

**A CRITICAL REVIEW OF LANGUAGE ERRORS IN THE WRITING OF DISTANCE
EDUCATION STUDENTS**

by

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I declare that **A CRITICAL REVIEW OF LANGUAGE ERRORS IN THE WRITING OF DISTANCE EDUCATION STUDENTS** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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Abstract

'A critical review of language errors in the writing of distance education students' examines linguistic competence and investigates the language errors made by a heterogeneous group of 100 entry-level distance education university students with a view to improving their academic writing skills. The research follows a process of error identification and statistical analysis, and reviews intervention strategies based on the findings. Despite the continuing debates on the value of error correction, especially in relation to 'World Englishes', language accuracy remains a key factor in determining academic success. This is of particular concern in the South African multi-lingual context and in the light of the under-performance of South African students as evidenced in international comparative studies. The implications of the bimodal pattern of distribution in the review findings are discussed and pedagogically appropriate approaches and intervention strategies are suggested.

Key terms: language errors, error correction, distance education, academic writing skills, intervention strategies, South African English (SAE), Black South African English (BSAE), TESOL, World Englishes, linguistic competence.

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STATEMENT OF VERIFICATION: Statistical calculations

This is to certify that I, Johannes Stephanus MARITZ..... (full name) performed the statistical calculations in the dissertation entitled 'a critical review of language errors in the writing of distance education students'. I believe that appropriate statistical methods were chosen, and that they were correctly applied using the program R:

R Development Core Team (2012). R: A language and environment for statistical computing. R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria. ISBN 3-900051-07-0, URL <http://www.R-project.org/>.

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D Sc. (Wits)

Qualifications

14/11/2012

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STATEMENT OF VERIFICATION: Xhosa language features

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ACRONYMS/ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THIS DISSERTATION

AR - Acceptability rating

BSAE - Black South African English

CFI English - Cape Flats English

DE - Distance Education

EFL - English as a foreign language

ENL - English Native Language

ESL - English Second Language

FET - Further Education and Training

FTFL - Face-to-Face learning

LoLT - Language of learning and teaching

LSK0108 - Language and Learning Skills

L1 - First Language

L2 - Second Language

OBE - Outcomes-based Education

SAE - South African English

SES - Socio-economic status

TESOL - Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

UNISA - University of South Africa

WE - World Englishes

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Accuracy in writing is important in the academic environment. Despite the continuing debate on what constitutes accuracy and which standards to use in judging the quality of students' written work, the fact remains that they are penalised for inaccurate language use, especially when intelligibility is compromised. At tertiary level, students for whom the language of learning and teaching (LoLT) is an *additional* one are frequently at a linguistic disadvantage due to their inadequate mastery of the language of instruction and academic discourse. In consequence, they often fail. These students need, and in fact expect, guidance in the use of the LoLT in order to further their academic goals. This would include receiving assistance in attaining accuracy in the use of the conventions of the target language.

The research originated from my observations and concerns as a tutor at the Parow Learning Centre of the University of South Africa (hereafter Unisa), and arose from the desire to assist students who encounter difficulties in their attempts to master academic writing in a distance education (hereafter DE) context. The LoLT of Unisa is English, which is an additional language for the majority of the target group.

This chapter provides an outline of the research undertaken and discussed in this dissertation. The aim of the research is stated, the background is sketched, and the rationale for the research is provided. This leads to a discussion of the research problem, followed by a description of the research design and methodology, including data-collection techniques and data analysis. In conclusion, the chapters of the dissertation are briefly outlined.

1.2 Aim of the study

The error review aims to pinpoint problem areas in the written language usage of students studying in a distance education (hereafter DE)¹ environment and to suggest possible ways of addressing these effectively. With this aim in mind, the study examined a corpus

¹ Holmberg *et al.* (2005:166) describe distance education as "a form of teaching and learning which is not under the supervision of teachers present with their students in lecture rooms or generally on the same premises, but which benefits from the support of a tutorial organisation".

(n=100) of student assignments with a view to identifying and classifying language errors² made by the target group. These errors, as defined by the study, are described and classified as a basis for fostering the development of academic writing skills in similar groups in the future. This leads to a number of suggestions for possible intervention, including an examination of learning materials and the formulation of effective feedback strategies to improve students' academic writing skills. It is envisaged that this review will provide a stepping stone to further error analysis and intervention strategies.

1.3 Background

The target student body comprised distance education students of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at Unisa. These entry-level students were registered for the module *Language and Learning Skills* LSK0108³ which was designed to improve students' academic reading and writing skills. The perceived difficulties experienced by these students, especially in the area of language usage, is a cause for concern in the specific academic context of this dissertation, in which language accuracy is important and inaccuracy is penalised and could lead to failure, even if the content is adequate. Thus it is important to identify these 'errors' and find effective means of intervention in order to break the cycle of persistent failure as a result of inaccurate language usage. It was therefore decided to research the issue in order to obtain empirical evidence which could serve as a foundation to rendering assistance to the students.

Not only are Unisa students from a diversity of demographic backgrounds, but in most cases English is an additional language and their difficulties are exacerbated by the minimal lecturer-student contact and lack of day-to-day classroom interaction. The number of students registered for LSK0108, as well as those registered for tutorial classes at the time of the research, is provided in Appendix A.

² The term *language error* is contextually defined in section 2.2.3 of this dissertation.

³ This module (adapted from the access module LSK011-9) originated from an investigation launched at Unisa in 1995 in response to the Senate discretionary admission of students who had obtained a senior certificate but without the matriculation exemption required for university admission, and of students with foreign qualifications. The module was designed "to equip learners with the language and learning skills that are necessary for success in the first year of undergraduate study" (*Research report on Language and Learning Skills* 2001:3). The outcomes include the ability to "communicate effectively using ... written English that is appropriate for university study" (3).

Demographically, the target group in this study consisted of Afrikaans-speaking students from middle- and lower-middle class communities around Cape Town; and South African students, mainly from the poor communities of Langa, Khayelitsha and Gugulethu.⁴ The target group also included immigrants from Zimbabwe and one Russian-speaking student married to an Afrikaans-speaking South African. These demographics reflect the increasingly heterogeneous nature of student populations at Unisa, as well as at other universities locally and internationally. The distribution of the home-language groups of the participants in this study is reflected in the following percentages.⁵

Home language	% of total
Xhosa	52
Xhosa/English	2
Afrikaans	18
Afrikaans/English	16
Sesotho	2
Sesotho/English	1
Zulu	1
Shona	5
Shona/English	2
Russian	1

The largest group in the study comprised South African black students (58%), whose communicative command of English was generally poor, possibly due to various socio-economic and political factors such as poverty and other consequences of the apartheid system.⁶ The under-preparedness of similar target groups in the South African distance education context has been discussed in Spencer (1997, 1998, 2005); Spencer *et al.* (2005); Pienaar (2005); and Lephalala and Pienaar (2008). Anecdotal evidence obtained by observation of student interaction on campus suggests that these students

⁴ These townships developed under the apartheid policies of segregation. While Langa is a more established area near the middle-class suburb of Pinelands, Gugulethu and Khayelitsha are situated on the Cape Flats, some 15 to 20 kilometres outside Cape Town. This area is rife with socio-economic problems such as drug abuse, gangsterism and violent crime.

⁵ These figures show that some students declared that they had two ‘home’ languages. As it is frequently difficult to determine ‘home language’ in a multilingual country such as South Africa, it was initially decided to categorise these students separately. Consequently, in these cases, students were not asked to choose a dominant home language, although at a later stage of the research it was ascertained that Xhosa was the dominant language of the two students who had claimed both English and Xhosa as a ‘home’ language, and the data was adjusted accordingly.

⁶ One of the features of the apartheid system was a segregated education policy. The education provided for black students was known as Bantu Education and concentrated on skills training to the detriment of academic learning.

communicate almost exclusively through the medium of their home language when in the company of their peers.

The local variety of English spoken by Xhosa students (52% of the participants) can be described as Black South African English (hereafter BSAE), which is defined by Coetzee-Van Rooy and Van Rooy (2005:1) “as a variety of ‘South African’ English which is further specified as ‘Black’ to indicate its origin ... and its status as a language spoken by speakers who have already acquired at least one other language.”⁷ While it would seem that this variety has, for various sociolinguistic reasons, not yet stabilised (Spencer 2011b), it appears that it has begun to develop recognisable features (De Klerk & Gough 2002; Van Rooy 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Spencer 2011a, 2011b).

Given the ever-growing body of research, this dissertation attempts to ascertain which features of BSAE were present in the target group, suggest possible reasons for the features, and consider what intervention, if any, would be necessary in dealing with similar groups in the future. For example, my experience as a Unisa tutor at the Parow regional centre has shown me that one of the characteristic grammatical features of the BSAE spoken by the target group is that there are no equivalents to the gender-based pronominals “he/she/it” and their grammatical variants (“him/her/it” and “his/her/its”), and that gender confusion could be attributed to first-language influence. Black speakers of English furthermore frequently prefer using a noun where a pronoun would suffice, for example: “John told Mpho that Mpho must tell the sister of John...” Similarly, due to the absence of a shortened apostrophic form to denote possession in the indigenous languages, students would use constructions such as “the sister of John” instead of “John’s sister”. The use of the article is also a cause of confusion, due to its absence in the home-language construction. Furthermore, sentence structure tends to be characterised by circumlocution, which could result in muddled syntax. These observations were examined empirically in the research.

⁷ Spencer (2011a:137) points out that BSAE is a “contested nomenclature because of its use of racial categories” and adds (137) that Schneider (2003:235) places South Africa in the category of “multilingual ancestral English”. While this caveat is acknowledged, it is argued the term BSAE is used in recent research to indicate an emerging language variety and is not intended to have negative racial connotations.

The other large group in this study comprised local so-called coloured students,⁸ 32% citing Afrikaans as their home language and 16% claiming both Afrikaans and English as home language. Typically, these participants communicate with their peers through the medium of a distinctive variety of Afrikaans which differs in pronunciation and vocabulary from the spoken variety of the white⁹ Afrikaans-speaking students (who comprised 2% of the total number of participants).

The local variety of English spoken by the coloured students is commonly referred to as Cape Flats English (hereafter CFL English),¹⁰ which typically uses Afrikaans word-order and sentence-stress patterns, idiomatic Afrikaans expressions, and a sing-song intonation (Mesthrie & Bhatt 2008:57, 129). The latter feature affects the coloured students' *spoken* English and is therefore not directly relevant to this research which concentrates on written English.¹¹ However, other features such as vocabulary, word choice and idiomatic expressions can result in miscommunication with other groups.

My experience at the Unisa regional centre suggested to me that the main difficulties encountered by all the Afrikaans-speaking students seemed to result from first-language influence. In particular, they had difficulty with the system of English concord and tended to use the singular form of the verb with a plural subject (e.g. "Where's my books? I cannot find *it*."). This suggests the influence of Afrikaans, which does not have rules of concord and uses the generic "dit" [it] to indicate both singular and plural. The research project was designed to test these assumptions.

When considering the target group of this study, it is important to realise that language is embedded in a complex social and sociolinguistic matrix of cultural beliefs, customs and

⁸ In South Africa, the term 'coloured' denotes a person of mixed race. Again, care must be taken to avoid the negative racial connotations given to the word by the apartheid regime. However, it should be noted that this term is used in post-apartheid South Africa (and in research studies such as that of Mesthrie & Bhatt 2008) to indicate a particular demographic group which has developed distinctive cultural characteristics, and not to imply negative racial stereotyping. The current review uses the term in the same context.

⁹ Once again, negative racial connotations are not implied. The distinction between coloured and white students is made to indicate certain linguistic differences between these two groups.

¹⁰ Mesthrie and Bhatt (2008:57) describe this variety of English as that "spoken by people referred to as 'Coloured' (as opposed to 'Black') in and around Cape Town". The Cape Flats is an area that is home to a large coloured population, who were moved there in accordance with the forced removal practices of the apartheid regime.

