness of the data collected. The interview was, therefore, chosen as an appropriate tool to accord participants an opportunity to outline the challenges they encounter when writing different academic tasks. Conducting interviews enables a researcher to gather empirical data from participants, in this case ESL first-year students to an in-depth insight into their challenges with academic writing.

Procedure
Participants in this study were level one students registered for English Communication Skills (ECS). This is a transition course that focuses on bridging the gap between high school and university-level standards of reading, thinking and writing, hence, academic language. A total of 20 participants were purposefully sampled from a population of 209 students; they comprised a selection of one ECS group from the 12 groups registered for the course. The researchers ensured that all ethical clearance processes were adhered to, and the sampled participants were informed about the date and time to conduct the interviews, two weeks before the process commenced. Interviews were conducted in a faculty board room, at the university, which the researcher had secured to conduct interviews without interruption.

Data collection
The researcher conducted a pilot study by interviewing two students who were not selected as participants for the study, thereafter, all questions that the students found confusing were restructured as confusing questions, due to challenges like ambiguity and poor

construction may yield unsatisfactory and unreliable data (Vanderstoep, et al., 2009:228). To capture accurate data from the participants, during interviews Creswell's (2009) methods of making hand-written notes and using an audiotape to capture information were used. The information recorded in the audiotape was compared with the researcher's handwritten notes in order to cross-check the data gathered. This process also enabled the researcher to revise some of the interpretations of the responses given by the participants.

The interviews were conducted during April 2022 and each session lasted between 20 and 30 minutes depending on the nature of the responses given. The primary goal of the interview was to get participants' experiences of the challenges they encountered when writing academic texts and what can be done to improve their writing proficiency levels. Before the commencement of each session, the interviewer assured the respondents that all responses were confidential and would be used for the purpose of the study only.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results from interview data provided divergent views as each participant gave an unbiased individual perspective about achieving proficiency in academic writing. They aired their views freely as the researcher assured them of anonymity. Some of the participants, however, experienced challenges when trying to elucidate certain points and they then would stop. In such instances, the researcher probed with follow-up questions in an effort to help interviewees continue sharing their thoughts.

This is in line with what Hyland (2005) postulates as one of the reasons for the effectiveness of using an interview as a data-gathering instrument. He describes an interview as "a systematic way to cover salient issues, yet is flexible enough to allow for follow-up on interesting possibilities when participants introduce their own ideas" (Hyland 2005:185). Essentially, it is an appropriate instrument to acquire empirical data from the participants. Most of the participants, however, found it difficult to express themselves which ultimately compromised their ability to give comprehensive opinions.

This clearly confirms that, although problems during the interviews were indications of their oral ability, it can be inferred that the majority of level-one students are likely to grapple with challenges when required to write academic texts in an appropriate style and register. A thematic content analysis was used to classify and interpret the responses under four themes, hence, questions with similar responses were grouped together under themes; details of the thematic analyses and their interpretations are discussed below.

Improving writing proficiency levels

When these students enroll at universities, they believe that the universities will provide them with all the necessary skills to help them acquire knowledge and prosper in their chosen fields. They also believe that it is the responsibility of the university to help them improve their writing proficiency levels and not the secondary schools where they completed their matric.

Of the twenty participants interviewed, only six indicated that they had received instruction about writing at secondary school, however, they highlighted that the type of instruction received was on writing a good essay and letter writing, focusing on the mechanics of writing such genre. The remaining 14 participants indicated that they never

received any instruction at their secondary school level because teachers focused on finishing the syllabus rather than on improving their writing skills.

The great disparity between participants who indicated that they received some sort of training and those who indicated that they had never been trained, confirms that there is a dire need to lecture undergraduate students on how to improve their academic writing levels. In addition, students who indicated that they had received training in academic writing seem to have misunderstood the question as they were referring to instructions on how to write a good essay. Training in academic writing goes beyond the level of writing an essay as it includes, inter alia - effective use of academic vocabulary, text connectors, coherence, appropriate tone, and register. One participant who never received any training shared her frustration:

> I was very disappointed when I received the results of my first assignment in one of the courses as the score was very low. The only comment given by the lecturer was that my essay is not written in the appropriate academic standard expected at university level.

