

# ASSESSING THE ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS OF FINAL YEAR ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) EDUCATIONS STUDENTS TO DETERMINE THEIR PREPAREDNESS AS LANGUAGE TEACHERS: A PRACTICAL APPROACH AT A UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Atrimecia Hass<sup>1</sup>, & Brigitte Lenong<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Department of Languages, Central University of Technology (South Africa)*

<sup>2</sup>*Department of Education and Professional Studies, Central University of Technology (South Africa)*

## Abstract

The schooling system plays a significant role in teaching basic literacy skills such as reading and writing, yet students from all schooling backgrounds find it challenging to uphold an acceptable standard of academic writing in higher education in comparison with their advantaged peers. The fact that universities have adopted English as the medium for teaching and learning purposes makes it difficult for students to demonstrate the ability to write in their own words, as they are second or third language speakers. Student success at institutions of higher learning depends largely on the adequate mastery of reading and writing skills required by the discipline. The article assesses the academic writing skills of final year education students completing their studies at a University of Technology in South Africa. This study was necessitated by the realisation that students at both undergraduate and post-graduate level are struggling to express themselves through writing in the academic language which is critical for them to succeed at university. The article draws on a writing process skills questionnaire administered to fourth year students and English lecturers in the Department of Education and Communication Sciences. General academic writing conventions such as organisation, development, building an argument, grammar, and spelling were examined through an academic essay. The results highlight the poor writing skills and lack of mastering of academic writing skills of students.

**Keywords:** *Academic writing, academic literacy, writing skills, final-year, education.*

---

## 1. Introduction

Historically, university was meant for a few elites in South Africa who came from a good schooling system and were better prepared for university as they have naturally acquired academic literacies at home. This supports the findings by Gee (1990) who believes that such homes and communities should be acknowledged for socialising students to acquire academic literacies by exposing them to particular social spaces. The South African higher education system is confronted with different challenges which stem from a history of racial and class inequalities during the apartheid era (CHE, 2016). As a result of the culturally and linguistically diverse student body, many students are not prepared for the specialised type of writing expected at university and therefore should be introduced into disciplinary writing as it is imperative that they master the writing expectations of the discipline (Pineteh, 2014). Academic writing plays a fundamental role in socialising students into the discourse of subjects and disciplines in universities (Pineteh, 2014; Tuck, 2012; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Jones, Turner & Street 1999). The study gives insights into the poor academic writing skills and lack of mastering of academic conventions such as organisation, voices, explicitness, development, argument, grammar, and spelling. To understand this problem, the article investigates how well students are prepared in class for assessment tasks and if they are given extended opportunities to improve their academic writing skills. In addition, this article examines the preparedness of education students as future language educators and makes recommendations to address this problem. The article is written against the background of diverse accounts around the rationale for the poor academic writing skills of students at university of technology and the growing burden on South African universities to transform and “to standardise and systematise the teaching and learning context by introducing quality assurance measures” (Bailey 2008:2). Furthermore, it is also set against the criticism of increasing “marginalization of writing from mainstream curricula” with reference to universities of technology such as the case of the Central University of Technology, Free State (CUT) (Archer 2010:496).

Hence this paper will attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. What major challenges are encountered with fostering academic writing skills?
2. To what extent are students prepared for writing tasks?
3. What strategies can be used improve academic writing skills of Education language students?

The above questions directed the data collection process and the responses to the questions and provided a structure for the discussions in the ensuing sections of this paper.

## 2. Literature review

The academic writing skills of students in higher education have received significant interests amongst researchers (Tuck, 2012; Lillis & Scott, 2007). For the purpose of this article, academic writing refers to a literacy practice instead a skill because writing in higher education is not just “a set of neutral techniques that are somehow separate from the social context...” (Archer 2010: 499). The Academic Development Centre at Rhodes University (ADC, 2013:03) defines “academic literacy” as the process to learn how knowledge is structured and produced in diverse disciplines and locations. Examples include the rules for what “counts as an acceptable argument” or substantial evidence and in addition issues such as “structure, voice, referencing, explicitness, links between theory and practice, vocabulary”. Writing is the main form of assessment at the (CUT) as students are expected to demonstrate competence in writing of assignments, research proposals, essays and report writing. To respond to this problem many universities have put different students support programmes in place to address the inadequate academic writing skills which the poor schooling system could not solve. This led to an increase demand for academic development programmes as a practical approach to improve the academic writing skills and other soft skills essential for students (Fernsten & Reda, 2011; Jacobs, 2007). Consequently, CUT writing centre was established against this backdrop to assist undergraduate students with writing skills by supporting the academic language needs of non-English speakers. Archer (2010, p.496) believes that the “language of academia is a very specialized discourse which presents a problem for all students whether they are first or second language speakers” of English.