¹¹ Occasionally pronunciation can influence orthography. For example, the word 'asthma' is often written as 'ashma' as a result of its pronunciation in CFL English.

practices. Sociolinguistically, language is not neutral, as the considerable variations in the attitudes to English of these different groups of speakers of so-called non-standard¹² English clearly show. For example, although English is frequently associated with imperialism and the hegemony of the English language (Phillipson 1992, 1996; Pennycook 1998), it is evident that the language is now increasingly being viewed in a more neutral light by black and coloured students who consider it to be a stepping stone to academic and career success (Mesthrie & Bhatt 2008; Jenkins 2009). Paradoxically, despite the different attitudes, covert racial tensions, prejudices and stereotypes between the two groups, my experience indicates that English is accepted as the language of contact and wider communication between them.

1.4 Rationale for the study

Research on this topic is highly relevant against the backdrop of current South African education, with its emphasis on the empowerment of learners at all levels. Writing skills present serious problems for this target group, whose difficulties are exacerbated by the challenges posed by distance learning with its lack of regular face-to-face classroom interaction with educators and peers. This is corroborated by recent research (Spencer 1997, 1998, 2005; Pienaar 2005; Lephalala & Pienaar 2008). There is thus a need for a further examination of the problems encountered in the teaching and learning of writing skills in the distance-education context, their possible causes, and the effectiveness of the current teaching methodology in addressing these problems.

The focus of the current review is on linguistic competence and ‘errors’ that recur in student writing and which are penalised in the assessment of their work. The research addresses these issues in the higher education and distance learning environment, highlights students’ errors (defined in terms of recent research and the context of this project), and prepares the ground for further research. Such an examination could also yield valuable information to practising tutors in the field of distance education and would thus make a contribution to assisting students in their written discourse.

¹² It must be noted that Standard English (and, by extension, non-standard English) is a problematic concept which the discussion of the theoretical background in Chapter 2 attempts to clarify

In research of this nature, it is important to bear in mind that local non-standard varieties of English are a sociolinguistic reality fulfilling various social and regional communicative functions, and that presenting them as inferior or deviant would be unnecessary and harmful to local students. On the other hand, the academic environment to which these students aspire requires mastery of an internationally recognised variety of Standard English, namely academic English. The challenge facing educators is to introduce this variety as an additive form of bidialectism (diglossia),¹³ which will ensure that students enjoy the benefits of their local variety of English as well as those that accrue from fluency in the variety of English used in the academic sphere.

From the outset, it is important to establish what constitutes ‘error’ in this context and to bear in mind changing attitudes to regional language varieties in relation to Standard English as defined. In brief, the point is made that the educator should be taught to realise that Standard English, despite being the most useful and widely used of all international varieties, is not intrinsically superior to other Englishes. However, this does not imply that it is not worth learning. If Standard English is seen as a neutral, effective instrument of wider communication, its empowering, additive value becomes clear. This is of particular importance in the international academic environment in which the students will ultimately have to operate. With this in mind, a working definition of linguistic ‘error’ was formulated for the purposes of this research and in the context of the aims of the LSK0108 module.

While the focus of the review was on language usage, it was not the intention of this project to advocate a product-based, form-focused approach to the treatment of errors. This will be made clear in the discussion of intervention strategies in the final chapters. It was, however, believed that highlighting the most frequently made language errors, defined for the purposes of this dissertation as “language use that is in violation of the conventions of the target variety” (Louw 2006:33), and then extrapolating some explanations for them, would assist educators in their understanding of students’ language difficulties and enhance the effectiveness of the overall response to student writing, as well as that of other intervention strategies.

¹³ An additive view of language proficiency strives to add a language or language variety to the student’s existing repertoire. Bidialectism indicates proficiency in (or the use of) two dialects or varieties of the same language.

It is hoped that this angle of research will assist both researchers and educators in facilitating learning, designing relevant materials within a distance education framework, and generating ideas for further research.

1.5 Statement of the problem

The problems encountered by this target group are similar to those of the Practical English group studied by Spencer (1998) in an unpublished thesis. Spencer points out that the majority of students enrolled for the course were “learning English as an additional language” (16). She notes that, although skills obtained in the first language (L1) can be transferred to the second language (L2), negative transfer¹⁴ can also occur. The problem is exacerbated in instances where literacy has not been established in the L1 and in cases where the L2 has been inadequately taught (16). In this context, these two problems often apply to the same students, who thus face a ‘double bind’.

Furthermore, as Spencer (1998:16) mentions, certain social variables complicate the issue and produce a very poor learning environment. These include the legacy of the apartheid era which encouraged the dominance of the target language; the lack of desire of the learners to acculturate and mingle socially with members of the target culture; the fact that the L2 group is larger than that of the target language, and the problems caused by “remnants of past negative attitudes towards the target language group” (16). Despite the 12 years that have elapsed since Spencer’s study, my experience as a tutor suggests to me that many of these social variables are still applicable to the target group, although the negative attitudes towards the target language are not as apparent as before. On the contrary, many students seem to have an instrumental goal and are keen to master English, which is increasingly seen as an international language and a stepping stone to further career and educational opportunities. This perceived shift in attitude is yet to be empirically tested but is consistent with the increasing perception and use of English as a *lingua franca*, described by Mesthrie and Bhatt (2008:214) as the “use of English in conversations between people who are still in the process of mastering the language”.

¹⁴ Care should be taken not to overstate the concept of negative transfer since the term ‘additional language’ is now favoured.

Compounding the problem in the present situation is an education system that seems to be failing the students despite the earlier promise of redressing past imbalances and ensuring a good education for all learners. Problems associated with the implementation of Outcomes-based Education (OBE), and the related confusion caused by constantly changing (and often contradictory) departmental policy statements, have resulted in an uncertain and demotivating learning environment. This is particularly apparent in the schools in the townships and rural areas in which pupils were previously subjected to so-called Bantu Education, and from which the majority of the students who participated in this study originated. For this reason, this research investigated a further variable, namely the type of school that the students attended. The comparative research studies of Pretorius and Ribbens (2005) and of Pretorius (2008), which examined literacy (with the emphasis on reading skills) in South African schools, as well as the *PIRLS¹⁵ Summary Report* (Howie *et al.* 2008) which summarised the findings of an international study of reading proficiency by Mullis *et al.* 2006, indicate a bimodal¹⁶ pattern of distribution with significant differences between the schools studied in terms of governance, resources, teaching time, assessment and accountability. Although the sample group of the current review was too small to support definite conclusions, it was hoped that the findings would indicate whether there are correlations, in the context of academic writing, with this previous research, which emphasised reading ability.

1.6 Research design and methodology

1.6.1 Research approach

The research included a study of sources combined with quantitative elements in the form of the calculation and tabulation of results.

The main descriptors (error, error correction, distance education, and academic writing skills) were identified and defined within the context of the current research and of the

¹⁵ The acronym PIRLS indicates Progress in International Literacy Study

¹⁶ A bi-modal pattern of distribution indicates that one mode is very low and the other very high. For example, in the case of the South African studies, the low score came from learners who were mainly from largely poor, dysfunctional schools and the other from learners of all races in largely ex-Model C schools (previously catering for white pupils but now increasingly multi-racial), and private schools.

target group. Of particular interest was the controversial error-correction debate, as well as the problem of marrying the exigencies of academic writing to the current research on World Englishes, particularly BSAE. With this in mind, a working definition of ‘error’ within the context of this research was formulated. This definition was not intended to be generally prescriptive, but provided a basis for discussing how many of these ‘errors’ were characteristic of the home languages represented, and to what extent these should be accepted within the context of academic writing. These issues provided a theoretical background to the critical evaluation of a selection of scripts, tentative explanations for language errors, and suggested intervention strategies designed to address these errors appropriately.

1.6.2 Ethical considerations

The researcher obtained written consent (see Appendix B) from the students who participated in the research study. Before writing the essay, the participants had received a full and clear explanation of what was expected of them so that they could make informed choices whether or not to participate voluntarily. The researcher also gave an overview of all steps to be followed during the research. Furthermore, potential participants were informed that they would have the right to discontinue their participation at any point, despite having given initial consent. They were assured that the researcher would always be available for any further explanation or clarification, if needed, and were given the opportunity to accept or decline the invitation to participate in the study. All volunteering participants were requested to sign the consent form once they were sure that they understood the scope and process of the research. This was done in the presence of all the participants and was witnessed by a peer.

The parameters of the confidentiality of any information they supplied were also discussed with the potential participants during the information session. Consistent with what they had been told, no names, addresses or student numbers were used in this study. Each script was (randomly) allocated a number, such as “Script 1”.

1.6.3 Data collection techniques

The data comprised the first 100 words of a corpus of 100 essays written by entry-level Unisa students registered for the LSK0108 module and attending the Parow Learning

Centre. The essay assignment was confined to a given topic (“*Should the death penalty be reinstated?*”) in order to eliminate the variables which may occur should a variety of topics be surveyed. Convenience sampling was used for the reasons given in Chapter 3 (p.56, section 3.2.1). The research took place at the beginning of the semester before students had been exposed to any teaching or learning at the Learning Centre. This obviated any influence that the learning materials or the Learning Centre might have had at a later stage of the course.

The assistance of two experienced markers with postgraduate qualifications in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) was enlisted for the purposes of reliability and accuracy. Each marker received unmarked copies of the essays and marking was carried out independently, after an initial consultation regarding the error types and categories. The first 100 words of each essay were thoroughly marked for language errors, which were classified into the broad categories of morphological, lexical, syntactical and mechanical errors as adapted from the research of Ferris (2002:113–116) (Appendix C).

Each essay was first read through, then marked intensively (using codes to indicate each type of error) (Appendix D). Scripts were then reread to check the accuracy of the marking. During the marking process, consultation took place in order to clarify the definition and scope of certain error categories.

1.6.4 Data analysis

After all the errors had been noted, the raw data was quantified in the form of tables and taxonomies before being statistically analysed in order to reflect an accurate picture of the distribution of errors. For example, the number of errors per group was normalised (by calculating the mean or average number of errors per group). Interrater variance was also considered and the reasons for any discrepancies were investigated.

Cognisance was taken of the problem involved in drawing conclusions from the errors of the smaller groups. Although it is questionable whether anything can be learned about the language skills of groups with only one or two participating students, it was decided to retain all the groups in the initial stages. The reason was that they were representative of

the heterogeneous nature of the LSK0108 student group, but an Analysis of Variance was conducted in the later stages of the research to counter the effects of the small groups.

The patterns that emerged from the data contained significant clues as to the origin of the errors (for example, first-language influence or the type of school attended). This led to suggestions for further intervention, with an emphasis on responses to students' writing and other relevant strategies suggested by the findings. These have been incorporated into the final chapters of the study.

1.7 Chapter outline

Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the review and describes the aims and background of the study. It then continues with a discussion of the rationale for the research and a statement of the problem that the study addresses. This is followed by a description of the research design and methodology, which includes the research approach, ethical considerations, data collection techniques, and data analysis. The chapter concludes with a chapter outline.

Chapter 2 consists of the literature review that constitutes the theoretical background to the research and commences with a preamble acknowledging the research that provided the impetus for this dissertation. The nature of 'error' is then discussed with a view to defining the concept in the context of World Englishes and to reach a working definition of 'error' for the purposes of this research. This leads to a discussion of academic literacy in the South African context and of language learning in distance education. The error correction debate is then discussed and includes the opposing views of researchers, in particular those of Ferris (1995, 1999, 2002, 2004, 2006) and Truscott (1996, 1999). Arising from this debate is a discussion of the theory of fossilisation and of research on editing and revision, both in the international and the South African TESOL context. The latter includes research undertaken in a distance education (DE) environment, specifically at the University of South Africa (Unisa). Effective written feedback is examined in the light of the foregoing discussion and the treatment of specific error types is also considered before the focus narrows to an examination of study materials for the LSK0108 module (the target group of this dissertation). The chapter concludes with a

summary of the status of the two major controversies addressed by the literature review and indicating the position taken by the current review.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology adopted by the research and includes an overview of the study, as well as a description of ethical considerations, data collection and data analysis.

