Academic writing in an ODL context: perceptions and experiences of first-year university students

Chokwe JM and Lephalala MMK

Abstract

The study reported on here sought to examine first-year students' conceptions of writing and the extent to which these 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 English second language (ESL) contexts. The study was underpinned by the academic literacies model. A qualitative research methodology was adopted and a case study approach was used 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. The findings showed that although students rated their writing skills as average, tutors had a different perspective. Tutors found that students still struggled with aspects of writing including grammar, spelling, the structuring of essays, coherence and cohesion in paragraphs, and arguing a point convincingly. Although it was shown that students valued feedback highly, in some instances tutors did not provide adequate, understandable and useful feedback.

Introduction

Research shows that student writing continues to pose challenges for English second language (ESL) teaching and learning throughout the world, in higher education institutions in particular (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 contend with.

In South Africa there are growing concerns about the poor quality of student writing in schools and higher education. Recent media reports show that students entering higher education are struggling to write effectively and are therefore under-prepared for studies in institutions of higher learning (News24 30/06/2009[1]; Motlanthe 2010). Several studies in South Africa confirm these reports and have identified factors that tend to have a negative influence 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 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.

Factors influencing student writing

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.

---

[1] This is an online news report

Niven (2005:774) attributes the problems experienced by under-prepared student with writing at university to the wide gap between writing expectations and demands at school and at university. This means that universities should expect first-year students to be inadequately prepared for the required writing tasks because, as Hirst et al. (2004:66) confirm, students are not equipped to deal with the academic or tertiary literacies required of them. Therefore, universities should introduce proper structures to help under-prepared students to begin improving their academic writing.

In examining the literacy levels in South Africa, Moutlana (2007:2–3) argues that the low literacy standards among students should be cause for 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) notes that it is common knowledge that ESL students often have difficulties with academic writing and argues that there is a clear link between low literacy levels and 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 at their studies. However, under-preparedness is not just a student problem, but a staff problem as well, because lecturers and tutors also seem unprepared and at times reluctant to intervene to improve first-year students' inadequate writing skills.

Conceptual/Theoretical framework

The study reported on in this paper was 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 AL approach view writing as a communicative act which involves the sharing of observations, information, thoughts, or ideas with 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 the student's 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 insights in this regard can contribute to a better understanding of why students continue to struggle with their writing and inform institutions of higher learning on 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 of 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 rather through observing and interacting with the members of the discourse until the ways of speaking, acting, thinking and valuing common to that discourse become natural to them.

Method

A qualitative research methodology was adopted 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 was of importance in this study because it sought to understand perceptions of ESL students and tutors regarding academic writing.

The case study

Case studies are a type of qualitative research that can be used to study a phenomenon in a specific context (Ary, Jacobs and Razavier 2002; Eisenhart 2002; Kumar 1996; Best and Kahn 1993). In addition, a case study is a way of organising 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 one organisation (Ary et al, 2002:2; Eisenhart 2002:8; Kumar 1996:99). Furthermore, a case study probes deeply and analyses interactions between various factors that can explain present status or that influence change or growth. It also involves studying a phenomenon individually and in its totality in order to gain more insight into it. As the study examined the perceptions and experiences of ESL first-year university students and tutors with regard to academic writing, a case study was appropriate because the study aimed at a better understanding of a particular case, namely 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), there are also some pitfalls. For example, Best and Kahn (1993:195) warn that although the case study method may look deceptively simple, requiring familiarity with existing theoretical knowledge of the field of inquiry and the skill to isolate significant variables from irrelevant ones, it can be

subjective and effects may be wrongly attributed to factors that are merely associated rather than causally related. Caution must be exercised so as to avoid bias.

The context

Context includes the geographical environment or the setting in 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. The study reported on investigated the perceptions and experiences of ESL first-year university English students and tutors of 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 distance learning (ODL) university in Southern Africa, with over 300 000 registered students in 2011.