The biggest challenge with regards to academic literacies at CUT is that lecturers and students use the concepts “academic literacy” and “English” interchangeable. As a result of this misunderstanding the dominant culture in the institution is that lectures cannot teach language skills during their classes because they are not qualified English teachers to teach English skills. Lecturers regard themselves as discipline specialists but show unwillingness to teach other skills such as academic writing conventions. Given this linguistic gap, such approaches focus on teaching English as a set of apparent ‘neutral reading and writing skills’ in the belief that this was what students needed to become successful university (Boughey and McKenna, 2016). The approaches towards academic literacies at CUT have a deficit approach as such practices are not taught by discipline experts. Students struggle to master academic literacies practices despite all efforts is place because such practices are taught through mandatory courses at CUT such as Academic Literacy Courses (ALC), Communication skills and Writing centre practices. This argument was supported by McHarg and Thompson (2014) who believe that the remediating strategies adopted by institutions to introduce English Second Language (ESL) students to academic literacy has created feelings of inadequacy, incompetency, and discrimination among such students.

Research by Stein, Dixon, and Isaacson (1994, p392) suggest that “many writing disabilities may derive from too little time allocated to writing instruction or from writing instruction inadequately designed around the learning needs of many students. The useful methods proposed in their study are the notion of big ideas, approaches, scaffolding, and review. Another important component in accomplishing excellence in writing is the reflective process – the skill to critique your own writing as well as the writing of your peers. The fact that today’s university students communicate primary through texting and sending emails also contributes to the problem. The main challenge with these is that students might depend on the use of abbreviations and informal language. The inability of writing adequately is the result of many reasons (Bartlett, 2003; Odell and Swersey, 2003). Much attention was given to the preparedness of lectures to teach academic writing skills and how well students are prepared for academic writing tasks. Another huge challenge is the overcrowded classes and small venues makes it difficult for lecturers, especially the Education programme to teach and assess academic writing skills (Matoti & Lenong, 2018). The findings of Boughey and McKenna (2016) suggested that it has become obvious that the way in which academic literacies expected of students in academic contexts is viewed by some students as colonial and writing ‘skills’ out the belief that it was needed by students to succeed in the academy (Pineteh, 2014.).

## 3. Research methodology

The population of the study comprised of final year students who were studying towards Bachelor of Education degree, specializing in Languages and lectures teaching English and Academic Literacy. One hundred and one (101) final year students were selected for the study; 77 females and 24 males. The Language course final-year students were selected because English is their compulsory subject until third year level of their studies, which would qualify them as English teachers. A mixed method design comprising both quantitative and qualitative research methods was used for this study, which can be characterised as a QUANqual design (Ivankova & Creswell 2009:138;). The quantitative approach was based on questionnaire surveys, while the qualitative component was based on semi-structured interviews

to add depth and scope to the study. The self-constructed questionnaire contained 28 statements and the pilot track showed that the statements on the questionnaire were well understood by the respondents. The mixed method design further enhanced validity and reliability. The second phase semi-structured interviews were used by the researchers to collect qualitative data from the lecturers teaching English and Academic Literacy. In both phases of the study, the sample method used in this research is purposive sampling. The researchers observed the following ethical guidelines, namely, informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality. Participants were not obliged to answer any questions they did not want to and were free to withdraw from the research process at any time if they felt uncomfortable. In the first phase, descriptive as well as inferential statistics were generated from the data and in the second phase, the semi-structured interviews were recorded and transcribed, thereafter text analysis was used to analyse and interpret the data.

#### 4. Findings and discussion

The findings discussed in this paper are drawn from both the questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews. Whilst English is the sole medium of instruction at CUT, most of the respondents (99%) speak African home languages, with only one percent (1%) of the respondents being English speaking. It is for this reason that Bradbury (1993) argues that the challenges black students encounter as they participate in learning in higher education is since they are being taught in a language that is not their home language.

##### 4.1. Before writing

Table 1. Before Writing (n=101).

Questions	Scale	Q1		Q2		Q3		Q4		Q5		Q6	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
1. I consider the assignment or topic carefully before writing.	1	1	0,99	4	3,96	1	0,99	1	1	2	2	4	3,96
2. I ask questions about the topic.	2	4	3,96	9	8,91	7	6,93	10	10	7	7	8	7,92
3. I think about what I already know about the topic.	3	16	15,84	29	28,71	16	15,84	25	25	27	27	29	28,71
4. I brainstorm and write down facts.	4	46	45,54	34	33,66	45	44,55	40	40	34	34	44	43,56

From the above table 80% of respondents were confident that they consider the assignment or topic before writing but only 59% of the students can ask questions about the topic. On average above 60% of the students can engage on finding ideas, organise ideas or generate their thoughts and gather information before writing.