Chapter 4 provides the findings of the review and, after a preamble and introduction, presents the raw data of the findings, followed by detailed statistical manipulation of this data, including the means for the groups involved and interrater reliability. Results in respect of language groups and schools attended by the target group are presented and discussed. The chapter concludes with an overview of features of South African English (SAE), particularly Black South African English (BSAE), found in the corpora.

Chapter 5 discusses the implementation of intervention strategies in the context of the findings of the error review. The relevance of the theoretical background is reiterated, after which practical suggestions are given with regard to the timeframe of the module, the format of study materials, and, in particular, the manner in which specific language errors can be dealt with in the contexts of academic language, distance education and the balance between form and a communicative approach to academic writing. Bearing these contexts in mind, suggestions for effective written feedback are then made. Other resources, such as online intervention and learning centres, are also briefly mentioned.

Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation with a consideration of the objectives of the review and whether these have been achieved. The researcher reiterates the position adopted towards the two major debates (namely the error correction controversy and the debate on World Englishes) that form the theoretical background to the implementation of the suggested intervention strategies. The issue of identifying errors is then mentioned, followed by a discussion of the findings of the review and the implications of these findings. The subsequent discussion of intervention strategies deals with error treatment by means of written feedback, learning materials and assignments. The chapter continues with a description of the limitations of the research and suggestions for further research, and concludes with an overview of the chapter and closing comments on the review as a whole.

1.8 Conclusion

This introductory chapter has described the aims and background of the study and provided the rationale for the review and a statement of the problem the research set out to address. The chapter continued with a description of the research design and methodology, specifically the research approach, ethical considerations, data collection techniques, and data analysis employed by the study. Finally, an outline of the contents of each chapter was given in order to provide an overview of the investigation and the approach adopted by the intervention strategies suggested by the research findings. Throughout this chapter, emphasis was placed on the purpose of the error review, which aims to assist students in their attempts to master academic writing in the challenging DE environment.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review begins with an evaluation of the unpublished master's dissertation of Wissing (1987) which provided the impetus for the present research. This literature survey progresses from a study of texts that provide a broad theoretical framework to those dealing with the more specific issues that were researched. In the course of the review, relevant research on distance education, language learning, error correction, academic literacy, 'World Englishes', and the treatment of specific error types is discussed. The literature review negotiates its way between two hotly contested issues: firstly, the so-called 'deficit-versus-liberation' view of World Englishes and, secondly, the debate on the value of error correction. Existing tutorial material for the target group is also examined with the view to possible future intervention.

2.1 Preamble

The initial idea for the present research was derived from an investigation of errors made by black¹⁷ South African senior secondary learners and teacher trainees. In his master's dissertation, Wissing (1987) examines target-language contact and first-language influence (which he terms "interference") in the acquisition of proficiency in English. His research was based on written work submitted by 124 senior secondary Soweto¹⁸ pupils and 75 trainee teachers from a teacher training college in Soweto. The sample group comprised speakers of Zulu, Tswana, South Sotho, Xhosa, Swati, Tsonga and Venda. Wissing describes this group (187) as being "representative of a typical cosmopolitan Black urban school population".

Learners at one of the schools had been taught by first-language speakers of English for five years, whereas the learners at the other two schools had been taught exclusively by black second-language speakers of English. The topic of the essay used in the research was whether the prescribed literature was relevant to modern life. The length of the essay

¹⁷ The ethnic divisiveness of the term 'black' within the context of the apartheid regime is acknowledged. However, in recent research the word 'black' has assumed a more neutral connotation with reference to Black South African English (BSAE) as a developing variety of English.

¹⁸ Soweto refers to the area originally known as the South Western Township, outside Johannesburg. It was a racially zoned 'black location' (black residential area) under the repressive policies of the apartheid regime.

was restricted to two A4 pages and the work was completed in the classroom under the supervision of teachers. Wissing (1987:12) points out that, although the topic “demanded a literary approach”, the research data was interpreted “in terms of the grammatical, lexical, syntactical, phonological and stylistic errors revealed in each essay”.

The essays were processed in three stages. Each essay was first read through and then marked intensively using codes for each type of error. Finally, after an interval, the essay was read through again to check the marking and to alter the error-correction data if new errors were noted. Errors were then tabulated and classified into six broad classes, namely grammar, lexis, syntax, phonology, style and punctuation.

The method of error analysis was that of ‘interference analysis’ which Wissing (1987) describes as “following the deviant structure or item back to the first language to isolate, where possible, the cause of error in the nature of the first language” (187). Wissing’s findings were restricted to instances of first-language influence in all groups.

In the current post-apartheid situation, and given the development of research since 1987, critical awareness of Wissing’s vocabulary is essential. The implication that all errors are a result of “interference” and are “deviant” has been widely questioned and will be discussed in this chapter (see pp.18–19, section 2.2.2.). Furthermore, Wissing’s uncritical use of the labels ‘first’ and ‘second’ language does not show awareness that the reality (especially for black students) is deeply complex, as was shown in the groups investigated in the present review (see pp.60–61).

In summary, Wissing’s dissertation was written more than 20 years ago for a different target group and under very different socio-political circumstances, namely the policies of racial segregation under the apartheid regime. This would account for the demographically homogenous target group (that is, in terms of race). In addition, Wissing’s methodology and research base, as well as his theoretical framework, while valid at the time, obviously do not take into account recent developments in research, especially on error correction and World Englishes, and thus need to be extensively updated in this regard. Of particular significance is the changing attitude to national and regional varieties of English which are increasingly becoming regarded as legitimate rather than “deviant”.

Wissing (1987:12) notes that certain problems regarding the classification and interpretation of data were manifest from the outset and that some of these were “only imperfectly resolved”. He discovered that, while it is relatively simple to identify an error, it is more difficult to classify it, and even more difficult to explain why it has occurred (12).

Furthermore, he cautions against attaching too much importance to actual percentages or numbers and types of errors, believing that these should be viewed as “indications of relative types and frequencies rather than as absolute, empirically tested items” (Wissing 1987:12). He also points out that issues such as avoidance strategies should be borne in mind when considering the results “lest concentration on errors at the expense of other ... considerations leads to false conclusions” (12). Despite these caveats, Wissing (12) avers that errors are significant because they can indicate the learner’s progress (in terms of accuracy) to the teacher, are a means of assisting the researcher in formulating theories of language leaning, and can be used by the learner as a device to track his/her own learning.

Arguably, a similar post-apartheid study that takes into account the changed socio-linguistic dynamics of the country and current research developments could make a valuable contribution to the present educational context. For example, Wissing’s survey yields insight into errors made by the speakers of Black South African English (BSAE) of his target group. This needs to be reconsidered in the light of recent research on the current state and status of BSAE (De Klerk & Gough 2002; Van Rooy 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2010) which studies the changed status as well as the changing nature of BSAE and its position as a World English (WE) variety.

An additional dimension of the current research is the inclusion in the target group of speakers of languages other than the so-called ‘black’ South African languages studied by Wissing. These remaining languages include Afrikaans, other African languages such as Shona, and in one case a European language (Russian). This heterogeneous target group is representative of a tutorial class at the University of South Africa and provides a range that was not accessible, for socio-political reasons, to Wissing who worked in a segregated society.

A further dimension in the case of the current study is the context of distance learning, which presents challenges not applicable to Wissing's research. The particular challenges of distance education include

- the geographical distance between students and lecturers and students and peers;
- minimal face-to-face contact;
- logistical and administrative problems not found in a face-to-face learning (FTFL) environment.

2.2 The nature of ‘error’

2.2.1 Differing definitions of ‘error’

As Louw (2006:32–33) points out, definitions of the concept of ‘error’ display a “lack of conformity”. Furthermore, many researchers distinguish between errors, mistakes and slips (see Ellis 1996:50–54; Hartman & Stork 1997:116). Hartman and Stork describe errors as being “systematic, governed by rules, and [which] appear because a learner’s knowledge of the rules of the target language is incomplete”. Mistakes, on the other hand, are “unsystematic features of production that speakers would correct if their attention were drawn to them” (116). Crystal (2003:98) concurs that errors “are assumed to reflect, in a systematic way, the level of competence”, but describes ‘mistakes’ as “performance limitations that a learner would be able to correct”.

By contrast, Van Rooy (2006:62) asserts that “learners do not make mistakes in any meaningful sense of the word. They display (are displaying!) their mastery of a different grammatical system”. Here Van Rooy seems to be using the term ‘mistakes’ synonymously with ‘errors’, but makes the important point that errors can be part of the learner’s developing language system. He argues that students are using a form of South African English (SAE) – a different variety from the Standard English in which they are being tested. This viewpoint also casts doubt on the concept of an interlanguage as a stage on the path to the mastery of Standard English. Thus it is evident that the definition of ‘error’ is further complicated by recent discussions on ‘World Englishes’ (WE) and the

extent and contexts in which regional or local varieties of English are acceptable. The problem faced by the educator is whether (and how) to deal with these distinctions, particularly regarding the relative seriousness of ‘errors’, ‘mistakes’ and ‘slips’ (careless oversights) as defined by the research.

2.2.2 ‘Error’ in the context of World Englishes

Jenkins (2006:157) describes World Englishes (WEs) as referring “to the indigenized varieties of English in their local contexts of use”. The diffusion of varieties of English has elicited a growing body of research which has led to the questioning of previous, conventional norms of correctness.

In describing the diffusion of World Englishes, Kachru (1990) and Mesthrie and Bhatt (2008) refer to the following three ‘circles’:

- the Inner Circle, which is described as “influential ENLs [English Native Languages] that are ‘norm providing’”(Mesthrie & Bhatt 2008:29);
- the Outer Circle, which consists of ESLs [English Second Languages] that have their own spoken norms but tend to rely on the Inner Circle norms for formal written English; and
- the Expanding Circle, which comprises speakers of English as a foreign language (EFLs) “who have not developed internal norms and accordingly rely on external norms” (Mesthrie & Bhatt 2008:29).

This has stimulated debate among theorists, which has led to the questioning of exo-normative standards and attempts at determining acceptability ratings (AR), which indicate the extent to which language features are accepted by various target groups, particularly in the context of formal writing (Spencer 2011a, 2011b).

Kachru (1990:3) does not include South Africa in any of these circles due to its sociolinguistic complexity in terms of its “English-using populations and the functions of English”. However, an argument can be made for South Africa as belonging to the Outer

Circle since the widespread contact with English in South Africa obviates any possibility that English can be viewed as a foreign language in most parts of South Africa (Coetzee-Van Rooy & Van Rooy 2005:3). For the purposes of this study, South Africa was therefore regarded as belonging to the Outer Circle.

The Dynamic Model of Postcolonial Englishes by Schneider (2003) is relevant in the context of developing varieties of English. This has been described by Van Rooy and Terblanche (2010:358) as “the most recent and advanced model that accounts for the complex linguistic ecologies in former British colonies”. The authors believe that this is because the model “incorporates both native and non-native varieties in one coherent account” (358).

Schneider (2003:271) distinguishes five stages of language variation in the emergence of a New English, namely the

- foundation stage;
- exonormative stabilisation stage;
- nativisation stage;
- endonormative stabilisation stage;
- differentiation stage.

It is not the purpose of this review to discuss these stages in detail. What is relevant is the pedagogical implication of the model with reference to the position of South African varieties of English. There is evidence (Van Rooy & Terblanche 2010) that South African English is entering stage 4 (endonormative stabilisation). This stage presents problems to the educator as “there is a disjunction between the language tested and the language used by the majority of the population” (Spencer 2011a:137). Indeed, Spencer (137, 138) adds that

...despite progressive initiatives ..., the variety has not yet gained institutionalized recognition and research is needed to establish which features are stabilized and how far they are on the road to becoming acknowledged, stable features of a new variety of English.

Kachru's position elicited a response from Quirk (1990), who acknowledges the possibilities of the developing varieties of English but argues that Standard British or American English should be taught in Outer Circle classrooms. The reason is that these varieties represent an international norm which would be to students' disadvantage to ignore.