Student support at Unisa includes tutorial classes offered by tutors at regional offices; discussion classes presented once a semester by lecturers; academic literacies centres, which are responsible for teaching and training students in academic writing; and *my*Unisa, which is an online learning management system.

ESL first-year students registered for 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 is intended to provide students with critical skills necessary for them to succeed at university. ENN103F focuses on developing students' academic reading and writing skills in the English language. Students registered for various qualifications offered by the Colleges of Human Sciences, Education, Economic and Management Sciences, Agriculture and Natural Sciences as well as Engineering, Science and Technology enrol for this module. Most of these students are second- or third-language speakers of English. Although the module is aimed at first-year students fresh from high school, the expectations are as follows:

- Students admitted to this module must have passed English at National Qualifications Framework (NQF) level 4. They are assumed to be

capable of reading extended texts, comprehending the main ideas and following a line of argument.

- Students admitted to this module are expected to be able to read a number of texts on a related topic and collate the ideas.
- Students admitted to this module are also expected to write extended discursive/argumentative texts that focus on a given topic, using an introduction, body, and conclusion structure (Unisa 2002).

Academic writing at first-year level

Some students mentioned that they were not adequately prepared for the demands of writing at university level, while others felt they were well prepared for this. Participants indicated that they struggled with the structuring of their essays. 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".* Jacqui, however, said: *"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 de[2] topic and lastly the conclusion where you summarise the whole essay. You can call it a solution".*

In one instance, the findings revealed that students claimed to be well prepared to write essays. However, an analysis of the written essay indicated that students were still struggling and had problems 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. 2009; Lamberg 1977).

Although in some instances the findings showed that participants indicated that writing coherently was not a problem, students struggled with "*organisation of ideas*" (John)

---

[2] Questionnaire responses are reproduced verbatim and were not corrected.

7

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 and in avoiding surface grammar errors. Participants therefore acknowledged their weaknesses in academic writing. This finding supports Nunan's (1990) argument that learners' inputs should also be considered in curriculum design, as they are aware of their weaknesses. Writing coherently is a critical aspect of academic writing because in most cases students have relevant ideas, but do not organise them well. This also suggests that ESL practitioners should teach this component.

The findings relating to students' perception of what constitutes good quality academic writing revealed them to understand features of good writing as few or no grammar mistakes, sound structure (an introduction, body, and conclusion) as well as coherence. These responses resonate with Anokye's (2008) definition of good writing 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 expressed the view that good writing has "*no spelling errors and the sentence construction is good*" and that it is *"any writing with good spelling"*. Jane stated that good writing "*must have organized ideas, good grammar and less spelling errors"*.

The findings reveal that respondents thought that the word "revising" meant preparing for exams. However, this process was explained further in focus group interviews. This may also be an indication that they were not familiar with the writing process. However, some answered the questions in the right context. Some participants indicated that they did indeed revise their work as part of the writing process. One participant responded: "*I check for spelling errors, grammar and organization of ideas*" (Lesiba), and another 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). Tshepo explained that he *"read it loudly, edit it and give it to someone to edit"*.

Although the respondents reported applying these revision strategies, the tutors and marked assignments indicated the opposite. It is only a small number of good students who might have been employing these strategies, particularly those who performed well and made few or no grammar mistakes.

Once more grammar emerged as an important aspect. This corroborates the findings from other studies, in which ESL students placed a high value on perfect grammar (Mojica 2010).

Students have an idea of what good writing entails, yet they fail to apply these principles in their essay writing. This could suggest that lecturers are doing very little to improve the quality of student writing and should become 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).

Participants were asked how good they were at writing essay assignments in English. Some students felt that their writing skills were between fair and average, while some felt they were poor. Only one student claimed to have excellent writing skills. Some respondents perceived themselves to have good writing skills while others felt they had average writing skills. An assessment of students' essays and their writing on the completed questionnaire indicated that these ESL students had average writing skills.

