

**ACADEMIC WRITING IN ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE CONTEXTS:**

**PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES**

**OF**

**FIRST YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND TUTORS**

**by**

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**submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of**

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## DECLARATION

I, Jack Matlou Chokwe, student number 3334-128-1, declare that this dissertation entitled “**Academic writing in English Second Language contexts: perceptions and experiences of first year university students and tutors**” is my own work and has never been submitted anywhere for a degree purpose. All sources consulted in this study have been duly acknowledged and fully cited.

**Signature:** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

## **ABSTRACT**

The study sought to examine first year students' conceptions of writing and the extent to which these conceptions influence their academic writing; explore tutors' expectations and understandings of student writing and how they respond to it; and suggest guidelines that can inform effective teaching and learning of writing in ESL contexts. The study is underpinned by the academic literacies model.

The study adopted a qualitative research methodology and used a case study approach as research design. Participants included ESL first year students and their tutors. Questionnaires, focus group interviews and marked student writing samples were employed as data collection instruments. Though students claimed that they subscribed to the ideologies of the academic literacies model, and that the first year level course improved their academic writing, the findings show that, on the contrary, students were underprepared for engaging in the academic writing activities required at university level. Moreover, the findings showed that although students categorised their writing skills as average, tutors had a different perspective. The findings reveal that tutors found that students still struggle with aspects of writing including, for instance, grammar, spelling, the structuring of essays, coherence and cohesion in paragraphs as well as arguing a point convincingly. However, although the findings show that students valued feedback highly, in some instances tutors did not provide adequate, understandable and useful feedback.

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### BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

#### 1. Introduction

Research shows that student writing poses specific challenges for English Second Language (ESL) teaching and learning contexts across the globe; in particular, in higher education institutions (Lillis and Scott 2007; Ivanic and Lea 2006; Lea 2004; Munro 2003; Lea and Street 1998; Gambell 1991). On the international front, particularly in the United Kingdom (UK), in noting the relationship between writing and literacy, Lea and Street (1998:157) report that literacy standards in schools and higher education institutions are very low and academics often complain that students cannot write properly. Munro (2003:327) confirms this view and argues that dealing effectively with students' literacy difficulties and, in turn, poor academic writing skills, is a challenge that universities across the world have to contend with.

In South Africa, too, there are growing concerns about the high levels of poor student writing in schools and higher education. Recent media reports show that students entering higher education struggle to write effectively and are therefore under-prepared for studies in institutions of higher learning (News24 30/06/2009<sup>1</sup>; Kgalema Motlanthe, 22/04/2010). Several studies in South Africa confirm these reports and have identified some factors that influence and impact negatively on student writing. These include students' low literacy levels and under-preparedness (van Schalkwyk, Bitzer and van der Walt 2009; Moutlana 2007; Banda 2007; Niven 2005), students learning in a second, third or fourth language (Banda 2007; Jacobs 2005; van Rensberg

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<sup>1</sup> This is an online news report

and Lamberti 2004), and lecturers and tutors adopting inadequate approaches in teaching academic writing (van Schalkwyk *et al.* 2009; Moutlana 2007; Bharuthram and McKenna 2006; Boughey 2000). These factors are pertinent to the South African context and are discussed further below.

## **2 Factors influencing student writing**

### **2.1 Student under-preparedness**

Various research studies indicate that ESL students tend to be under-prepared for university studies (Cliff and Hanslo 2009:274; Granville and Dison 2009:56; Hirst, Henderson, Allan, Bode and Kocatepe 2004:74; Schwartz 2004:27; Maloney 2003:664; Boughey 2000:281). Under-prepared students find it difficult to cope with the writing tasks that are expected of them in higher education teaching and learning contexts (Cliff and Hanslo 2009:274; van Rensberg and Lamberti 2004:68; Maloney 2003:664). As a result, their experiences of academic writing tasks tend to be negative.

These studies show that there is a strong link between student writing difficulties and under-preparedness. Niven (2005:774) attributes the problems of under-prepared students' experience with writing at university to the wide gap between writing expectations and demands between school and university. This means that universities should expect first year students to be inadequately prepared for the required writing skills because, as Hirst *et al.* (2004:66) confirm, students were not equipped to deal with the academic or tertiary literacies required of them. Therefore, universities should be expected to put in place proper structures that can support under-prepared students to start addressing and improving their specific academic writing needs.

In examining the literacy levels in South Africa, Moutlana (2007:2-3) argues that the low literacy standards among students should be an issue of concern in education circles and ascribes the low literacy standards among South African students to student under-preparedness at various levels. Furthermore, he points out that learning problems within institutions will not disappear until language proficiency and academic literacy occupy a central place in tertiary institutions (Moutlana, 2007:3). Similarly, Banda (2007:2) concedes that it is public knowledge that ESL students often have difficulties with academic writing and argues that low literacy levels have a strong link to students' under-preparedness for higher education studies. It is clear that both factors, that is, students' low literacy levels and under-preparedness, can impact negatively on students' writing competencies, and in turn their ability to succeed in their studies. However, under-preparedness is not only a student problem but a staff problem as well because lecturers and tutors also seem unprepared and at times reluctant to address first year students' inadequate writing skills.

## **2.2 Staff under-preparedness**

Staff under-preparedness is an important issue because in some instances under-preparedness tends to be perceived and ascribed to students only. But, as Moutlana (2007:3) argues, the problem of student writing is exacerbated by lecturers and tutors who are not adequately prepared to provide the appropriate support to under-prepared students. In addition, Niven (2005:787) argues that lecturers and tutors need to consider the possibility of their own under-preparedness to address the specific writing problems of the diverse student body that they are required to teach each year in the first year classroom. In order to address academic writing difficulties, lecturers or tutors should also see themselves as active participants in the process by making sure that they are fully equipped and trained to help students improve their academic writing skills.



A particular concern is that lecturers and tutors tend to perceive academic writing as a school problem or the duty of someone else, that is, as an external and additional task that is not part of their teaching duties. As van Rensberg and Lamberti (in Gravett and Geyser 2004:67) and Moore (1998:88, 92) indicate, some lecturers seem to think that students' writing difficulties should not be addressed by lecturers. Moore (1998:88, 92) reports about such sentiments of some tutors as follows:

I don't think it's my job to teach undergraduate students to write in English. If they won't make an effort to brush up in the medium they are taught in, there's nothing we can do, and they have to fail if they can't communicate. I would have thought that by definition a university as a centre of excellence would exclude people who were so disadvantaged, and yet we have people of the calibre of perhaps a standard seven...The problem is out there, and I don't think the university should be handling that...

These comments are an indication of the realities ESL students have to contend with at university level. They also show the frustrations and confusion some lecturers and tutors experience when faced with ESL students' difficulties in language use, in particular academic writing. Therefore, it is necessary that both lecturers and tutors are adequately trained to address ESL students' specific writing skills that are required at university.

### **2.3 Reading and writing support for underprepared students**

For under-prepared students to cope with the required academic writing tasks at university, they will need support. Van Schalkwyk *et al.* (2009:192) argue that reading and writing play a fundamental role in student learning and that acquiring these skills during the first year at university is a critical factor in

ensuring that students succeed. In addition, research by Granville and Dison (2009:56) indicates that students generally benefit from interventions provided by universities because these interventions assist in developing and enhancing their skills and thus enable them to meet their reading and writing demands. These studies confirm Scott's (2006) observations that under-prepared students do require additional and appropriate support for them to succeed in their studies and gain access to specific communities of practice.

The main concern is that, although research indicates that student academic writing is still a problem at university level, as shown above, there is a tendency to address this problem superficially. Student writing interventions in some institutions still remain peripheral to the mainstream offering; that is, as add-ons and not as part of the core teaching and learning activities throughout the university from first year to postgraduate studies. The reality is that teaching staff on writing programmes tend to be employed on a contract basis and this sends a negative message to students and staff, suggesting that writing is not an important component of the students' studies and staff duties. As a result, institutions cannot be fully committed to teaching writing (Curry 2006:183; Ivanic and Lea 2006:10). Adequate support for developing and improving students' writing skills is critical to students' success in higher education, particularly in second language learning contexts. Thus, higher education institutions need to start taking writing more seriously than they do at present.

## **2.4 Learning in a second language**

The reality that English, which is a second or additional language for the majority of students, remains the language of instruction in South Africa, also presents a challenge to learning and teaching at university. Banda (2007:3) attributes the problem of poor academic writing to students having no other

option but to study in English, which is their second, third or fourth language. He further argues that students from African-language speaking homes are at a disadvantage and will continue to seek strategies to mediate ESL academic writing (ibid). This view is also shared by van Rensberg and Lamberti (2004:68) who contend that students who have had poor schooling and study in a language other than their mother tongue are at a disadvantage academically. Furthermore, as Jacobs (2005:476) argues, students who are taught in a second language (English in this context) are denied immediate access to content. But this is not only an ESL problem because, as Spencer (2007:300) argues, experienced first language writers also find academic writing challenging. Thus, the challenges are only exacerbated for ESL students. Studying in a second language is a highly contentious issue and will remain so until decisive political leadership is exercised on the matter as well as institutions of higher learning making a strong commitment to providing adequate support structures.

## **2.5 Inadequate approaches to teaching writing**

Research shows that some of the approaches used in teaching writing at tertiary level are problematic because they are considered inadequate and do not address particular aspects of students' writing needs (van Schalkwyk *et al.* 2009; Ivanic and Lea 2006; Scott 2006; Wingate 2006; Hyland 2002; Lea and Street 1998). For instance, the study skills model, defined as the theory of language which emphasises surface structures, grammar and spelling (Lea and Street 1998:159), tends to focus mainly on de-contextualised surface features of language such as grammar and syntax. Therefore, there is a need to rethink the way in which student academic writing is addressed. The problem is that universities tend to mainly adopt the study skills also referred to as the deficit model in addressing student academic writing difficulties. According to Boughey (2000:281), the limitations of the study skills model are that they label ESL students as not having any language and suggest that

their language problems can be solved through introducing remedial English classes taught by English language specialists.

Though some researchers such as Wingate (2006:458) recommend that inadequate approaches, including the study skills model, should be completely abandoned, this study argues that no single model can address students' writing difficulties as students come from different backgrounds and have different academic needs. This study proposes that the different approaches and models on writing have particular strengths which can be considered in teaching academic writing. These models are discussed briefly in the conceptual framework section and substantiated further in Chapter Two.

### **3. The Research Problem**

Research shows that ESL students' experiences of and perceptions about their academic writing needs are often ignored, particularly in curriculum design (Krause 2001:158; Prain and Hand 1997:152; Nunan, 1990:29). It is often argued that students are not able to determine their needs and that only teachers can decide the 'what' and 'how' of the teaching context (Nunan, 1990:29). But, as the present study argues, an understanding of students' experiences of academic writing can contribute insights into the 'what' and 'how' of teaching and learning contexts, in particular ESL academic writing contexts. Furthermore, as this study contends, an examination of students' perceptions and experiences can bring about a deeper understanding of the factors that influence their writing negatively or positively (Benesch, 1996:723; Freire, 1970:54) as well as better insights into the strengths and weaknesses of current intervention practices.

Tutors' and lecturers' approach to writing is of significance if they are to tackle the teaching of academic writing effectively. However, academics are often not in agreement about what constitutes a good piece of writing (Lea and Street 1998:157; Nightingale 1988). Good academic writing can be described as a combination of several factors including relevant content, logical and coherent organisation of paragraphs and the use of correct expressions specific to an academic audience (Anokye 2008:68). However, research also indicates that some lecturers and tutors, particularly discipline specialists, still perceive the teaching of writing as a sole responsibility of language specialists (Boughey 1997; Zamel 1995; Gambell 1991). For instance, in his study, Gambell (1991:421) argued against the reluctance of professors to teach students to write in the mode of discourse valued in the discipline. Interestingly, Gambell (1991:429) found that none of the students in his study were poor, reluctant or unpractised writers and did not see themselves as such.

Therefore, as this study advocates the provision of effective writing programmes for ESL students, it is imperative that the experiences and perceptions of writing and academic writing of both students and lecturers are examined.

### **3.1 Research Aims**

The aim of this study is threefold, that is, to

- (a) examine first year students' conceptions of writing and the extent to which these conceptions influence their academic writing;
- (b) explore tutors' expectations and understandings of student writing and how they respond to it;

- (c) determine guidelines that can inform effective teaching and learning of writing in ESL contexts.

### **3.2 Research Questions**

#### **1. Central Question:**

What are ESL students' and tutors' conceptions of academic writing and to what extent do these conceptions influence student writing?

#### **Sub-questions:**

1. What are ESL first year students' perceptions and experiences of academic writing?
2. How do these perceptions and experiences influence first year students' academic writing?
3. What are tutors' perceptions and experiences of first year students' academic writing?
4. How do tutors respond and give feedback to first year students' academic writing?
5. What guidelines can inform the effective teaching and learning of writing in ESL contexts?

#### 4. Conceptual / Theoretical Framework

The study is underpinned by the academic literacies (AL) approach. This approach is appropriate for examining students' conceptions of writing because *"it identifies writing as a social and disciplinary process"* (Lillis 1999:26). The AL approach focuses on reading and writing within the disciplines (Lea and Street 1998:369). Thus, proponents of the academic literacies view consider writing as a communicative act which involves the sharing of observations, information, thoughts or ideas amongst students themselves and others (Cohen and Riel 1989:143). The AL approach confirms Jurecic's (2006:1) contention that writing is not a formula or a series of exercises that can be drilled and corrected but is an unruly process in the teaching and learning process.

The AL model recognises and acknowledges that students' background is critical and core to teaching and developing academic writing at university. Students' perceptions and experiences of writing in ESL contexts are of importance because such insights can contribute to a better understanding of why students continue to struggle with their writing, and can inform lecturers at institutions of higher learning of effective ways of developing and improving students' writing competencies (Lafaye and Tsuda 2002:156). In addition, Lea and Street (1998) argue that treating students as collaborators in the writing process and the development of academic literacies is a necessary activity that universities should engage in.

The AL model also challenges lecturers and tutors to reflect on their practice in academic writing and foregrounds many dimensions to student academic writing including the impact of power relations on student writing; the centrality

of identity; academic writing as ideologically inscribed knowledge construction and the nature of generic, academic as well as discipline specific writing practices (Lillis 2003:195). As a result, the theory takes a holistic approach to writing and examines ways in which current models and practices may need to be adapted in order to accommodate the changing culture of higher education. In other words, the AL approach encapsulates the strengths of the study skills and academic socialisation models. In arguing for the incorporation of the AL model by tutors and lecturers, Hirst *et al.* (2004:66) propose the adoption of the contextually-based approach which involves the introduction of students to the conventions and genres of particular disciplines as an integral part of teaching within that discipline. In addition, Boughey (2000:281) argues that literacy is not something that can be overtly taught in a convenient series of lectures, but through observing and interacting with the members of the discourse until their ways of speaking, acting, thinking and valuing common to that discourse become natural to them.

## **5. Definitions of key concepts**

### **5.1 Academic Writing**

Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) define academic writing as any writing that fulfils the purpose of education in a college or university, whereas Henning, Gravett and van Rensberg (2002: ix) define it as a process of thinking that uses written language. This study adopts both Thaiss and Zawacki's (2006) and Henning *et al.*'s (2002) definitions of academic writing because both view writing as a core academic activity that is not merely a technical skill but one which incorporates critical thinking. For the purpose of this study, the concepts 'writing', 'student writing' and 'academic writing' mean writing for academic purposes. These concepts are used interchangeably.



## **5.2 Perceptions**

According to Lindsay and Norman (1977), perception is the process by which organisms interpret and organize sensation to produce a meaningful experience of the world. They further point out that perception better describes one's ultimate experience of the world and typically involves further processing of sensory input. In addition, the high school perception study conducted by Mt. San Antonio College (2002-2003) defines perception as becoming aware of something using external clues which often become a reality in the person's mind. Individual perceptions are central to this study as they can reveal and bring about a better understanding of ESL students' and tutors' understandings of academic writing and, more importantly, can highlight those aspects of academic writing that universities should focus on to improve and develop student writing at university. This study adopts the definition proposed by Lindsay and Norman (1977) because students can have a certain perception towards their writing, which can be either positive, negative or neutral.

## **6. The Context**

Context includes the geographical environment or the setting under which a study takes place. It is vital to understand the setting of the ESL participants in order to find solutions to the academic writing challenges that they face. This study investigates the perceptions and experiences of ESL first-year university English students and tutors toward academic writing at the University of South Africa (Unisa), which is based in the City of Tshwane/Pretoria in South Africa. Unisa is the largest Open and Distance Learning (ODL) university in southern Africa and had over 300 000 students

registered in 2011. As an ODL university, Unisa operates at a distance and students are able to learn wherever they are without any geographical or time constraints. Learning is also flexible as students are able to learn at their own pace.

Student support at Unisa, amongst others, includes tutorial classes held by tutors at regional offices; discussion classes which are held once a semester by lecturers; Academic Literacies Centres which are responsible for teaching and training students in academic writing; and *myUnisa*, which is an online learning management system used for teaching and learning. This system can be accessed by any registered student anywhere in the world through the internet. Amongst other features, included in the system are study materials (formal and additional), discussion forums, announcements, and self-assessment tools.

Unisa also provides additional support through tutorial classes which are offered by tutors appointed by the Tutorial Support and Discussion Classes (TSDL) department, as well as academic writing support by the Academic Literacies Centres. Currently, some TSDL tutors offer tutorials and are also involved in assessing students as tutor-markers. However, this intervention is still in its pilot phase and the tutor-markers who participated in this study do not have face-to-face contact with students, but provide marking services as external markers who are also involved in tutoring as they assess and provide valuable feedback to students. Therefore, tutor-markers are referred to as tutors in this study. The students come from different schooling backgrounds with some being employed and some being 'full time' students (See Table 3.1, page 58).

Despite having a limited number of English first language students, Unisa is an appropriate university for this study because the student population

comprises ESL students who are expected to do extensive academic writing for their studies. Furthermore, Unisa students are mainly based in southern Africa and other parts of Africa and are sporadically spread across the world. Arguably, Unisa is one of the largest ODL universities in the world.

ESL first year students who are registered for the module English for Academic Purposes (ENN103-F) were selected to participate in the study. This module is referred to as a fundamental module, which means that it has to provide students with the critical skills that are required for them to succeed at university. The ENN103F module focuses on developing students' academic reading and writing skills in the English language. English is the medium of instruction at Unisa. As a result, the students who enrol for the course are registered for various qualifications in the Colleges of Human Sciences, Education, Economic and Management Sciences, Agriculture and Natural Sciences, as well as Engineering, Science and Technology (See Figure 3.2, page 59). Most of these students are second or third language speakers of English (See Figure 3.1). Although aimed at first year students, the course expects that students should have acquired several of the skills outlined below:

1. Students admitted to this module must have passed English at level 4 on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), and they are assumed to be capable of reading extended texts, comprehending the main ideas and following a line of argument;
2. They are expected to be able to read a number of texts on a related topic and collate the ideas; and
3. They are expected to write extended discursive/argumentative texts that focus on a given topic,

using an introduction, body, and conclusion structure (Unisa 2002).

## **7. The significance of the study**

As a case study, this study can contribute to research on student writing and provide a deeper understanding of factors that impact on students' writing. This understanding is of importance in ESL contexts because, as Balfour (2000 in Mqgwashu 2002) contends, it is critical that universities give adequate and appropriate support to improving student writing, particularly ESL first year undergraduate students. The study also reveals the importance of ESL students' perceptions by their lecturers and tutors in order to teach academic writing effectively.

This research provides valuable input for universities that enrol ESL students. The study may also guide the Department of Education and policy makers within the education sector to look for better ways of systematically teaching writing from preschool to university because academic writing is an important component of teaching and learning, as knowledge is evaluated through writing.

This study is useful to teachers, lecturers and tutors in ESL contexts because it can contribute insights into those aspects of writing in which students require support. The study is also reflexive as its results may be used to harness or sharpen the practices of both ESL practitioners and other stakeholders with some guidelines on teaching academic writing. As a result, it is hoped that ESL learners will benefit from the spin-offs of this study.

The study will make a valuable contribution to research in student writing in ESL contexts by ensuring that the results of this study are published in academic journals and also presented at academic conferences.

## **8. Ethical considerations**

To adhere to ethical considerations, permission to conduct the study was sought from the Research Ethics Committee in the Department of English Studies at Unisa (See Appendix 5). In addition, both ESL students and tutors were assured that the information provided in this study would remain confidential and would only be used for research purposes. Thus, the study adhered to the required ethical considerations.

## **9. Research Design and Methodology**

Kumar (1996:74) defines research design as a procedural plan that is adopted by the researcher to answer questions validly, objectively, accurately and economically. In addition, Mouton (1996:35) defines research methodology as the 'knowledge of how' to do things or the total set of 'means' that scientists employ in reaching their goal of valid knowledge. This study adopted a qualitative research methodology because 'it aims to better understand human behaviour and experience' (Bogdan and Biklen 2007:43). Qualitative researchers believe that approaching people with the goal of trying to understand their point of view can bring about deeper insights and understandings of the informants' experiences (Bogdan and Biklen 2007:26). A qualitative paradigm is of importance in this study because it seeks to understand perceptions of ESL students and tutors regarding academic writing.

A case study approach was employed in this study. Eisenhart (2002:8) defines a case study as a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings. A case study approach was used in this study because it provides rich, detailed and in-depth information on a specific context (Berg 1998:212). Furthermore, a case study is relevant to this study because it involves the systematic gathering of information on a particular person, social setting, event or group that can allow a researcher to gain deeper insights into a context (ibid). These insights are of importance in a study which examines perceptions of students and tutors on academic writing, in an ESL context. More importantly, a case study is aligned to the AL approach which emphasises the need for lecturers and tutors to acknowledge individual students' background in teaching and learning (Lea 2004:740).

## **9.1 Sampling**

Johnson and Christenson (2004:197) define sampling as the process of drawing a sample from the population where the characteristics of a subset are selected from a larger group. The sample for this study consisted of students and tutors. First year ESL students and their tutors participated in the study. Purposive sampling was used in this study because it is a non-random sampling technique in which a researcher solicits persons with specific characteristics to participate in a research study (Bogdan and Biklen 2007; Johnson and Christensen 2004:215).

## **9.2 Data collection techniques**

Data in this study was collected through questionnaires, interviews and student essays in order to examine students' and tutors' perceptions of student writing. Questionnaires were relevant in this study because they

probed students' and lecturers' views about academic writing, and they were found to be an efficient data collection instrument for this study because they facilitated anonymity which also helped participants to express their views freely (Marshall and Rossman 1995:95-96). Interviews were also useful in this study because they elicited in-depth data regarding students' experiences and perceptions towards academic writing. Finally, students' written essays provided confirmation and evidence of the views expressed by students and tutors, and at times disproved their claims.

### **9.3 Data analysis**

According to Vithal and Jansen (2005:27), the purpose of data analysis is to make sense of data. In this study, data analysis involved three steps suggested by Vithal and Jansen (2005:28) and (Neuman 2006: 457):

1. Open coding: scanning and cleaning the data which involve reading the data, checking for incomplete, inaccurate, inconsistent or irrelevant data and identifying preliminary trends in the scanned data;
2. Axial coding: organising the data which involves describing, comparing and categorising;
3. Selective coding: representing data which involves organising data in the form of graphs, selected quotations and case boxes.

When analysing data, the researcher's goal was to organise specific details into a coherent picture, model or set of interlocked concepts (Neuman 2006:458-459). Guided by Neuman's (2006) and Vithal and Jansen's (2005)

suggestions in handling and analysing qualitative data, data sets from all data collection instruments used in this study were transcribed. Responses to each question were grouped together. Subsequently, an analysis was undertaken and codes were assigned to the data and themes began to emerge. Only selected representative quotations were recorded and reported on in this study.

#### **9.4 Delimitations**

Delimitations refer to boundaries of the study (Best and Hahn 1993:40). This study focused on ESL first year students registered for an English course at an ODL institution (Unisa) and also included tutors involved in the same course. As a result, English first language students were excluded from the study. The study sought to examine students' and tutors' perceptions of academic writing.

#### **9.5 Limitations**

According to Best and Kahn (1993:40) limitations are those conditions beyond the control of the researcher that may place restrictions on the conclusions of the study and its application to other situations. The study focused on ESL student writing and tutors' feedback as well students' and lecturers' perceptions of academic writing. Several factors, including time limitations and access to students, were a challenge. For instance, the teaching of courses in shorter periods known as semesters posed a challenge because the study incorporated students registered for both the first and second semesters. Some of the questionnaire/interview items such as tutor feedback comments were premature for second semester students as they had not yet received their assignments back. However, some of the limitations were compensated



by questionnaire responses from first semester students who completed a questionnaire after writing the exams.