By contrast, Kachru (1990, 1991) emphasises the link between applied linguistics and sociolinguistic reality, arguing that Quirk's position implies a language 'deficit' in the case of users of other varieties of English. Kachru advocates an endonormative approach (later termed 'liberation linguistics' by theorists) which incorporates codifying regional varieties and using "local linguistic resources" (in Mesthrie & Bhatt 2008:202).

However, while Kachru favours endonormative models, he concedes that these should be extended and that students should be prepared to "cope with variation" (in Mesthrie & Bhatt 2008:202). This would suggest a point of intersection with Quirk, as Kachru does not recommend that Standard British and American English be avoided or ignored, but that each variety of English should be given a central place in its sociolinguistic milieu. The problem would seem to lie in the perception by purists (such as Quirk 1990) that these varieties are inferior to Standard British or American English. By contrast, Kachru (1991:6–7) believes that New Englishes are appropriate and necessary vehicles for creativity and communication in their social and cultural environments.

Kachru (1996a:252) concedes that, even though many researchers are willing to accept the ideas of multilingualism and multiculturalism, these issues are complex when attempting to formulate "hypotheses and attitudes" and their impact on "language data", and that researchers are "reluctant to modify, reformulate, revisit and reassess our favourite paradigms". He suggests that there is a gap between the theoretical acknowledgement of a reality of World Englishes and the more conservative view evident in testing in the classroom. This leads him to ask the pertinent question: "How does one account for the variation that is characteristic of every level of language in each variety?" (Kachru 1996b:141).

Kachru's question raises the problem of analysing research data. In dealing with this issue, Van Rooy (2010:3) comments:

When researchers adopt the world Englishes position, and turn their attention to variable data, they are confronted by the failure of formal linguistic paradigms to make available meaningful systems for the analysis of the data. In consequence, many well-intended analyses slide back into the terminology associated with what Kachru has termed the deficit approach.

Compounding the problem is the question of the preference of students and teachers in the Outer and Expanding Circles. The research conducted by Timmis (2002:240) investigated the degree to which "students should conform to native-speaker norms of English in an era when English is increasingly used in international contexts". From an evaluation of 600 questionnaires completed by students and teachers from over 45 countries, Timmis discovered that, in contrast to the majority of between 60–68% of respondents from the outer/expanding circle, participants from South Africa, Pakistan and India showed a reduced preference for native-speaker competence (34%). In a conference paper, Spencer (2011b:3) points out that this

...section of the research is significant in that it shows that there is a discrepancy between the representatives of the inner circle and the group representing the outer and expanding circles. This suggests that findings from inner-circle studies are not always transferable and that local research is vital.

In a similar vein, Spencer (2011b:4) shows that the findings of Timmis (2002) on issues of grammar demonstrated that all groups expressed a preference for native-speaker norms and, in contrast to other groups who favoured the mastery of both formal and informal grammar, the South African, Pakistani, and Indian groups demonstrated "an increased desire to require grammatical 'perfection' in formal contexts only" (Timmis 2002 in Spencer 2011b:4). Timmis (2002:248) points out that "teachers seem to be moving away from native-speaker norms faster than students are", which raises the question of the need to meet student expectations. This finding is corroborated by the research in a South

African context of Van der Walt (2001) and Coetzee-Van Rooy and Van Rooy (2005), and is also consistent with Jenkins's view (2006:162) that there is a "limited uptake" of World Englishes.

In discussing the opposite positions represented by Quirk (1990) and Kachru (1990, 1991), Phillipson (1992:197) poses the following question:

Should periphery-English speakers, in particular those ensconced in education systems, aim at an idealized exo-normative model (derived from standard British or American English), or an institutionalized endo-normative model (based on an educated indigenous variant)?

Phillipson (1992:198) argues that what lies behind the question of norms is essentially the issue of power and control, and that the worldwide shift towards linguistic and cultural emancipation also "signifies an end to the era with the British and Americans as guardians of a monopolistic global norm". The question of intelligibility, he argues, depends on whether students need English for national or international purposes.

On the issue of intelligibility, Van der Walt (2001:7–8) is of the opinion that "...errors are judged not only in terms of their effect on comprehensibility, but also in terms of the image that the learner projects". While one may or may not agree with the subjectivity of this statement, it should be acknowledged that a criterion of academic writing is that of language accuracy, currently judged by English or American Standard English norms. Ignoring this fact would therefore be unfair to students who aspire to develop competent academic writing skills.

As regards Phillipson's (1992:197) ideological position (made more extreme by his derogatory use of the words "ensconced" and "idealized" in the intended quotation) with reference to the exonormative model, it can be argued that it is not for the educator to presume to decide the current or future use to which the student's English will be put. A decision based on a subtractive¹⁹view could very well result in disempowerment, as the student would forego the opportunity to add another local or international language or

¹⁹ In contrast to the additive view of language proficiency, a subtractive view of language teaching aims to "subtract [from] rather than add a language" to the student's linguistic repertoire (Jenkins 2009:105).

language variety to his or her language proficiency. On the other hand, the student only stands to gain from an additive view of language proficiency in both the local and international standard varieties of English. By Phillipson's own admission (197–198), national borders have become permeable and the issue of intelligibility is as yet largely unresearched.

In dealing with the local varieties of English, it is important to bear in mind the opinion of Wolfson (1989:212–213) that they do not represent degenerations or corruptions of some perfect standard form but are the result of normal linguistic divergence. The local varieties are perfectly legitimate forms of communication for the groups concerned, but at the same time it must be acknowledged that, because of the students' aspirations to obtain academic qualifications, they would be at a distinct disadvantage if they did not acquire fluency in the form of institutionalised Standard English used in the formal, academic sphere. Educators should introduce this variety as an additive, and not as a superior, form of language usage, empowering students to enjoy the benefits of the international environment in which they might ultimately need to operate.

It seems fair to believe that students should not be locked into immutable, hermetically sealed local varieties of non-Standard English, nor be forced to adopt an uncompromisingly exonormative standard. Instead, they should be exposed to different varieties of local and international English as an extension rather than as a curtailment of their linguistic repertoire. This would enable them to code-switch and communicate with relative ease in both the local and international varieties of English. If students are assisted to understand the issues involved, and to accept the fact that learning the Standard English required by their academic course is not intended to stigmatise or marginalise their local variety, the standard local or international variety of English which is taught can be neutral, devoid of ideological baggage, and empowering.

It is thus important to establish what constitutes 'error' in the context of this research, bearing in mind changing attitudes to language varieties in relation to Standard English, a concept that in itself is embattled and problematic. Davies (1999:181) argues that, given the fact that Standard English is a set of abstract norms, a search for perfection, and not a finite and definable reality, the solution may be to accept the reality of the uncertainty surrounding the concept and divest it of its ideological baggage. Thus, for the concept to

be useful as a guideline in certain contexts, it should be seen as a neutral instrument of wider communication.

This means that Standard English, despite being the most useful and widely used of all international varieties, is not intrinsically superior to other Englishes. The challenge is to recognise the sociolinguistic reality of the local (non-standard) varieties of English and the communicative functions that they fulfil, while acknowledging that students aspire to an academic environment that requires fluency and accuracy in an internationally recognised variety of Standard English.

Pedagogically, as Van der Walt (2001) points out, there is a need for a norm in testing and “a particular language variant has to be selected as a norm” (2). Van der Walt discusses the development of new variants of English (particularly BSAE) and examines the implications for language assessment from a linguistic, ideological and, most importantly, an educational perspective. In the latter context, he considers the effect that new features of BSAE will have on language assessment, but cautions that decisions to change norms in this regard must be based on “empirical evidence of the stability of such features” (1) which he believes is currently inconclusive. He concludes that, while the development of such features should be acknowledged, a clear-cut norm is required in language assessment and that at present this norm remains Standard British English. However, he does acknowledge that while Standard British English “is likely to remain the norm … it is likely to include Standard BSAE” (8).

2.2.3 A working definition of ‘error’ for the purposes of this research

Louw (2006:33) makes the valid point that, while the distinction between errors, mistakes and slips is of interest when studying the process of language acquisition, it is “not so useful for teachers who simply want to mark an essay”. Louw states:

To distinguish whether something is indeed a slip and not an error would mean that intensive research would have to be done on the issue. This would not be useful in a marking environment. If there is anything that is not correct, then it is an error. Be it a slip or a mistake, the fact remains

that it is not optimal language use in that it is in violation of the conventions of the target variety (33).

For the purposes of this research, Louw's comments on "language use that is in violation of the conventions of the target variety" (33) are taken as a working definition of error, the target variety being the standard academic English to which the students aspire in the given context.

A conventional form of error classification has been adopted, based on the research of Ferris (2002) (see Appendix C). This is in no way to be seen as ignoring current research on norms and World Englishes and also Van Rooy's (2010:3) caution about sliding back into terminology associated with the deficit approach, but merely as a starting point from which observations about students' writing can be made.

2.3 Academic literacy in the South African context

The aim of the Language and Learning Skills (LSK0108) module is to assist Unisa students in developing the academic literacy skills essential to functioning successfully in a higher education environment. The module was introduced in order to improve the literacy skills of "students who had a senior certificate but not matriculation exemption and other students with foreign qualifications" (Unisa Research Report 2001:2) with a view to enabling them to gain access to first-year Unisa courses.

Van Dyk (2005:38, 39) points out that "significant numbers of students with high academic potential are at risk because of their low levels of academic literacy". Reasons cited for these low literacy levels are

- the unequal distribution of resources as a result of previous racial segregation policies;
- problems arising from changing syllabus paradigms; and
- the increasing preference of students to study in English, which is not necessarily their first language.

Van Dyk's article discusses the possible contribution that a placement test, followed by student support (appropriate to the institution), could have on academic performance. These suggestions, while valid, might be difficult to implement at a DE institution which is characterised by a lack of face-to-face interaction and a large and diverse student population distributed over a large geographical area. The latter factor, in particular, gives rise to logistical constraints not present in the study by Van Dyk.

Parkinson *et al.* (2008) question the effectiveness of academic literacy programmes and examine a Communication in Science course in which academic literacy was closely linked to the content of the course. Comparison of final tests for these groups showed improvement in performance in both reading and writing. The writers suggest that "mainstream lecturing staff need to build literacy work (such as reading assignments, essays and reports summaries) into their offerings and be prepared to scaffold student execution of these" (24). Once again, this would be easier in a FTFL environment with its regular interaction than in the DE context, but the article provides useful insights into the difficulties experienced by a student body similar to that of Unisa. The challenge is how to adapt relevant suggestions to DE.

Osman *et al.* (2008) examine the experiences of English Second Language (ESL) students attempting to master academic literacy at a mainstream university. The researchers believe that, apart from developing academic literacy skills, courses in academic literacy should "be concerned with how students learn in social contexts and what knowledge is included and what knowledge is excluded" (1). They point out that "academic writing in the context of the university is more than the ability to read and write; it is often the basis for the evaluation of students" (1). Again, it would be difficult to incorporate these ideas into the DE environment with its very limited social interaction and, in many cases, very tight, semester-based time frames, but the observation about the evaluation criteria should be remembered when providing feedback to students.

2.4 Language learning in the distance education context

Language learning, especially in adults, is highly complex, relying on fluctuating variables. The difficulties presented by this complexity are exacerbated in DE, which is characterised by linguistic and demographic diversity, as well as minimal or non-existent

face-to-face interaction with educators and student peers. In order to address these problems, research on language learning in a DE context should take into account the differences between DE and FTFL as they relate to language learning, and attempt to address the difficulties encountered by the DE student in learning a second language.

The characteristics of DE and of the factors that distinguish it from FTFL comprise a vast area of research which, for the purposes of this study, has been restricted to those aspects of direct relevance to the current project, namely language errors in the context of DE. Emphasis is placed on written error correction as being the major intervention strategy in the general absence of any face-to-face intervention.