The respondents felt that ENN103F helped them to write well in other modules. In other words, students claimed they were able to write in discipline-specific courses owing to the contribution made by ENN103F. For example, Samantha said: *"Yes, especially in other subjects like philosophy where we write essays,"* and Mosima explained: *"Yes, in cause in Physics we are often asked to write reports after experiments".* Similarly, Lesiba said: *"Yes, it is not in English were we write essays also on other modules and*

helps on the way we read and understand words". In addition, participants in the focus groups indicated that ENN103F provided the basics for writing in other courses.

Participants generally recognised the value provided by the EAP (English for Academic Purposes) course, as it equipped them with the academic literacies required for other courses (such as Philosophy and Physics) in which they wrote essays. The interview data indicated that some students felt that this module really did what it was intended to do, as it taught them conventions of academic writing and how to cite sources. The findings of this study therefore clearly resonate with the academic literacies theory (Lea and Street 2006; 1998) in that students considered their reading and writing within disciplines to be improving because of the contribution made by the EAP module.

The AL model involves not only writing, but also reading. Participants were questioned regarding their reading habits, and reported that they read academic books rather than leisure reading. Some acknowledged that reading improves both vocabulary and spelling. However, their writing on the completed questionnaire reflected a number of grammar mistakes, which suggested that they were not reaping the fruits of reading, as they were not transferring this to their writing. For instance, Martha said: *"Yes – it [the EAP module] 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, which resonates with previous studies (Rose 2004; Munro 2003; Hart 1995).

Participants also indicated that reading improved their knowledge. Participants had the following to say about the effects of reading : "*You get more ideas on different forms of writing"* (Martin), and *"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" (Kobela). These responses indicate students' perceptions of the developmental nature of reading in terms of increasing knowledge.

Some participants indicated that they read for leisure purposes. A respondent reported that the reading of Christian literature inspired and motivated 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). Stephanie said that she read *"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, an enriching type of reading. However, magazines and newspapers are not very enriching reading materials, as they may encourage skimming and scanning rather than comprehensive and thoughtful reading.

Participants seemed to devote the majority of their time to their academic books and less time to leisure reading. Although they were reading, the problem might have been with the quality of the materials (newspapers, magazines) they read. Students' writing (marked assignments and questionnaire responses) was so full of grammar mistakes that even though they reported using their dictionaries, one wonders whether this was in fact the case. Considering the length of time they were given to complete assignments, the number of gross spelling errors was rather surprising. If students do not use suitable resources in essay assignments as a means to improve their writing, they will inevitably make mistakes in exams, where the stakes are high and they are not allowed to use dictionaries.

Some participants indicated that writing an essay is more challenging and frustrating when the topic is difficult to understand. This is illustrated in Salome's response: *"It is when I don't understand the topic",* and that provided by Martha: *"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". Although it is the responsibility of ESL practitioners to ensure that students understand writing instructions, this might also imply that students have limited vocabulary.

Some students indicated that they struggled with *"gathering the right information"* (Tebogo), "*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).

Information gathering is one of the basic ways of introducing students to carrying out research, and in view of the number of resources available (both online and from the library), especially in the present information era, citing reasons like these is inexcusable. Thus, this study refutes the assertion by Jurecic (2006) that teaching writing is difficult in this era.

Some students found it difficult to construct an argument. For example, one student explained that he had problems with "*Finding or making argument concerning the topic"* (Sammy), while another said 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's (2008) assertions that students have negative perceptions regarding argumentation and that argumentation is an important skill for ESL students at both undergraduate and postgraduate level (Lloyd 2007). These responses indicate that ESL practitioners should incorporate this aspect in their pedagogy. Some students do not in fact know what an academic argument is, and tend to misconstrue the term as meaning an altercation between two people.

All these themes represent areas which ESL students are struggling with, and something should be done to address these issues. Some respondents mentioned the writing process when writing essays. However, this does not mean that they developed these skills at high school. It is possible that students learnt about the writing process from the study guide for the EAP course. On the other hand, there may indeed be rare

instances 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), and "*there are still areas I still need to improve but am not completely lost"* (Salome). Jane said "*really struggling, I don't know how to put everything into perspective", "Because I not perfect in English"* (Sammy), and *"I'm not good at English at all so I almost find everything to be difficult but not most difficult"* (Mosima)*.