Both student questionnaire administration and interviews were done immediately after the two-hour tutorial sessions. This may have affected the responses as students may have been tired from the tutorial, while some might already have been thinking of attending the next tutorial session for another module. In both instances, the focus group interviews and students' written essays compensated for some of the limitations.

## **10. Outline of the Chapters**

### **Chapter One Introduction and Background**

This chapter gives an outline of the research study and focuses on the background, rationale, purpose of study, research questions, theoretical framework, and the significance of the study, research methodology, delimitations and limitations.

### **Chapter Two The Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

Chapter Two outlines the theoretical and conceptual framework underpinning this study, that is, the AL model, and various theories on student writing. It examines what academic writing entails, the factors impacting on student writing and research studies on students' and tutors' experiences of academic writing.

This chapter discusses the research methodology employed in this study. It focuses on the qualitative paradigm which follows a case study approach. It outlines the research design and describes the sampling process, the data collection and the data analysis procedures adopted in the study. In each instance, the research shows how each subsection and research aims are integrated.

This chapter presents the findings of the study, which is an analysis of the findings on students' and tutors' perceptions and understandings of academic writing. The discussion of the findings is divided into two sections: a) students' conceptions and b) tutors' perceptions and understandings. The discussion in each section incorporates the findings from the questionnaires (students and tutors), focus group interviews (students) and marked essay assignments.

This chapter presents a synthesis of the findings and recommendations for further research. It also discusses the theoretical and methodological implications of this study to illustrate the extent to which it has contributed to a better understanding of ESL student writing at first year level.

### CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the theoretical framework, that is, the AL model, and other theories on academic writing. In addition, it examines other critical issues including what academic writing entails, factors impacting on student writing and research studies on students' and tutors' experiences of academic writing. In each instance, the chapter outlines the relevance of the issues to the research aims of this study.

#### 2. New Literacy Studies

The AL approach is derived from the New Literacy Studies (NLS). According to Prinsloo and Baynham (2008:2), the NLS, which originated in the 1990s, is associated with inter-disciplinary literacy researchers and draws its methodologies from discourse analysis, social anthropology and socio-linguistics. Similarly, some researchers indicate that the AL approach is closely linked with NLS and that the model challenges the belief that literacy can be acquired through de-contextualised cognitive skills (Lea 2004:740; Stephens 2000:10). According to Street (2003:77) "the NLS represents a new tradition in considering the nature of literacy, focusing not so much on the acquisition of skills, as in dominant approaches, but rather on what it means to think of literacy as a social practice, and entails the recognition of multiple literacies". To add, Stephens (2000:16) contends that literacy is not simply

knowing how to read and write a particular script, but applying this knowledge for specific purposes in specific contexts of use.

Literacy is viewed as social practice and involves reading and writing. Street (2003:18) argues that “the ways in which teachers or facilitators and their students interact already affects the nature of literacy being learnt and the ideas about literacy held by the participants, especially the new learners and their position in relation to powers”. In addition, Stephens (2000:18) maintains that the teacher of literacy can surely be seen as engaged in the development of the cognitive capacities of learners. Street (2003:77) states that there are two models of literacy, namely: autonomous and ideological. The autonomous model of literacy believes that introducing literacy to poor “illiterate” people will spur them to having improved cognitive skills which will subsequently improve their economic conditions and make them better citizens regardless of the socio-economic conditions that accounted for their “illiteracy”. He argues that autonomous literacy imposes western conceptions of literacy on to other cultures.

In contrast, the ideological model of literacy offers a more culturally sensitive view of literacy as one which varies from one context to the other (ibid). The NLS adopts the ideological model of literacy that views literacy as a social practice and which considers the ways in which people address reading and writing, which are rooted on conceptions of knowledge, identity and being (Prinsloo and Baynham 2008:2; Street 2003:77). Like Kalantzis, Cope and Harvey (2003), Street (2003:78) states that the ideological model is embedded in social practices, such as those of a particular job market or a particular educational market. Although she seems to agree with Street’s (2003) critique of the extreme view that literacy can be studied independently of its social context, Stephens (2000:12) apparently adopts a neutral view when she argues that it can be of value if language is looked at independently

of its social context. As a result, the AL model seeks to treat literacy issues within the social context. The next sub-section defines the AL model.

#### **4. The Academic Literacies Model**

There are several definitions of academic literacy in both local and international literature. Before looking at definitions of academic literacy, however, the focus will be on definitions of literacy. Au (1993:20) defines literacy “as the ability and willingness to use reading and writing to construct meaning from the printed text, in ways which meet the requirements of a particular social context”. Likewise, Street (2003:79) defines literacy as “the broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking and doing about reading and writing in cultural contexts”. These definitions put more emphasis on reading and writing as important components of literacy. Similarly, Lea and Street (1998:158) define academic literacies (AL) as reading and writing within disciplines which takes account of the cultural and contextual component of writing and reading practices. In addition, Neely (2005:7) defines AL as proficiency in reading and writing about academic texts with the goal of contributing to the on-going conversation in an academic field. Both definitions of AL indicate that writing is not a detached process but takes into consideration individual students’ identities, contexts and cultures which they bring to the academic process. Moreover, these definitions consider academic writing as a core and integral part of the teaching and learning process. Because they provide the basis for the theoretical framework in this study, both Neeley’s (2003) and Lea and Street’s (1998) definitions of AL are adopted.

### **3.1 Strengths of the AL Model**

The AL approach has made some significant strides in academic writing research. One of the strengths of the AL approach is that it does not assume that students are merely acculturated un-problematically into the academic culture (Lea 2004:741). In addition, the AL frame has helped to foreground many dimensions to student academic writing which include the impact of power relations on student writing; the centrality of identity; academic writing as ideologically inscribed knowledge construction; and the nature of generic, academic as well as discipline specific writing practices (Lillis 2003:195). Furthermore, the AL approach incorporates both the study skills and academic socialisation models into a more encompassing understanding of the nature of student writing within institutional practices, power relations and identities (Lea and Street 1998:158). As a result, the theory takes a holistic approach to writing and examines ways in which current models and practices may need to be adapted in order to accommodate the changing culture of higher education.

This study adopts the AL approach because, as Lillis (2006:32) argues, unlike other approaches to academic writing, this approach considers writing as a social practice. As a result, it expects students to be the core of the writing process and not detached onlookers. As Ivanic and Lea (2003:12) point out, past research on academic writing tended to ignore the importance of language in teaching writing and the AL approach sought to fill that gap. More importantly, in academic settings, according to Lea and Street (1998:159), academic literacy practices help students to contextualise learning as they have to switch from one setting to the other by deploying a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting. In their study, Lea and Street (2006:370) found that there was a link between cultural practices and different

genres; that feedback on students' written assignments played a significant role in the learning process and that both students and teachers could learn much from the foregrounding of both meaning making and identity in the writing process. Therefore, it is important for ESL students to acquire academic literacies so that they can function in an academic environment regardless of their field of study.

Research reveals that writing is a complex process and takes time to develop. Therefore, it is a mistaken belief that students can learn and improve their writing skills in ESL contexts virtually overnight through a few remedial classes by language specialists (Bharuthram and McKenna 2006; Mitchell and Evison 2006; Hyland 2002; Boughey 2000). In addition, there is little academic writing done in primary and high schools that prepares students to be smoothly integrated into academic discourses used in tertiary institutions (Wingate 2006; Cohen and Riel 1989; Harris 1977).

### **3.2 Shortcomings of the AL Model**

The AL model, like any other approach, also has some shortcomings. One of the shortcomings is that most studies on academic writing and the AL approach are conducted at universities and little attention has been paid to elementary and high school environments. Another limitation is that it tends to privilege tutor/institution's perspectives and denies students' contributions to meaning making (Lillis 2003:196; Nunan 1990). The proponents of this approach (Lea and Street 1998) privilege it more than the study skills and academic socialisation models; they have also adapted these prior models to best address student writing challenges. These two models that preceded the AL approach have their own pitfalls but that does not mean they should be discarded, as Wingate (2006) proposes. On the contrary, Zamel (1987:697) argues against the faulty assumption that there is a best method to teach

writing which is misconstrued as prescribing a logical set of written tasks and exercises and that good writing conformed to a predetermined and ideal model.

The present study is guided by the AL approach which includes examining students' written work, feedback on student writing, as well as students' and tutors' perspectives about academic writing as part of data collection techniques (Lillis and Scott 2007:11; Boscolo, Arfé & Quarisa 2007:433; Lea and Street 2006:370). Furthermore, the model encapsulates some aspects of the process approach to writing. In their study, Lea and Street (2006:370) identified the link between cultural practices and different genres, considered the importance of feedback on students' written assignments in the learning process and argue that both students and their teachers can learn much from the foregrounding of both meaning making and identity in the writing process.

In summary, though the AL model brought some refreshing perspectives to the academic writing pedagogy and research, it should be noted that prior models are still important. The model encapsulates other writing approaches and should not be seen as the ultimate model to solve student writing challenges but as an amalgamation of prior writing models to provide a holistic approach to addressing student writing difficulties (van Rensberg and Lamberti 2004).

## **4. Approaches to Academic Writing**

### **4.1 The Study Skills Model**

Several researchers point out that the study skills model tends to focus on surface language features at the expense of the content and context (Lea and Street 2006; Ivanic and Lea 2006; Lea and Street 1998). For instance, the



study skills model places more emphasis on surface features such as grammar, spelling and punctuation, where writing is seen as a technical skill that is transferable from one context to the other (Lea and Street 2006:368; Ivanic and Lea 2006: 12; Zhu 2004:37; Lea and Street 1998:158). This means that the study skills model tends to focus on the mechanical aspects of language as a priority in developing student writing. Nevertheless, the study skills model has guided curriculum, instructional practices and research at university, elementary and secondary level (Lea and Street 2006:369).

This model has been widely criticised for too much focus on the surface grammatical structures of language. For instance, Fregeau (1999:9) suggests that acquiring communicative academic writing proficiency should be stressed more than correction of surface errors. In addition, she argues that though surface errors will always remain important to English language teaching and learning, our obsession with it hurts our students (ibid). Like Wingate (2006), Lillis (2001) and Lea and Street (1998), Elton (2010:158) suggests a move away from the skills-based deficit approach to writing. He concurs with Thaiss and Zawacki (2009) that there are no simple solutions to the problem of academic writing. He suggests that enquiry-based learning might be a better way of unlocking students' writing skills than didactic teaching (Elton 2010: 158). On the whole, there has been an overemphasis on de-contextualized grammar skills in ESL teaching and learning contexts both nationally and internationally (Jacobs 2005:475; Barkhuizen 1998:87; Cohen and Riel 1989:144; Zamel 1987:700).

However, Wingate (2006:458) strongly criticised the use of the study skills approach to teaching academic writing and suggested that universities should abandon the approach. He further points out that the skills commonly addressed in the study skills courses are time management, essay writing, presentation, note taking and revising for exams (ibid). Nevertheless, these skills are considered to be vital for students beginning their tertiary education.

Like any other approach, the study skills model has its own shortfalls. One of the drawbacks as pointed out by Lea and Street (2006:369) is that it sees writing and literacy as primarily an individual and cognitive skill which focuses on written language on the surface level and ignores the context and other factors that can influence individual student writing. In addition, Carhill, Suárez-Orosco, & Puéz (2008:1156) argue that “the skills based approach - the point of view that academic literacy is a technical skill to be quickly acquired rather than a complex set of practices that take years to develop” - is problematic. However, the researcher is of the view that surface language features like grammar, spelling and punctuation are still very important in academic writing and there is no way we can have good writing without these basic language skills. Moreover, several ESL studies also found that students value the importance of these skills even when tutors or lecturers try to ignore them (Mojica 2010; Ransom, Larcombe and Baik, 2005; Lafaye and Tsuda 2002; and Leki and Carson 1994). In addition, Lloyd (2007:55) points out that poor grammar is a problem in higher education where many students are unable to construct proper sentences and paragraphs.

## **4.2 The Academic Socialisation Model**

The academic socialisation model has made an influential and meaningful contribution to the teaching of writing. This model is concerned with students' acculturation into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres (Lea and Street 2006:369). According to Lillis (2006:32), socialisation functions as the institutional default model which assumes that students will pick up writing as part of their studies without any specific teaching or practice. She states that when this approach fails to help students, then the study skills approach is brought in and this is proven by the type of guidance offered on writing and in feedback comments on students' written texts (ibid). The academic

socialisation model focuses on the textual conventions (genres) of the disciplines (Lea and Street 1998:106). Accordingly, Silva (1986) argues that from the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) orientation, writing is the production of prose that will be acceptable in the university in order to be socialised into the academic community. Zhu (2004) also found that the academic socialisation model prevailed in his study where students would need to grasp discipline-specific terminology. In addition, Hawkins (2005:59) views language and literacy development as a socialization process. However, she suggests that all teachers irrespective of the level at which they teach, should focus on academic literacies and not just on English vocabulary and generalized grammatical proficiency. Furthermore, the model assumes that students can learn disciplinary discourses through immersion.

However, several studies critiqued the notion of acquiring academic literacy through immersion (van Schalkwyk *et al.*, 2009; Bharuthram and McKenna 2006; Hirst *et al.* 2004). For example, van Schalkwyk *et al.* (2009:189) state that “lecturers often assume that students, simply by virtue of being immersed in the subject discipline, will become familiar with the required discourse and enhance their academic literacy competence”. In the same way, Hirst *et al.* (2004:66) state that it is often assumed that tertiary students can cope with any literacy demands that are made of them. Furthermore, Bharuthram and McKenna (2006:498) also argue that students are expected to catch up on the expected norms without transparent teaching and are often assumed to know the ‘rules and conventions’ of their field when they enter higher education. In addition, the academic socialisation model is concerned with students’ acculturation into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres. Like the study skills model, the academic socialisation model ignores the context and other possible aspects that might impact on students’ competence to write effectively (Lea and Street 2006: 369).

### **4.3 The writing process approach**

The writing process has been a teaching strategy used by ESL practitioners for many years. According to Anderson (1985: 388) the stages of the writing process include idea generation (prewriting or construction), composition (writing), rewriting and editing (transformation process) and execution (hand writing, typing). He maintains that prewriting is often ignored by teachers. Furthermore, he suggests that idea generation is a process of problem solving to achieve a goal. This includes brain storming followed by the generate and judge model where the writer evaluates what he has written. Composition is a careless approach where grammar or perfection is not an issue at this stage and the writer adopts free writing (Anderson 1985:394). He sarcastically states that “the ability to write a final draft quality paper the first time through is an enviable skill, but few have it” (1985: 395). Rewriting or editing is the stage where misjudgements made should be corrected or edited and poor ideas are eliminated using the generate and judge model. At this stage new ideas can still be incorporated. Ideas, structure, linking words or discourse markers, style and grammar are components of a piece of writing that should be reviewed (Anderson1985:396).

The writing process emanates from the expressionist model (Bacha 2002). The AL model also encapsulates the writing process. Similar to Anderson (1985), Murray and Johansson (1990:27) also indicate that the writing process includes thinking, planning, drafting, revising, editing and writing the final version. The wording is different but ideas are fundamentally the same. Figure 2.1 presents a schematic representation of the writing process.

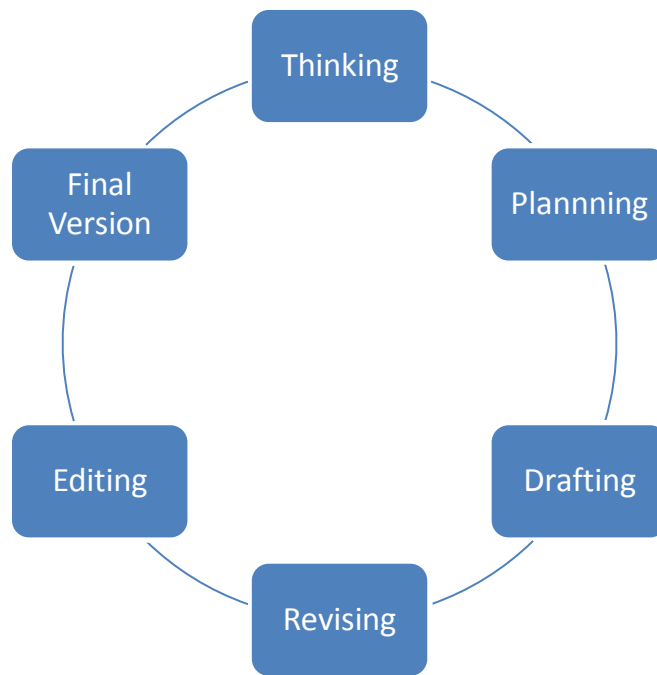


Figure 2.1 The Writing Process (Murray and Johansson 1990)

A number of researchers value the use of the writing process (Granville and Dison 2009; Lloyd 2007; Bharuthram 2006; Ellis *et al.* 2005). Building on the writing process approach, Lloyd (2007:50) further coined the PROCESS (Planning, Referencing, Organisation, Composition, Engineering, Spelling and Structure) framework that students may adopt in academic writing. Furthermore, Lloyd (2007:54) argues that presenting a balanced argument through critical analysis or evaluation in an assignment requires skill and practice and is an essential component of academic writing. She cites Moore (2003) who suggests that writing retreats and groups have been supportive and beneficial to some academic writers. Contrary to Zamel (1987:697), Lloyd (2007:55) concedes that every student has his or her own writing style and academic writing aims to modify individual styles and present a uniform style or standard that will address academic requirements. On the other hand, Boughey (1997:126) argues that for the writing process to be developmental, some form of constructive feedback to the successive pieces of writing is usually desirable and often necessary. Similar to Moore (2003), she also suggests group writing as conducive to the development of good writing

practices. She argues that it is possible that much of the plagiarised and regurgitated writing produced at tertiary level exists because students lack the confidence to speak in their own voice.

The process approach to writing seems to be taught for the first time in higher education and perhaps that is one of the reasons why most of the students entering higher education do not have an idea of what academic writing is. For instance, a normal practice at schools is that a teacher gives homework today and expects students to submit it the following day. The process approach to writing, if practiced, will not be efficient within such a limited time. However, Silva (1986:16) observed that the writing process was critiqued for being practiced in a de-contextualised manner as it does not prepare students for the working world and for not considering individual differences and situations. Nevertheless, the process approach to writing made a significant contribution to academic writing pedagogy and several writing models still subscribe to it.

According to Myles (2002) the socio-cognitive theory involves teaching students the apprentices in negotiating an academic community and in the process developing strategic knowledge. She further argues that writing skills are acquired and used through negotiated interaction with real audience expectations. She discusses Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1987) knowledge-telling model which depends on the processes of retrieving content from memory with regard to topical and genre cues and the knowledge-transforming model which involves more reflective problem-solving analysis and goal-setting. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987:143) argue that helping students move from the knowledge telling to a knowledge transforming approach to writing is an important and realistic educational objective. Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1987:143) knowledge telling method is a way to generate text content given in a topic to write about a familiar genre. This model constitutes an elegant solution to a large problem faced by beginning

writers, especially children in the early years of literacy. In addition, the knowledge telling model is adopted by novice writers who depend on having knowledge already assembled in forms ready for written presentation. However, the knowledge telling model does not imply that young people have no goals or concerns when they write but implies that their executive system lacks the means of bringing these goals and concerns actively into the composing process (Bereiter and Scarmadalia 1987:171).

On the other hand, experts can make use of complex knowledge processing procedures to transform knowledge that is not so assembled into a coherent and effective form. They further argue that expert writers execute powerful procedures that enable them to draw on, elaborate and refine available knowledge while novice writers reproduce but do not refine knowledge. In other words, novice writers describe knowledge at a superficial level while expert writers analyse and interrogate knowledge. In contrast, they state that the knowledge transforming model takes place within the content space, but in order for the writing process to play a role in this model, there must be interaction between content and rhetorical space (ibid).

Myles (2002) also discusses Anderson's (1985) model of language production which is divided into three stages, namely: construction (brainstorming, using a mind map, transformation), revising and execution. According to Anderson (1985:374) construction entails building the meaning to be communicated; transformation involves syntactic rules to transport meaning into the linguistic message; and execution refers to the physical form, such as writing or speech. He further asserts that language generation is a goal-oriented activity. He outlines that construction involves deciding facts to be expressed and deciding how these facts should be structured and embellished. On the other hand, transformation is when thoughts are converted into sentences. Anderson (1985:388) states that when the demands for construction (planning) increase, the quality of linguistic

transformation suffers. Evidently, this model is theoretically informed by the writing process.

Therefore, the knowledge telling and knowledge transforming models as well as the language production model are important in this study as they provide a theoretical and historical background for the understanding of present writing theories such as the academic literacies model.

#### **4.3.1 Product Approaches**

There have been a number of theories that have influenced student writing pedagogy and research over the decades. In his review of the literature, Bacha (2002:164) found that second language writing methodology drew on the process and product approaches which were developed by the expressive school of thought (Moffat 1968); the cognitive school of thought (Kinneavy 1980; Britton *et al.* 1975); the interactionists (Swales 1990) and the social constructivists (Halliday and Martin 1993).

The writing process was conceptualised out of the expressionist model. As Bacha (2002:164) states, the expressionist model argues for expressive, self-actualizing writing in which students discovered ideas themselves through free writing and brainstorming and also focused on the writer, audience and different types of texts. He further points out that the writing process approaches, which are predominantly used in American schools, have their roots in the expressionist model (Bacha 2002:165). Moreover, Fregeau (1999:8) reports that students indicated that the process approaches, rather than the micro-product approaches, are more effective as tools for motivating students to practice writing, to develop a positive attitude toward writing, and to teach writing skills and language structure. She reports that students considered the process approach, including dialogue, journaling, peer reading, clarification questions, idea revision and instructor/student



conferences, as effective (Fregeau 1999:8). Therefore, the expressionist model laid the foundation for the development of the writing process approach. On the other hand, Lamberg (1977:26) and Lea and Street (1998) observed that the teaching of writing in both high school and college has been criticised for its emphasis on the finished product and the corresponding neglect of the writing process. Lamberg (1977:27) further observed nine major problems with student writing, namely: lack of self management skills, lack of the writing process strategy, failure to follow instructions, poor organisation and weaknesses in content, ineffective introductions, ineffective proofreading, and difficulty in understanding or accepting criticisms.

Furthermore, he observed that the cognitivist model focused more on the rhetorical modes of discourse as end products (syntax, semantics and pragmatics); the interactionists focused on the readers' schemata (knowledge of the world) while the social constructionists were interested in discourse communities in which the writer had to consider the norms and expectations of the tasks and writing models required (Bacha 2002:165). As a result, the cognitivist model can be associated with the study skills model while the social constructivist model can be associated with the academic socialisation model. Although these models have dominated curriculum development and instructional practices at university, elementary and secondary level schooling, Lea and Street (2006:368) argue that these models are inadequate in addressing literacy and writing.

In general, these approaches to the teaching of academic writing provided a strong foundation for the development of the AL model, and they remain important. Out of their strengths and weaknesses, better writing approaches emerged, and new ways of addressing student writing in ESL contexts will continue to be a subject of research in the coming decades.

#### **4.4 The Multiliteracies Approach**

To address some of the criticisms discussed, van Rensberg and Lamberti (2004: 71) propose that the theoretical framework of academic literacies be complemented by a multiliteracies approach. In this approach, it is suggested that the skills, socialisation and academic literacies approach need to be amalgamated in order for institutions to develop effective frameworks to assist students in their academic development. In addition, van Rensberg and Lamberti (2004: 71) argue that this combination can offer a comprehensive understanding of the role of language in promoting learning in institutions of higher learning. They also state that the aim of multiliteracies work is to encourage lecturers to acknowledge, value and build on the multiple literacies that students bring with them to the learning context (van Rensberg and Lamberti 2004: 71). The researcher concurs with van Rensberg and Lamberti (2004) regarding the multiliteracies perspective and also argues that a 'one size fits all' approach to developing student writing cannot work. Each of these three approaches has its advantages and each of these models should be exploited optimally for the benefit of developing student writing.

Kalantzis, Cope and Harvey (2003:18) argue that 'Literacy' needs to be conceived more broadly than the coding of oral to written language to include 'Multiliteracies'. They report that old learning used to be based on the banking system of education (Freire 1970) which is characterised by rote learning, knowing the correct answers, and regurgitation of rigidly defined truths where people learnt things that were narrow, decontextualised and abstract (Kalantzis *et al.* 2003:19). In contrast, in the new basics, literacy entails a way of communication instead of focusing more on correct grammar structures. They further argue that literacy is about being faced with an unfamiliar kind of text and learning from one's successes and mistakes. They also contend that there is a need for new orientations to knowledge adopting the Multiliteracies perspective which encapsulate flexibility, autonomy, collaboration, problem-

solving skills, broad knowledgeability and diverse intelligence (Kalantzis *et al.* 2003: 24).