The issue of lack of face-to-face interaction is dealt with by Saba (2000) in a discussion of the differences between DE and FTFL. Saba points out that the concept of interaction is a common theme in DE research, and that this is not necessarily a negative factor. He states that in DE, “interaction transcends the idea of distance in its physical sense and embraces the discussion of teaching and learning in general” (4). This is always a valid point, provided satisfactory interaction takes place in the form of written feedback or online intervention. Unfortunately, it would seem that, in the case of the target group of this dissertation, regular and meaningful intervention was lacking due to the restrictions of the semester course and, in some cases, inadequate or delayed feedback. Contact is possible in regional learning centres, but the number of students using this facility is restricted (see Appendix A).

According to White (2005, 2006), in an examination of how the theory of learner-centred language learning can be applied in DE, the ideal situation is one in which “learners both construct and operate at the learner-context interface, according to their own needs, preferences and beliefs and also in response to the demands and requirements of the learning context” (White 2005:67). White believes that students should develop self-knowledge, knowledge of the learning process, and of their environment. They should also attempt to adapt these to the exigencies and opportunities offered by the available DE programme or course. In a later article, White (2006:251) notes a move away from a “linear model based on fixed content” towards one with “fluid course elements which are developed through the contributions and interactions among learners and teachers, and

the written and spoken texts they produce". It is, however, unclear how these can be implemented within the stringent timeframe required by many writing courses.

The variables affecting distance learning were investigated by Wang *et al.* (2008) in a research study that sampled 135 adult distance learners (68 females and 67 males). Based at the Beijing Radio and Television University, these students were majoring in software development and the application of electronic information technology. The aim of the research was to determine the interaction between, *inter alia*, learning, motivation, learning strategy and self-efficacy, and how these affected learning results. In order to determine this, self-assessment questionnaires were distributed to the 135 distance learners and, as a result of the findings, the researchers claim that relationships exist between self-efficacy, learning strategies, and learner results. Specifically, positive learner motivation and effective learning strategies were found to correlate with positive and predictable results. In a South African DE context, and within the narrower focus of this dissertation, which concentrates on accuracy in writing, emphasis should be placed on the importance of encouraging students to develop a sense of ownership of their written work as advocated by the corpus of research conducted at the University of South Africa by Spencer (1997, 1998, 2005), Spencer *et al.* (2005), Pienaar (2005) and Lephalala and Pienaar (2008).

The difficulty of tailoring DE courses and feedback strategies to suit the individual needs of students is demonstrated by Thang (2005) in a study of DE Malaysian learners' perceptions of English proficiency courses. The aim of the research was to investigate the issue of support and guidance as perceived by the target group. This was carried out by means of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. It was found that students who participated in the interview claimed to want more support and guidance while those who completed the questionnaires wanted greater freedom. The researcher had difficulty in accounting for these differences, but it is noteworthy that these imply that there is a range of needs and expectations and, consequently, a challenge in catering for individual needs. This is exacerbated by the DE environment in which the absence of personal contact makes it difficult to solve these problems by means of face-to-face dialogue. Another problem would be that of developing an approach that gives sufficient learner support while encouraging the autonomy that many students want and which is an important component of successful DE study. Given the focus of the current review, learning

materials and intervention strategies will have to be developed to meet the challenge of balancing support from lecturers and the students' sense of ownership of their written work.

In a comparison of two distance language programmes at two European institutions of higher education, Ros i Sole and Hopkins (2007) discuss the challenges faced by DE, in particular as the result of the pedagogical move “away from the cognitive models to more socioconstructive approaches to learning” in which “language learners assume a central role in the language learning experience” (351). The researchers point out that the student-centred approach emphasises “collaboration and interaction among learners”. Ros i Sole and Hopkins agree with White (2005) that the central issue is the learner dimension, which incorporates the characteristics, needs, experiences and conceptualisations of the student. A serious challenge is that of fostering and developing relationships in an environment in which the various parties are geographically distant from one another.

Ros i Sole and Hopkins (2007) further note the difference between “content-based” academic subjects and language learning which “is based to a much greater extent on the acquisition of skills” (352), and point out that for language acquisition to be successful, learners must be exposed to adequate comprehensible input (Krashen 1984, 1985) and also be given opportunities to produce comprehensible output (Ros i Sole 2007:352). The challenge presented by the environment of this dissertation is to provide input which will increase the accuracy and fluency of student writing (output) in a DE context.

As Ros i Sole and Hopkins (2007) point out, the problems are more acute in the acquisition of oral skills in DE, whereas writing skills can be practised fairly easily by means of post, e-mail or in a virtual writing environment. However, certain challenges are present in the assessment of and feedback on written work. For instance, assessment should be “congruent with and closely reflect the course material” and the tutors’ intentions should be clear to the students. Appropriate reflective tasks, “meaningful dialogue between tutor and student that is not exclusively focused on marks” (353), as well as the effective use of “new technologies” (354) are suggested.

According to White (2005, 2006) and Ros i Sole and Hopkins (2007), a major challenge in distance language learning is the need for learners “to develop knowledge of themselves, their learning processes, and the possibilities offered by their environment, and [to] try to integrate those with the distance educational possibilities available to them” (Ros i Sole & Hopkins 2007:353). In the implementation of these strategies and techniques, the issue of student autonomy and metacognitive skills, defined as “those that relate to the individual’s previous experiences, self-knowledge and expectations for a particular learning task” (353), was important.

The ideas of White (2005, 2006) and Ros i Sole and Hopkins (2007) warrant careful consideration and should go far in addressing the problems presented by language learning in a DE context. However, in order for the challenges to be met, students need sufficient time to develop their language skills, engage with the learning materials and form a relationship with the educators, despite the physical distance between the parties involved. Unfortunately, given the severe restrictions of the semester course for LSK0108 – which allowed for only one written assignment and therefore little time for any intervention or exposure to the target language at the time of the research – it would not have been possible for such ideas to be implemented without radically revising the timeframe of the course. Consequently, the present study will make recommendations based on the available research for implementing the strategies suggested in the research literature, despite the constraints that the target group and the learning situation were and are probably still subject to.

2.5 The error-correction debate

Issues of error analysis and correction are of great importance in addressing the language problems of all students. It is therefore necessary to examine the current general research status of these issues including the pendulum swings that have taken place and the controversy that has arisen as a result of strongly held views both for and against error correction.

Research on error correction was given impetus by Truscott’s (1996) controversial article *The case against grammar correction in L2 writing*. Truscott’s article argues against the correction of language errors in students’ writing, positing that such correction should be

abandoned because it is not only ineffective but harmful. Truscott believes that error correction has no positive effect, given the nature of the correction process and its lack of correspondence to the language-learning process. He cites research that he claims demonstrates the lack of effectiveness of error correction in L1 learning (such as Knoblauch & Brannon 1981; Krashen 1984; Leki 1990). He then extrapolates these findings to the writing of L2 students, supplementing them with his own research, as well as with an overview of the history of research on L2 and what he believes these prove about the lack of value of error correction.

It should be noted that the studies specifically cited by Truscott (1996) to disprove the theory that the correction of language errors is effective (Cohen & Robbins 1976; Hendrickson 1978, 1981; Semke 1984; Robb *et al.* 1986; Kepner 1991; Sheppard 1992) did not in fact purport to prove the effectiveness of error correction *per se* but were examining the effects of different types and strategies of correction. For instance, Robb *et al.* (1986:91) argue against corrective feedback based “exclusively on sentence-level errors” although they concede that “if teachers consider their students in need of some form of corrective feedback at the editing stage of writing, then … focus on form is justified” (91).

In the same vein, Truscott (1996) avers that Hendrickson (1978) based his opinion of the value of error correction on his findings that learners have difficulty in identifying their own mistakes and thus need guidance, presumably from an educator, to discover them. In commenting on Hendrickson’s findings, Truscott (1996:357) states that “this is no doubt an accurate statement about students’ limitations, but as an argument for correction it simply begs the question, making the groundless (and, I would argue, false) assumption that students will benefit by having their errors pointed out to them”. It could be asked if it is not Truscott himself who “begs the question” in his criticism of Hendrickson’s article since he fails to offer practical alternatives to the error-correction techniques offered by Hendrickson, while admitting that students have limitations.

It can be also be questioned whether Hendrickson’s (1978) article has as its main focus an argument in favour of correction. Although the question whether correction can benefit language students is asked in the introduction (216), Hendrickson’s implication, demonstrated in the rest of the article, is that error correction is useful if carried out

appropriately. The main thrust of the article is a discussion of appropriate feedback techniques and how these can improve the efficacy of error correction – not whether it should take place at all. This difference in focus, although ostensibly slight, is nonetheless significant when considering Truscott's aspersions. It can be asked if Hendrickson would not have adopted a more empirical approach if his purpose had been to prove the effectiveness of error correction in opposition to the lack thereof.

Cohen and Robbins (1976) examined the effect of written correction received by three advanced ESL students and concluded that the corrections did not seem to have any significant effect on their subsequent errors. However, this study does not dismiss the practice of error correction, as Truscott implies, but suggests that the questionable quality and consistency of the teachers' correction were responsible for the perceived lack of improvement in the students' language ability. In trying to prove that the study in question supports his theory of the ineffectiveness of error correction, Truscott (1996:331) seems to stretch the point by stating that "no reason was offered that better-done corrections would have helped". As this was not the purpose of Cohen and Robbins's study, the findings cannot be used to prove the ineffectiveness of all error correction.

In contrast to Truscott, Ferris (1999) is a strong advocate of the value of error correction. She points out that the L2 studies cited by Truscott "examined very diverse groups of subjects" (4). Several of the studies (Cardelle & Corno 1981; Lalande 1982; Semke 1984; Kepner 1991) investigated college-level foreign language students in the United States. Ferris (1999:4) notes that only the study by Fathman and Whalley (1990) was a "large-scale examination of ESL students in the US". Since the studies also employed a variety of research designs and instructional methods, Ferris (1999:5) believes the lack of generalisability makes Truscott's conclusions questionable. In addition, Ferris (5) notes that Truscott disregards the studies of Fathman and Whalley (1990) and Lalande (1982) which found that error correction had positive effects.

Furthermore, as both Truscott (1996) and Ferris (1999) point out, none of these studies had control groups who were given no correction whatsoever. Truscott (1996) concedes that a control group which is given no correction at all would be problematic for pedagogical and ethical reasons as this practice might arguably violate the relationship of

trust between educator and students. Truscott (359) also dismisses the strong desire for error correction demonstrated by students in many studies (Cohen 1987; Radecki & Swales 1988; Ferris 1995; Leki 1991) as unimportant and an aspect that could be changed easily. For instance, Leki (1991:205–206) found that out of a group of 100 students, 93 responded positively to the question “How important is it to *you* for your English teacher to point out your errors in grammatical forms … in your writing?” While Leki does express doubts about the value of these corrections in improving students’ writing in the long term, it can be argued that the feelings and needs of students are of importance and cannot be summarily ignored as Truscott would appear to be doing.

2.5.1 The fossilisation theory

A serious objection to Truscott’s ‘no correction’ philosophy is the possibility of fossilisation as a result of his methodology. De Wit (2007:3) defines fossilisation as “persistent erroneous forms and usages of the target language which are strongly resistant to change”. In an unpublished master’s dissertation, De Wit discusses the importance of suitable learning materials that are tailored to the learning needs of the student (107) and makes suggestions for the treatment of errors, claiming that “overlapping local and global erroneousness (repeatedly wrong discrete items which at the same time represent wrongly internalised grammatical concepts and/or impede the message) may thus be treated remedially” (112). The implication is that error correction is a helpful and significant strategy, even in the difficult case of fossilised language errors. Similarly, Brown (2007:276) points out that language learners “can benefit from feedback … indicating that a [language] form is in need of modification. Otherwise, in the absence of treatment, learners could perceive erroneous language as being *positively reinforced*.”

Calve (1992) also points out that there is a very real concern that uncorrected errors will become fossilised. Although Truscott (1996) dismisses this concern as ‘dubious’ in view of his ‘evidence’ that “correction is ineffective in general” (358), it can be argued that this circular argument does nothing to allay the reservations of language educators as yet unconvinced about Truscott’s central premise.