The issue of struggling with the English language confirms that ESL students are at a disadvantage (Banda 2007). However, academic writing is not a challenge to these ESL students only, but to first-language speakers of English 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 acknowledged that they were really struggling to write, which is far better than being in denial. We believe that this acknowledgement of their weaknesses in writing will spur the students to work hard at improving their writing.

As already indicated, the respondents rated their writing skills as fair to average, thus implying acknowledgement that their writing skills needed further development. However, one cannot simply disregard the fact that they are ESL learners: there is thus perhaps an argument for mother-tongue instruction, which is a contentious issue in education circles today. However, for this to be achieved, a tremendous effort would be needed to change the negative attitudes about the use of African languages in education prevalent in South African society. 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.

Participants viewed modelling as a strategy for the effective teaching of writing. Some suggestions from participants were: "*when we are in the classes, the tutor should do*

many examples with us and at the end homeworks 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 had the following request: *"give us some essay to write during our tutorial classes and correct us were we made mistake and stop saying they won't spoon-feed us".* This student appeared to be annoyed by what the tutor had 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 receive the support they expect, they become despondent. This bears out the argument by Zamel (1989) that if they are to become better writers, students need to be given more writing tasks.

We support these responses, as most of the time it is not clear what lecturers/tutors expect from student writing. Therefore, providing models and showing students how to write academic essays can be very useful to students. 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. Although the study guide for ENN103F does refer to the introduction, the body and the conclusion, students are not explicitly taught how to write them (Unisa 2002). During the focus group interviews students also expressed the need for more writing activities that are marked. Students write only one essay for the EAP course, and they felt that this was not sufficient.

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 mentioned the need to *"attend more classes, given more assignments"* and Lethabo 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 hone their writing skills (Wingate 2006; Cohen and Riel 1989). This possibly 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

14

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, and samples of student writing taken from the completed questionnaires confirm this finding. Fregreau (1999) contends that tutors' obsession with grammar is not helpful to students. Students are obsessed with their grammar mistakes, but perfect grammar would appear to be unattainable for them.

Recommendations

Guided by the findings from the study, we offer the following recommendations.

Intensive training of tutors/teachers

Tutors should undergo rigorous and continuous training to equip them fully with the necessary skills for assessing students' work (Spencer 2007). Unless there is a radical change in current practices, students will continue to be poorly served by the university.

Similarly, at school level, teachers should be trained adequately to 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 also be given incentives to further their ESL studies.

More tutor–lecturer interaction

There is a disjunction between what lecturers and tutors expect from students. In most cases, tutors do not know what lecturers expect from students, and that creates confusion on the part of students. To avoid confusing and contradictory messages to students, lecturers and tutors should communicate more frequently, particularly in the ODL context.

Academic literacies centres

The academic literacies centres or writing centres are crucial in solving academic writing problems that students are struggling with. Unfortunately, these critical services are often treated as peripheral services in 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 and Lea 2006; Lillis 2001). If academia is serious about academic literacy, then these services will have to be mainstreamed. Maloney (2003:665) points out that academic literacy requires students to synthesise and analyse text, and to 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 for at-risk first-year college students.

Typing of written assignments

Although students will be expected to submit handwritten examination scripts, we suggest that students be encouraged to hand in typed assignments. We live in a technology-oriented era where students are encouraged to use online learning management systems to learn and to submit assignments. This could eliminate a number of grammar errors through the help of the spell-check function on the computer and 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 and 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.

Editing of written assignments

Postgraduate dissertations and theses are sent for language editing before being submitted to supervisors or examiners. However, this is not encouraged at undergraduate level, particularly at first-year level. We suggest that language editing should also be extended to the first-year level, where it is needed the most. As much as excellence is encouraged at postgraduate 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 the inclusion of language editing among their interventions (Bharuthram and McKenna 2006), this is a crucial service that should be incorporated at undergraduate level.