The New London Group (1996:61) made a call for change when they argued that there is need for rethinking teaching in order to address new learning needs. They state that a pedagogy of Multiliteracies focuses on modes of representation much broader than language. They assert that new developments globally also necessitate the formation of new language (The New London Group 1996:66). As a result, there is a paradigm shift in the way things are done and a new way of communication, as well as training people for the ever-changing market place, is inevitable, particularly where people must possess Multiliteracies and be multi-skilled so that they can work in a diverse and dynamic environment. Therefore, the changing of things in the market place calls for a change in literacy pedagogy so that when learners leave the academic environment they are equipped with all the necessary skills which they need to apply immediately in the market place. It is a concern that many courses offered in institutions of higher learning contribute less to the gradueness of the students because of the disjuncture that exists between the course offerings and the relevant skills needed by employers. The New London Group (1996:67) suggests that students need to develop the capacity to speak up, to negotiate and be critical about the conditions of their working lives. Just like Jurecic (2006) who lamented that the teaching of writing is difficult in this era of technological gadgets, which also compete for the learning space and time, The New London Group also considers advancement in technology as a threat to education. This study argues that technological advancement should be viewed as an enabler and can complement educational activities instead of being seen as competition.

Some researchers attribute difficulty in language learning to the critical period hypothesis (CPH) (Lennerberg 1967 in Brown 1994). The proponents of this theory claim that there is a “biological determined period of life when language

can be acquired more easily and beyond which time language is increasingly difficult to acquire". However, this theory is contentious and has been critiqued by a number of researchers (Singleton 2003). Nevertheless, the main argument of this theory is that "second language acquisition occurs around puberty, beyond which people seem to be relatively incapable of acquiring a native-like accent of the second language" (Brown 1994). This could also imply that acquisition of aspects of grammar and academic literacy as essential components of writing may also be difficult to acquire beyond puberty.

#### **4.5 Guidelines in teaching and enhancing student writing**

Academic writing interventions should begin at elementary and secondary education so that when students are at tertiary institutions, they should not struggle with academic writing. Saddler *et al.* (2010:4) suggest some guidelines in preventing writing difficulties, namely: to provide exemplary writing instruction to all children from the start, beginning in the primary grades, and to provide early supplementary writing instruction aimed at preventing or at least alleviating later writing difficulties. Their study, which examined if early and extra instruction in how to plan and write would ameliorate struggling writers' difficulties with composing, found that extra planning instruction had a strong effect on students' story writing and resulted in improvements in similar personal narrative writing (Saddler *et al.* 2010: 15). Similarly, Munro (2003:334) found that reading comprehension at the secondary level can be enhanced by implementing systematic and consistent literacy teaching procedures in a range of subject areas.

Journals are recommended to ESL students as a tool for learning writing. For example, Blanton (1987:113) introduced journals to students in order to assist them to become better writers. She reports that she never inspected what the

students wrote in the journals and also critiques the reluctance of ESL teachers to use journals and experimentation. She is fully convinced that journals are effective tools for promoting fluency. Contrary to the common expectations of teachers, she argues that making errors is an important part of students' development as writers (Blanton 1987:114). Some studies also suggest that word processing is useful in language learning as it reduces mistakes (Dam, Legenshausen & Wolff, 1990; Kellogg 1994; Appel and Mullen 2000). Furthermore, Blanton (1987: 114) shares her practice in how she used journals, learning logs and essays (autobiographies) to encourage students to write. In the same way, Mojica (2010:24) reports that tasks that can enhance EFL students' ability to master English are keeping a diary, jotting down new words, memorising words and their meanings, reading good materials, getting more input from the teachers, being given encouragements, studying grammar, practicing, talking to other foreign students and consistently speaking and writing in English.

Blanton's attitude towards her learners is commendable. Instead of just complaining about her students, she devised strategies to engage with her students and also raise their confidence levels. This is what reflective practitioners should do in developing new ways of assisting learners and also sharing their practices with other scholars in the same field. Through her interventions, she motivated her learners and changed their negative perceptions towards ESL learning into positive ones.

Intensive writing instruction is also recommended for developing writing skills. SREB (Southern Regional Education Board 2003:11 in Barton and Klump 2008:4) recommends that students write on a weekly basis in all classes, asserting that "students who write regularly transfer new learning into their own language, discover their voices and learn how to effectively address others". Similarly, Hawkins (2005:66) found that English language development and learning happens in three ways, namely, opportunities for

practice, scaffolding and affiliations with school and schooling. She further argues that teachers must develop ways to support children to acquire school-affiliated discourses and identities (ibid). In addition, Zamel (1989:707) argues that students need to be acknowledged and be given numerous opportunities to write in order for them to become participants in the community of writers. Similarly, Barkhuizen (1998:102) recommends the following to teachers to be aware of ESL learners' perceptions:

- Ask learners to keep journals
- Ask learners to write letters to the teacher
- Ask learners to write compositions or paragraphs about their language learning experiences
- Listen for suggestions from learners
- Ask for learner feedback after tests
- Distribute course evaluation forms at the end of a unit/chapter
- Ask if learners enjoyed an activity

Blanton (1987:113) further cites Crowhurst (1990) who suggests the teaching of persuasive/argumentative discourse during the elementary school years and beyond because pupils have few opportunities for such writing, although such modes are demanded in higher education. He concedes that debating is oral argumentation which usually occurs in the middle grades of schooling rather than during the elementary years. He further argues that written argumentation must take account of the opposing voice because written argumentation must assume a debate. However, in his study of ESL students in Australia, Yong (2010:478) reports that foundation students disliked argumentation the most because it required them to produce con-arguments, pro-arguments and refutations based on controversial issues. On the contrary,

he found that foundation students were also aware that argumentation was the most important genre as it would inevitably be part of their personal and professional lives (ibid). Similarly, Adams (2008:1) states that writing to persuade and to inform forms an integral part of the under- and postgraduate experience.

Some authors adopt a formula or modelling in their quest to teach academic writing effectively. In contrast to Jurecic (2006) who argues against the use of formula to teach writing, Adams (2008:1) states that she helps her students understand the formula of academic writing so that they can meet the expectations of their writing and deviate from those standards as a tool for effective writing. In her qualitative research, she used semi-structured interviews and document analysis to get both students' and staff's views about academic writing (Adams 2008:2). She reports that students learned to write mostly by trial and error, by responding to feedback and modelling from the research articles assigned on the course while tutors expected students to use assignment briefs in the module handbooks as the primary source of information about a particular piece of assessment (Adams 2008:3). However, the researcher argues against students learning writing through trial and error as that demonstrates a lack of commitment in teaching academic writing.

Some researchers support the use of modelling in teaching writing. For example, Hirst *et al.* (2004:74) used modelling as a teaching and learning strategy to which students responded well. In the same way, Granville and Dison (2009:56) recommend modelling as a teaching tool as well as teaching through feedback. Furthermore, Kalikhoka *et al* (2009:45) also report that students suggested the use of examples or models of past essays, revision of essay mistakes in class, provision of hand-outs on essay writing and introduction to lecturers' required essay writing standards.

Lecturers need to collaborate with their students in order to be successful in teaching writing. As Silva (1992:44) recommends, teachers need to be aware of and sensitive to their students' perceptions about writing and expectations regarding instruction so that they can make informed decisions about the curriculum and pedagogy in order to develop courses that support and encourage students rather than alienating them. In the same way, Barkhuizen (1998:102) suggests that teachers and learners should collaborate more closely in selecting the learning content and materials, particularly in planning lessons and learning activities. Other factors to be considered should include teaching methods and techniques, classroom management and control and affective factors. Similarly, Hirst *et al.* (2004:75) report about the benefits of collaboration in that students' involvement in the selection of writing topics should motivate them. As Fregeau (1999:9) reports, student input into the selection of topics also promoted a positive attitude toward writing and language learning. Curry (2007:126) further argues that students' knowledge and prior experiences can be used to scaffold new learning.

While in most cases students do not have any say in what they should be taught, these studies endorse involving students in curriculum design. In other words, these studies advocate a learner-centred pedagogy in ESL where learners' views and perceptions are recognised. This is very important and this current study incorporates students' views in recommending better ways of teaching academic writing.

On the whole, previous studies attempted to provide answers to the challenge of student writing in ESL contexts. As a result, research in student writing should continue to explore ways in which ESL students can be developed into better writers. However, academic writing will continue to pose a challenge to these students due to various factors.



## **5. Factors Impacting on Student Writing**

The challenge of academic writing cannot be attributed to one factor but a myriad of factors, including colonialism and apartheid, which were instrumental in the marginalisation of blacks in South Africa. This resulted in resources being awarded to whites while other races received inadequate resources. The problems of underprepared teachers, ineffective teaching of writing in schools which also provided fewer writing activities and fewer opportunities for learning in a second, third and fourth language, are some of the factors discussed in this section.

### **5.1 Under-preparedness in ESL contexts**

The advent of democracy in South Africa made it possible for previously marginalised and disadvantaged people to access education. However, 17 years after the end of apartheid, many black students are insufficiently prepared by the schooling system to succeed at higher education. This is also echoed by Engstrom (2008:6) who states that society still struggles with translating gains of access to college into increases in college completion. She argues that colleges serve a large number of working class and under-represented students. The fact that most of our learners are ESL seems to be a major contributing factor to the dismal performance of our students (Jacobs 2005:476).

Engstrom (2008:6) contends that students may be unprepared for a variety of reasons, such as inadequate schooling experiences, competing family and work demands, lack of English language competency or unfamiliarity with how the college works. Furthermore, Sanchez and Paulson (2008) argue that

minority students' underprepared status often serves to compound their marginalisation and oppression. South African schools too are not unique to this phenomenon. It is a worldwide occurrence, particularly in ESL contexts where English is the medium of instruction. Similarly, other authors indicate that their students typically come from educationally underprepared backgrounds, with some having had no access to libraries and attempt some interventions to meet the demands of university reading and writing tasks (Granville and Dison 2009:56; Bharuthram and McKenna 2006:504; Schwartz 2004:27).

As Carhill, Suárez-Orosco & Puéz (2008:1156) report, low levels of academic English language proficiency can be an obstacle to academic success and to full participation in the discipline. However, Cliff and Hanslo (2009:266) observed that what students have learned at secondary school appears to make them better prepared to cope with the academic demands they face in higher education and also favourably associated with academic success and graduation. Some scholars will reject this assertion as the opposite is the most common finding in ESL academic writing research (van Schalkwyk *et al.* 2009; Bharuthram and McKenna 2006; Gambell 1991). Nevertheless, Cliff and Hanslo's (2009) assertion may apply to those students who attended well resourced schools, particularly private schools. On the contrary, Hirst *et al.* (2004:66) argue that students were not equipped by their previous life experiences with the academic or tertiary literacies required of them. Furthermore, Maloney (2003:664) argues that these students are often portrayed as unable to manage rigorous academic tasks and as such are not fit for higher education studies. Similarly, Fregeau (1999:8) reports that students were admitted to different disciplines without having acquired the academic English writing skills they needed to succeed in those courses.

Student under-preparedness tends to be perceived as a student problem. Several researchers argue that the problem of student writing is also exacerbated by teaching staff members who are at times under-qualified, underprepared and inefficient (Engstrom 2008:17; Moutlana 2007; Niven 2005). In addition, Engstrom (2008:17) contends that institutions that are serious about supporting the academic success and persistence of underprepared students must prepare the teachers, not just the students, about what these students need to learn and succeed. Engstrom (2008:6) further argues that many urban two- and four-year colleges are ill-prepared to deal with the substantial developmental needs students bring to the classroom. To address academic writing difficulties, lecturers or tutors should also see themselves as active participants in the process by making sure that they are fully equipped and trained to help students with academic writing. Engstrom (2008) is to be applauded for these brave remarks.

From the schooling system to tertiary education, there are still instances where members of the teaching staff are not trained to teach the subjects they are teaching. For instance, lecturers or tutors may be highly qualified in a specific subject but may not have been trained to teach the course, or a lecturer or tutor may be required to teach a course that was never part of their training. In most cases in the education field, most of the blame is put on students (Luna 2002:602) and none on the teachers. Teachers should also reflect on their practice and be introspective about what might be right or wrong about the pedagogic practices and approaches that they employ in their classrooms. A new breed of such practitioners is needed in the educational circles for the better development of our students' academic writing. With the kind of background that our students come from, we seem to be expecting miracles from our students in producing quality academic work without proper training. Such expectations cannot be justified.

## 5.2 Student Writing at School Level

Schools play a critical role in developing students' reading and writing skills. If student writing is not addressed adequately at school level, the higher education sector will always be inundated with students who are academically under-prepared. Hart (1995:118) reports that such ESL learners seldom use English in their daily lives, and that crowded classrooms and poor facilities dominate their learning and teaching environment. He also projects that this situation will remain in the schooling context for the vast majority of South Africans for the foreseeable future.

Notably, it is clear that what students learn in high school either prepares or under-prepares them for university studies. Cliff and Hanslo (2009:267) also observed that students from under-resourced school backgrounds are often characterised by weak academic performance, and that this was likely to continue in higher education. In addition, Lea and Street (2006:369) argue that the AL model might make explicit how teaching procedures are framed, not as deficit for students who are non-native speakers of English, but as something that all students encounter as they shift from secondary to tertiary education. In the same way, van Schalkwyk, *et al.* (2009:192) argue that reading and writing play a fundamental role in student learning and their acquisition during the first year at university could be regarded as a critical factor in student success. More importantly, Scott (2006 in van Schalkwyk *et al.* 2009:196) reports that under-prepared students may need further support before they achieve membership to the communities of practice in higher education.

Some researchers attribute students' poor writing skills to the teachers' reluctance to teach writing. For instance, Harris (1977:175) reports that some teachers do not teach composition at school level. This situation is exacerbated when students come to institutions of higher learning and are also confronted by academics who are not willing to teach academic writing (Moore 1998; Boughey 1997; Gambell 1991). Furthermore, research also indicates that there are fewer writing activities done in schools and student writing is underestimated (Wingate 2006; Cohen and Riel 1989). For example, Wingate (2006:458) found that many students are no longer required to write essays at secondary schools and that that could be why students have problems with academic writing.

In recent years, there have been numerous complaints about low literacy standards in schools. For instance, Nightingale (1988:265) mentions that the media attacked allegedly low educational standards which allow a generation of illiterates as a result of frequent attempts in tertiary institutions to set up some sort of fix-it programme to correct the problems left over from secondary education. Similarly, Munro (2003:327) states that dealing effectively with students' literacy difficulties is a challenge that faces many teachers and schools.

Although most research on academic literacy and academic writing has been conducted in universities, Lea and Street (2006:368) argue that academic literacies also apply to K-12 education (Grades R-12). In their study, Lea and Street (2006:370) report on an Academic Literacy Development Programme (ALDP) which was sponsored by the government to address the problem of under-prepared students. The programme, conducted by Kings College, London, targeted students in Grade 12 who were considering university study to prepare them for academic writing in a tertiary institution (Lea and Street 2006:370). In the ALDP, explicit attention was focused on switching, transformation and the changing of meanings and representations from one

genre and mode to another, which are elements that were missing from their schooling (Lea and Street 2006:372).

Cohen and Riel (1989:156) further argue that the task of writing in schools was not effective and could have been effective when writing to an imaginary audience, and if the purpose was made explicit. Interestingly, Engstrom (2008) reports that students consistently said that high school was a waste of time; they learned little from the lecture mode of class delivery and spent few hours (if at all) studying. In addition, Jurecic (2006:2) observed the perception gap that exists between professors and high school teachers and what they think students need to know to be prepared for college. As a result, Jurecic (2006:6) suggests a close collaboration between colleges and high schools in order to address writing issues.

### **5.3 Academic Writing at First Year Level**

Student writing and success in developing general communication skills through discipline-based modules is at the centre of teaching and learning in Higher Education (Jackson, Meyer and Parkinson 2006:261; North 2005; Ellis, Taylor & Drury 2005, Krause 2001; Lillis 2001:20). On the other hand, writing and academic discourse are difficulties that many students encounter as they shift to higher education (Lea and Street 2006:370). Gambell (1991:421) reported that professors were not willing to teach students to write in the mode of discourse valued in the discipline. As Yong (2010:474) argues, the transition from secondary school to foundation studies poses a serious challenge for many in terms of academic writing. Understandably, lecturers are also frustrated and complain about their students' reading and writing deficiencies (Jackson *et al.* 2006:261; Moore 1998:88). Nevertheless, Ellis *et al.* (2005:54) investigated students' conceptions of writing, their approaches to writing and their perceptions of the learning context and found that, though

challenging, the teaching of biology to first year university students can be integrated successfully with teaching writing. This suggests that writing can be taught more effectively in the relevant disciplines in which students are members in those communities of practice.

Researchers concur that the teaching of academic writing should involve collaboration between language specialists and discipline specialists (Elton 2010:152; Mitchell and Evison 2006:72; Jackson *et al.* 2006; Hawkins 2005:59; Jacobs 2005:475). In addition, Gee (1990 in Jacobs 2005:478) argues that people who have been allotted the job of teaching discourses are best placed to change the social structures at institutions that continue to marginalise non-mainstream students. On the other hand, Mitchell and Evison (2006:72) argue that the teaching of writing should not be a remedial or add-on activity, but an integral, on-going part of disciplinary learning for all students. They further argue that teaching writing should be part of the responsibility of disciplinary academics and should occur within the disciplines' curriculum (ibid). Lea (2004:741) observed, however, that it is common in higher education for the teaching of, or support for, student writing to be separated from mainstream study in learning support programmes or specialist foundation courses for undergraduates. She further argues that where all teaching and communication is in writing and where there is no face-to-face communication for participants, issues of literacy, language and learning are inevitably pertinent to the teaching and learning contexts (ibid).

Jurecic (2006:6) identified three essential points about college writing, namely: that students will be expected to write in all disciplines and a significant part of their grades may be based on their writing-papers and exams; college writing frequently requires students to write lengthy and challenging texts and that college writing generally involves making arguments, taking positions, and developing coherent intellectual projects. Significantly, all these authors agree that academic literacies should be taught

within the disciplines by discipline specialists and not as a remedial activity by language specialists. Therefore, the foundation of academic writing should be laid by language specialists by teaching conventions of academic writing and be continued to be taught by discipline specialists so that students can be apprenticed and acculturated into the discourse communities they are entering.

In a nutshell, academic writing remains a challenge in tertiary education. The AL approach may alleviate this problem as it advocates for the collaboration of language and discipline specialists. These two practitioners tend to operate in silos where language pedagogy is considered the sole responsibility of language specialists. Discipline specialists are also best suited to teach discipline specific discourse and should not just assume that ESL students will acquire academic literacy through immersion.

#### **5.4 Academic Writing and Feedback**

Academic writing is one of the most critical skills at university because most assessment tasks require a demonstration of learning through writing. As Lea and Street (1998:373) argue, one of the underlying assumptions of an AL model is that educators need to be concerned with literacies more generally across academic contexts and focus not only on the assessed texts produced by students, such as the papers students submit for grades or examinations they take.

Several researchers suggest the use of effective feedback in academic writing pedagogy (Granville and Dison 2009; Ferris 2008; Li 2007; Spencer 2007; Weaver 2006:379; Zhu 2004:43; Cabral and Tavares 2002; Saito 1994:66). For instance, Weaver (2006:379) and Ferris (2008:390) concur that students



should be shown their strengths and weaknesses so that they can improve on their future work. Weaver (2006:390) further states that some academics think feedback does not work as students are only concerned about the grade they receive from their assignments. She found that students were motivated to improve when they received constructive feedback and also suggests that tutors should provide appropriate guidance and motivation rather than diagnosing problems and justifying the marks. Similarly, Saito (1994:66) suggests that ESL teachers need to make explicit the purposes of their feedback so that students can know how to handle that feedback and use it to their benefit. Furthermore, Spencer (2007:308) suggests the following solutions to teaching and responding to academic writing, namely: teacher education where teachers are trained to effectively respond to student writing; adequate exchange of information by writers (students) and readers (lecturers/tutors); and that teachers should also be writers and teach writing as a process. However, Lea and Street (1998) found that tutors often gave vague comments which students were not able to understand and use effectively.

Time is the most critical factor in giving quality feedback to students. Bailey (2009:1) indicates two challenges that tutors have regarding feedback, namely, less time to write comments on students' work and fewer opportunities for tutorial interaction. The researcher concurs with Bailey's observation as that is what occurs at Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions, particularly with the semesterisation and modularisation of courses. Bailey's (2009) study, which is qualitative in nature, found that students value feedback and need explicit language free of jargon for them to understand feedback clearly.

There is a tendency where some tutor feedback on student writing focuses mainly on the mechanical aspects of language. Saito (1994:65) found that ESL students found teacher feedback satisfactory when it focused on

grammatical errors. He indicates that many ESL students feel that they need more help with grammatical errors and also think that the teachers' responsibility is to model these aspects of English. He further argues that feedback that gives clues (talkback) is more effective in helping students to revise than that (feedback) which is corrected (ibid). Similarly, Curry (2006:186) found that feedback on student writing focused on correcting surface features of language. Again, Radecki and Swales (1988:363) noted that learners expect error correction from their teachers and if they (learners) do not get that, they (teachers) may lose their credibility. In the same way, Fregeau (1999:7) found that surface structure correction was the most common type of correction used as an approach to teaching writing skills and language structure and reports that it was not effective. She further reports that students felt that the types of responses they got were hypocritical and ineffective in improving their writing (ibid). Furthermore, Jackson *et al.* (2006:269) notes that grammatical accuracy influences students' marks to a lesser extent, and tone and style only marginally, and that feedback on student writing is largely in the form of brief written comments, with corrections of grammar also being common.

A talkback approach is suggested as a better way of communicating with students regarding their writing. Lillis (2006: 41) suggests the shift from feedback to talkback in responding to student writing because it (talkback) is considered to be student-centred. She critiques feedback as concentrating on student written texts as a product and a tendency towards closed commentary with evaluative language (good; weak). Furthermore, Lillis (2001:169) argues that talkback provides student writers with the opportunity to respond to, and to question, tutor comments as well as articulate their criticism of dominant conventions. She contends that talkback focuses on "the students' texts as a process, an acknowledgement of the partial nature of any text, an attempt to open up space where the student writer can say what she likes and does not like about what she is expected to make meaning within" (Lillis 2006:42). Bharuthram and McKenna (2006) share the same view.

It is inevitable that students will value more the grade they receive from the assignment than carefully reading tutor comments. However, that should not imply that feedback is not important. For example, Higgins, Hartley and Skelton (2001:270) state that tutors argue that students do not take feedback comments seriously, that they only care about the grade and that the only time they read the comments is when that feedback concerns correct exam answers. Comparatively, they associate giving feedback to the communication process which involves “the linear transfer of information from the sender (tutor) to the recipient (student) via a media (usually written comments)” (Higgins *et al.* 2001:271). Similar to Lea and Street (1998), Higgins *et al.* (2001:271) further contend that a tutor assumes a position of authority within a power relationship based on their experience and institutional context where the tutor occupies the dual role of both assisting and passing judgement on the student. In addition, they suggest that there should be more open discussion, collaboration and negotiation between tutors in order to reflect on, question, make explicit and share competing understandings. Like Lillis (2003), they further suggest that feedback needs to be more dialogical and ongoing, which means that discussion, clarification and negotiation between students and tutors can equip students with a better appreciation of what is expected of them in the process of writing. Moreover, they suggest a feeding forward approach instead of a feedback approach (Higgins *et al.* 2001:274). Boughey (1997:131) similarly reports that she uses questions as part of feedback to prompt students to reflect upon what they had written so that they develop their awareness of the need to be explicit in writing and to consider the possibility of the existence of viewpoints other than their own.

Research reveals that students would like their teachers to attend to mechanical errors and academic literacies indeed involves deeper writing issues than just surface grammar errors. This current study makes

recommendations in the form of detailed guidelines that could be employed to address student academic writing difficulties and provide effective feedback.

As discussed above, feedback to student writing is an important pedagogical practice in higher education, particularly in ESL contexts. Nothing is more valuable to ESL students than being shown the strengths and weaknesses pertaining to their writing. Therefore, teaching through feedback is one of the precious opportunities AL practitioners may use to effectively acculturate these learners into their discourse communities.