The issue of fossilisation is by no means uncontested, particularly in the light of research into World Englishes. Jenkins (2009:38) discusses attitudes towards new varieties of English and points out that

... implicit in these attitudes is the belief that the New Englishes are the result of a process known as fossilisation. In other words, the learning of English is said to have ceased (or ‘fossilised’) some way short of target-like competence, with the target being assumed to be either Standard British or Standard American English.

She feels that this idea is of dubious validity when considered from a sociolinguistic perspective. The question must therefore be asked to what extent persistent ‘errors’ are actually features of an emerging variety of English and thus to what extent they should be corrected (or modified). This leads one back to the as yet unresolved debate on acceptability ratings. However, in the light of the error correction controversy, arguments in favour of feedback as a means of preventing fossilisation are valid, provided that the target variety has been clearly identified.

2.5.2 Responses to Truscott: the continuing error-correction debate

Truscott’s controversial theory sparked a heated debate, with many researchers and educators – most notably Ferris (1999, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006), Ferris and Roberts (2001) and Chandler (2003, 2004) – arguing forcibly in favour of grammar correction.

In her rebuttal of Truscott’s (1996) article, Ferris (1999) examines the points of agreement as well as disagreement with Truscott, and examines the evidence that Truscott claims supports his argument. Ferris concludes that this evidence is flawed because of its selectivity, inadequacy, and lack of generalisability. She argues that Truscott has made an unacceptable “logical leap” in claiming that “research has proven that grammar correction never helps students” (5). Ferris further avers that problems in correcting errors stem from ineffective correction and not from the fact that correction takes place *per se*. Indeed, she believes that Truscott’s point of view is “premature and overly strong” (1) and she thus concludes with a plea for restraint, pointing out that “the issue of accuracy in writing is too important to be ruled out hastily” (10).

In his article *The case for the case against grammar correction in L2 writing classes*, Truscott (1999:11) states that the criticism levelled at his viewpoint by Ferris is “unfounded and highly selective” as it does not address large sections of the case against grammar correction and in some cases strengthens it. He disputes Ferris’s research evidence, claiming that this alleged evidence plays little or no role in the case for error correction (113). Truscott furthermore bemoans the “bias” in favour of language-error correction which leads to the belief that “critics [of error correction] must prove beyond any doubt that correction is never a good idea, while supporters need only to show that uncertainty remains” (111).

Ferris’s viewpoint is reinforced by that of Chandler (2003, 2004) who responds to Truscott by describing a study undertaken with two groups of students. (Chandler 2004). Students belonging to the experimental groups were required to revise an assignment shortly after receiving the first (corrected) draft. This group was compared with a control group whose errors were merely underlined and who completed corrections of these errors only at the end of the semester when all five first drafts of the assignment had been written. Chandler argues that since the experimental group in this study showed an improvement in accuracy, a strong argument can be made in favour of the efficacy of grammar correction. The subsequent work of Ferris (2002, 2003) reinforces these findings, and reiterates her arguments in favour of error correction. She gives an overview of research on responding to student writing, and evaluates product and process-based approaches as well as specific intervention strategies.

The nub of the debate is contained in a significant article by Ferris (2004) entitled *The “Grammar Correction” Debate in L2 Writing: Where are we and where do we go from here? (and what do we do in the meantime?)*. The article reaches the conclusion that existing research is incomplete and inconclusive. Ferris warns that it is premature to formulate conclusions and that educators should develop strategies (including the correction of errors) to assist students in the meantime. This is essential, especially in the case of DE where feedback plays a crucial role in the absence of face-to-face contact with lecturers or tutors. In the light of these arguments, the focus of the current research project was to review language errors in a target DE student population as a starting point in considering strategies that could be helpful to the target group. Error correction was

regarded as central to the intervention process in the DE context and thus is of great importance to the present study.

2.5.3 The revision and editing debate

The error-correction debate has stimulated an interest in revision and rewriting as a potentially valuable strategy in the development of writing skills. This strategy has become increasingly popular not only as a means of developing writing skills, but also of fostering a sense of ownership on the part of the students.

Parisi (1994) points out that students, in particular those unfamiliar with the tertiary-education environment, frequently fail to recognise the link between their performance (measured in terms of success or failure) as writers and the decisions they make when writing. Parisi posits that revision of the initial draft will make students aware of the importance and value of submitting a final draft that has been assessed and edited. This presupposes that time is available for intervention and redrafting.

Similarly, Tavers (1998) recommends that lecturers assist students in evaluating their own progress by giving them questions that focus on specific issues. This could obviate the problem of self-evaluation mentioned by Parisi because, in concentrating on specific issues, students would be guided to develop introspection and an objective assessment of their own work. It could be argued that it is unrealistic to expect students to be effective critics of their own work until some initial guidance is given.

Axelrod *et al.* (2001:357) agree with the efficacy of revision in the promotion of writing skills, arguing that

revision is a matter of consciousness-raising. Our job as writing teachers ... should be to raise our students' consciousness to teach them to recognise the strengths of their prose and to strengthen the weaknesses, to help them understand the tools of the writer's craft.

The issue of consciousness-raising is a valid one, and adds a further dimension to the editing debate. The argument could be made that, even though it is difficult (if not

impossible) to trace long-term improvement in specific error categories, general consciousness-raising will make students aware of their language usage, and this increased awareness will benefit them in the long term. While it may be difficult to prove this assertion empirically, it is one that could be taken seriously as offering a valid goal for educators and as a stepping stone to further research.

Axelrod *et al.* (2001) further claim that for revision to be effective, corrections should not be based on general advice but must take account of the student-writer's purpose and audience. Markers must avoid being merely "judges and error hunters" (51) because extensive comments and advice can cause students to feel discouraged and overwhelmed.

On the issue of encouraging students, Wilhoit (2003:82) recommends a positive approach to assessment, and urges assessors to "point out what students do well, explain why it is good and suggest how they might build on that success instead of focusing on errors". He notes that students are more conscious of their weaknesses than their strengths, and implies that this approach will cultivate self-confidence and motivation in addition to fostering a sense of ownership of the text.

For the same reason, Wilhoit (2003) believes that the marker should avoid correcting all errors as this practice can lead to the marker dominating the text. Some work should be left for the students to correct or edit for themselves. Students should "own" their improvements (82). This approach would also avoid the danger of the marker's appropriation of the student's writing.

The topic of ownership is addressed in an earlier study by Davis (1988). Disturbed by the apparent disregard of students for corrections made on their written work and their observed habit of throwing away corrected texts at the end of every year, Davis developed a card system, listing the errors of individual students. Davis points out that by adopting this system, students can keep track of individual errors and, it is hoped, will become involved in the development of their own writing skills. It would be more difficult to use this system in a DE context, but it could be suggested in the learning material.

Russel and Spada (2006) conducted a meta-analysis of research on the effects of error correction. The goal was to determine how error correction affects learning. The research included three experiments on revision which showed a significant improvement in revised texts. Based on these findings, the authors concluded that revision had a positive effect on learning.

Guenette (2007) continues the debate by agreeing with the views of Ferris (1999, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006), citing her studies as useful evidence for the effectiveness of error correction. However, Truscott and Hsu (2008:294) point out that Guenette leaves open the question of whether the effects found by Ferris's studies were only short-term.

In contrast, Truscott and Hsu (2008) make a case against the effectiveness of revision, casting doubt on the results obtained by Russel and Spada (2006). Truscott and Hsu wonder whether Russel and Spada's final results were not inadvertently loaded in favour of error correction, and how the study actually measured learning, given what they believe to be the lack of evidence that improvement noted in revised texts is a measure of learning or merely a short-term effect.

Truscott and Hsu (2008) furthermore aver that, although rewriting corrected drafts results in fewer grammatical errors in rewritten texts, this effect does not carry over to subsequent new writing; consequently, there is no long-term, meaningful language improvement. They argue that revision corrections are not a measure of improvement and of learning since subsequent assignments do not reflect the improved scores found in the previous, edited texts. This study found that error feedback had a significant effect on students' rewrites (98) but no meaningful impact on error rates from Narrative 1 to Narrative 2 (299). The central question raised by Truscott and Hsu is whether revision research can be taken as evidence of the impact of correction on learning. The researchers admit that there is no hope for an easy solution to this issue.

Bruton's (2009) research partially corroborates Truscott and Hsu's (2008) findings that rewriting corrected drafts results in a lower rate of grammatical errors in the short term, but that it does not lead to long-term language improvement. However, on the basis of various sets of data, Bruton (2009) suggests the possibility of an alternative explanation,

namely that errors in a new piece of writing bear no relation to errors corrected in the first.

The problem, according to Bruton (2009), is that targeted features are not tracked in subsequent writing. If this could be achieved, the results would demonstrate whether improvement has taken place. Unfortunately, it is unclear how this could be done within a communicative process approach which encourages freedom of expression and avoids the form-based practice of focusing on one language feature at a time.

As Bruton (2009:140) points out, what is needed is more precision, consistency and appropriateness in the design and execution of classroom-based research on the effects of language correction on subsequent L2 writing. As mentioned, the challenge is how to incorporate this design into a communicative approach to language teaching and learning. This challenge poses even more difficulties in DE with its lack of face-to-face classroom interaction.

It follows that the issue of the effectiveness of error correction needs to be resolved as a matter of urgency, but this has proven to be a highly contentious and complex undertaking which remains largely unresolved. Ferris (2002:16) describes what she terms the “catch 22” dilemma of error research, namely that if improvement in a single revised draft is tested, no long-term improvement can be demonstrated, while in a long-term study, many divergent factors can influence the result, thus making it virtually impossible to prove the efficacy (or ineffectiveness) of error correction. Thus, in answer to the vexing question “... what do we do in the meantime?” (Ferris 2004), it appears that the only way open to educators at this stage is to continue to explore possible intervention strategies and to be wary of abandoning error correction until a more conclusive and convincing argument against it can be made. Despite the problem of empirically measuring improvement, it seems possible that editing and revision could be one such viable strategy as it at least raises consciousness of language features, encourages a sense of ownership of the text, and at best holds the possibility of both short-term and long-term language improvement.

The question “... what do we do in the meantime?” (Ferris 2004) is crucial to educators. We cannot sit by and watch the unfolding debate when there are students to be educated.

Some interim strategies will obviously have to be formulated. This is of particular importance in the context addressed by this dissertation.

2.5.4 The South African distance-education TESOL context: Research on editing at the University of South Africa

The issues of error correction, feedback, editing and the importance of a sense of ownership are addressed by Spencer (1997, 1998, 2005), Spencer *et al.* (2005), Pienaar (2005), and Lephalala and Pienaar (2008). These research projects place the issues of feedback and error correction in a South African and DE context and use similar target groups to that of the present dissertation. Furthermore, the work of these researchers adds to the controversial error-correction debate.

Spencer (1997:48) recommends that feedback should contain “useable information on the strengths and weaknesses” of the text and that marks awarded should “provide incentives and opportunities for improving performance”. She maintains that the issue of performance is of paramount importance (40) and that lecturers should change their approach “towards a form of assessment which is not restricted to monitoring, but aims to improve performance” (46–47).

To this end, Spencer (1997:46) suggests that students edit their own work because “by insisting on multiple drafts the teacher invites the student to clarify and refine meaning”. However, she adds that “teacher intervention does not guarantee improvement, but it affords the learner an opportunity to practise, and in the process, reassert control over the text”. This implies a hoped-for, long-term improvement which further research must still quantify.

The responses to student writing discussed by Pienaar (2005) confirm and develop Spencer’s (2005) findings. Pienaar’s article is grounded in previous research, particularly in that of Tavers (1998), Axelrod *et al.* (2001) and Wilhoit (2003). Pienaar emphasises the need to “empower the students to take greater responsibility for their writing” (2005:93). In Pienaar’s study, the students enrolled for Unisa’s *English for Academic Purposes* (ENN103-F) course were given criteria to assess their own writing before editing it. The lecturer then confirmed the accuracy of the changes made to the original

version. Pienaar (202) makes use of a marking grid adapted from Jacobson *et al.*'s *ESL Composition Profile* (Appendix F). The important distinction which the marking grid makes between surface errors, which do not affect meaning, and those which obscure meaning was borne in mind throughout the examination and discussion of the language errors encountered in the course of the current research. This prevented the danger of focusing on form to the detriment of meaning.