Conclusion

On the whole, the study revealed 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. Tutors and lecturers teaching first-year students should also be equipped to teach academic writing in a way that fulfils students' specific needs. However, the challenges relating to student writing will continue being a problem at first-year level unless institutions of higher learning start considering academic writing, particularly in ESL contexts, as a critical and core component of students' academic development. The study reported on has unearthed some of the pertinent challenges in this regard.

References

Anokye, D. 2008. Teaching writing teachers to teach writing. In Friedrich, P. (Ed). *Teaching Academic Writing*. London. Continuum International Publishing Group.

Appel, C. and T. Mullen, 2000. Pedagogical considerations for a web-based tandem language learning environment. *Computers and Education*, Vol. 34.

Ary, D., Jacobs L.C. and Razavier, A. 2002. *Introduction to Research in Education*. 6th Edition. Stamford, USA. Wadsworth.

Bailey, R. 2009. Undergraduate students' perceptions of the role and utility of written assessment feedback. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, Vol. 1.

Berg, B.L. 2004. *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences.* 5th Edition. Boston. Pearson Education.

Best, J.W. and Kahn, J.V. 1993. *Research in Education*. 7th Edition. Massachusetts. Allyn and Bacon.

Bharuthram, S. and McKenna, S. 2006. A writer-respondent intervention as a means of developing academic literacy. *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol. 11, No. 4.

Bogdan, R.C. and Biklen, S.K. 2007. *Qualitative Research for Education: An Introduction to Theories and Methods.* USA. Pearson Education.

Boughey, C. 2000. Multiple metaphors in an understanding of academic literacy. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, Vol. 6, No.3.

Cliff, A. and Hanslo, M. 2009. The design and use of alternate assessments of academic literacy as selection mechanisms in higher education. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 3.

Cohen, M. & Riel, M. 1989: The effect of distant audiences of students' writing. *American Educational Research Journal*, Vol. 26, No 2.

Eisenhart, K.M. 2002. Building theory from case study research. In Huberman, A.M. and Miles, M.B. (Eds.) *The Qualitative Researcher's Companion.* California. Sage.

Freire, P.1970. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. England. Penguin Books.

Gambell, T.J. 1991. University students' self-perceptions of writing. *Canadian Journal of Education*, Vol.16, No. 4.

Granville, S. and Dison, L. 2009. Making connections through reflection: writing and feedback in an academic literacy programme. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1.

Hirst, E., Henderson, R., Allan, M., Bode, J. and Kocatepe, M. 2004. Repositioning academic literacy: charting the emergence of a community of practice. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, Vol. 27, No 1.

http://www.news24.com/SouthAfrica/Politics/Hearings-into-school-curriculums-20090630. Accessed on 30 June 2009.

http://www.learnhigher.ac.uk/resources/files/Academic%20Writing/academic_writing_literature.pdf. Accessed on 06 May 2009.

Ivanic, R. and Lea, M.R. 2006. New contexts, new challenges: the teaching of writing in UK Higher Education. In L. Ganobcsik-Williams (Ed.) *Teaching Academic Writing in UK Higher Education: Theories, Practices and Models*. New York. Palgrave Macmillan.

Jacobs, C. 2005. On being an insider on the outside: new spaces for integrating academic literacies. *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol.10, No.4.

Jurecic, A. 2006. Is teaching writing still possible? New Jersey Writing Alliance. Available from:
 http://www2.bergen.edu/njwa/NJWA_2006_materials_jurecic.pdf   Accessed on 03 March 2011.

Kumar, R. 1996. *Research Methodology: A Step by Step Guide for Beginners*. London. Sage.

Lafaye, B.E. & Tsuda, S. 2002. Attitudes towards English language learning in higher education in Japan and the place of English in a Japanese society. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 3.

Lamberg, W.J. 1977. Major problems in doing academic writing. *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 28, No. 1.