## **5.5 Socio-economic factors**

Socio-economic factors contribute negatively to student learning, particularly to academic writing. Sanchez and Paulson (2008:165) observed that in the United States, students who are in transitional English courses often come from inferior schooling conditions. These observations by Sanchez and Paulson (2008) apply in the South African context where historically disadvantaged groups, in this case a majority, have had similar experiences. In addition, van Rensburg and Lamberti (2004:68) argue that it is widely understood that students who attended under-resourced rural and township schools are under-prepared and will have difficulty with writing at university.

Poor student writing cannot only be attributed to the poor schooling system but also to universities, because in South Africa, universities took up the role of Teacher Training after Colleges of Education closed down. Hence, academic staff from universities should take responsibility and also contribute in addressing students' academic writing problems. Though it will be a difficult exercise to embark on, higher education institutions should endeavour to correct what the schooling system failed to do by designing effective writing

programmes that will catapult students into contextual academic discourses within their respective disciplines as well as effective teacher training. This study acknowledges that in order to address student writing difficulties, a holistic approach is needed and it has to start from elementary education through to higher education where writing intensively becomes an integral part of the learning outcomes. Academic staff should also get themselves involved in teaching and transferring academic writing skills to students because in some instances, specific discipline-related writing problems will require subject-specific interventions which language specialists do not have.

Many under-privileged students in South Africa now have access to higher education as opposed to the previous political dispensation where universities were only meant for the privileged few (van Rensberg and Lamberti 2004:67 & Boughey 2000:281). In addition, van Rensberg and Lamberti (2004:67) argue that universities are no longer only for the elite. The same sentiments are also echoed by Boughey (2000:281) who states that in the past university education was reserved solely for the educated elite who had been equipped for the experience and taught in schools that prepared them for university studies and homes that did not differ from those of their lecturers and professors. She further states that now, with the massification of education, more doors are opening for students who never had such privileges (Boughey 2000:281). However, the opening of the doors of education to historically disadvantaged communities also brought challenges of reading and writing with it. Such students need to be supported, particularly in improving their academic writing competencies, so that they can function effectively within their discourse communities in universities. However, it is difficult to support these students when academics often disagree on what academic writing should entail and who should be responsible for teaching academic writing.

As shown above, socioeconomic factors made a significant contribution to the kind of ESL students we currently have. The link between the disadvantaged

backgrounds of ESL students and academic writing has been established, and directly impacts on learning, particularly writing. Although the AL approach is deemed to be appropriate in addressing student writing difficulties, socioeconomic factors are out-of-school factors which the government should attempt to address.

## **5.6 Writing as a product of reading**

Writing cannot be discussed in isolation from reading. Research has shown that the two complement each other (Rose 2004; Munro 2003). For example, Rose (2004:96) argues that parent-child reading before school is the first stage in a curriculum of reading skills that underlies the content and processes of teaching and learning in each stage of schooling. He found that parent-child reading is not practised in rural areas where the indigenous people of Australia live (Rose 2004:96). Similarly, Jubhari (2009:68) also reports that the aboriginal people of Australia only received basic reading and writing and are not fully functional in Australian society because they were not introduced to cultural values embedded in the use of the English language. This situation is comparable to a majority of South Africans who live in rural areas. In addition, Rose (2004:96) argues that writing activities in schools tend to be regarded as secondary and are dependent on reading proficiency. Furthermore, he suggests that for learners to become better writers, they have to master reading from an early age. The implication is that in order to have students who are adequately prepared for higher education in terms of academic writing, the whole schooling system from early childhood development to high school should be infused with systematic reading and writing activities and students will have a smooth synergistic transition to tertiary education (Munro 2003).

However, Jurecic (2006) argues that teaching writing in high school or college is challenging in this era where the reading culture has been eroded by television, movies, videos and games, amongst other factors. He maintains that students need to read more to be prepared for reading and writing in different disciplines (Jurecic 2006:10). He also suggests that students also need more practice in using writing to explore ideas, develop positions, deliberate about problems and paradoxes, make arguments and think new thoughts about the world (Jurecic 2006:11). Furthermore, Voss and Silfries (1996 in Maloney 2003:665) suggested that at-risk college students must first become fluent in academic literacy. Baker (1974 in Maloney 2003) found that 85% of all learning in college comes from independent reading.

Kobayashi & Rinnert (2002:97) indicate that reading is prevalent in Japanese high schools while writing is not given a primary role. Furthermore, Cabral and Tavares (2002:2) report that lecturers complain that students do not read analytically, cannot distinguish between important and unimportant ideas, cannot adjust their reading to the different materials they encounter and do not enjoy reading. In their qualitative study that used open-ended interviews for 80 students, Christison and Krankhe (1986:63) found that previous studies on students' beliefs and perceptions were flawed because of objectivity, sampling and validity. They report that students in their study preferred an active interactional approach to language learning (Christison and Krankhe 1986:73). They also found that listening and reading (80%) dominated their language learning more than speaking and writing (20%). In summary, research suggests a strong link between reading and writing, thus indicating that these academic literacies components are pivotal in academic writing research.

Zamel (1992:463) states that writing allows students to write their way into reading, that reading shares much in common with writing, and that reading is also an act of composing. She critiques the way reading is being taught in

schools. She observed that students view the purpose of reading as to answer questions that follow after reading. In agreement with Freire (1970), she also noticed that students read textbooks so that they can regurgitate what they read back to the teacher, and that if students fail to regurgitate information, they feel they are not good readers. She also noted that students are apprehensive about their own writing. Notably, Zamel (1992:468) challenges the structure of reading textbooks which relegates writing to the last activity. Therefore, reading and writing are reciprocal as students read what has been written and incorporate that as part of their writing. She also argues that writing enables us to re-look at texts in a way which lets us grapple with uncertainties, reflect on complexities, deal with puzzlements, and offer approximate readings. She also argues that writing dispels the notion that reading is a matter of getting something and getting it at the outset (Zamel 1992: 472).

The biggest challenge is that there is little synergy between what happens in high schools and what happens in tertiary education. The high school curriculum contributes very little to the tertiary education curriculum, particularly in the teaching of writing. This gap needs to be addressed so that ESL students from high schools can be better equipped for the writing demands required in higher education. Unless this problem is addressed, the problem of student writing difficulties will be perpetuated. Though important, the practice of focusing more attention on grammar in teaching language in high schools has not helped students improve their writing skills and more attention should be on writing longer texts where students are exposed to argumentation and other skills they will need in tertiary education.

In summary, this section discussed pertinent challenges that impact negatively on the teaching and learning of writing. These include the lack of proper teaching of reading and writing in schools, which creates a problem when students go to institutions of higher learning. Under-resourced schools



and impoverished family backgrounds also have an effect on the poor state of ESL students' writing skills. The quality of teaching and the feedback provided on student writing are also crucial and, if compromised, affect student writing negatively. But as discussed, the AL approach offers a number of possibilities to address some of these challenges.

## **6. Students' and Tutors' Perspectives on Academic Writing**

Understanding the perceptions of ESL students and tutors regarding academic writing was the main focus of this study. There is a huge perception gap that exists between tutors and students, which several studies confirm. To understand the perceptions of these important players in the academia is very important and neglecting these two stakeholders may negate efforts to improve the teaching of academic writing. It is interesting to note that some teaching staff perceived ESL students negatively and could not help them much in their writing. In contrast, ESL students also have certain expectations about their tutors and lecturers. The discussion below raises these issues in more detail.

### **6.1 Students' perspectives**

Student writing is one of the greatest challenges in ESL contexts. The perceptions and experiences of ESL students and practitioners toward academic writing were examined so that appropriate and effective ways of improving student writing could be found. To this end, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the various factors that impact on student writing, either positively or negatively.

Several studies cited the importance of understanding students' perceptions when teaching academic writing in the ESL context (Lea 2004; Cabral and Tavares 2002; Lillis 2001; Zamel 1987). These ESL authors argue that students' perceptions and attitudes toward instruction are critical and should be taken into account in our endeavour to teach writing. Similarly, other researchers also value perceptions of ESL students in the teaching of writing (Lafaye and Tsuda 2002:156; Hart 1995). As a result, the practice of involving learners' inputs in curriculum development is an issue that is heavily debated in the ESL literature and the possibilities of involving students cannot be ignored (Wingate 2006; Hirst *et al.* 2004; McCune 2004; Krause 2001; Nunan 1990).

Lea and Street (1998:160) employed an ethnographic qualitative approach which included in-depth semi-structured interviews with staff and students, participant observations, samples of student writing, written feedback on students' work and handouts on essay writing. They found that students experienced difficulties with writing, particularly with conflicting, contrasting and implicit requirements for writing in different courses (*ibid*).

Several studies found that ESL students are anxious about writing. For instance, Hirst *et al.* (2004:74) acknowledge that many students often feel disempowered, lack confidence and feel completely unprepared for university study. In addition, Gambell's (1991:420) study that aimed to discover students' perceptions toward their own writing and how they go about academic writing found that even successful students are uncomfortable with their own university-level writing and that writing is difficult and stressful to many of them. Spencer (2008) also shares the same sentiments. Furthermore, Blanton (1987:112) reports that her students are scared to death that they may not write English well enough to pass their exams in ESL in order to advance their academic studies to obtain a degree. She reports that anxiety is a hindrance for them to becoming proficient writers. Although she

concedes that it will not be an easy task to help these students, she took it upon herself to assist these students by raising their confidence levels and enabling them to see themselves as members of a club of those who speak and write English (Blanton 1987:113).

A number of researchers investigated ESL student perceptions and they all agree that it is important to involve these students' suggestions in developing academic writing programmes. Some found that ESL students think that contact with target language speakers will solve their writing problems (Lee and Tajino 2008; Koboyashi and Rinnert 2002). Some found that students expected error correction whereas lecturers did not consider that intervention. Others found a gap between high school and tertiary education regarding the teaching of academic writing (Mojica 2010; Brandt 2009; Ransom, Larcombe and Baik 2005; Barkhuizen 1998). Furthermore, some researchers found that students struggle to paraphrase information from sources and express their ideas in a coherent manner (Kalikhoka, *et al.* 2009).

## **6.2 Tutors' perspectives**

Several researchers mention that academics complained about a decline in students' writing standards (Kalikhoka *et al* 2009; Moutlana 2007; Lea and Street 2006; Nightingale 1988). Gambell (1991) repudiated these professors for their reluctance to teach students to write in the mode of discourse valued in the discipline (Gambell 1991:421). It is appalling that professors in Gambell's (1991) study expected good academic writing from students when they were unwilling to teach these skills, and these perceptions still exist within the academia where the teaching of academic writing is considered as the responsibility of language specialists (Boughey 1997).

Similarly, Zamel (1995:508) observed that professors had negative perceptions toward their students which she refers to as self-fulfilling prophecies about the potential of students. Therefore, ESL students yearn for support from their lecturers. She argues that as long as ESL instructors are expected to fix students' problems, misunderstandings, unfulfilled expectations, frustration and resentment will continue to mark their experiences (Zamel 1995: 516). In addition, Gambell (1991) states that some student writing problems stem from the propensity to delay writing papers to the last minute and thus do not use the process approach to writing even if they are familiar with it. As a result, academics need to have a paradigm shift in how they view their students so that they can help students more efficiently with academic writing.

Some teachers seem to hold stereotypical opinions toward ESL learners, as Wright (2004:1) points out. She reports that innate intelligence is not the only key to academic success. Williams (1971 in Wright 2004:2) found that student-teachers tended to judge minority children according to their stereotypes of those minorities and not solely on performance. Wright (2004:2) argues that university professors who hold stereotypes of international students will do the same. She suggests that the stereotyping of ESL students is a disturbing issue at the university level. In a quest to address problems experienced by our students, it is necessary to deconstruct academics' stereotypes of ESL learners. Before judging, labelling and shifting the responsibility of helping disadvantaged learners, academics need to consider the learning contexts from which our students come. For us to effectively teach these students, we need to change the way we view them because these students have the potential to succeed at university. As Li (2007:45) states, "learning can be enhanced if students perceive teachers' intentions accurately when setting certain tasks and expectations".

Both Wright (2004) and Gambell (1991) found that academics have stereotypical opinions toward ESL students which were not a true reflection of their students. As a result, there is a need for academics to change the way they perceive their ESL students if they would like to achieve success in teaching academic writing to these students. As mentioned earlier, the blame is always directed on students and none on academics. However, some studies propose that academics should also question themselves regarding their own under-preparedness in teaching ESL students (Engstrom 2008; Moutlana 2007; Niven 2005; Luna 2002).

Research indicates that academic staff members tend to have unrealistic expectations about ESL students and do not take into cognisance students' educational backgrounds (van Schalkwyk *et al.* 2009; Bharuthram and McKenna 2006; Gambell 1991:429). In a study on university professors' expectations for student writing, Gambell (1991) found that professors believed that their students wrote poorly because they were not capable of coming to grips with the mode of discourse demanded by the discipline. In addition, Leki and Carson (1994:89) found from students that professors did not focus on sentence-level features of writing and also ignored grammar errors. They report that students were more concerned about grammatical accuracy and vocabulary, factors that conflicted with what their professors expected. Moreover, they argue that students' desire to master the language should not be underestimated as it will help them to efficiently focus on their education rather than on the cognitive demands imposed by difficulties in using the language (Leki 1994:92). Leki (1995:95) also proposes a student-centred approach in designing ESL courses, where students' perceptions are considered in order to help them to improve their academic literacies. Cabral and Tavares (2002:2) also suggest that lecturers should make their writing expectations, opinions, demands and understandings explicit and understandable to students in order to help them get acquainted with university writing skills. This suggestion is important in the teaching of

academic writing because in most cases students are not sure of what their lecturers expect from them and vice versa.

Like Zamel (1995) and Nunan (1990), Christison and Krankhe (1986:61) observed that curriculum planning and the design of ESL programmes mostly excluded students' perceptions and experiences. In addition, Zamel (1995:518) states that students felt that their writing struggles were misconceived and underestimated. She reveals that students want the faculties in which they are registered to help them with clarity, accessible language and careful explanation so that they can be accepted in their discourse communities despite negative attitudes some academics have toward them. In contrast, Bailey (2008:5) notes the importance of understanding and identifying with the experience and perspective of teachers in the changing context of higher education and also endorses the importance of research as an integral part of the work and contribution of writing teachers.

Zhu (2004:30) states that academic readers approach student writing with different sets of expectations, depending on the goals of writing, the perceived roles of student writers and academic readers' own disciplinary expertise. He also found that the business and engineering faculties believed that they had a role to play in helping students develop academic writing skills, something which most discipline-specialists shun (Gambell, 1991). However, these academics saw their role in teaching academic writing as secondary to teaching content and technical skills. Nevertheless, some professors felt they should outsource the teaching of language to language specialists while they concentrate on their core business of teaching content. Others saw the need for collaboration between language specialists and content specialists.

Zhu (2004) noted from the faculty comments concerning the nature of academic literacy and faculty's role in academic writing instruction as

indicating the need for teaching specificity in the EAP context. He argues that teaching specificity is a necessity in the EAP classrooms for the preparation of students for academic writing. Student academic writing is an apprenticeship that ESL students should engage in under the careful tutelage of their teachers because the ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill but learned through practice and experience (Myles 2002). Myles (2002) further argues that academic writing requires conscious effort and practice in composing, developing and analysing texts. Student writing in a second language also requires proficiency, writing strategies, techniques and skills. In addition, Zhu (2004) also observed that students want to write error-free texts and expect to become proficient writers in their second language. She argues that students writing in a second language generally produce texts that contain varying degrees of grammatical and rhetorical errors. She also concedes that writing in a second language is a complex process involving the ability to communicate in L2 and the ability to construct a text in order to express one's ideas effectively in writing.

On the whole, all these studies on perceptions and experiences of ESL students and tutors revolve around a perception gap that exists between students and tutors. At one extreme, lecturers expect to find ESL students who are well prepared for university reading and writing tasks while on the other hand, students expect tutors to address writing issues that were not well addressed in school. Perhaps this gap can be narrowed by clear communication that needs to be established between tutors and students so that their mutual expectations can be addressed. Tutors need to understand the perceptions and experiences of these students and also involve them in designing teaching and learning materials in order to assist them to become better writers. However, Boughey (1997:126) observed that many lecturers are still opposed to the idea that the development of language-related skills should take place in their classes or form part of their own work. A common outcry in these studies is that ESL learners have low literacy levels (Moutlana 2007; Niven 2005; Lillis 2001; Nightingale 1988). The researcher also argues

that tutors should also pay attention to their own teaching practices and abilities to teach writing. There are also issues of power relations as students are not given opportunities to question or comment on the abilities and teaching approaches of their ESL tutors.

## **7. What constitutes good writing?**

Research shows that controversies about what constitutes good writing abound and that debates have been ongoing for decades (Jurecic, 2006; Lea and Street, 1998; Gambell, 1991; Nightingale, 1988; Eblen, 1983; Harris, 1977). Because academics are often not in agreement about what constitutes a good piece of writing, it is confusing to students who receive contradictory messages on what constitutes academic literacy or a good and poor piece of academic writing (Lea and Street 1998:157). Similarly, Nightingale's (1988) study reveals that researchers and writers were amazed to learn that they do not know enough and lack evidence about what constitutes genuinely effective scientific, technical or business writing. The latter research confirms Jurecic's (2006:1) argument that a perception gap exists between what professors and high school teachers think students need to know to be prepared for tertiary studies. Hence, it is worrying that there are various differing and unclear views on what constitutes good student writing. While the researcher concurs with Jurecic (2006:6) that there is no easy way to prepare students for writing at tertiary level, it is important that research on student writing continues because this is crucial for the success of ESL students who have no other option but study in a second language.

The difference in views on what constitutes good writing has been assigned to various factors related to lecturers' and students' day-to-day practices. In her survey of university faculty's views and classroom practices, Eblen's (1983: 347) findings suggest that academic staff value overall quality rather than



surface correctness or mechanics. As already mentioned, Gambell (1991:431) also noted that poor student writing stems from students themselves as they procrastinate writing papers to the last minute. As Anokye (2008:68) argues, if good writing can be described as a successful combination of content, organisation and expression used and also considers the audience, all these attributes cannot be achieved in one draft as many students think. It can be deduced from research that good writing is an equitable combination of language skills, argumentation, relevant content and organisation demonstrated by a student's work.

## **8. Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the AL approach and other theories on academic writing. The chapter argued for a holistic approach to student writing development which should encapsulate other writing theories instead of abandoning them. Studies of perceptions and experiences of students' and tutors' academic writing were explored. The chapter discussed factors that affect student writing at school and university level and argued for a synergistic transition between high school and tertiary education to close existing gaps. Feedback strategies to student writing as well as guidelines for the effective teaching of writing were also outlined. The next chapter looks at research methods as well as data collection techniques employed in the study.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### 1. Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodology employed in the study. It outlines the research design, describes the sampling process, the data collection and data analysis procedures adopted in the study. In each instance, the chapter shows how each subsection and research aims are integrated.

#### 2. Research Design

Kumar (1996:74) defines research design as a procedural plan that is adopted by the researcher to answer questions validly, objectively, accurately and economically. In addition, Mouton (1996:35) defines research methodology as the 'knowledge of how' to do things or the total set of 'means' that scientists employ in reaching their goal of valid knowledge. As a result, this study adopts a qualitative research methodology which uses a case study approach as design.

According to Seliger and Shohamy (1989:118), qualitative research studies human behaviour within the context in which it would occur naturally without the researcher's interference. Furthermore, a qualitative study is defined as a study that attempts to understand ordinary people's perceptions, perspectives and understandings of a particular situation as well as to describe and interpret an experience by determining the meaning of the experience as

perceived by people who have participated in it (Leedy and Ormrod 2005:139; Bodgan and Biklen 2003:23; Ary *et al.* 2002:447). Therefore, a qualitative paradigm is relevant in this study because the research seeks to examine the understandings of ESL first-year university students' and tutors' perceptions and experiences of what academic writing entails.

## **2.1 The Case Study**

Case studies are a type of qualitative research that can be used to study a phenomenon in a specific context (Ary, *et al.* 2002; Eisenhart 2002; Kumar 1996; Best and Kahn 1993). In addition, a case study is a way of organizing social data for the purpose of viewing social reality (Best and Kahn 1993:193) and to arrive at a detailed description and understanding of reality which involves an in-depth study of a single unit, such as one individual, one group or an organisation (Ary, *et al.* 2002:2; Eisenhardt 2002:8; Kumar 1996:99). Furthermore, a case study probes deeply and analyses interactions between various factors that can explain the present status or influence change or growth. It also involves studying a phenomenon individually and in its totality in order to gain more insight into it. As this study examines the perceptions and experiences of ESL first year university students and tutors with regard to academic writing, a case study is appropriate because the research aims at a better understanding of particular cases, which are ESL students' and tutors' perceptions.

Even though case studies have some advantages in qualitative research (Berg 2007:28; Eisenhardt 2002:8; Ary, *et al.* 2002:27; Kumar 1996:99), they also have some pitfalls. For example, Best and Kahn (1993:195) warn that, although the case study method, which requires familiarity with existing theoretical knowledge of the field of inquiry and the skill to isolate significant variables from irrelevant ones, may look deceptively simple, it can be

subjectively biased and its effects may be wrongly attributed to factors that are merely associated, rather than the cause and effect. As already indicated, it is important that the researcher is cautious so that bias can be avoided.

### **3. Sampling**

Johnson and Christenson (2004:197) define sampling as the process of drawing a sample from the population where the characteristics of a subset are selected from a larger group. Purposive sampling, that is, a non-random sampling technique in which a researcher solicits persons with specific characteristics to participate in a research study, was employed in this study (Bogdan and Biklen 2007; Johnson and Christensen 2004:215). The criteria used to select the student and tutor samples for this study are discussed in the subsections that follow.

#### **3.1 Student sample**

The sampling process involved several stages. In the first instance, first year students registered for English for Academic Purposes (ENN103F) module were selected. Secondly, only ESL speakers were selected to participate in the study. The study population comprised of 48 students who were purposefully and conveniently chosen to participate in the study. Only 15 of these students were involved in focus group interviews because they consented to participate in the study after the Saturday tutorial class. A small sample was deemed necessary in order to make the data more manageable (Fossey, Harvey, Mc Dermott and Davidson, 2002:726). These students were those who attended Tutorial Support and Discussion Classes (TSDL) tutorials and were conveniently accessed after the tutorial class. They were willing to participate after the study was explained to them.

Student demographics are important in this study because they help us understand participants' characteristics and, most importantly, confirm their ESL status. Of the 48 students involved in the study, some chose not to disclose some of the required information. Table 3.1 below demonstrates the demographics of the students, looking specifically at age, gender and whether they were employed or not. Most students were females (27) while males were only 12 (11 participants did not provide their gender information). Fifteen (15) students were older than 28, 12 were in the age range of 20-23, 11 were between the ages of 24-27, while 10 were aged between 16 and 19. About half of the students were unemployed (studying full-time) while some were employed.

| <b>Age</b>         | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Occupation</b> |
|--------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| 16-19 (10)         | Female 27     | Employed (17)     |
| 20-23 (12)         | Male 12       | Unemployed 20     |
| 24-27 (11)         |               |                   |
| Older than 28 (15) |               |                   |

Table 3.1 Age, gender and occupation of participants

In terms of language, the North-Sotho speaking students were predominant with 13 students participating in the study, followed by Tshivenda speaking students (7) then both Setswana and Zulu speaking students (5 each), Afrikaans (3), Xhosa (2), South Sotho (1) and 5 international students (See Figure 4.1). The predominant languages (North Sotho and Tshivenda) indicate that most students migrated from other provinces (e.g. Limpopo) to come to study in Pretoria despite those provinces having regional offices that

also offer the same tutorial services. As already indicated, data confirm the ESL status of participants.

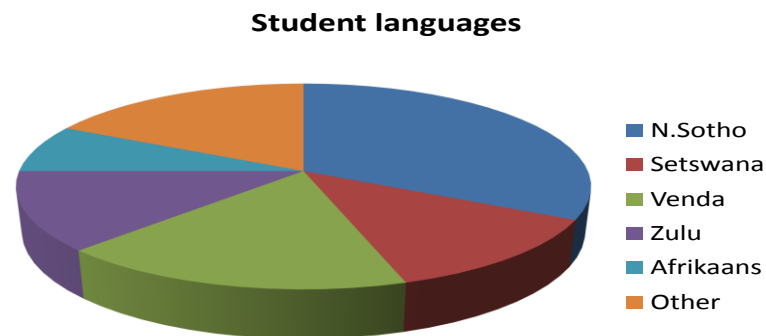


Figure 3.1 Languages spoken by participants

Some students (20) were from the humanities while other students (10) were enrolled for a social work degree, followed by Engineering, Science and Technology students (10) with 9 students registered for Engineering degrees and, lastly, 5 students from Economic and Management Sciences (See Figure 3.2). Some students did not mention the degrees they were enrolled for.