Pienaar (2005) states that “shared assessment” should not be “restricted to monitoring” but should aim “to improve the students’ performance” (194) by showing them “how to make connections between the feedback and the quality of their work and how to improve their writing for future assignments” (201). The rationale is that “when [students] become familiar with the assessment criteria, they will use the information to judge their own work” (202). Pienaar (199) supports the view of Connors and Glenn (1995:41) that the marker should be seen as an interested reader, rather than “a nitpicking critic or a grammar enforcer”.

The research of Spencer (1997, 1998, 2005), Spencer *et al* (2005), Pienaar (2005) and Lephalala and Pienaar (2008) argues against the excessive emphasis on form in marking. To counter this tendency, revision and editing are suggested as assisting successful language learning in a South African DE environment. More research is necessary, but this option was considered when examining the choices for intervention in the target group of this review.

Revision and correction of initial drafts would seem to be the direction which the language-error correction debate is taking. The practice of revision that requires students to edit their own work is an attractive strategy and one that is compatible with the communicative approach. In addition, it can be adapted to the needs of distance-education students, as demonstrated by Spencer (2005) and Pienaar (2005). However, the problem faced by the researcher is the difficulty, if not impossibility, of empirically assessing long-term improvements in writing skills as a result of these interventions (Bruton 2009). It is for this reason that the issue of improvement was not tested empirically in this study.

2.5.5 Written feedback

An issue related to that of error correction and feedback is that of the type and quality of the marker's comments. This is particularly significant in the DE environment where comments often comprise the only interaction between tutor and student.

Louw (2006:31) defines feedback as follows:

Feedback constitutes any mark by an external reader on the text. The mark may indicate something that is considered to be wrong, or something that is considered less than optimal. Feedback may also indicate instances where the reader is satisfied or impressed by something in the text.

Spencer (1998:10) differentiates between feedback and response, classifying feedback as a subcategory of response, which she sees as commentary promoting learning. It is possible that Spencer makes this distinction bearing in mind the exigencies of DE which relies to a greater extent on written commentary. Louw (2006:31) points out that it “is clear that Spencer is aiming at response as communication – enabling the students to *learn* from the teacher commentary”. However, he adds that the “difference between feedback as communication and response as communication is inconsequential if both have the inherent aim of enhancing learning”. For ease of reference, and since this review has “the inherent aim of enhancing learning”, the researcher adopted Louw’s definition of feedback as combining feedback and commentary (as described by Spencer), while acknowledging the value of Spencer’s distinction in drawing attention to the purpose of commentary or response.

As indicated in the discussion of the error correction debate, (pp.31–37), the position of Ferris is that error correction should be continued unless (and until) it is demonstrated to be of little value (Ferris 2002, 2004; Yates & Kenkle 2002:30). Although it seems impossible to prove long-term improvement, it would appear from the literature surveyed that having students revise and edit their own work is an effective strategy for improving their writing skills as well as promoting their sense of ownership of the writing.

As indicated, (p.18), the present research was carried out in the DE context, which is characterised by geographical distance and very little face-to-face contact between lecturer and student. It stands to reason that constructive commentary by markers is essential to compensate for the lack of day-to-day interaction. Furthermore, the issues of motivation and autonomy are important in the DE environment, and these can be encouraged by carefully designed editing strategies, reinforced by effective feedback.

Written feedback is thus of central importance in DE, and will therefore form an important part of the intervention recommended. In this regard, the attributes of good feedback need to be carefully examined in order to ensure that this written intervention is effective.

Spencer (1998:10) maintains that “response is only as effective as the student’s ability to grasp what has been conveyed, internalise the knowledge, and use it constructively in the learning process”. According to Spencer (208), students want the following from feedback or commentary:

- a mark;
- input from lecturers in the form of detailed commentary;
- specific, encouraging, honest criticism;
- the opportunity to take responsibility for their own writing.

Louw (2006:7) agrees that students and parents expect feedback, but he queries the use made of this feedback. He points out that “it appears as if a lot of the effort going into the marking of student writing is wasted, as students do not know how to handle feedback or simply discard it. This may be attributed to marking techniques that focus on surface errors and do not analyse or explain the problems found in students’ writing”. Louw adds:

Feedback is a type of consciousness-raising, whereby learners are reminded of where they do not have the target language features under full control. If handled incorrectly learners will not see their errors (and the lecturers’ feedback) as a learning opportunity, and may feel that they should strive for ‘perfect’ language use. Instead of experimenting with the

language, they then stick to what they know they are capable of. This leads to the undesirable effect known as avoidance.

Louw (2006:83) provides a feedback checklist that includes the following characteristics relevant to the target group of this research. According to Louw, feedback should be

- consistent;
- understandable and in a written form so that students can go back to it later;
- provided by a competent lecturer who is not simply a proofreader;
- individualised;
- linked to teaching;
- systematic;
- used by learners.

Louw adds that feedback should

- set the learner thinking;
- place responsibility on the learner;
- encourage rewriting;
- encourage exploration of language;
- distinguish between grave and less important errors;
- should see the text as a process and not a final product;
- encourage communication between the learners, and the teacher should involve students in their own learning;
- raise student awareness of language features;
- sometimes focus only on specific errors (minimal marking), without ignoring the others.

The question is how this type of feedback can be implemented and especially how to involve the student in the feedback process. It follows that it is necessary to examine the concept of interactive feedback. Spencer (1998:10) argues that feedback, as she defines it, is not sufficient on its own and that response should result in interaction between

lecturers and students. Louw (2006:25) describes this interaction as “a type of conversation between the lecturer and learner”. It is this “conversation” that could hold the key to successful student writing. Louw (81–82) states that the “crucial point is that the teacher’s role in student writing is not the last event in the process of writing”. He adds that marking “should always provide a platform from which students can reassess and redraft their work”.

This is in keeping with Sheppard’s (1992:107) opinion that

... students who negotiate meaning in conference with a teacher are unlikely to do so at the risk of diminished accuracy; indeed, they are more likely to be accurate in their use of the language than students whose attention is constantly drawn to surface-level inaccuracies and repair techniques.

In a study concerned with effective support in the form of feedback to DE learners, Hyland (2001:233) points out that “interaction and feedback on performance are essential elements of the language learning process”. She furthermore states that, since opportunities for face-to-face interaction in a DE context may be limited, feedback plays a central role in the dialogue between teachers and students. The article examines the differences in the feedback of individual tutors and also the variations in “the type of feedback the students want and their reported uses of it” (233). These differences are exacerbated in DE where students have little or no direct contact with the tutor and find it difficult, and often impossible, to discuss needs, expectations, language difficulties and the interpretation of feedback.

While Hyland (2001) found that the students who participated in her survey had demonstrated an encouragingly high level of self-reliance, she expressed concern that students may overlook the institutional support being offered and thus jeopardise their chances of success. This is of greater concern in distance education, especially in skills-based subjects such as LSK0108, where study material comprises guidelines, and knowledge of the content of this material is not directly tested.

Hyland (2001) suggests that student support should include written guides offering advice on learning strategies, and that mechanisms for discussing feedback and obtaining information from students regarding their problems, needs and wants should be developed. Recommendations include providing cover sheets with the first assignment that give students an opportunity to enumerate their feedback requirements. Another possibility is to incorporate reflective writing in initial assignments in which students could write about their feedback needs and how they envisage using feedback.

The issue of responding to student writing in a tertiary DE context is dealt with in considerable detail by Spencer (1997, 1998, 2005); Spencer *et al.* (2005); Pienaar (2005); and Lephalala and Pienaar (2008). The unpublished doctoral thesis by Spencer (1998) and a further study by her (2005) examine lecturers' responses to student writing at the University of South Africa. Spencer (1998) found that "lecturers are perceived by 80.8 per cent of the students in a judging role, albeit by the majority of those students as a benign expression of that role" (185). Unlike the students who failed the examination and tended to regard the assessor as a judge, the more capable students demonstrated an interest in practical editorial suggestions for revision instead (185). Spencer examines different feedback styles (namely, the use of correction codes, minimal marking; the provision of a mark only, audiotaped response; and self-assessment) and student reactions to these styles. The research found that the majority of students preferred the use of correction codes as a form of feedback. Furthermore, Spencer's findings suggest that students react most favourably to commentary that is positive and empowering.

The article by Spencer (2005) reinforces her previous research (1998) and describes a taxonomy of tutor commentaries in response to student writing in a tertiary DE context. Of particular interest to this research project was Spencer's (2005:220) finding that there was a disproportionate emphasis on form as opposed to content found in tutor commentary. The challenge faced by the present review was to avoid exacerbating this emphasis while drawing attention to the most common language errors found in the study. The recommendations on tutor response made in Spencer's article prompted ideas for intervention which avoided an authoritative, purely form-based approach. These ideas are examined in the final section of the review.

A footnote in the article by Yates and Kenkle (2002:30) entitled *Responding to sentence-level errors in writing* sums up the present state of the situation and the position of educators. The authors state:

Even if it is ultimately right that error correction is useless and should be abandoned [a stance which I contest], teachers are still left with the issue of responding to problems in their students' texts. ... Whether a teacher writes extensive comments on student papers or not, we believe it is important for writing teachers to be aware of how their students handle information flow in their texts.

2.6 Treatment of specific error types

This literature review did not confine itself to matters of general concern in the treatment of errors, but aimed to discover the types and frequency of these errors in the target group with a view to possible intervention. Thus attention was paid to dealing with specific language errors found in the students' writing, always bearing in mind that care should be taken to avoid the danger of decontextualisation and an over-emphasis on form.

Sheppard's (1992) study of the effect of feedback on various error types implies the efficacy of different treatment for different error types, namely accuracy of verb forms, accurate marking of sentence boundaries, and complexity of writing. Chandler (2003:269) points out that in Sheppard's study "the only measure on which there was a statistically significant difference between the gains of the two groups was on percentage of correct punctuation". The implication that different error types respond differently to error correction must be borne in mind when recommending interventions in a DE context with its unique challenges.

The most important question to be asked when identifying errors, giving feedback and planning intervention is whether communication is impeded. Seidlhofer (2004:220) identifies the features that do not cause communication breakdown, which raises the contentious issue about the degree to which these should be penalised in a testing situation. These features are:

- the interchangeable use of ‘who’ and ‘which’;
- the non-use of the third-person present tense;
- article omissions or insertions;
- the all-purpose tag: *isn’t it?* or *no?*;
- increased redundancy: added preposition: ‘*discuss about*’;
- increased explicitness: ‘*black colour*’;
- heavy reliance on verbs with semantic generality;
- pluralisation of uncountable nouns: ‘*staffs*’;
- the use of ‘that’ clauses: ‘*I want that we discuss about.*’

This research project will propose a number of tentative recommendations on whether and how to deal with these features as demonstrated in the writing of the target group. For instance, the question can be asked whether intensive correction of incorrect articles is vital given time constraints and other issues (such as the standardisation of BSAE in South Africa). Masters (1997) describes the “acquisition, function and frequency of the English article” and questions the necessity of spending excessive time on this error, which he regards as of peripheral importance.

The opinion of Masters (1997) is in agreement with Siedlhofer’s (2004:220) corpus and is of importance in the BSAE context, as the omission of the article, as well as the use of the indefinite instead of the definite article (and vice versa), has been found to be a feature of BSAE (Van der Walt 2001:5–6). In a study that surveyed the opinions regarding a number of grammatical features of 525 third-year students of English at two universities and a college of education in the Northern, North West and Gauteng provinces, Van der Walt found that the use of the indefinite article instead of the definite article was considered acceptable by more than 75% of subjects, whereas the reverse showed a “small effect size”, indicating that this feature was accepted by fewer students (between 50% and 64%). This suggests that the levels of entrenchment differ in respect of the specific use of the article. Van der Walt concludes (5) that, although the results of his study confirm “the impression that a Standard BSAE is in the process of being developed,” it seems that there are also “indications of confusion and inconsistency … and [that] it may take some time before an endonormative phase is attained”. Thus, although relatively minor ‘errors’ such as article use should not be over-emphasised, a

case can be made for drawing the students' attention to them, especially in academic writing.