Lea, M.R. 2004. Academic literacies: a pedagogy for course design. *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 29, No. 6.

Lea, M.R. and Street, B.V. 1998. Student writing in higher education: an academic literacies approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol. 23, No. 2.

Lea, M.R. and Street, B.V. 2006. The "academic literacies" model: theory and applications. *Theory into Practice*, Vol. 45, No. 4.

Lillis, T. 2001. *Student Writing: Access, Regulation, Desire*. New York. Routledge.

Lillis, T. 2003. Student writing as "academic literacies": drawing on Bhaktin to move from critique to design. *Language and Education*, Vol. 17, No. 3.

Lillis, T. 2006. Moving towards "academic literacies" pedagogy: dialogues of participation. In L. Ganobcsik-Williams (Ed). *Teaching Academic Writing in UK Higher Education: Theories, Practices and Models.* New York. Palgrave Macmillan.

Lillis, T. and Scott, M. 2007. Defining academic literacies research: issues of epistemology, ideology and strategy. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 4, No. 1.

Lloyd, M. 2007. Developing academic writing skills: the PROCESS framework. *Nursing Standard*, Vol. 21, No. 40.

Maloney, W.H. 2003. Connecting the texts of their lives to academic literacy: creating success for at-risk first year college students. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, No. 46:8.

Motlanthe, K. 2010. Speech presented at the Higher Education Summit, Bellville, Cape Town, 22 April.

Moutlana, I.N. 2007. Challenges facing higher education: The problem of academic literacy. *VC/Speeches/North West University Workshop* 17 September.

Munro, J. 2003. Fostering literacy across the curriculum. *International Journal of Learning*, Vol. 10.

Niven, P.M. 2005. Exploring first year students' and their lecturers' constructions of what it means to read in the humanities discipline: a conflict of frames? *South African Journal of Higher Education*, Vol. 19, No. 4.

Nightingale, P. 1988. Understanding processes and problems in student writing. *Studies in Higher Education*, Vol.13, No. 3.

Nunan, D. 1990. Using learner data in curriculum development. *English for Specific Purposes*, Vol. 9.

Rose, D. 2004. Sequencing and pacing of the hidden curriculum: how indigenous children are left out of the chain. In J. Muller, A. Morais & B. Davies (Eds.) *Reading Bernstein, Researching Bernstein.* London. Routledge Falmer.

Saddler, B., Moran, S., Graham, S. and Harris, R. 2004. Preventing writing difficulties: the effects of planning strategy instruction on the writing performance of struggling writers. *Exceptionality*, Vol. 12, No. 1.

Scott, I. 2006. Improving first year student success: models and structures*.* Unpublished document produced for the Coordinating Committee of the Stellenbosch University First Year Academy Initiative. Cape Town.

Spencer, B. 2007. Towards greater equality: power and role relations involved in response to student writing. *Language Matters: Studies in the Languages of Africa*, Vol. 38, No. 2.

Unisa. 2002. *Only study guide for ENN103 (English for Specific Purposes).* Muckleneuck, Pretoria.

Van Rensberg, W. and Lamberti, P. 2004. The language of learning and teaching. In Gravett, S. and Geyser, H.C. (Eds). *Teaching and learning in higher education.* Pretoria. Van Schaik.

Van Schalkwyk, S., Bitzer, E. and Van der Walt, C. 2009. Acquiring academic literacy: a case of first year extended degree programme students. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 2.

Wingate, U. 2006. Doing away with the study skills. *Teaching in Higher Education*, Vol. 11, No. 4.

Wright, S.A. 2004. Perceptions and stereotypes of ESL students. *The Internet TESL Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 2, February. Available from: http://iteslj.org/Articles/Wright-Stereotyping.html. Accessed on 18 January 2009.

Yong, F.L. 2010. Attitudes toward academic writing of foundation students at an Australian-based university in Sarawak. *European Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 13, No. 2.

Zamel, V. 1987. Recent research on writing pedagogy. *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 4.