Figure 3.2 Degrees enrolled by participants

### 3.2 Tutor sample

The sample comprised tutors who mark assignments and exams for the ENN103F module. A total of eight English tutor/markers participated in the study. All eight tutors who mark for this module were willing to participate in this study after an invitation was extended to them.

|         | <b>Highest Qualification</b> | <b>Years of teaching experience</b> | <b>Years of marking university assignments</b> |
|---------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|
| Tutor 1 | Masters Degree               | 16 years and above                  | 1-4 years                                      |
| Tutor 2 | BA Degree                    | 6-10 years                          | 1-4 years                                      |
| Tutor 3 | BA Degree                    | 16 years and above                  | 1-4 years                                      |
| Tutor 4 | BA Degree                    | 6-10 years                          | 1-4 years                                      |
| Tutor 5 | Masters Degree               | 16 years and above                  | 5-9 years                                      |
| Tutor 6 | BA Degree                    | 1-5 years                           | 1-4 years                                      |
| Tutor 7 | BA Degree                    | 16 years and above (33 years)       | 15 years and more (22 years)                   |
| Tutor 8 | BA Degree                    | 16 years and above                  | 5-9 years                                      |

Table 3.2 Tutor demographic information

#### 4. Data Collection Techniques

A questionnaire, focus group interviews and marked student assignments were the data collection instruments used in this study. A questionnaire was administered to both students and tutors and was subsequently followed by interviews and a content analysis of marked assignments. The rationale behind the use of a combination of these data collection methods (triangulation) was to get rich and in-depth data regarding the perceptions and experiences of ESL students and tutors of academic writing (Bell 2005:197).



This was also done to replicate the methods used by theorists of the academic literacies approach which is the theoretical framework underpinning this study (Lea 2008; Lea and Street 1998). As Lea (2008:232) states, “the academic literacies approach generally uses qualitative and ethnographic methods to obtain data. Accordingly, interviews, students’ writing samples and feedback on students’ writing were identified as the common methodological approaches used in academic literacies research” (Lea 2008:232). However, in this study questionnaires were also used as a data collection instrument and the study adopted a case study instead of ethnography.

#### **4.1 Questionnaires**

Johnson and Christensen (2004:164) define a questionnaire as a self-report data collection instrument that each research participant fills out as part of a study. In addition, they state that questionnaires are used to obtain information about the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, beliefs, values, perceptions, personality and behavioural intentions. They view the questionnaire as not restricted to one method. The advantages of a questionnaire are that it is less expensive and offers greater anonymity (Kumar 1996:114) while the disadvantages are limited application, low response rate, self-selecting bias, lack of opportunity to clarify issues and spontaneous responses are not allowed. Other disadvantages are that a response to a question may be influenced by the response to other questions, it is possible to consult other people and a response cannot be supplemented with other information. However, the researcher self-administered the questionnaires in order to address any clarification issues with regard to the questions, and for increasing the response rate. According to Bless and Higson-Smith (2000:116) there are two types of questions asked on a questionnaire or interview schedule, namely factual questions and opinion

questions. They see a questionnaire and interview schedule as referring to the same thing as they use the two interchangeably (Bless and Higson-Smith 2000:105). Similarly, Marshall and Rossman (1995:95-96) state that researchers administer questionnaires to some sample of a population to learn about the distribution of characteristics, attitudes or beliefs. They argue that in using questionnaires, researchers rely totally on the honesty and accuracy of participants' responses.

As a result, in this study, a student questionnaire was distributed through an online learning management system (*myUnisa*) to student e-mails as well as face-to-face to the Gauteng Regional Office. In addition, the questionnaire was distributed after two tutorial sessions on the 04<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> August 2011 to two groups of students. Of the 48 questionnaires, 33 questionnaires were completed by students who were attending tutorials while 15 were completed by students who responded to online questionnaires distributed through *myUnisa* which students returned through e-mail (See Appendix 2). Online respondents signed the consent form manually and scanned it while some just typed their names. In addition, eight ENN103F tutors voluntarily participated in the study and completed the questionnaire after it was explained to them (See Appendix 4).

All data gathering instruments employed in this study were piloted to test how long it would take recipients to complete them, to check that all questions and instructions were clear and to enable it to remove any items which did not yield usable data (Blaxter *et al.* 2006:137; Bell 2005:147; Leedy and Ormrod 2005:110; Glesne 1999:38). These authors argue that researchers should guard against the temptation to rush to the distribution stage, irrespective of how small the study may be. Furthermore, they suggest that the instruments should ideally be tried out on a group similar to the one that would form the population of the study. Accordingly, the questionnaire/interviews schedule was tested on a group of ENN103F students based at the Unisa Polokwane

regional office, with a view to revising the research statement, research plans, interview and questionnaire questions and the presentation (Glesne 1999:39). As suggested by the researchers above, both student and tutor questionnaires and the interviews guide (see Appendix 2 and 4) used in this study were pretested to ensure that all the weaknesses and potential problems were addressed before embarking on the major data collection for the study.

#### **4.1.1 The Pilot Study**

The pilot questionnaire was tested on ENN103F students based at the Polokwane regional office, which is part of the North Eastern region of Unisa. The region was selected for its familiarity to the researcher and because the majority of the students are ESL from disadvantaged backgrounds. The questionnaire was distributed on the last day of the first semester tutorials on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2011. The questionnaire was distributed towards the end of the tutorial when students were already thinking of going home or to other classes.

Some students did not return the questionnaire while some could not fill in the entire questionnaire. Only six students filled the pilot questionnaire and it was hence easy to analyse students' comments without following any rigorous data analysis methods. One student suggested that they should have been given more time with the questionnaire and that they should not be distributed at the "last minute, especially when attending lectures" while another claimed the questionnaire had difficult words which could not be easily understood. However, some completed in the entire questionnaire without objections. While some were not precise about the time they had spent on the questionnaire, one student said it took 10 minutes to fill in the form while the other student said it took 30 minutes. Based on students' comments from the

pilot study questionnaire, specific questions that were problematic were refined on the questionnaire/interviews schedule for further probing during the interviews stage.

#### **4.2. Focus Group Interviews**

Focus group interviews are interviews which involve a group of participants who are simultaneously interviewed together (Neuman 2006:406). Their advantages are that they are appropriate for complex questions, useful for collecting in-depth information, information can be supplemented, and for questions that can be explained (Kumar 1996:115). Furthermore, they help to elicit data about the perceptions and experiences of a group regarding a specific matter. In contrast, the disadvantages of focus group interviews are that extroverts may participate more than other students. However, all participants were given a chance to participate by ensuring that they exchanged taking turns equally in responding to the questions. In this study, 15 students participated in these interviews and were divided into three groups of five students. There were some limitations in this study because only students who attended the tutorial classes formed part of the focus group interviews. As a result, it is not known if the results of the study would have been affected by perhaps including students who had not attended these classes. Nevertheless, the use of qualitative research methodology was important as the focus was not on the number of participants but on the descriptions they provided regarding their perceptions and experiences of academic writing in ESL contexts.

According to Neuman (2006:406) a field interview involves asking questions, listening, expressing interest and recording what was said. He sees the field interview as a joint production of a researcher and members who are active participants whose insights, feelings and cooperation are essential parts of a

discussion process that reveals subjective meanings. He suggests that a field interview involves a mutual sharing of experiences which help to build trust and encourage the informant to open up (ibid).

Some students were not comfortable with the interviews being recorded and the researcher had to make a contingency plan and ensure compliance with the ethical considerations. Field notes were taken and a summary of responses is provided. However, questionnaire responses are sufficiently detailed and, in most cases, written comments are quoted.

In this study, focus group interviews were held on 18th August 2011 after a tutorial class. Although interviews are considered to be a common data collection instrument in qualitative research, they were complemented by an open-ended questionnaire and marked students' essays which provided rich reliable data. The study used focus group interviews which probed students' perceptions and experiences about academic writing to supplement and confirm the questionnaire data in order to increase the reliability of the data. The purpose of the interviews in this study was to gain insight into English first year university students' and tutors' perceptions and experiences regarding academic writing as well as to confirm questionnaire data (Kobayashi and Rinnert 2002:98).

### **4.3 Documents: Essay assignments**

Documents in research may include, inter alia: policies, acts and written essays. In addition, the material may also be public records, textbooks, letters, films, tapes diaries, themes and reports (Neuman 2006:323). In this study, it was important to look at student essay assignments in order to confirm the data from both student and tutor questionnaires. Content analysis,

which is defined as a technique for gathering, analysing and interpreting the content of text, was used to analyse marked assignments (Ary *et al.* 2002:27; Neuman 2006:322). In addition, content or documents analysis focus on analysing or interpreting recorded material to learn about human behaviour. Therefore, the documents in this study were students' marked assignments. The analysis focused on students' writing, and tutor feedback on students' writing were explored in addition to administering questionnaires and conducting interviews in order to adhere to the academic literacies theory. This data collection strategy was also employed to validate both student and tutor responses to confirm or corroborate information from other instruments (the questionnaire and focus group interviews). Content analysis was also adopted in this study to answer the sub-question: How do tutors respond and give feedback to first year students' academic writing?

Fifteen (15) scripts were randomly selected and analysed but only nine were selected to report on as data reached a point of saturation (Fossey *et al.* 2002:726).

## **5. Data Analysis**

Data analysis in this study involved three steps suggested by Vithal and Jansen (2005:28) and (Neuman 2006: 457):

1. Open coding: scanning and cleaning the data which involve reading the data, checking for incomplete, inaccurate, inconsistent or irrelevant data and identifying preliminary trends in the scanned data;
2. Axial coding: organising the data which involves describing, comparing and categorising;

3. Selective coding: representing data which involves organising data in the form of graphs, selected quotations and case boxes.

The researcher primarily used immersion strategies, that is, reliance on the researcher's intuitive and interpretive capacities (Marshall and Rossman 2006:106).

According to Miles and Huberman (1994:56 in Neuman 2006:460) codes are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during the study. The study looked for patterns in relationships and the researcher created new concepts by blending together empirical evidence and abstract concepts. The researcher categorised data into codes and thereafter identified patterns and relationships between the three sets of data from the questionnaires, focus group interviews and student's essays.

In data analysis, the goal was to organise specific details into a coherent picture, model or set of interlocked concepts (Neuman 2006:458-458). Guided by Neuman's (2006) and Vithal and Jansen's (2005) suggestions in handling qualitative data above, the latter from all data collection instruments used in this study were transcribed. Responses from each question were grouped together. An analysis was undertaken and codes were assigned to the data and themes and categories began to emerge. However, only selected representative quotations were recorded and reported on this study.

## **6. Reliability and validity**

Reliability and validity are important in research because the study needs to fall within the framework of the work done by other scholars in the field, and is important also for replication. Reliability provides information on whether the data collection procedure is consistent and accurate (Bell 2005:117; McDonough and McDonough 1997:63; Best and Kahn 1993:208; Seliger and Shohamy 1989:185). Reliability refers to dependability or consistency while validity suggests truthfulness (Neuman 2006:188). In addition, Kumar (1996:140) argues that the greater the degree of consistency and stability in an instrument, the greater its reliability. In addressing the principle of reliability and validity, the questionnaire/interviews schedule used in this study were guided and adapted from tested questionnaires in the ESP field including those compiled by scholars such as Leki and Carson (1997) and Margaret van Zyl (1993).

Several researchers view validity as the extent to which the data collection procedure measures what it intends to measure (McDonough and McDonough 1997:63; Best and Kahn 1993:208; Seliger and Shohamy 1989:188). They argue that it is important to obtain evidence of validity as it cannot be really proven. The researcher also intends to have copies of data readily available for inspection. According to Glesne (1999:31), the use of multiple data collection methods, commonly called triangulation, contributes to the trustworthiness of the data. She argues that the purpose of triangulation is to attempt to relate to them so as to counteract the threats to validity in each. McDonough and McDonough (1997:53) cite Erickson (1986:140) who gives the description of five rules to ensure plausible interpretations: evidence must be adequate in amount to support interpretations; evidence should come from a variety of data types and not rely on only one; data must have good interpretive status, disconfirming evidence should be included and actively sought; and discrepant cases should be analysed carefully. This study



triangulated the methods to strengthen the validity and reliability of data. In other words, all data collection methods, as well as the participants used in this study, aimed to test and validate the data to see if it produces the same results (reliability). The pilot study also aimed to evaluate the validity and reliability of the instruments by ensuring that questions that did not elicit the correct responses were eliminated.

## **7. Conclusion**

The chapter outlined the qualitative research paradigm and case study approach adopted in this study. The data collection instruments used in the study, that is, open-ended questionnaires, focus group interviews and documents in the form of marked assignment essays, were also discussed. In addition, the data analysis process was outlined. The importance of ensuring validity and reliability was also considered. The next chapter discusses the findings and results of the study.

### **ACADEMIC WRITING: STUDENTS' CONCEPTIONS AND TUTORS' EXPECTATIONS**

#### **1. Introduction**

The previous chapter outlined the rationale for adopting a qualitative research paradigm in this study. This chapter presents an analysis of the findings on students' and tutors' perceptions and experiences.

As the discussion in Chapters One and Two shows, on the one hand, ESL students struggle with various aspects of academic writing which include grammar (spelling), information gathering, structure (introduction, body and conclusion), presenting an argument and organisation of ideas (coherence). On the other hand, this study also reveals that tutors perceive low literacy rates, insufficient teaching of writing in schools, and lack of library and argumentation skills as factors contributing to student writing difficulties. The findings indicate that both students and tutors agree with most of the factors highlighted above. However, the findings of this study also indicate that though some students perceive themselves to be ready for writing at university, tutors clearly think that some students still need to improve their writing to the standard required at university. The reality is that academic writing takes time to develop and cannot be acquired in a limited time, and that ESL students need to master the basics of writing before they can fully acquire academic writing.

The discussion of the findings in the present study is divided into two sections: a) students' conceptions and b) tutors' perceptions and understandings. The discussion in each section incorporates and integrates the findings from the questionnaires, focus group interviews and marked essay assignments. Furthermore, the discussion and analysis in each section is presented in relation to three key themes that emerged from the findings: a) student writing at school level, b) academic writing at first year level, c) academic writing and feedback. The themes were generated from categories that emanate from data analysis (Neuman 2006; Vithal & Jansen 2005), the theoretical framework (AL approach), as well as other theoretical perspectives outlined in Chapters One, Two and Three. Therefore, the themes are not separate and detached but interlinked in complex ways such that none can be ignored or be prioritised over others. These themes are of significance in this study because they confirm that academic writing still poses challenges to first year ESL students and that lecturers/tutors do not adequately address these challenges.

## **2. Academic writing: Students' Conceptions**

As shown in Chapters One and Two, an understanding of students' conceptions of academic writing is important because it can give better insights into the challenges students face when approaching writing tasks at first year level. These challenges, as AL proponents Stephens (2000) and Lea (2004) contend, result from teaching and learning contexts that view writing as a de-contextualised cognitive skill. But more specifically, as shown in Chapter One, Nunan (1990) and Fregeau (1999) argue that students' perceptions are often ignored by ESL practitioners, particularly in curriculum design processes. Of significance, as research discussed in Chapter Two indicates, learner input is pivotal in selecting the relevant content to be taught in the ESL classroom (Lea 2004; Cabral and Tavares 2002; Lillis 2001; Barkhuizen 1998;

Silva 1992). Thus, students' conceptions of their writing can highlight those factors that will need to be addressed so that writing can be taught effectively.

The findings on students' conceptions of academic writing are discussed in three areas: a) student writing at school level, b) academic writing at first year level and c) student writing and feedback. It should be noted that questionnaire responses were taken verbatim as written by participants and any grammar or sentence construction mistakes were not corrected.

## **2.1 Student writing at school level**

Schools play a significant role in the teaching of writing in ESL contexts and should provide a good foundation for learners to grasp basic writing skills which they will need to use for the rest of their lives. As a result, writing skills should be taught properly and adequately from the onset. The limited and poor quality of writing that students are exposed to at school level, as shown in Chapters One and Two, constitute some of the problems students have to contend with at university (Wingate 2006; Lea and Street 1998; Harris 1977). Various factors at school level result in students coming to university under-prepared (Engstrom, 2008). The findings are presented in accordance with the questions asked to the participants in the questionnaire/interviews guide.

The responses to the question: "What kind of writing tasks and activities did you do in high school?" reveal a number of factors at school level that impact on students' quality of writing. Firstly, the findings indicate that some students were actively involved in writing. For instance, essay writing, comprehension tests, grammar and literature emerged as the common activities students were exposed to in high school. For example, one participant confirmed that: "I did write essays and read prescribed books and debated about facts in the

books and also about everyday activities. Learning about tenses and different kinds of words and when using them in sentences” (Blessing), while two other respondents indicated that they did “multiple choice, essay writing, comprehension” (Lucky) and “letters; essays; comprehension; stories” (James). From these responses, it is evident that students were involved in writing in high school. However, the extent of writing done is not clear. In addition, the focus group interviews revealed that students engaged in writing essays, grammar, letters and poetry, thus corroborating the findings from the questionnaires.

Students’ responses to the question: “Do you think your high school teachers prepared you adequately for writing essay assignments in English at university?” reveal that some participants believed that they were taught good English from high school and perceived themselves adequately prepared to engage in university writing tasks. For example, Lebo said: “Yes. Due to the experience I had I have not faced any difficulties, most of all I have good marks with the few I have done already”, while Tshepo said: “Yes, I did my A levels which is an international and is supervised by Cambridge, one of the most prestigious university”.

In some instances, though at surface level it seemed that these ESL students were actively engaged in writing activities, their written essays showed that they still faced challenges in this area. Their writing had not improved, that is, despite engaging in a variety of activities, students still performed poorly in their writing at first year level, thus confirming school studies which show that schools provide limited writing experiences (Wingate 2006; Lea and Street 1998; Cohen and Riel 1989; Harris 1977). The exposure to writing seemed to be of little benefit to student participants in this study because they still demonstrated poor writing skills in their essays.

The responses revealed that there is a gap between high school and university, particularly in the teaching of academic writing (Yong 2010; Wingate 2006; Jurecic 2006; Lea and Street 1998; Cohen and Riel 1989; Lamberg 1977). For instance, one student (Mosima) mentioned that: “we did not write essays that often in high school” while another student (Tshwene), intimated that: “one was only required to relate a story and only grammar, sentence construction was tested. University essays require more than that”. In showing how limited writing at high school impacted negatively on his writing at first year level, Lesetja commented that: ‘in a way since I am able read a paragraph and be able to interpret it to myself in the best way; I understand though at times the vocabulary and English use is hard in my current study unlike in my high school set books”. These findings indicate the gap in expectations from student writing between high school and university levels.

These findings corroborate with other studies (Wingate 2006; Cohen and Riel 1989) which show that some students were not satisfied with how they were taught writing in high school. For instance, Lerato mentioned that “... my high school teachers were just typing essay assignments and give it to us without discussing them and showing us our mistakes”. Another participant expressed his dislike for the use of code switching while teaching English by stating that “... because my teacher teach me in Zulu language while we are doing English” (Themba). In addition, the focus group participants also criticised “the teaching style and lack of strategies” and that “they did not teach introductions and the standard was very low”. This response corroborates with observations by Lea and Street (1998) and Nightingale (1988) who indicated that there was an outcry of low literacy levels in schools and universities.

In general, the findings indicate that despite some students claiming that they were adequately prepared for the demands of writing at university, the samples of student writing, tutor responses and language mistakes from the

completed questionnaires give a different picture. The implications are that more still needs to be done in preparing ESL students to cope with writing at university level.

## **2.2 Academic writing at first year level**

Responses to the question: “Do you think your high school teachers prepared you adequately for writing essay assignments in English at university?” varied. Some students stated that they were not prepared adequately for the writing demands required at university while some felt they were well prepared. Participants clearly indicated that they struggled to structure their essays. For example, Debora stated that she was not ready for academic writing required at university “because I am struggling when it comes to the introduction and conclusion in writing” while Nancy commented that: “I find it difficult to write the essay like in a very good...was doing all the three structures of an essay”. On the contrary, Jacqui mentioned: “Yes, we are able to supply what is needed when you write essay must have introduction, body and conclusion”. Interestingly, Kwena explicitly said that: “The essay must have an introduction which pulls the attention of a reader, the body where you you’re your story or your thoughts about de2 topic and lastly the conclusion where you summarise the whole essay. You can call it a solution”.

In one instance, the findings reveal that students claimed to have been well prepared to write essays. However, an analysis of written essays indicated that students were still struggling and had problems in structuring their writing. This finding corroborates assertions that writing is one of ESL first year students’ main weaknesses (Cliff and Hanslo 2009; van Schalkwyk *et al.*

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<sup>2</sup> Language errors were taken as they were from their questionnaire responses and were not corrected

2009; Lamberg's 1977). So, students clearly conceptualise good writing but fail dismally in implementation. They should be given more writing practice in order to harness their writing skills and be taught that writing is a process and not an overnight event (Lloyd 2007).

Although in some instances the findings show that participants indicated that writing coherently was not a problem, these students, however, struggled with "organisation of ideas" (John) and "to know how to arrange my arguments, differentiate an essay and a thesis and arrange my paragraphs as expected" (Esther).

The findings show that students realised that they required assistance in writing paragraphs in addition to addressing surface grammar errors, a serious concern which participants acknowledged regarding their weaknesses in academic writing. Again, this finding supports Nunan's (1990) argument that learners' inputs should also be considered in curriculum design processes as they are aware of their weaknesses. Writing coherently is also a critical and very important component of academic writing because in most cases students had relevant ideas which were not well organised. This also suggests that ESL practitioners should teach this component.

Students' responses to the question: "Give your definition of good quality writing in an English essay assignment" indicate that they have some idea of what quality writing entails. The findings on students' perceptions on what constitutes good quality academic writing indicated their understanding of good writing included few or no grammar mistakes, the structure (that is, the introduction, body and conclusion), as well as coherence. These responses resonate with Anokye's (2008) definition of good writing (see Chapter One) as well as tutor responses. For instance, John commented that writing is good "if your spelling is correct and not mixing points and originality". Similarly, David



mentioned that good writing has “no spelling errors and the sentence construction is good and that it is “any writing with good spelling”. In addition, Jane concurs that good writing “must have organized ideas, good grammar and less spelling errors”.

It is interesting to note that somehow students have an idea of what good writing entails and yet fail to apply that in their essay writing. As mentioned earlier, perhaps this suggests that tutors/lecturers are doing very little to improve the quality of student writing and should get more involved in showing students how to write essays at university level (Gambell 1991) or that writing was introduced late in their language learning curriculum (Lennerberg 1967 in Brown 1994).

Responses to the question: “What strategies do you use when revising your essay assignments” reveal that respondents thought the word “revising” meant preparing for exams. However, it was explained further in focus group interviews. Perhaps this is also an indication that they were not familiar with the writing process. Nevertheless, some answered the question accurately. Some participants also indicated that they indeed revised their work as part of the writing process. One participant indicated that: “I check for spelling errors, grammar and organization of ideas” (Lesiba) and the other one said: “I usually read through the neat work and try to change anything except the spelling and maybe add something here and there. I do not like changing anything because I will change the whole story line when beginning to make changes (Martha) while another participant explained that he “reads it loudly, edit it and give it to someone to edit”(Tshepo).

Though the respondents highlighted that they apply these revising strategies, this is not the case in real practice as the tutors and marked assignments indicated the opposite. So, very few good students might be employing these

strategies, particularly those who performed well with little or no grammar mistakes at all.

Once more, grammar emerges as an important aspect of writing by these ESL students. This corroborates with findings from other studies where ESL students desire to have a perfect grammar (Mojica 2010). It seems like students have been indoctrinated with the Study Skills model ideologies where good writing is associated with the mastery of grammar features. Though grammar is important, students need to be equipped with academic literacies where they will be able to transfer their skills to other disciplines (Lea and Street 1998).

The responses to the question: “How good are you at writing essay assignments in English?” varied. Some students felt their writing skills were between fair and average while some felt they were poor. Only one exceptional student claimed to have excellent writing skills. Some respondents perceived themselves to have good writing skills while others felt they had average writing skills. Judging by looking at students’ essays and their writing on the completed questionnaire, these ESL students had average writing skills. As a result, this indicates that the school system feeds the university with students who are underprepared to tackle academic writing tasks required at higher education.

In response to the question: “Do you think your English course you have registered can help you write well in other courses? Explain.” The respondents indicated that the English course (ENN103F) helps them to write well in other modules. In other words, students claimed they were able to write in discipline-specific courses due to the contribution made by the English module. For example, Samantha said: “Yes, especially in other subjects like philosophy where we write essays” and Mosima also said: “Yes, in Physics

we are often asked to write reports after experiments”. Similarly, Lesiba said: Yes, it is not in English where we write essays also on other modules and helps on the way we read and understand words”. Similarly, participants from the focus groups indicated that the ENN103F module gives them the basics for writing in other courses.