The students complained that the lecturers never gave them any training in academic writing but expected them to write academically acceptable essays, right from the first assignments. It is clear that the university regards the ECS course as the only one tasked with bridging the gap between high school and university in teaching various aspects of academic writing.

All participants confirmed that ECS is a basic course that helps them to acquire basic knowledge about academic writing. It empowers them to tackle different assignments with confidence though it is unable to address all features of academic literacy within the duration of the course. Dudley-Evans (1991) maintains that socialising students into the academic community is a tedious process even for native speakers of English, therefore, it is a very demanding activity to teach ESL students the appropriate academic style of writing. It is further complicated by the fact that the majority of students enrolled at the selected South African university come from extremely rural areas where they hardly have any contact with native speakers of English. One participant indicated that "*I struggle to understand what the majority of lecturers say in class as they speak very fast and do not repeat statements*". It is an excruciating experience for participants who were taught, in the universities by a native English speaker for the first time as they fail to understand the contents presented. Enhancing the process of initiating ESL students into the academic discourse and appropriate English rhetoric requires extra effort and commitment from both students and lecturers. Additionally, contact with native speakers, during pre-university days, plays an important role as students can then become acquainted with the appropriate style of using English for different purposes, including, for academic purposes.

The university policy of offering the ECS course for only a year has a serious negative impact on students' achievement levels when instructed in academic writing; although, this is an international procedure that is functional in most courses, however, it is not very effective for ESL students who have very low academic writing proficiency levels. Barnhisel, Stoddart and Gorman (2012) pointed out that most institutions have devoted lessons on writing skills to first-level students only, disregarding the fact that writing is an ongoing

pedagogic process. First-level classes are usually overcrowded and lecturers pay little attention to helping individual students sharpen their writing skills as the former work under immersed pressure. A participant said, "*if you do not arrive on time, you will find the class overcrowded and you would not hear what the lecturer is saying*". Academic writing can be effectively taught in small classes where the lecturer can interact with students and monitor their progress. It is also clear that, although there are numerous challenges, students do not fully commit themselves to practice writing regularly, as they only write text for formative and summative evaluation.

As a result of these challenges indicated above, all participants, including those who indicated that they had received basic training in writing texts, agreed that the situation at the selected South African university makes it practically possible for lecturers to help them upscale their writing proficiency levels. Unless other programmes are put in place, the university curricula amended or the current working conditions are improved, the academic writing proficiency levels of first-year students will remain unsatisfactory until they complete their studies. ESL students lack sufficient English language proficiency to understand course content, therefore, they need comprehensive, needs-oriented, thorough courses.

Effective use of academic vocabulary

Most participants consented that they are struggling to adapt to the academic writing style required at the university level. They have realised that academic writing is different from the style of writing they were accustomed to at the secondary-school level and that they need to put in extra effort to improve their writing levels. They have currently realised that writing an academic essay is not just putting words into paragraphs, but it requires knowledge of a particular genre required for a specific course. All participants acknowledged that their knowledge of academic discourse structure, like the use of text connectors and appropriate lexical items, is very low and that they need more instruction and practice on how to use them effectively. This is a serious challenge because students cannot engage in appropriate academic writing if they possess insufficient academic vocabulary necessary for university-level text creation.

Students need adequate academic vocabulary that can empower them to write informative essays without using the same terms repeatedly. They must, for instance, use different types of dictionaries to learn about the etymology of different words and how they are connected to other words. After realising that the majority of students lack sufficient vocabulary at the tertiary level, Coxhead (2000) proposed students to be exposed to an academic word list that cuts across different subject areas such as - literature, mathematics, social science, and natural science. Students, at this level, are expected to have such knowledge as the word families, classes as well as their morphological structures to use words effectively and coherently in different types of writing.