##### 4.2. During writing

Majority of the students (65%) have confirmed that they can write a good introduction, a clear topic sentence and can give sufficient support to topic sentence, whilst 56% of respondents indicated their ability to edit content, use dictionary, write good conclusions, write difficult words without errors, use their own independent thinking. However, only 29% paraphrased effectively. It is evident that most students still struggle to reference properly and as a result they commit plagiarism. Teaching students referencing techniques would be one way to introduce students to disciplinary ways of writing, thinking, and arguing their points coherently. This supports the findings by authors such as by Stefan and Carroll (2001) who believe that teaching students how to avoid plagiarism should be part of the core curriculum where lecturers should teach students what is regarded as right and wrong academic writing.

##### 4.3. After writing

Table 2. After Writing (n=101).

Questions	Scale	Q22		Q23		Q24		Q25		Q26		Q27		Q28	
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
5. I go back to my writing to revise the content.	1	4	3,96	6	5,94	2	2	1	0,99	1	0,99	0	0	1	0,99
6. I go back to my writing to check if it is coherent.	2	11	10,89	9	8,91	8	8	6	5,94	6	5,94	8	7,92	9	8,91

Majority of the respondents (70%) can proofread their documents to find errors, revise the content to make appropriate corrections.

#### **4.4. Qualitative data from interviews with lecturers**

The study included five lecturers from the Education and Communication Sciences Department and all of them had a postgraduate qualification either in Language Practice or Education, which are relevant qualifications for teaching this course. The semi-structured interview questions were sent to all lecturers well in advance and they had to respond to seven questions. The questions were developed around the type of academic writing tasks given to students, support offered to foster writing skills, collaboration with other departments, and challenges encountered by students to acquire writing skills and strategies to improve academic writing.

#### **4.5. Challenges regarding academic writing**

According to the Communication Science lecturers, students do not understand what academic writing is or what it entails and often refers to it as English lessons. All lecturers agreed that not enough is being done in the institution to teach academic writing skills. The identified challenges included the following:

*“Never mind academic writing, students struggle to write in basic English.”*

*“Lecturers do not receive any training by the university on how to teach academic writing skills to students.”*

*“Students who enter university are not well prepared on how to write properly by the schooling system.”*

Compounding the problem is that there is no liaison and collaboration in fostering academic writing across academic programmes and Faculties. As proof in this regard is a comment made by one discipline lecturer, who said; *“I teach large classes and do not have the time to teach academic writing skills, someone else should do it”*. Another challenge is that students are from diverse backgrounds, therefore are expected to learn and write academic tasks in English and not their home language (Bradbury,1993). Lecturers indicated that they are unable to give constructive feedback due to large numbers of students in the lecture room, thus missing an opportunity to correct deficiencies in academic writing. (Gibbs & Simpson, 2001). The respondents also corroborated the view by other discipline lecturers that it is not their responsibility to teach writing skills. Mitchell and Evison (2006) argue that teaching writing should be part of the responsibility of disciplinary academics and should occur within the disciplines' curriculum.

#### **4.6. Preparedness of students in academic writing**

Whilst the majority of responses (65%) from student respondents in this study were that they are well versed in academic writing in English and can reference properly, Lecturer's analysis of written tasks by students found a contradiction between student's perception of their academic writing abilities and the tasks they submit. Most written tasks had no clear thesis statement and topic sentences were not clearly written with a lack of effective organization of ideas. About 70% of students committed general grammatical errors in their writing and are unable to transition ideas between paragraphs coherently. Most students (72%) failed to acknowledge sources nor a reference list at the end of their written tasks. Stefani & Carroll (2001) mentioned that lecturers who request students to write essays as assessment tasks should model the process and the referencing of sources.

### **5. Strategies to improve writing skills**

The education lecturers advocated for a credit bearing course that should be offered in the first year or be incorporated into the English course (LCS 5012) with the emphasis on sustained academic writing, and not only short programmes in the writing centre. The participants suggested that there is a need for more collaboration with discipline lecturers, as well as model correct writing skills needed in academic writing.