Participants generally recognise the value provided by the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) course, acknowledging that it equips them with the academic literacies they need for other courses (Philosophy, Physics) where they write essays. From the interviews data, when the researcher probed more on this question, some students felt this module really fulfils what it is intended to do as it teaches them the conventions of academic writing as well as the ability to cite sources. As a result, the findings of this study clearly resonate with the academic literacies theory (Lea and Street 2006; 1998) in that students view their reading and writing within disciplines improving because of the contribution made by the EAP module.

The following are responses to the questions: “Do you enjoy reading? Yes/No; how often do you read? Why?; do you think reading improves your English writing skills? Why?” As discussed in Chapters One and Two, the AL model does not only involve writing but also includes reading. Participants were probed on their reading habits and indicated their engagement in reading academic books as opposed to leisure reading. Some claimed that reading improves both vocabulary and spelling. However, their writing on the completed questionnaire showed a number of grammar mistakes, suggesting that they were not reaping the fruits of reading as they could not transfer that to their writing. For instance, Martha said: “Yes- it (reading) broadens your knowledge and vocabulary. The more things you know the more things you can talk about, the easier it is to write constructively”. On the other hand, Karabo stated: “Yes of course, because subconsciously you pick up the correct grammar and spelling”. All these responses indicate that participants

perceived reading to have a positive influence on their writing, thus resonating with research (Rose 2004; Munro 2003; Hart 1995).

Participants also indicated that reading improves their knowledge. Participants said this about the effects of reading: "...you get more ideas on different forms of writing" (Martin). Kobela said that she reads "novels, motivational books because I needed to stimulate my brain and expand my general knowledge on things but currently I try to read academic material that will help my studies and education". These responses indicate students' perceptions on the developmental nature of reading as it increases their knowledge.

Some participants indicated that they read for leisure purposes. As indicated by one of the respondents, the reading of Christian literature inspires and motivates him: "Motivational (lift up my spirit i.e. Joel Osteen), a book with quotes i.e. Shakespeare, the parable of a pipeline (life teachings), magazines, for entertainment and books for my studies" (Lebo). In addition, Stephanie said she reads "comic books. I love cartoons" while Andrew was interested in "Conspiracies (Dan Brown)/scientific documentary material, Thrillers... anything that will have me glued to the pages from page 1".

These responses indicate that some respondents read for non-academic purposes, which is the most enriching type of reading. However, it seems like magazines and newspapers are not very enriching reading materials as students may be skimming and scanning and not be involved in comprehensive and thoughtful reading.

Participants appear to spend more of their time on their academic books and less on leisure reading. Though they are reading, the problem might be with the quality of the materials (newspapers, magazines) they read. Students'

writing (marked assignments and questionnaire responses) is so full of grammar mistakes that one wonders if they do consult and use their dictionaries despite some indicating that they did use dictionaries. Considering the amount of time given for them to complete assignments, it is unforgivable that their assignments had such gross spelling errors. If they do not use this opportunity in essay assignments, it is inevitable that they will repeat these mistakes in exams where the stakes are high and they are not allowed to use dictionaries. As a result, ESL students need to acquire the basics of language before we can expect them to effectively incorporate academic literacies into their learning practices.

Responses to the question: “What do you find most difficult about writing an essay assignment?” varied. Some participants indicated that writing an essay is more challenging and frustrating when the topic is difficult to understand. This was illustrated by Salome when she said: “It is when I don’t understand the topic”, while Martha argued that “the most difficult part when beginning to write an essay is if the topic is something you are not familiar about and you are not interested in”. Though it is the responsibility of ESL practitioners to ensure that students understand writing instructions, this might also imply that students have a limited vocabulary.

Some students also indicated that they struggled with “gathering the right information”(Tebogo) and another student confessed that: “I mainly struggle to get good information about the topics and sometimes I get myself confused as to how to put the pieces together” (Lucky).

In addition, information gathering is one of the basic ways of introducing students to research. Considering the number of resources (the Internet, Google, and library) available, especially in this information era, citing reasons

like these is inexcusable. Thus, this study refutes the assertion by Jurecic (2006) who argues that teaching writing is difficult in this era.

On the other hand, some students perceived themselves to have problems with argumentation. For example, one student claimed he had problems with “finding or making argument concerning the topic” (Sammy) while another student commented that his problem was “where to start, when the topic is there do I start with yes, no I agree or disagree” (Lesiba). This finding supports Yong’s (2010) and Adams’ (2008) assertions that students have negative perceptions regarding argumentation and that it is an important skill for both undergraduate and postgraduate ESL students (Lloyd 2007). These responses indicate that ESL practitioners should incorporate this aspect in their pedagogy. Sometimes, students do not even know what an academic argument is and tend to misconstrue it to be an altercation between two people in a conversation.

All these themes represent factors with which ESL students struggle and which should be addressed. Some respondents indicated the incorporation of the writing process when writing essays. However, this does not mean they developed these skills from high school. It is possible that students learned about the writing process from the study guide of the EAP course. On the other hand, there might be some rare cases where students bring these skills with them from high school, particularly those from well resourced schools.

Some participants indicated that they struggled with writing in English and gave a number of reasons including: “I don’t have good skills from high schools (Thandi) ...there are still areas I still need to improve but am not completely lost” (Salome). In addition, one participant said “... really struggling, I don’t know how to put everything into perspective” (Jane). Another participant said “because I am not perfect in English” (Sammy) and

Mosima indicated “I’m not good at English at all so I almost find everything to be difficult but not most difficult”.

The issue of struggling with the English language just confirms that ESL students are at a disadvantage (Banda 2007). On the other hand, academic writing is not only a challenge to these ESL students, but to first language speakers as well (Spencer 2007). This is because academic writing is a discourse used in higher education and all students need to be apprenticed into it as they do not come with it from high school. Participants concede that they are struggling to write. This is very important and needs to be addressed. The researcher believes that this acknowledgement of weaknesses in writing will spur the students to work hard in learning how to improve their writing.

As indicated earlier, the respondents rated their writing skills to be fair to average, implying that they admit that their writing skills need further development. On the other hand, one cannot be oblivious of the fact that they are ESL learners and this perhaps indicates the need for mother-tongue instruction, a contentious issue in education circles today. However, for this to be achieved, it would take a tremendous effort to change negative attitudes about the use of African languages in education which still prevail in South Africa today. Nevertheless, the proposition by the Higher Education Minister to have university students enrol for at least one African language might be a move to change these stereotypes.

Responses to the question: “What do you think lecturers and tutors should do to help you improve your essay assignments?” revealed that modelling was deemed by participants as a strategy for the effective teaching of writing. Some participants indicated that “when we are in the classes, the tutor should do many examples with us and at the end homework so that we can mark when meeting again” (Given), “work more on academic writing” (Esther) “one

to one consultation with a marker or tutor (Tebogo) “Yes, but for me to be more adequate in knowing English; I also need more academic English support” (Karabo). One participant contended “give us some essay to write during our tutorial classes and correct us where we made mistake and stop saying they won’t spoon-feed us”. This student is apparently annoyed by what the tutor said about not spoon-feeding them. It must be noted that students are desperate for all the support they can get from tutorials. If they are told they will not be supported as expected, they become despondent. Furthermore, this finding concurs with Zamel (1989), who argues that students need to be given more writing tasks for them to become better writers.

The researcher supports these responses because most of the time lecturers/tutors are not clear enough on what they expect from student writing. Therefore, providing models and showing students how to write academic essays can be very useful to them. In most cases, lecturers or tutors will say that an essay should have an introduction, body and conclusion without explicitly showing the students how to approach these components. Though the study guide for ENN103F teaches about the introduction, body and conclusion, they are, however, not taught explicitly (Unisa 2002). During the focus group interviews students also felt they needed more writing activities that are marked. In the EAP course, students write only one essay assignment and they strongly feel it is not enough.

Some students felt they needed more writing tasks to improve their writing skills. For instance, Tom said: “I think writing more and spelling checks”, while Sarah saw the need to “attend more classes, given more assignments” and Lethabo also suggested “more written exercises and oral practices in study groups/tutorials”. These comments are an indication that students are not given enough writing tasks to harness their writing skills (Wingate 2006; Cohen and Riel 1989). Perhaps this confirms that most writing in educational



circles is directed to the teacher for evaluation purposes. Some researchers found that writing for a different audience improves student writing (Jurecic 2006). Until the monopoly of writing to the teacher for evaluation purposes is minimised, students are likely to experience writing difficulties.

The issue of grammar is a predominant theme that emerged from the data and marked assignment data as well as student writing and that could be clearly seen on students' filled questionnaires. Fregreau (1999) contended that tutors' obsession with grammar hurts the students. Similarly, students are also obsessed with their grammar mistakes and it seems like perfect grammar is an unattainable skill for them.

Participants felt they needed more writing support from tutors and lecturers. A number of themes emerged from this question, namely, modelling, grammar, structuring of an essay, more writing exercises and clarity on assignments. Some felt they needed any help they could get while another student demanded challenging topics (Krause 2001; Prain and Hand 1997; Nunan 1990). For example, Lesiba said: "I would like to have more detailed topics to write about. We do not like to write about politics please. Please give us something challenging, you'll get challenging essay assignments to mark".

This finding supports above researchers' assertions that students should be involved in determining the curriculum and the content to be taught, particularly in ESL contexts. However, some students' responses below refute assertions of the above researchers as they were not specific about their needs as they said they would appreciate all the help they could get, thus suggesting they do not know what they need. They simply indicated that they would appreciate any help from their lecturers and tutors. One participant said that "any help is welcomed as long as it can help me to have a full understanding about writing an essay" (Samantha). Another one commented

that “every type of help that she/he can offer I am here to learn I won’t refuse to be helped because I want to know, learn, and be better in future” (Derrick).

Some participants were keen to have lecturers and tutors model essays to them so that they could follow the same structure. One participant wanted “guidelines on how to write the essay. By showing me how to use words in the academic tasks, how to structure the academic essay” (Mike). Similarly, Tom suggested that “they (lecturers) should show us how to, give us activities to do on our own, so that we can improve, and be best we can in future. They should make me understand in full how I should approach the essay and how my introduction should look like and in which format should the essay be.” Another participant pointed that “the guidelines on how to write the essay should be simplified so as to understand better since many are the times I believe I have done as per the markers expectation but when the results get back to me there are so many mistakes” (Sarah). These expressions strongly indicate students’ desire for more writing support in the form of modelling. This finding resonates with some of the modelling propositions by other researchers (e.g. Granville & Dison 2009; Kalikhoka *et al.* 2009; Adam 2008; Hirst *et al.* 2004).

On the other hand, some participants indicated that they face a number of challenges when writing essays. For example, one respondent stated that: “In exams-spur of the moment/pressured writing I find extremely hard- here I suggest three topics, even more, be given to students before the exams. They can mull over them, do a bit of research in preparation for the exams, thereby giving them constructive comments with which to work with for the “meat” of the essay. How they put all these together to form their arguments is what is being marked” (Blessing). In addition, another respondent conceded that: “Sometimes I get carried away in writing and wanting to prove my point that I tend to miss the whole point of the topic and noticing it afterwards when it come back” (Tshepo).

Blessing suggests that tutors should give topics which students can practice with before they write exams. However, the practice might put the validity and integrity of the assessments into question. He actually means that students should be given opportunities to employ the writing process so that they can develop into better writing (Murray and Johansson 1990; Anderson 1985). On the other hand, Tshepo is able to identify his weaknesses when writing the essay and this awareness is vital in his development as a writer.

### **2.3 Academic writing and feedback**

Responses to the question: “How do you feel about feedback you receive in your essay assignments?” showed that some participants value feedback because it helps them avoid repeating the mistakes in future writing tasks. For instance, Jim indicated that: “I feel good because I will know the way forward after that” and Mary noted that: “They help improve your mistakes”. Similarly, Sarah commented that: “During tutorials a tutor must ask students to write an essay and mark them in class to correct and show us our mistakes before we submit our essays to the lecturer”.

While writing feedback, one tutor made the following comments:

*PLEASE NOTE THAT TASKS 2&3 WAS SUPPOSED TO BE SUBMITTED AS TWO SEPARATE TASKS. PLEASE ENSURE THAT YOU FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS CAREFULLY IN FUTURE. WHILST YOU HAVE RAISED SOME VALID AND INTERESTING VIEWS YOU HAVE NOT MANAGED TO ORGANISE YOUR ARGUMENT IN A LOGICAL AND COHESIVE MANNER. YOU ALSO NEED TO PAY PARTICULAR ATTENTION TO YOUR WORD*

*ORDER AND SENTENCE STRUCTURE. MAKE USE OF A DICTIONARY TO VERIFY YOUR SPELLING AND VOCABULARY.*

In this assignment, the marker circled all language errors, for example, spelling and vocabulary. Language errors were mostly highlighted. The student was advised to define different types of euthanasia. Though this marker pointed out issues that the student needed to work on, the use of capital letters does not set a good example to students as they may adopt this style of writing in their future writing tasks. The subject-verb agreement in the first sentence is also erratic. Accordingly, the marker advises the student to use a dictionary to fix spelling errors and for improving vocabulary. This could attest to the fact that students delay writing assignments to the last minute to the extent that they submit poor quality of work (Ellis *et al.* 2005; Gambell 1991).

However, some students were not happy with their feedback due to the effort they put in the task, particularly when they did research and yet received a lower grade. Some put it like this: "I am so pleased but at some extent I feel that I deserved more than the mark I got" (Calvin). Debora indicated that: "Some of the feedback are not good when you give us". Samantha said she is "not happy because they (tutors) are not satisfied even though I spend a lot of time researching and finding information on the topic", while David said: "To be honest there was not much feedback because I got a high mark".

Responses to the question: "How useful do you find markers' comments or feedback in improving your essay assignments?" were not pleasant to students. Participants found that they did not receive good feedback regarding their writing from their tutors. One student lamented that "they are not as clear as to what I was supposed to write or where I was wrong (Mosima) while

another one said that “this time around not useful because of illegible hand writing”.

These comments indicate poor use of feedback and that participants did not benefit at all from the comments and resonates with Krause’s (2001) findings. As a result, tutors missed a good opportunity to communicate with students and this carelessness in giving feedback should be discouraged at all times.

However, some found that the feedback was “very useful because they pin point all the mistakes, so I get a clear understanding of what I should do next time on my essay assignments” (Lerato). Furthermore, another one said: “I like knowing what the lecturer/tutor thought about my essay and what they found exciting and not so exciting, the feedback is of great importance, I learn a lot from them” (Tlou).

Seemingly, some markers gave useful comments while others did not give any helpful comments. The fact that some students indicated that feedback was useful refutes assertions that students do not value feedback, as suggested by Higgins *et al.* (2001). Students yearn for teaching from ESL practitioners through quality feedback and if we are not doing that, we are cheating and failing them.

Feedback is very important, more especially in the ODL context, as it is one of the few interactions that tutors or markers have with students. Therefore, the quality of feedback that students receive from ESL practitioners cannot be underestimated. Interestingly, an analysis of marked assignments data also revealed that students who got high marks did not receive any feedback comments except “excellent”. Some students need to know how they got that mark and why; so that they can continue in a similar vein in their future writing

tasks (Weaver 2006). Some respondents thought that the feedback they received was very useful. These students were keen to know where they went wrong in their essays. One student complained of illegible handwriting and could not benefit from the comments.

Responses to the question: “What do you think your lecturers/tutors should focus on when marking your essay assignments?” revealed that the students felt error correction is important when marking. Some felt that lecturers/markers should focus on spelling. However, some students felt that grammar should not be considered when marking; suggesting therefore that only content is relevant.

Unsurprisingly, some students expect marking to focus on error correction. For instance, Tom commented that tutors should focus “on understanding of how I wrote on that paper and focus on correcting my mistakes” while David said that “they assist you a lot you turn not to repeat what was detected as wrong”. Similarly, Nancy said that “it helps to identify the mistake I made and do some corrections according to markers’ comments”.

Two students indicated that markers should focus more on content than on language, a very rare demand from ESL students. This comment resonates with a number of researchers advocating the move away from concentrating more on grammar than on content (Curry 2006; Fregeau 1999; Saito 1994; Harris 1977). One participant said that marking should focus on “the points/idea and not much of the framework” (grammar/language) (Jim) while another one said that marking should focus on “other things except spelling” (Karabo).

One student requested empathy from the markers by stating that “when marking our assignments, please do not look down on us. Place yourself in our position and try to think like we do. A student’s perception on a certain topic will not always be the same as those of the lecturer’s” (Thandi).

Students clearly indicate that grammar, spelling in particular, is a great challenge to them (Lloyd 2007). They would like to have all their mistakes highlighted so that they can correct them (Radecki and Swales 1988). Notably, this shows that they need comprehensive feedback that addresses all their weaknesses and strengths. Some also feel they also need to be commended when they do well. In other words, they need markers to also give positive comments instead of being negative all the time. Therefore, they need motivation in this regard.

These responses indicate that students would like to learn from their mistakes where their writing weaknesses are brought to the surface by markers so that they do not repeat the same errors. This implies that markers/tutors need to teach through giving feedback. This is crucial in ODL where students get only one of the rare opportunities of having communication from the teaching team regarding their writing.

On the whole, data from participants indicate that these ESL students struggle with academic writing. The problems that emerged include grammatical errors (spelling, punctuation, tenses etc.), structure (introduction, body and conclusion), argumentation skills, coherence, and library skills. They struggle with basic writing skills and are likely to have problems with academic writing as a result of this. On the other hand, there are those who are well equipped with academic writing skills, but they are very few.

### **3. Academic writing: Tutors' understandings and perceptions**

It is important to also examine tutors' expectations and understandings as they contribute to the way ESL students are taught. As already indicated in Chapter Two, some tutors tend to perceive ESL students negatively (Wright 2004; Zamel 1995; Gambell 1991).

#### **3.1 Student writing at school level**

Responses to the question: "What is your general opinion of first year students' academic writing competencies?" were fascinating. Some tutors indicated that the problem of academic writing emanates from poor schooling, which subsequently led to low literacy standards. For example, one participant argued that "high school education English standard is low and cannot prepare learners for university" (Tutor 1). Similarly, another participant said: "They have low literacy skills, lack confidence and are at the level of grade 7 or 8" (Tutor 2). This response is similar to the one reported by Moore (1998) and this indicates that there has been little change since this statement was raised 13 years ago. In addition, another tutor asserted that "language proficiency-high school competencies are very low, spelling and punctuation errors are common" (Tutor 8). This finding confirms observations by other researchers who made remarks or arguments on low literacy standards amongst university students (Moutlana 2007; Lea and Street 2006; Nightingale 1988). It is concerning that one tutor mentioned that the literacy levels of some of the students are comparable to those of high school, especially Grades 7 or 8 (Tutor 7).

Responses to the questions: "Based on your experience, what specific difficulties do students experience when writing essays? a. What types of



writing problems do you see as the most common in students' writing? b. What type of writing problems do you perceive as the most serious? c. What kinds of strengths and/or weaknesses do you see in your students' writing?" were enlightening. Some tutors indicated that ESL students need intensive language support in order to cope with academic writing demands in higher education (van Schalkwyk *et al.* 2009). For example, one tutor contended that "more work in terms of teaching writing needs to be done. Their writing skills are bad. Language usage is a concern" (Tutor 4). Another tutor declared that "it (their writing) needs serious interventions" (Tutor 6). Notably, another tutor said: "Mixed- but generally not competent enough to express themselves fully" (Tutor 8). Due to their under-preparedness for academic writing tasks at university, it is inevitable that students will need further remedial support. However, this finding and yearning from both students and tutors about provision of remedial support is heavily criticised and refuted by research (Bharuthram and McKenna 2006; Hirst *et al.* 2004; Hyland 2002; Boughey 2000). This is the common critique of the Study Skills model: that it teaches decontextualised language skills, particularly by proponents of the AL model.

The issue of grammar frequently comes to the surface in a number of questions asked to both students and tutors. One tutor explained that students have the "... inability to use the correct syntax, vocabulary and register (Tutor 6) while another one commented that the students were "not able to use tense, punctuation, agreement-concord" (Tutor 8).

Responses to the question: "What do you think should be done to improve students' English writing skills?" revealed the need for the teaching of reading and writing to be part of early childhood development. One tutor commented that "learners should be taught this at an early age. Be taught how to read and write at an early age" (Tutor 3). On the other hand, another tutor indicated that teachers needed to "provide guidelines as far as possible: by giving alternative answers, approaches or different responses" (Tutor 5).

This finding indicates that the foundations of language learning should begin in early childhood development and that it will be difficult to acquire language basics later in life which can apparently happen as a result of the CPH (Lennerburg 1967 in Brown 1994).

Responses to the question: “In your opinion, what could be missing from students’ writing that was not addressed by the schooling system?” corroborated with findings from the students’ data. Tutors also noticed that there are gaps that exist between education levels where there is no proper foundation in earlier schooling levels which builds up to further levels. One tutor commented that “it would be difficult to address errors which have not been addressed at school. A great amount of “tidying” up is needed. Much work gives shoddy, careless impression which is not appropriate for academic writing” (Tutor 8). In addition, one tutor revealed that “at primary school, learners do not do much, and this leads to a big gap between secondary and primary. Teachers at secondary do what was supposed to have been done at primary” (Tutor 3).

Furthermore, one tutor eloquently argued that “it may sound old-fashioned-but academic writing needs to be succinct, correct, perfectly expressed. I think the fault lies with the schooling system where grammatical rules are not taught or certainly not impressed upon learners. Shoddy, badly expressed work is seen as being acceptable” (Tutor 8).

On the whole, these responses indicate that there will never be good writing without mastering the basic aspects of grammar. They also clearly indicate that explicit grammar teaching is the foundation towards better writing skills and that this should begin earlier, particularly during early childhood

development through to high school (Saddler *et al.* 2009; Munro 2003). Furthermore, these comments indicate a lack of teaching at primary schools which implies that when learners are at high school, teachers will still be catching up on the foundation skills learners should have acquired at primary school. This backlog continues until students come to higher education and this clearly indicates that the schooling system fails South African students and also creates a huge burden on higher education.

### **3.2 Academic writing at first year level**

As already shown in the findings from ESL students who participated in this study, tutors also confirmed that these participants cannot express themselves well in English, which was also the medium of instruction in their schooling days. For instance, two tutors reported that “they (students) are not able to express themselves in English” (Tutor 1 and Tutor 5). In addition, another tutor indicated that the students struggle to “communicate their thoughts in English as a language” (Tutor 2). These responses show that English proficiency is a great challenge to these students. Writing is an important communication skill required at tertiary education (Brandt 2009; Lillis 2003). Therefore, it will be difficult for ESL students to succeed at university without the necessary language skills. As already indicated in Chapters One and Two, this finding confirms other ESL research which reports that ESL students are at a disadvantage because they study in a language which is not their mother-tongue (Moutlana 2007; Banda 2007).

Sentences and paragraphs are pivotal elements of writing and students should master constructing them if they are to develop into better writers. Tutors observed that students struggle to “address basics: sentence construction (grammar, paragraph construction)” (Tutor 7) and demonstrate “failure to write in a coherent manner as well as unfamiliarity with academic

writing conventions” (Tutor 4). Furthermore, one tutor said that “they seem to lack logic and do not plan well” (Tutor 6). This finding resonates with Lloyd’s (2007) study when he reported that sentences and paragraphs are some of the language components with which students struggle.

Again, just like students indicated that they had difficulties in collecting information; tutors also confirm the same problem. One tutor said that students struggle with “information collection, arranging the fact orderly...” and the “inability to extract what information is required” (Tutor 3 and Tutor 6). These comments evidently indicate that library skills and manipulation of information are very important skills ESL students should acquire so that they can become effective writers.

In summary, these findings clearly mirror the type of ESL students we have today. They desperately need some serious interventions for them to become competent users of the English language. They still need to learn the basic components of language before they can further learn academic writing. Furthermore, they need research writing skills for them to be able to cope with the academic literacies required of them at university level. However, as indicated in Chapters One and Two, academic institutions do not show sufficient commitment and support for the teaching of academic writing as the staff responsible for conducting these interventions is mostly appointed on a part-time basis (Lillis 2001).

### **3.3 Academic writing and feedback**

The findings show that tutors agreed that good writing includes the following: structure (introduction, body and conclusion), coherent paragraphs, and good language skills.