A total of 17 participants indicated that they have average knowledge of academic vocabulary, and connectors but lecturers must scaffold them so students can use them effectively as they are unable to master them all on their own. One of them pointed out that "*it is the responsibility of the lecturer to teach them how to use text connectors effectively*". Three participants agreed that they have an adequate vocabulary, but they are able to use

text connectors effectively, however, they still need further instruction in order to improve their current levels. This is what one participant said:

> *I started a WhatsApp group with my classmates where we learn new words for about one hour every Sunday afternoon. One member can post a new word where we discuss its meaning and how it can be used in a sentence.*

This is a useful strategy as most participants acknowledged that they mainly use text connectors commonly used in secondary schools such as *but, because, also, and,* as well as *however*, which are mainly used for ordinary discourse. Some students have a tendency of memorising text connectors and try to apply them in writing without really knowing their main function. One participant noted, "it is difficult to know all text connectors and their functions." The majority of ESL students fail to improve the quality of their texts, even after many years of studying at the tertiary level which is an indication of their inability to attain academic writing proficiency. This is because the acquisition of vocabulary and text connectors is essential in academic writing as they guide the reader or assessor on how ideas flow from one point to the other.

Hinkel's (2013) highlights that ESL students sometimes misuse or overuse text connectors incoherently in their essays. ESL students mainly insert text connectors that do not contribute to the overall quality of the text to impress. The author further elaborates that students must be taught the rhetorical aspects and discourse-level features of writing before they can be expected to demonstrate proficiency in academic writing. Detailed instruction in L2 academic vocabulary and grammar, hence, is pivotal in developing academic writing proficiency as students are assessed on the final texts that they write.

For students to succeed at the university level, they must acquire a particular level of vocabulary in order to articulate ideas, freely, in different circumstances. Horst (2013) proposed that ESL students must have knowledge of 2,000 high-frequency words in order to succeed at an institution of higher learning. Douglas (2013) concurs with Horst (2013) but goes a step further by indicating that 2,000 words can be a starting point as students must constantly acquire new vocabulary, on a daily basis to enlarge what they already have. Universities, thus, must design programmes that can equip students with appropriate vocabulary and how to utilize it effectively when writing different texts.

Differences between writing in L1 and L2 (English)

Data sources have revealed that many students experience challenges when writing essays as they fail to express their ideas clearly in English which is their L2. This corroborates what researchers, such as Cummins (1980) and Hinkel (2013) have asserted; they have concluded that it is beneficial for students to use their L1 while generating ideas in L2. It is, hence, not surprising that all participants confirmed that they develop ideas in their mother tongue and then translate them to English which is their L2. One of them reported, "*I effortlessly construct compound and complex sentences when writing essays in my mother tongue but I struggle to construct meaningful sentences when writing in English.*" This confirms that participants have not yet acquired adequate knowledge of English, although, they are expected to use the language in different forms of academic writing.

The results of this study are in line with the findings from a systematic review of 83 conducted by Macaro, et al., (2018) who discovered that there is no clear evidence that the use of English as the medium of instruction helps students improve their performance. It has become a common practice, globally, that institutions implement the use of English as the medium of instruction without studying the prospects and challenges to be encountered by ESL students. One participant commented that: "*It is challenging to write longer essays in English, but we must continue writing in English until we became perfect because English is an international language*". This quotation clearly encapsulates the fact that students view English as the language of upward mobility which must be mastered in order to be successful in life. Another participant has this to say:

> *I do not have any challenge in writing an essay in my mother tongue because I have good vocabulary and can use language creatively. But when I write essays in English I struggle to come up with good ideas and I spend a lot of time writing.*

Participants confirmed that they are capable of producing extensive texts within a short period when writing in L1 whereas they need double the time or more to produce a text of equivalent length when writing in L2. They are aware that writing in L2 is challenging, as they have not yet acquired the stylistic conventions used in academic writing, at the tertiary level. Writing in L1 also enables them to eloquently use dynamic expressions and figurative language which, however, pose a problem when writing in L2. This highlights that students can write better in their native languages as they are acquainted with the rhetorical conventions and logic patterns of the writing style.