### **6. Conclusion**

The paper assessed the academic writing skills of final year education students at CUT. The results highlight the poor writing skills and lack of mastering of academic writing skills by students. This article concludes that there are many reasons for the poor academic writing abilities of undergraduate students at CUT. A lack of teaching academic writing skills by discipline lecturers could be a major contributing factor. Firstly, academic writing is often outsourced to external practitioners such as writing centres and communication lecturers who often have very little to no knowledge of the discipline. Teaching academic literacy skills should be infused in everything you do as a teacher and learning cannot take place outside the classroom. The study identified a lack of cooperation between the different departments at the institution to foster academic writing skills. The researchers would therefore recommend that academic writing skills should be a joint effort between language and discipline specialist. Secondly, very little time is allocated in time for academic writing and most lecturers regard the teaching of such skills as an ad-on activity and do not include it as part of the curriculum. Teaching writing skills should be an integrated and on-going part

of socialising students into disciplinary ways of learning. Academic writing plays a critical role in socialising students into disciplinary ways of thinking, writing, arguing, and speaking. Writing skills are only taught at first-year level of study with the belief that students will sustain such skills throughout their academic journey. Academic writing skills should be taught at all levels of academic study, not only in first year as students from all levels of study struggle to write as new literacies are introduced during each year of study. The findings conclude that despite the reasons for the poor academic writing skills of students, most students still struggle to cope with the demand of academic writing expected at university. Limited sample population sourced from one faculty is acknowledged as a potential limitation of this study.

## References

- Academic Development Centre (2013). Rhodes University: Grahamstown.
- Archer, A. & Richards, R. eds., (2011). Changing spaces: Writing centres and access to higher education. AFRICAN SUN MeDIA.
- Archer, A. (2010). Challenges and potentials for writing centres in South African tertiary institutions. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 24 (4): 495-150.
- Bailey, R. (2008). Academic staff perceptions of the role and utility of written feedback on students' written work. *Zeitschrift Schreiben*, 2-6.
- Bartlett, T. (2003). Why Johnny can't write, even though he went to Princeton. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 49 (17), A39-A40.
- Beard, C. Clegg, S. & Smith, K. (2007). Acknowledging the affective in higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 33 (2): 235-252. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01411920701208415>
- Boughey, C. & McKenna, S., (2016). Academic literacy and the decontextualised learner. *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning*, 4(2), pp.1-9.
- Bradbury, J. (1993). The meta-language of cognition. Paper presented at the Kenton, Olwandle Conference, October 1993.
- CHE. (2016). *South African Higher Education Reviewed: Two Decades of Democracy*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.
- CUT Institutional Planning (2018). Central University of Technology, Free State: Bloemfontein.
- Fernsten, L.A. & Reda, M., (2011). Helping students meet the challenges of academic writing. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16(2), pp.171-182.
- Gee, J.P. (1990). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in Discourses*. Basingstoke, Falmer.
- Gibbs, G. & Simpson, C., (2005). Conditions under which assessment supports students' learning. *Learning and teaching in higher education*, (1), pp.3-31.
- Jacobs, C. (2007). Towards a critical understanding of the teaching of discipline-specific academic literacies: making the tacit explicit. *Journal of Education*, 41: 59-81.
- Lillis, T. and Scott, M., (2007). Defining academic literacies research: Issues of epistemology, ideology and strategy. *Journal of applied linguistics*, 4(1), pp.5-32.
- Matoti, S.N. & Lenong, B., (2018), July. Teaching large classes at an institution of higher learning in South Africa. In *Proceedings of International Academic Conferences* (No. 6509064). International Institute of Social and Economic Sciences.
- McHarg M.P., & Thompsom, G. (2014). Reconceptualizing the writing centre in the wake of local admissions: Redefining writing centres in Qatar. *Arab World English Journal*, 3, 77-85.
- Mgqwashu, E. (2009). On becoming literate in English: A during- and post-apartheid personal story. *Language Learning Journal*, 37(3): 293-303.
- Mitchell, S. & Evison, A. (2006). Exploiting the potential of writing of educational change at Queen Mary, University of London. In L. Ganobcsik-Williams (Ed) *Teaching Academic Writing in UK Higher Education: Theories, Practices and Models*, New York: Palgrave, Macmillan.
- Odell, L., & Swersey, B. (2003). Reinventing invention: Writing across the curriculum with WAC. *Language and Learning Across the Disciplines*, 6 (3), 38-43.
- Pineteh, E.A. (2012). Using virtual interactions to enhance the teaching of communication skills to information technology students. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 43 (1): 85-96. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2011.01193.x>.
- Stefani, L. & Carroll, J., (2001). A briefing on plagiarism. LTSN.
- Stein, M., Isaacson, S. & Dixon, R.C., (1994). Effective writing instruction for diverse learners. *School Psychology Review*, 23(3), pp.392-405.
- Tuck, J. (2012). Feedback-giving as social practice: teachers, perspectives on feedback as institutional requirement, work, and dialogue. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17 (2), 209-221. <http://dx.doi.org>