Responses to the question: “What is your definition of good quality academic writing?” were also similar to students’ data. Both tutors and students agreed on the qualities of good writing. For example, one tutor indicated that “good quality writing can be defined as a writing that has an introduction, message and conclusion”. Though structure has been indicated as important by both students and tutors participating in this study, structure is mostly taught abstractly without showing students how to actually write when incorporating this structure.

Furthermore, tutors indicated that good writing “has coherent paragraphs” (Tutor 6), “arranging points orderly” (Tutor 2) as well as the “ability to put ideas in a logical order, paraphrasing, summarising but they are still a problem” (Tutor 8). In addition, tutors highlighted the importance of having good English language skills. For instance, tutors stated that a student who writes well “uses appropriate language” (Tutor 1), and communicates “thoughts through good language” (Tutor 2). Another tutor argued that “good writing entails good usage of syntax, rich vocabulary and, formal, succinct tone and style are important for work to be really impressive” (Tutor 8).

Generally, responses indicate that good writing involves good structure, coherence and good command of the English language. Findings from students are also consistent with perceptions from tutors as well as research (Anokye 2008).

Responses to the question: “What do you think should be done to improve students’ English writing skills?” were also similar to the student data. Like students, tutors acknowledge the value of reading and more writing activities in enhancing student writing. Some tutors said that ESL students can improve their writing through “reading, more reading magazines, newspaper and other materials” (Tutor 2) and also urged tutors to “give them a lot of reading ...

activities” (Tutor 3). Interestingly, one tutor stated that “students need to read, a huge problem is unfamiliarity with the written word-misspelling of e.g. sit/seat; live/leave” (Tutor 8). This finding is also consistent with comments from one student who indicated that reading can improve writing skills, and also resonates with research on reading (Rose 2004).

Responses to the question: “What do you think constitutes effective teaching and learning of academic writing?” revealed that tutors feel ESL students “need to be exposed to more writing, even if the work is not marred. The more they write, the more they will improve” (Tutor 4). Moreover, students need “more writing activities” (Tutor 6). Another tutor suggested that students should attend “workshops on academic literacy, critical thinking skills, conversation, reason and an opportunity to practice language writing” (Tutor 5). One tutor indicated that students can improve their writing through “learning by practice and a lot of exposure to such work. Sentence construction, paragraph construction, writing practice, shorter pieces/ (manageable) feedback, writing tasks in all school subjects (writing across curriculum) I really think writing and reading tasks should be scaffolded, manageable, clear focus & criteria with relevant feedback” (Tutor 7).

This finding is also confirmed by student participants where they felt that they need to be given more writing activities to develop their academic writing skills. This is a legitimate concern because, apart from self-assessment activities in the study guide for this module, there are indeed very few writing activities required for formative assessment. If we really need to develop our students from struggling to proficient writers, more writing activities need to be embedded into the curriculum. This finding resonates with Wingate’s (2006) and Cohen and Riel’s (1989) observations about few writing activities at school level and in this case, the tendency continues into higher education.

Responses to the question: “In marking an assignment, how extensively do you comment on student writing?” varied. Tutors indicated that they make feedback as comprehensive as possible in order to make the students aware of what they did right and where they need to improve. For example, one tutor said: “For those who perform badly, I comment on every item e.g. content, organisation, language, show them what and where to improve” (Tutor 2) while another tutor stated: “I indicate where they have gone wrong and try to encourage them to correct their mistakes” (Tutor 4). Furthermore, another tutor provides “guidelines as far as possible: - by giving alternative answers, approaches or different responses, sometimes not possible” (Tutor 4). One tutor said that she “starts with positive things like “I enjoyed reading your essay, your essay/language/organisation is good. Then I indicate the areas which he/she needs to improve” (Tutor 7).

This finding indicates a motivational role which tutors need to adopt when responding to students’ work before pointing out areas where students need to improve (Weaver 2006). However, some responses from marked assignments indicate that when students are doing well in an assignment, tutors tend not to give elaborate comments.

Responses to the question: “How do you evaluate an essay assignment that has good content and poor grammar and vice versa?” also varied. One tutor said: “I give the student what he deserves, but indicate to him/her where he went wrong with the hope that she would rectify and also give an average mark for the content and less mark for grammar obviously when the grammar is irrelevant it mostly distorts the content” (Tutor 3). In contrast, another one said: “I believe that the content should weigh as much as language because this is academic writing. Language can sometimes hamper content, but the language is a means to content delivery” (Tutor 7). Furthermore, one tutor said: “I look at the facts, the right answer more than the grammar. Although grammar is also important, correct response counts more” (Tutor 4).

This finding indicates that it is difficult to evaluate content that is clouded by grammar mistakes. It can be deduced from these responses that both language and content are important aspects of writing and should therefore be treated equally.

Disappointingly, one tutors' comment was just a phrase which stated: "Mind your spelling". Some language errors were circled whereas some were ignored. Good points were appreciated and talkback was used (Lillis 2001). The comments were not explicit enough to show the student in detail what she did right or wrong in the essay and how the student could improve future submissions. The comment was not sufficient as it only commented on grammar (spelling) and not on the content. This confirms Harris' (1977) and Fregreau's (1999) observations that teachers tend to focus more on grammar and less on content when marking essay assignments.

The responses above indicate that more attention should no longer be on surface grammar features but on content. This suggests that the focus should be on deeper writing issues. However, the finding is contrary to Harris' (1977) observation where teachers focused more on grammar when marking. Therefore, the present study stresses the importance of addressing both content and grammatical aspects.

Another tutor demonstrated poor quality of marking when he/she did not give sufficient feedback. The comment reads "good essay" (Script 3). There was no evidence that the marker had read the essay. Obvious grammar errors were not highlighted. Again, comments were not sufficient and a student who might have failed this assignment instead passed with flying colours. This is an example of poor marking and this student will probably not ever come to



learn that academic writing is not story-telling, and is likely to repeat the same writing style in other courses as it was earlier rewarded. However, another marker tried to give more details in his/her comments, as follows “I enjoyed reading your work-has good points, language not bad but should have been edited before submission, be more relevant”. The marker’s comments motivated the student and also highlighted areas that needed some improvement. The marking was elaborate and did not only focus on grammar errors.

In another script, the tutor did not bother to give any comment. The marker used the marking code to show the student language errors and where points were not clear for more explanation. This is poor marking and this finding corroborates Lea and Street’s (1998) argument that tutors fail to identify the components of writing provided by students. This student could have just passed but failed despite providing the work in a coherent manner and structure. Perhaps this confirms Harris’ (1977) observation that tutors tend to give a lower mark to a student whose work has grammar errors despite having good content. As Fregeau (1999) argues, obsession with grammar errors hurts our students.

Another tutor just gave a one word comment (excellent) regarding the essay. Though the student had done well in the assignment, a comment like this is not sufficient to the student. The marker just ticked the paragraphs to indicate they were fine. There were no written comments. Again, well-written essays have fewer comments. As already indicated in the interviews comments on feedback, students would like to know what they did right or wrong. Despite excellent work by the student, the marking is of poor quality.

The most common problems tutors commented on were grammar (spelling), coherence, organisation or structure and citing sources. These problems were

confirmed by responses from the student questionnaires and marked assignments. Tutors put more emphasis on grammar when marking, whereas content was less commented on. Therefore, tutors need to address all aspects of academic writing when commenting on students' work, as the marking code for ENN103F specifies. The approach used by markers is largely the Study Skills oriented one where more emphasis is put on grammar. Though grammar is an important element of writing, tutors need to shift from the Study Skills approach to the AL model where all the components of writing are looked at.

#### **4. Students' and Tutors' perceptions**

##### **4.1 Similarities: Students' and Tutors' Perceptions**

The findings revealed a number of similarities between tutors' and students' perceptions of student academic writing. Amongst others, these include: structure, coherence, grammar, gathering information and the importance of quality feedback.

The findings of this study show that both students and tutors have similar ideas about what academic writing should entail. The findings from both groups of participants indicate that components of academic writing like structure, coherence, argumentation and grammar are areas of great challenge to ESL students. Both tutors and students agree that feedback is an important part of teaching academic writing in ESL contexts. In addition, both students and tutors indicated problems with gaps that exist between high school and university; English proficiency; difficulties in collecting information; qualities of good writing ; the need for more writing activities and intensive language support.

## **4.2 Differences: Students and Tutors**

The findings revealed a number of differences between tutors' and students' perceptions of student academic writing, including: under-preparedness, effective feedback, gaps in the teaching of writing in schools, low literacy levels and good writing.

On the issue of under-preparedness, tutors clearly indicated that these ESL students were not ready to cope with the writing demands required in higher education even though some students indicated they were ready.

There were some conflicting responses where tutors indicated that there were gaps in the teaching of writing in schools while students reported that they did a number of writing activities at school including essays, comprehension texts, etc. In addition, one tutor somewhat exaggeratedly stated that some of the students' literacy level were equivalent to Grade 6 or 7 while the students felt that they had average writing or literacy levels.

While tutors indicated that they provided effective feedback to student writing, the essays they had marked indicated that some of them did not apply what they were claiming in their responses to the questionnaire. In contrast, though they indicated that they valued feedback, students complained of receiving shoddy feedback that was not helpful.

While both students and tutors concurred that good writing entails a good command of the English language, structure and coherence, they differed in terms of implementation. For example, some tutors failed to recognise good

writing from some of the marked assignment essays and some students were not able to demonstrate their writing competently, though they did have an idea of how good writing should be structured.

In summary, both students and tutors demonstrate some under-preparedness. They have different views about student literacy levels and they also differ in the application of good writing and provision of effective feedback. It seems that both students and tutors theorise well about academic writing and what it entails. However, they are not able to apply their claims in real practice (Lea and Street 1998).

## **5. Effective academic writing: Suggested guidelines**

From the findings, a number of factors that were perceived to constitute good academic writing were identified. These include synergy in all school levels, reading for leisure, encouraging students to use journals, more writing practice, explicit grammar teaching, the writing process, modelling, more student-lecturer interaction and providing effective feedback. Figure 4.1 below shows guidelines coined by the researcher for teaching academic writing effectively. They are based on literature on academic writing as well as the responses received from participants in this study.

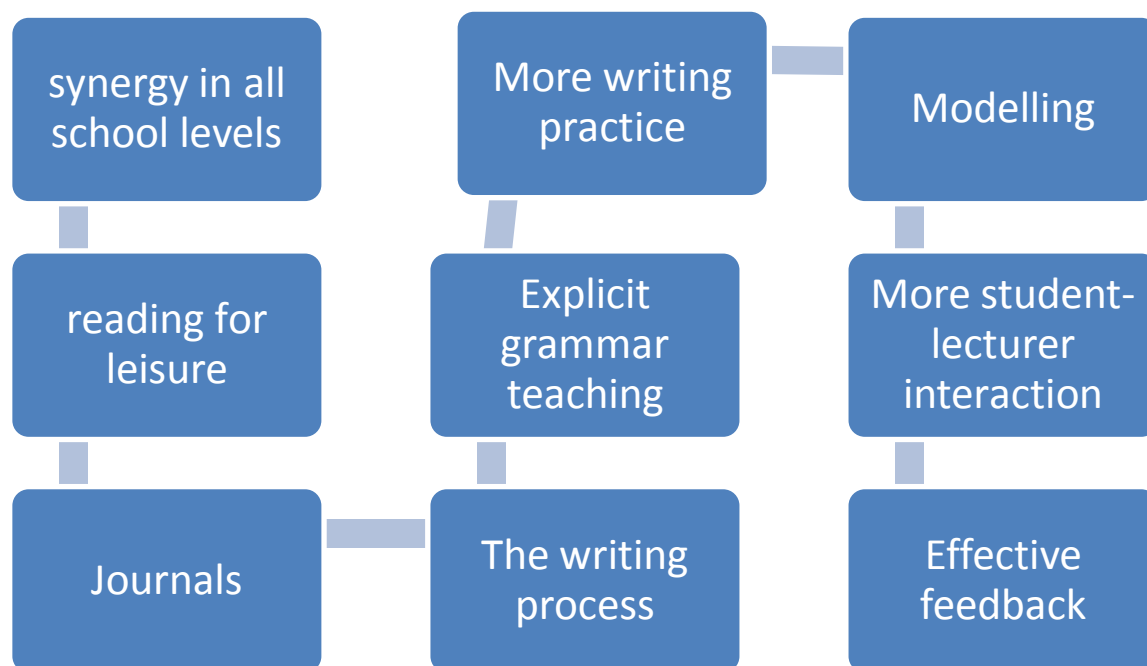


Figure 4.1 Guidelines for teaching academic writing effectively

### **Synergistic relationships at all schooling levels**

The present study is in agreement with Saddler *et al.* (2010) that the teaching of writing should begin at early childhood, primary and high school for students to cope with writing at university level. Academic literacies should be intensified in schools where reading and writing should occupy a central place (Munro 2003). According to Munro, there should be “systematic and consistent teaching procedures in all subject areas”. Reading should also be taught and introduced at an earlier age (Rose 2004). In a classical example, Lea and Street (2006) initiated the academic literacy development project as an intervention strategy aimed at high school students who were likely to enrol for university studies in order to prepare them for university academic literacy practices.

## **Leisure reading (Reading for non-academic purposes)**

The AL model involves writing as well as reading. A culture of reading should be inculcated amongst school-going youth because reading feeds into writing. Parents, teachers, libraries and the education ministry are important stakeholders who have a huge responsibility to encourage children to read from a young age. As already discussed in Chapter Two, there should be parent-child reading before a child goes to school and good reading materials should be provided for children at school (Mojica 2010; Jubhari 2009; Rose 2004). As there is insufficient time for teaching academic literacies in the classroom context, further opportunities should be available even outside schools (Rinnert & Koboyashi 2002). Technological devices like iPods can be used to load books for the youth to read as these gadgets are attractive to young people who have a number of technological attractions competing for their time. For reading to survive the technological onslaught, communities need to use technology to advance it.

## **Journals**

Journals are also important teaching tools used by ESL practitioners (Barkhuizen 1998; Zamel 1989; Blanton 1987). Through the use of journals, learners are able to write without being anxious that their work will be marked by the teacher. Research indicates that writing for different audiences improves academic writing (Cohen & Riel 1989).

## **More lecturer-student interaction**

Guided by the findings, where possible, lecturers should have more interaction with students through a number of avenues including multimedia technologies like satellite broadcasting, video conferencing, computer-mediated communication (e.g. e-mail, *myUnisa* and social networking sites) and discussion classes, among other modes. These facilities are available and should be fully exploited by the academic staff in tertiary institutions.

## **Explicit grammar teaching**

Grammar is an important foundational element of academic writing and it should be taught as early as possible so that it is grounded in student writing. If students do not have a good grasp of it from their schooling days, there is little that universities can do to correct that. Though several researchers seem to be arguing against its teaching (Elton 2010; Mojica 2010; Hawkins 2005; Lea and Street 1998), grammar still remains an integral part of writing in educational circles, particularly in ESL. This study argues that teachers should be looking for the best ways in which grammar can be taught instead of trying to make it a peripheral activity in ESL pedagogy.

## **The writing process**

The writing process is apparently taught for the first time in tertiary education. It should also filter down to primary and secondary schools. The problem of writing deficiencies will not be solved until the principles of writing are taught early to our students. As discussed in Chapter Two, Lloyd (2007:50)

presented the PROCESS (Planning, Referencing, Organisation, Composition, Engineering, Spelling and Structure) framework in academic writing which students may adopt.

This approach is also supported by Granville and Dison (2009:56) who advocate writing as a process whereby students have multiple drafts of their work and also show the importance of giving feedback to students so that they learn in the process of writing their essays. However, Ellis *et al.* (2005:67) found that their students did not plan for the writing process which subsequently led to leaving writing to the last minute. The findings from student writing (marked assignments) suggest that some participants submitted their first draft as the final draft without adhering to the writing process even though they were instructed to adopt the strategy (Macbeth 2006).

### **More writing practice**

More writing tasks should be given to students so that they can harness the art of writing. The old popular English adage states that 'practice makes perfect'. All best artists or sport personalities go through rigorous practice to perfect their arts or performances and yet students are expected to display dexterous writing skills without being provided with sufficient opportunities to do so. A few writing tasks here and there are not going to produce the best writers out of our students. This should be done at all levels of schooling, not only at higher education. As Lloyd (2007:54) argues, presenting a balanced argument through critical analysis or evaluation in an assignment requires skill and practice and is an essential component of academic writing.



Some researchers critiqued the practice of always directing writing for teacher evaluation and found that writing to different audiences improves student writing (Thaiss and Zawacki 2006; Rose 2004; Cohen and Riel 1989). As a result, there is a need to introduce writing activities that are not part of formative or summative assessment where students will practise to become better writers. In other words, more self or peer assessment writing tasks need to be incorporated into the ESL curriculum.

## **Modelling**

Teachers should teach through modelling instead of just teaching abstract concepts that an essay should have an introduction, body and conclusion. They should demonstrate to the students how to achieve that goal (Granville and Dison 2009; Kalikhoka *et al.* 2009; Adams 2008; Hirst *et al.* 2004).

## **Effective detailed feedback**

Feedback is an important teaching tool which should be used effectively in order to address issues with which students grapple. It is a beaming light in the path of learning and if it is dim or dysfunctional, students will continue to walk in the darkness of illiteracy. The provision of marking services should provide value for money for students who paid precious tuition fees to obtain their education. As already indicated in Chapter Two, Spencer (2007:308) suggests that teachers should be trained to respond effectively to student writing; that there should be adequate exchange of information between writers (students) and readers (lecturers/tutors), and that teachers should also be writers and teach writing as a process. In addition, Ferris (2008:980) indicates that some of the purposes of responding to student writing are to

assist students with future writing assignments and to assist students in improving their writing skills.

A talkback approach is suggested as a better way of communicating with students regarding their writing. Lillis (2006: 41) suggests a student-centred approach involving a shift from feedback to talkback in responding to student writing. . She critiques feedback as concentrating on student written texts as a product and a tendency towards closed commentary with evaluative language (good, weak). Lillis (2001:169) argues that talkback provides student writers with the opportunity to respond to, and to question, tutor comments as well as articulate their criticism of dominant conventions. She contends that talkback focuses on “the students’ texts as a process, an acknowledgement of the partial nature of any text, an attempt to open up space where the student writer can say what she likes and does not like about what she is expected to make meaning within” (Lillis (2006:42). In contrast, other researchers suggest feeding forward instead of feedback (Higgins *et al.* 2001). In other words, feedback should help students to produce better writing in future writing assignments.

Feedback will be irrelevant and meaningless if it is written in a language students do not understand. Li (2007:44) argues that in the second language context, teachers’ specific, idea-based and meaning-level comments can lead to substantial student revisions that improve the quality of writing. In addition, Cabral and Tavares (2002:2) suggest that lecturers should adopt strategies for effective feedback. Granville and Dison (2009:54) argue that feedback should be specific and written in a simple language that students will understand. They also value one-to-one consultations as one of the effective ways of teaching and giving feedback to students which shifts the responsibility from the teacher to the student to change his/her work (Granville and Dison 2009:54).

More researchers suggest effective ways of giving feedback to students for the development of academic literacies, peer feedback (e.g. Saltmarsh and Saltmarsh 2008) such as giving dialogical and ongoing feedback (talkback) (Higgins 2001). On the one hand, students struggle to understand tutor feedback whereas, on the other hand, tutors misinterpret and misread students' work as the very things they were looking for are sometimes provided but failed to recognise those aspects of writing (structure and argument) (McCune 2004; Lea and Street 1998).

To sum up, the findings indicate inconsistencies regarding the provision of feedback by tutors. These results are similar to those of Lea and Street (1998:373) who report that academic staff have their own fairly well-defined views regarding what constitutes a good piece of writing, which includes syntax, punctuation and layout as well as structure, argument and clarity (ibid). They also found that it was difficult for academic staff to explicitly explain a well-developed argument (ibid). This tallies with what is indicated in the findings in this chapter regarding instances where students who would probably have failed, passed with distinction, while those who deserved more got lower marks. The study also reported on the case of students who felt they deserved more and could not impress the marker despite all the hard work they put into their work. Tutors cannot afford to be sloppy in giving feedback because, in the ODL context, it is one way of teaching students.

## **6. Conclusion**

This chapter presented the findings from data collected through a triangulation of three data collection methods (questionnaire, interviews, marked assignments). Though the results are neither surprising nor earth-shattering,

they reflect the current state of ESL student writing, particularly after the implementation of outcomes-based education in South Africa. The basics of writing including grammar (spelling), proficiency, coherence, gathering information, structure and presenting an argument emerged to be problematic areas to student participants from all data collection instruments. In addition, other themes like error correction, more writing activities and more lecturer/tutor interaction also strongly emerged from the responses. The findings were not discussed but only explained (Bitchener 2010). A discussion of the findings is done in Chapter Five.

### SYNTHESIS, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 1. Introduction

This chapter provides an overview of the study by drawing on the findings in Chapter Four and the issues that were raised in Chapters One and Two. The findings reveal critical aspects relating to students' conceptions of academic writing as well as tutors' expectations and understandings of student writing. The chapter concludes by offering recommendations and conclusions of the study.

As already mentioned in Chapter One, the study sought to answer the following research question:

What are ESL students' and tutors' conceptions of academic writing and to what extent do these conceptions influence student writing?

The sub-questions were:

- What are ESL first year students' perceptions and experiences of academic writing?
- How do these perceptions and experiences influence first year students' academic writing?
- What are tutors' perceptions and experiences of first year students' academic writing?

- What are tutors' perceptions and experiences of first year students' academic writing?
- How do tutors respond and give feedback to first year students' academic writing?
- What guidelines can inform the effective teaching and learning of writing in ESL contexts?

The chapter presents an overview of the study by drawing on the findings on students' conceptions of academic writing as well as tutors' expectations and understandings of students' academic writing in three categories: writing practices at school level, academic writing at first year level and feedback to student writing. The chapter concludes by examining the theoretical and methodological contributions of the case study – raised in Chapters Two, Three and Four – and offers guidelines and recommendations on how some of the challenges of students' writing at first year level can be addressed to improve ESL students' academic writing at first year level.

## **2. Student's and tutors' conceptions of academic writing**

The findings reveal that students had both positive and negative experiences and perceptions of academic writing. In addition, there are several similarities and differences between students' and tutors' conceptions of academic writing.

## **2.1 Students' conceptions of academic writing**

The findings show that students engaged in various writing activities, at school, including writing essays, grammar exercises, comprehension tests, analysing literature and engaging in debates. Some of them thought these activities prepared them for university writing tasks. Some participants were confident and perceived themselves to be ready to write at university level. However, some still manifested gross grammatical errors in their writing in their first year of study at university. This also suggests that teaching writing could have been superficial and that they had little practice in improving their writing, resonating with the observation made by some scholars (Wingate 2006; Lea and Street 1998; Cohen and Riel 1989; Harris, 1977) that students are not adequately taught writing at school level.

The findings show that students value and appreciate the writing exercises they have to do at first year level. Student participants also mentioned that the EAP module (ENN103F) helps them to write well in other courses. This finding resonates with the AL approach which underpins this study because, as Lea and Street (1998) argue, academic literacy practices help students to contextualise learning as they have to switch from one setting to the other by deploying a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting. Similarly, Zhu (2004:37) argues that success in academic writing largely depends on a set of well-developed general skills which could be transferred to different contexts. Notably, it is not surprising that ESL students still experience difficulties with academic writing because literacy is not something that can be overtly taught in a convenient series of lectures but through observing and interacting with the members of the discourse community until their ways of speaking, acting, thinking and valuing common to that discourse community become natural to them (Hyland 2002; Boughey 2000:281).

Some respondents indicated they were ready while some thought they were not ready for university. Tutor responses also reinforce this perception. Regardless of the fact that some participants thought they were ready for dealing with writing demands at higher education, the reality is that most of them are not ready (Cliff and Hanslo 2009; van Schalkwyk *et al.* 2009; Granville and Dison 2009; Engstrom 2008; Bharuthram and McKenna 2006; Hirst *et al.* 2004; Maloney 2003). In addition, this is also confirmed by the fact that students responded that their writing skills are within the range of fair to average. Evidently, this is an acknowledgement by students that they still need some preparation for further apprenticeship into their academic discourse communities at university level.

The findings on feedback revealed that students valued feedback from the tutors. This finding is contrary to some assertions by other researchers who argue that students are only interested in the grade they obtain and that giving elaborate feedback is a waste of time as students do not read it (Weaver 2006). In some of the comments on marked assignments, some tutors just wrote “mind your spelling” or “excellent” as general feedback to students. This kind of feedback is not helpful. One of the respondents indicated that all her strengths and weaknesses should be highlighted. Though the respondents value feedback, due to limited writing activities at university they do not have the benefit of constructive feedback as they had in high schools. This is also confirmed by Weaver (2006:379) who argues that students should be shown their strengths and weaknesses so that they can improve their future work. Similar to Lea and Street (1998), Weaver (2006) found that tutors often gave vague comments which students were not able to understand and use effectively. She suggests that tutors should provide appropriate guidance and motivation rather than diagnosing problems and justifying the marks (Weaver 2006:390). Furthermore, students also mentioned that marker comments were not clear enough.