From the findings, all participants concur that they prefer to receive tuition through the medium of L2 because it is a neutral language that unites students from different languages and cultural backgrounds. They value it as an international lingua-franca that can enable them to secure employment in different companies, nationally and internationally. They have the perception that all indigenous languages are not well developed enough to be used as media of instruction at the tertiary level. In summary, students would prefer to interact in English, despite the challenges they encounter, rather than learning through their native languages which would confine them to certain areas.

Failing to evaluate written corrective feedback (WCF) given by lecturers

Participants raised similar views that they hardly have time to edit and revise their essays before submitting them. Editing and revising enable students to address issues like - sentence-level grammar errors, improve lexical choices, evaluate discourse patterns, and check if the essay is in line with the English rhetorical pattern. One participant stated that "*we do not have sufficient time to write essays and subject them to the rigorous system of following the necessary step to help improve them because the academic term is very short*". This has a negative impact on their performance as lecturers usually identify glaring errors that would have been avoided if the essays had been edited. Some of the students admitted that they are 'lazy' and 'disorganised', hence, they do not write their essays on time and follow the process approach to writing, before they submit their work.

Most participants concurred that they have insufficient skills to evaluate the written corrective feedback (WCF) given by lecturers. The process of evaluating WCF is essential in

scaffolding low-proficient students to improve their writing accuracy levels (Anggunsari & Wahyuni, 2023). Participants shared different views on the effectiveness of WCF they received from lecturers. Some participants indicated that they hardly check the lecturers' comments when they receive their scripts as they are mainly concerned with the grades they receive, rather than focusing on how to improve their academic writing proficiency levels. They regard the issue of rewriting an essay, merely as a punitive measure meted out by lecturers to keep them busy. One of the participants had this to say:

It is very difficult to read and understand all comments which lecturers give after marking our scripts. We also have another course to focus on rather than rewrite the work for the sake of improving its academic writing standard.

The above statement indicates that students are not seriously committed to improving their academic writing proficiency levels. They are mainly concerned with the grades they receive after an evaluation rather than looking at the errors they have committed and how to correct them. They justify their laziness by claiming to have a heavy workload which prevents them from analyzing the comments and rewriting the essay; thus, Shields (2015) suggests that institutions should adopt a holistic assessment approach to encourage students to work on the feedback provided. If students receive timely feedback, they will realise the centrality of feedback and be motivated to improve their written texts.

Very few participants acknowledged that they benefit substantially from the lecturers' comments. They indicated that they prefer the practice where lecturers write clear comments which help them improve their performance in their oncoming activities, rather than underlining or using symbols where there is an error. One interviewee commented, "*It is easy to improve our writing when lecturers give clear comments. I sometimes get confused when lecturers underline or put question marks in my paper without explaining*". The comment clearly highlights that students prefer comprehensive, detailed and unambiguous comments which would help them to improve, rather than lecturers just indicating/underlining the errors and expecting students to correct them on their own.

Participants' responses in this section indicate that the majority of the participants have low proficiency levels in English as they struggle to express themselves clearly when they respond to questions. The fact that they fail to correctly interpret the comments given by lecturers indicates that students do not have enough exposure to English to interpret lectures' comments for correction.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study indicate that first-year university students find it difficult to adjust to the writing standard required by the university. They struggle to adjust to the standard required at the university as they are in the process of learning English and struggling to practice the requisite standard for academic writing. Also, there is a disjuncture between the manner in which high school students are taught writing skills and the pass rate, and the lecturing and assessment system used at universities. As Covid-19 seems to have ended, lecturers, therefore, must give more attention to teaching academic writing to first-year students to help them cope with the writing conventions needed at institutions of higher learning.

The study would also raises awareness among university management and lecturing staff on the challenges which level-one students encounter when writing different tasks. Students need assistance, during the process of transition from secondary school to university and writing is one of the skills which they cannot acquire without focused intervention. Fisher et al., (2011) opine that formative assessment is an effective tool that helps students adjust to the university style of writing. It also helps them to understand the cognitive process involved during the process of constructing a text, as well as improve their linguistic skills. It is therefore important that ESL students have an explicit type of discourse creation which is highly valued in academic writing.

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