In summary, writing activities that ESL students engage in at school level are not sufficient to sustain them at university. Universities should also get more involved in preparing these students because of the gaps that exist between high school and universities. Assuming that students will just be integrated smoothly into university writing tasks will not help the situation and is unrealistic. Teaching through providing effective feedback is one of the effective ways of teaching academic writing in ESL contexts.

## **2.2 Tutors' expectations and understandings of student writing**

The findings show that although research indicates that some tutors view ESL students negatively (Wright 2004; Zamel 1995; Gambell 1991), tutors in this study objectively indicated that students have low literacy levels and struggle to express themselves in English. Some even mentioned that these students have bad language skills which require serious interventions. Tutors also observed that ESL students struggle with sentence and paragraph construction as well as coherence (Lloyd 2007). The finding concurs with other ESL studies (Banda 2007; Moutlana 2007; Lea and Street 2006; Nightingale 1988). Some tutors also indicate that there are gaps that exist between primary schools, high schools and tertiary education. They suggest that this gap could be narrowed by teaching academic literacies from an early age so that students do not struggle as they progress in their learning (Rose 2004; Munro, 2002; Lennerberg 1967 in Brown 1994). They further suggest that students should be exposed to more reading and writing activities as they seem to have less exposure to these activities (Wingate 2006; Cohen and Riel 1989).

The findings reveal that tutors acknowledge that in giving feedback, they tend to comment on grammar and also use error correction (Lillis 2001; Fregreau 1999; Radecki and Swales, 1988; Silva 1986; Harris 1977). In addition, tutors

claim to show students their strengths and their weaknesses (Weaver 2006). Although some used effective ways of providing feedback, they generally showed application of poor marking where some comments just indicated “mind your spelling” or “excellent”. These kinds of comments are not comprehensive and students are not shown their weaknesses and strengths as they claimed. Some failed to interpret students’ work and failed students who were supposed to pass and vice versa (Lea and Street 1998). One student indicated that feedback she received was not helpful due to the tutor’s illegible hand writing.

### **2.3 Students’ and tutor’s conceptions: Similarities and differences**

The findings show that there are similarities between students’ and tutors’ experiences of ESL students’ writing. Both students and tutors agree that ESL students are not ready for university writing tasks and have average writing skills which need further interventions by universities. Both groups agreed that good quality writing should have structure, coherence and demonstrate a good command of the English language, with perfect grammar. Furthermore, they agree that the provision of quality effective feedback is essential where students are made aware of the areas they did well and those they need to improve on. Lastly, they agree that grammatical error correction should be one of the issues attended to when evaluating and giving feedback to ESL students (Radecki and Swales 1988; Silva 1986; Fregeau 1999:9). Several ESL studies also found that students value the importance of these skills even when tutors or lecturers try to ignore them (Mojica 2010; Ransom *et al.* 2005; Lafaye and Tsuda 2002; Leki and Carson 1994; Saito 1994).

The findings also revealed some differences between students’ and tutors’ conceptions of ESL students’ writing. For instance, tutors seemed to perceive

ESL students as having low literacy levels (Lea and Street 1998; Nightingale 1988) while students perceive themselves as having average writing skills. Hyperbolically, one tutor mentioned that their literacy levels are similar to those of Grade 7 or 8. In addition, some tutors view the academic writing problem as something that emanates from schooling where primary school teachers feed high schools with learners who were underprepared. Instead of being taught the content of high school level, they first have to catch up by teaching writing skills that were never attended to at primary school level. Some ESL students have not complained much except one who was against the use of code-switching in teaching English.

In summary, both students and tutors are important stakeholders in the teaching and learning context. Students know their weaknesses and strong points and their views can also inform the content to be taught in ESL writing courses for first year students. However, both tutors and students have an idea of what should happen on the conceptual level but fail to adhere to the ideals at the implementation level. For instance, students have a clear view of what good quality writing is but fail to attain that level and tutors clearly understand what they should do when giving feedback but in real practice fail to adhere to those ideals.

### **3. Academic Writing: Guidelines informing academic writing in ESL contexts**

The CPH theory advocates that language learning is easier from the age of 1 to 13 after which language learning becomes difficult (Lennerberg 1967 in Brown 1994). Controversial as it is, this theory seems to be true to our ESL learners and this implies that some of the important issues concerning language learning are not being addressed earlier, particularly during the formative childhood years. Failure to address these issues earlier seemingly

creates problems when students come to higher education. Another related issue might be that students are not grounded in the acquisition of African languages, which also creates a problem for ESL. One of the tutors indicated strongly that it would be difficult to address issues at university that were not addressed at high school, while another one indicated that academic literacy (reading and writing) should be taught from an early age, which is an issue also corroborated by research (Saddler *et al.* 2009; Rose 2004; Munro 2003).

Though these ESL students wrote essays, grammar and literature as part of their high school curriculum, they did not benefit much from these activities. Perhaps the problem might not be with the high school curriculum per se but with early childhood education and primary schooling. There seems to be a lack of synergy in what is taught from early childhood education, primary and high schools. One tutor/marker, who is a high school teacher, mentioned that primary school teachers placed a huge burden on high school teachers as they received learners who were unprepared due to the lack of proper pedagogical interventions, particularly in reading and writing.

Student participants also expressed interest in having essay writing being modelled to them. This finding resonates with findings from other researchers (Granville and Dison 2009; Kalikhoka *et al.* 2009; Adams 2008; Hirst *et al.* 2004). For instance, Adams (2008:1) states that she helps her students understand the conventions of academic writing so that they can meet the expectations of their writing and deviate from those standards as a tool for effective writing. Similarly, Hirst *et al.* (2004:74) used modelling as a teaching and learning strategy to which students responded well. In the same way, Granville and Dison (2009:56) recommend modelling as a teaching tool as well as teaching through feedback. Kalikhoka *et al.* (2009:45) also report that students suggested the use of examples or models of past essays, revision of essay mistakes in class, provision of hand-outs on essay writing and

introduction to lecturers' required essay writing standards. The present study also confirms the same findings revealed by other studies cited above.

Students also expressed a desire to have frequent contact sessions with the lecturers as opposed to their tutors. Although they can conceptualise good writing, in practice these ESL students failed to write good academic essays. As a result, students expressed a desire to have good writing taught and modelled to them. This also suggests that the university is not doing enough in terms of teaching writing because students do only two assignments in a semester, of which one is a written task. Bailey (2009:1) indicates two challenges that tutors have regarding feedback, namely, less time to write comments on students' work and fewer opportunities for tutorial interaction.

In general, both ESL students and their tutors who participated in this study concede that academic writing is the biggest challenge experienced by both learners and academics in higher education. The students are aware that they need further support in writing for them to cope with the academic reading and writing demands at university (Cliff and Hanslo, 2009; van Scalkwyk *et al.* 2009). Since nothing can be done about their past, universities have a huge responsibility to establish structures that should assist these ESL students to be transitioned and integrated smoothly into their academic discourse communities.

#### **4. Theoretical and Methodological Significance of this study**

Having discussed the findings of the study, I discuss the theoretical and methodological significance of the study in the next subsections.

#### **4.1 Theoretical Significance of this study**

The academic literacies theory advocates reading and writing within the disciplines (Lea and Street 1998). The teaching of academic literacies necessitates a close collaboration between language specialists and discipline-specialists (Jurecic 2006; Bharuthram and McKenna 2006). This is because both practitioners are mostly specialists in either language or a certain discipline but not in both. Therefore, the academic literacies approach needs to be adopted as it endorses reading and writing within disciplines and not the de-contextualised teaching of surface grammatical features as advocated by the study skills model (Wingate 2006). Furthermore, the findings of this study partly indicate that there are some remnants of the study skills model in ESL pedagogical practices. Interestingly, student writing still has grammatical errors and that makes it difficult to focus more on writing than just surface features. Because of this problem in student writing, students who participated in this study perceived surface grammar features to be the preeminent skills that they need to master (Yong 2010; Hawkins 2005). As a result, their writing cannot move beyond the superficial skills into academic literacies where the focus is more on content than grammar features because it is difficult to move deeper into other writing aspects if the basics are not mastered.

Some authors argue that ESL students should be socialised, affiliated and apprenticed into the academic discourse. For example, Hawkins (2005:59) views language and literacy development as a socialization process and also suggests that all teachers, irrespective of the level at which they teach, should focus on academic literacies and not just on English vocabulary and generalized grammatical proficiency (Hawkins 2005:80). Similarly, Krause (2001:148) argues that students need to develop a strong affiliation with the

academic environment to be integrated in their first year university study. Furthermore, she argues that the academic writing process brings with it new challenges and demands requiring acculturation on the part of the writer.

However, participants emphatically indicated that their English course equips them for discipline-specific writing (writing across the curriculum). Arguably, the EAP module initiates these ESL students to writing at university as it provides them with the basics they need to further acquire the discipline-specific writing skills they need to function effectively in their respective discourse communities. It must be noted that every discipline has its own discourses and academics expect students to learn this through immersion (van Schalkwyk *et al.* 2009; Bharuthram and McKenna 2006) and not explicit teaching. Their responses clearly resonate with the academic literacies theory which “helps students contextualise learning as they have to switch from one setting to another by deploying a repertoire of linguistic practices appropriate to each setting” (Lea and Street 2006:368; Ivanic and Lea 2006: 12; Lea and Street 1998:159). Specifically, some participants mentioned that the EAP course helps them to write in Physics, Philosophy and Psychology, to mention a few. They valued the course for helping them with the academic writing conventions which they are able to transfer to other courses.

On the other hand, as indicted in Chapter Two, the present study supports the idea of viewing academic literacies from the multiliteracies perspective where the study skills, the academic socialisation and academic literacies model should be amalgamated, which means adopting a holistic approach to the teaching of academic writing (van Rensberg and Lamberti 2004; Kalantzis *et al* 2003; The New London Group 1996). The present study reiterates that no single writing method can be a “one size fits all” approach to academic writing pedagogy and that an academic literacies perspective should encapsulate other approaches instead of trying to abandon them.

## **4.2 Methodological Significance of this study**

The use of the qualitative methodology in this study provided an opportunity to unveil students' and tutors' perceptions of academic writing. The method made it possible to elicit the lived experiences of ESL students and tutors regarding academic writing (Bodgan and Biklen 2007; 2003). Moreover, the triangulation of data collection methods was pivotal in obtaining rich data from participants. The use of a questionnaire made it possible to not only get the views of the students but also provided a clear picture of how they write. The interviews with ESL students were instrumental in confirming views expressed on the questionnaires and also clarifying some of the responses that were not explicit. Furthermore, marked student assignments were also intended to observe student writing as well as feedback comments made by tutors. The use of this combination of data collection instruments also enhanced the reliability and validity of the responses from participants.

In summary, the findings from all data collection instruments unequivocally indicate that first year university students who participated in this study struggle with reading and writing (academic literacies). Their writing is fraught with grammatical mistakes, particularly with regard to spelling, sentence construction, tenses and punctuation. They also struggle to organise their ideas (coherence), structure their essays (introduction, body and conclusion) and present an argument. Seemingly, students learn academic writing for the first time at university and leave writing to the last minute (Ellis 2005; Gambell 1991), a fact that is confirmed by spelling errors in their writing. It is therefore argued that if students struggle with the basic elements of writing, they will find it difficult to acquire other forms of academic literacies. The current state of student writing which is marked by poor grammatical correctness robs them and the academic staff of the opportunity to deal more with content and to fully integrate students to more academic literacies instead of being distracted by grammatical structures.



Though the respondents value feedback, they cannot have the benefit of constructive feedback due to limited writing activities at university as they had in high schools. In addition, time is also a crucial factor in providing feedback (Bailey 2009; Ellis 2005; Gambell 1991) and because of tight deadlines that need to be met by tutors and markers, the provision of effective feedback to students is compromised. The study also found that, despite some tutors doing relatively well, feedback given to students by many tutors is not of a very good quality.

## **5. Recommendations**

Guided by the findings revealed in this study, I offer the following recommendations in the subsections below.

### **5.1 Intensive training of tutors/teachers**

Tutors should undergo rigorous and continuous training so that they can be fully equipped with the necessary skills for assessing students' work (Spencer 2007). Unless there is a radical change to the current pedagogic practices, ESL students will continue to be compromised by the university.

Similarly, at school level, teachers should be trained adequately so that they can teach writing effectively and not just spend more time on administrative work. They should undergo continuous professional development in the form of in-service training and should also be given incentives to further their ESL studies.

## **5.2 More tutor-lecturer interaction**

There is a disjuncture between what lecturers and tutors expect from students. In most cases, tutors do not know what lecturers expect from students, which creates confusion amongst students. To avoid confusing and contradictory messages to students, these two ESL practitioners should communicate more frequently, particularly in the ODL context.

## **5.3 Academic Literacies Centres**

The Academic Literacies Centres or Writing Centres are crucial in addressing academic writing issues with which students struggle. Unfortunately, these critical services are often treated as peripheral services in the academia. In most cases, these services do not have permanent staff members and quality cannot be sustained as experienced facilitators are normally snatched by other departments who offer them full-time employment (Ivanic & Lea 2006; Lillis 2001). If the academia is serious about addressing issues of academic literacies, then these services will have to be mainstreamed. Maloney (2003:665) points out that academic literacy requires students to synthesise and analyse text and demands that they read and write the texts competently and persuasively. He reports that throughput rates improved dramatically as a result of changing the approach in the compensatory literacy programme implemented on at-risk first year college students.

## **5.4 Typing of written assignments**

Though students will be expected to use hand writing in the exams, the researcher suggests that students should be encouraged to hand in typed assignments. This is relevant because we live in a technologically-oriented era where students are encouraged to use online learning management systems to learn and to submit assignments. This might eliminate a number of grammar errors through the help of a spell-check function on the computer and might also help ESL students to develop their spelling in the process. Research also confirms that word processing is useful in language learning as it reduces mistakes (Dam, Legenshausen & Wolff, 1990; Kellogg 1994 in Appel and Mullen 2000). This might help markers to give more comments on content (academic writing) than on surface grammar features.

## **5.5 Editing of written assignments**

Post-graduate dissertations and theses are taken for language editing before being submitted to supervisors or examiners. However, this is not encouraged at undergraduate level, particularly at first year level. Therefore, the researcher suggests that language editing should also be extended to first year levels where it is needed the most. As much as excellence is encouraged at post-graduate level, this should also build up from undergraduate level and this will help in focusing more on academic literacies than on surface grammar features when evaluating student writing. Though Academic Literacies Centres do not endorse language editing to be incorporated as part of their interventions (Bharuthram and McKenna 2006), this is a crucial service that should be incorporated at undergraduate level.

## **6. Conclusion**

On the whole, the study shows that both students and tutors face numerous challenges relating to academic writing at first year level. This means that more work still needs to be done in this area. The present study argues that teachers teaching ESL students at high school level should approach writing as a critical and core aspect of students' education. Students should be exposed to intensive writing activities throughout their high school years. Teachers who lack the skills should also be given specific training in writing skills. This will ensure that when students come to higher education, they are fully equipped to handle university writing. Tutors and lecturers teaching first year students should also be equipped to teach academic writing that addresses students' specific needs. However, the challenges relating to student writing will continue to be a problem at first year level, particularly in ESL contexts, unless institutions of higher learning start addressing academic writing as a critical and core component of students' academic development.

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## APPENDIX 1

P O Box 3129  
Ga-Maraba  
0705  
01 July 2011

The Manager  
Tutorial Support and Discussion Classes  
UNISA Gauteng Regional Office  
P O Box 392  
PRETORIA  
0003

Dear Sir/ Madam

### **REQUEST TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT YOUR INSTITUTION**

I am a Masters in TESOL student at UNISA and request your permission to conduct research at your institution.

The research study entitled “Academic Writing in English Second Language Contexts: Perceptions and Experiences of First Year University Students and Tutors” will involve first year English students and their tutors. Students and tutors will be requested to respond to a Questionnaire and group interviews will also be held with selected students and lecturers.

All issues of confidentiality will be adhered to and participation is voluntary. If required, I will share the results of this study with the students and tutors. I also wish to confirm that in conducting the research, I will not interfere with the normal daily academic activities.

Yours faithfully  
M. J. Chokwe

## APPENDIX 2

### Student Questionnaire / Interviews Schedule

Dear Student

I am embarking on a research study entitled “**Academic Writing in English Second Language Contexts: Perceptions and Experiences of University first year students and tutors**”. Please fill in this questionnaire as honestly as possible.

#### 1. Demographic Information

Mark the appropriate box with (X)

1. What is the name of your degree?

\_\_\_\_\_

2. How old are you?

|       |       |       |                     |
|-------|-------|-------|---------------------|
| 16-19 | 20-23 | 24-27 | older than 28 years |
|       |       |       |                     |

3. What is your gender?

|      |  |        |  |
|------|--|--------|--|
| Male |  | Female |  |
|------|--|--------|--|

4. What is your home language?

|          |       |          |          |      |                         |
|----------|-------|----------|----------|------|-------------------------|
| N. Sotho | Venda | Xitsonga | Setswana | Zulu | Other<br>(Specify_____) |
|          |       |          |          |      |                         |

5. What do you do apart from being a student? You may mention your occupation (if applicable).\_\_\_\_\_

#### Students' perceptions and experiences of academic writing

6. What kind of English writing tasks or activities did you do in high school?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you think your high school teachers prepared you adequately for writing essay assignments in English at university? Yes/ No  
Give reasons for your answer

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. What do you think lecturers and tutors should do to help you improve your essay assignments?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Do you think the English course for you have registered can help you to write well in other courses? Explain.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

9. a. Do you enjoy reading? Yes/No

b. How often do you read?

c. What types of books do you read? Why?

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d. Do you think reading improves your English writing skills? Why?

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10. Give your definition of good quality writing in an English essay assignment

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**Students' views on feedback to their writing**

11. How do you feel about the feedback you receive in your essay assignments?

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12. What do you think your lecturers/tutors should focus on when marking your essay assignments?

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---

13. How useful do you find markers' comments or feedback in improving your essay assignments?

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15. In your essay assignments or examinations, in which areas do you think you lose most marks?

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**Students' perceptions of their academic writing skills and abilities**

16. How good are you at writing essay assignments in English? Why?

|           |      |                 |      |           |
|-----------|------|-----------------|------|-----------|
| Very poor | Poor | Fair to average | Good | Excellent |
| 1         | 2    | 3               | 4    | 5         |

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17. Which activities/writing skills do you think contribute the most in improving your essay writing?

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18. a. How important do you think the following aspects of written essays are?

**Mark the appropriate number in each case with (X)**

|                       | Not Important | Fairly important | Averagely important | Crucially important |
|-----------------------|---------------|------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Spelling              | 1             | 2                | 3                   | 4                   |
| Punctuation           | 1             | 2                | 3                   | 4                   |
| Grammar               | 1             | 2                | 3                   | 4                   |
| Organisation of ideas | 1             | 2                | 3                   | 4                   |

- b. What strategies do you use when revising your essay assignments?

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- c. What type of support do you require to improve in the aspects you selected in 18 a.?

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19. What steps do you follow when writing an essay assignment?

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Adapted from Margaret Van Zyl (Orr) (1993) & Leki & Carson (1997)

**Thank you very much for your time and patience in completing the questionnaire**



## APPENDIX 3

### CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Project name: **“Academic writing in English Second Language contexts: Perceptions and experiences of first year university students and tutors”**

Researcher: J. M.Chokwe Telephone 012 429 6232 e-mail: chokwmj@unisa.ac.za

#### Introduction

You are invited to consider participating in this study. The decision to participate in this study lies with you. If you decide to participate, please sign at the last line of this form.

#### Explanation of the study

The study aims to explore the perceptions and experiences of university first students and tutors of English regarding academic writing. Several studies have pointed out that students' views are often ignored in designing English Second Language (ESL) teaching and learning programmes including academic writing. Hence in this study, the researcher is interested in the views and experiences of ESL students and tutors regarding academic writing. This study purposefully selected students who are enrolled for the English for Academic Purposes course (ENN103F) at UNISA to participate in this study. A questionnaire will be distributed to these students. Focus group interviews will subsequently be held with some students to get more details on the views expressed in the questionnaires.

#### Confidentiality

The information gathered in this study will be strictly confidential. No reference to specific names will be made while reporting on the study. The information provided will only be used for research purposes and, if required, the results of this study will be shared with participants.

#### Your participation

Participation in this study is voluntary and students may withdraw from this study at any time if they feel they no longer want to continue.

#### Researcher's statement

I have fully explained this study to the student and will answer any clarity-seeking questions from participants.

#### Student's consent

I have read the information provided in this consent form and I voluntarily participate in this study.

Your signature\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_

Adapted from Mackey and Gass 2005

## APPENDIX 4

### Tutor/Markers Questionnaire

#### 1. Demographic Details

Mark the appropriate box with (X)

1. What is your highest qualification (in English Studies)?

|         |        |         |         |           |
|---------|--------|---------|---------|-----------|
| Diploma | Degree | Honours | Masters | Doctorate |
|         |        |         |         |           |

2. For how many years have you been teaching English?

|           |            |             |                    |
|-----------|------------|-------------|--------------------|
| 1-5 years | 6-10 years | 11-15 years | 16 years and above |
|           |            |             |                    |

3. How long have you been marking assignments for English first year students at university?

|           |           |             |                 |
|-----------|-----------|-------------|-----------------|
| 1-4 years | 5-9 years | 10-14 years | 15 years & more |
|           |           |             |                 |

#### Tutor/markers' perceptions of students' English academic writing skills in English

4. What is your general opinion of first year students' academic writing competencies?

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5. Based on your experience what specific difficulties do students experience when writing essays?

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- a. What types of writing problems do you see as the most common in students' writing?

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- b. What type of writing problems do you perceive as the most serious?

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- c. What kinds of strengths and/or weaknesses do you see in your students' writing?

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6. What is your definition of good quality academic writing?

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7. What do you think should be done to improve students' English writing skills?

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

8. In your opinion, what could be missing from students' writing that was not addressed by the schooling system?

\_\_\_\_\_

9. What do you think constitutes effective teaching and learning of academic writing?

\_\_\_\_\_

**Tutor/markers' approach in providing feedback to student writing**

10. In marking an assignment, how extensively do you comment on student writing?

\_\_\_\_\_

11. Which approach (es) do you follow when giving feedback to students?

\_\_\_\_\_

12. In your position as a marker, how would you describe your relationship with the student whose work you are marking?

\_\_\_\_\_

13. How do you evaluate an essay assignment that has good content and poor grammar?

\_\_\_\_\_

14. How do you evaluate an essay assignment that has good grammar and poor content?

\_\_\_\_\_

Adapted from van Zyl, Margaret (1993); Leki & Carson (1997)

Thank you for your time and patience in completing this questionnaire

## APPENDIX 5

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES

13 June 2011

**Proposed title:** ACADEMIC WRITING IN ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE CONTEXTS: PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF FIRST YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND TUTORS

**Principal Investigator:** J.M. Chokwe

**Approval status recommended by reviewers:** Approved

The Ethics Committee of the Department of English Studies, having been duly constituted as such at a meeting of the Higher Degrees Committee of the Department of English Studies on 13 June 2011, has reviewed this proposal and considers the methodological, technical and ethical aspects of the proposal to be appropriate to the tasks proposed. Approval is hereby granted to the principal investigator to proceed with the study in strict accordance with the approved proposal and the ethics policy of the University of South Africa.

The principal investigator is required to heed the following guidelines:

1. Only begin research after obtaining informed consent from participants. The consent must be translated into the home languages of participants.
2. Ensure anonymity.
3. Use numbers to identify participants (both the students and the lecturers who will be interviewed).
4. Carry out the research according to good research practice and in an ethical manner.
5. Maintain confidentiality of data and maintain security procedures for protection of privacy.
6. Record the way that ethical issues have been implemented in the research.
7. Work in close collaboration with the supervisor and inform the Higher Degrees committee if any change to the study is proposed that relates to ethical procedures.
8. Notify your supervisor and the Committee if any adverse event relating to ethics occurs in your study.
9. In consultation with your supervisor, submit a report to the Committee confirming that the procedures specified above have been carried out and that the criteria specified above have been met.

I.A. Rabinowitz (Prof.)

Chair: Higher Degrees Committee and Ethics Committee of the Department of English Studies