Furthermore, it can be argued that, while these 'errors' may be becoming entrenched as features of a variety of English and do not interfere with communication, some attention should be paid to them at present to prevent students from being penalised in their academic work. Jenkins (2006:174–175) points out that "until the examination boards acknowledge the importance of these new competencies, teachers and curriculum planners will not do so either, for fear of jeopardising their students' exam prospects". The gatekeeping function of assessment is demonstrated by the English Second Language (ESL) marking profile (Appendix F) in which 50% of current assessment is based on language proficiency.

This research project thus attempts to offer solutions to specific problems, as well as suggest a more generally effective approach to the treatment of errors of the chosen target group. These suggestions were determined by the findings of the error review.

2.7 Study materials for the University of South Africa's LSK0108 course

In relating this theoretical background to the target group of the present research project, it was necessary to examine the approach adopted in the tutorial letters, assignments and the study material.

The Study Guide entitled *Language and Learning Skills only study guide for LSK0108* adopts a student-friendly approach, relating topics and exercises to the experiences of the young adult DE student. This material deals with reading and writing skills by means of case studies and contextualised exercises. While the largely sound content of the study material is generally acknowledged, it is a matter of concern that it has been largely unchanged since 2007 and needs to be re-evaluated in terms of the changing demographics of the student population.

Specific language issues are dealt with in *Tutorial Letter 103*. This letter supplements the more communicative approach of the study guide and is more form-focused. Students are urged to refer to the sections dealing with those language forms and rules with which

they experience problems, many of which will have been pointed out in their assignment feedback. The study material thus aims to achieve a balance between form and function. Unfortunately, it would seem that this letter is sent out so late in the semester (if at all) that students cannot obtain optimal benefit from it and have to find other texts to assist them with their language difficulties. This is a logistical and administrative issue beyond the scope of this dissertation, but does warrant mentioning as a factor exacerbating the difficulties of the target group.

Tutorial Letter 101 reflects some awareness of the current interest in editing as a strategy to improve student writing and attempts to adopt the suggestions of Spencer (1997, 1998, 2005), Spencer *et al.* (2005), Pienaar (2005), and Lephalala and Pienaar (2008). Unfortunately, due to the stringent time restrictions of the semester course, this is confined to the self-editing of a single assignment prior to submission, and to the submission of only one draft.

To assist with the self-editing exercise, students are presented with a grid, which is a simplified version of the ESL profile (Appendix F) but which unfortunately contains extremely insensitive comments in respect of scripts that obtain a low mark (Appendix G). For example, the “interpretation and arguments” presented by these students are dismissed as being “so lacking in intelligence that it would be futile for the candidate to repeat the subject” (*Tutorial Letter 101* 2009:26). A statement of this nature could be extremely hurtful and demotivating to students who find themselves in this category. It could also be asked if students are capable of self-evaluation and, by extension, self-editing, at this level and stage (Parisi 1994), especially since little or no guidance in language skills has yet been given.

In an unpublished master’s degree dissertation, Westbrook (2009) avers that “when students have to stretch and struggle with new concepts, they learn – but they must be supported in that struggle” (29). She adds that the “teacher can serve as both a source of support as well as a model for developing and internalizing new information or concepts.”(29). This support is known as scaffolding (56) and is one of the stages of the framework for the cognitive apprenticeship paradigm advocated by Collins *et al.* (1991). This framework can be described as a pedagogical model based on the historical apprenticeship system of “transmitting knowledge from expert to novice in many crafts

and trades” (Westbrook 2009:56). Collins *et al.* (1991:1) express concern that in modern schooling “the processes of thinking are often invisible to both the students and the teacher” The authors posit that “cognitive apprenticeship is a model of instruction that works to make thinking visible” (1). The paradigm adapts features of traditional apprenticeship to the modern learning situation. These features are “modeling, scaffolding, fading, and coaching” (2).

In modelling, the instructor gives explicit instructions and shows the students what to do, thus helping them to “build a conceptual model of the processes that are required to accomplish the task” (Collins *et al.* 1991:2). The students are then given a similar task during which the instructor or educator provides them with any support they need (scaffolding). Westbrook (2009:57) states that “supports can be suggestions or graphic organizers that provide an ‘intermediary step’ the student needs to complete the task”. These ideas are relevant to the current review and will be explored during the discussion of intervention strategies (Chapter 5), with particular reference to the learning materials for LSK0108 that address language issues.

As the student’s proficiency increases, the supports are gradually removed. In other words, the scaffolding ‘fades’ and the student assumes increasing responsibility for the task. Coaching takes place throughout the process and includes choosing tasks, scaffolding, feedback and evaluation.

Westbrook (2009) applied this framework to a group of ESL students who exhibited “gaps in their ability to communicate critical and creative thinking and reasoning in English”. Similar to the LSK0108 students in the current review, they represented a “microcosm of the diverse challenges of both language fluency and school background” presented to language educators (56).

Westbrook’s (2009) research on scaffolding techniques is “based on the assumption that English teachers have a unique opportunity to help students learn to think critically – and that students learn critical thinking by engaging in [these techniques]”(19).These include editing and other self-assessment activities. Westbrook (19) points out that studies such as that of Tsui (2002:748–749) corroborate this viewpoint. Tsui (748–749) stresses the

value of “an emphasis on writing and rewriting” as well as a related “focus on the synthesis, analysis, and refinement of ideas through the medium of writing”.

The discussion of the LSK0108 learning materials took place against the background of the situation in the schools from which the students originated. For this reason, the current research studied a small sub-sample in order to investigate a further variable, namely the type of school that the students attended.

The international study of reading proficiency conducted by Mullis *et al.* (2007) is summarised and discussed with particular reference to its South African findings in the *PIRLS Summary Report* (Howie *et al.* 2008). This summary notes the poor ranking of South African primary schools in terms of overall performance relative to international standards of reading ability (17–27). For example, South Africa was classified as the lowest performing country (out of a total of 40) in terms of reading achievement (18). Suggested reasons for this were background factors such as the home, the school, and degree to which the learners had been exposed to print media (58). These findings, in particular the latter, were corroborated by the smaller-scale comparative study of Pretorius and Ribbens (2005) and the research of Pretorius (2008), which examined literacy (with the emphasis on reading skills) in South African primary schools. What seems clear in the context of the research studies is that socio-economic factors play an important role in the acquisition of literacy skills and that the results indicate a bimodal pattern of distribution indicating a higher score in well-resourced schools (for example, former Model C and independent schools) and very low scores in disadvantaged, ‘print poor’ schools (usually catering for pupils in the townships or rural areas).

Fleisch (2008:3) points out that this bimodal distribution indicates the existence of two separate schooling ‘systems’ in South African education and that if the achievements of primary school learners were “plotted on a frequency distribution, two ‘humps’ or hills would be apparent”. The first of these would reflect the achievement of the majority of learners and falls into the lower performance range. The second ‘hump’ “is likely to reflect the achievement of children who attend former white, Indian and independent schools”. These results suggest that children in this second group, “both black and white, have achievement levels comparable to those of Germany or the United States”. This is in

stark contrast to the larger group which “tells the story of pervasive under-achievement in disadvantaged schools”.

These studies provide insight into the conditions under which different groups of South African students conduct their school studies, and highlight the discrepancies between the results of schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas and those of more affluent suburban schools. This might provide some explanation for the challenges the former group experiences in a tertiary, academic environment, and thus would assist educators in designing meaningful learning materials and other intervention strategies. Despite the small sample and different target group of the current review, it was hoped that the findings would indicate (albeit tentatively) whether there are correlations with the cited studies on reading ability with the research findings of the present review, which focuses on the related competency of writing.

2.8 Conclusion

This literature review has attempted to cover the major theoretical issues that had to be borne in mind in planning the research that this dissertation is based on. Of central importance is the question of reconciling the exigencies of academic writing with current research in WE, an issue complicated by an observed difference between the attitudes of researchers and those of students and curriculum advisers, and a divergence between theory and grassroots teaching.

Another issue of crucial importance is the definition of ‘error’ and the controversy surrounding theories of error correction and feedback. The debate generated by Truscott (1996, 1999) and Ferris (1999, 2002, 2004, 2006) was explored, together with the related and contested theory of fossilisation, which provides an intersection with WE research.

It is evident from the research on WEs and on error correction that there are no conclusive answers to the questions of which norm(s) to adopt in responding to student writing, as well as to whether in fact error correction and feedback have any long-term effect on student texts. However, in practice students are waiting to be educated. Ferris’s (2004) question “...what do we do in the meantime?” should thus be pondered in connection with both of these contentious issues.

Furthermore, it is also evident from the application of Ferris's question to the problem of norms that, while different varieties of English should be respected and acknowledged, it is important to tailor feedback to the purpose of the writing, and especially whether it is aimed at a national or international readership. A further important consideration that became obvious in the course of the research is the finding that Standard British English is preferred by curriculum planners as well as students (Jenkins 2006; Spencer 2011b).

Regarding the error correction controversy, the position of Ferris is that error correction should be continued unless (and until) it is demonstrated to be of no value (Ferris 2002, 2004; Yates & Kenkle 2002:30). Although it seems impossible to ascertain long-term improvement, it would appear from the literature surveyed in the course of this research that revision and editing of their own work by students is an effective strategy for improving writing skills, as well as promoting students' sense of ownership of the writing.

This research was carried out in the DE context, which is characterised by geographical distance and minimal face-to-face contact between lecturer and student. Therefore, research on DE and, in particular, theories on feedback in DE language teaching have been discussed in this literature review. The conclusion that has emerged is that constructive commentary by markers is essential to compensate for the lack of day-to-day interaction. Finally, there is evidence in the literature reviewed that the issues of motivation and autonomy are important in the DE environment and these can be encouraged by carefully designed editing strategies.

CHAPTER 3: DESCRIPTION OF METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter commences with a brief explanation of the research design, including the theoretical background underpinning the research. Thereafter, the methods of obtaining data are explained and the process of analysis is sketched. This proceeds from the general (total number of errors) to the particular (specific errors) and includes interrater reliability and an examination of the secondary variable, namely that of schools attended.

3.2 Research design

3.2.1 Sampling method

The study took the form of a primarily quantitative study of data combined with qualitative elements in the form of the study of sources.

Convenience sampling (defined as a sample of subjects taken from a group that is conveniently accessible to the researcher) was used to choose the cohort from the student target population of the *Language and Learning Skills* (LSK0108) module at the University of South Africa. Participating students were attending tutorial classes at the Parow Learning Centre where the researcher is a tutor.

The advantages of convenience sampling are:

- ease of access;
- a good chance of a high response rate (members of the group are often known to the researcher and are inclined to recognise the value and purpose of the data collection);
- relatively inexpensive.

However, the disadvantages of this form of sampling are:

- limitations to the degree to which it can be generalised to the population as a whole;
- sampling bias that can occur as a result of the exclusion of large numbers of the population.

Despite these limitations, this form was chosen because the researcher was a tutor of LSK0108 at the Parow Learning Centre and therefore the advantages of convenience sampling (namely, ease of access, chances of high response rate, and relatively low cost) applied to the situation. An important factor instrumental in the choice of this research topic was concern about the challenges encountered by students of LSK0108 in developing academic writing skills.

While it is acknowledged that there are limitations to the degree to which one can generalise from a sample such as this to the whole population, it should be pointed out that the aim of the research was pedagogical in nature and does not claim to extrapolate the findings to the population as a whole. The purpose of the project was to identify the language ‘errors’ of this group (as defined by the study) with a view to intervention.

All the students submitted a piece of writing on the same topic (“*Should the death penalty be reinstated?*”). In order to obviate any influence that the tutorials or any other intervention by the Learning Centre might have had, the research took place at the beginning of the semester. Students would therefore have received instruction in writing skills at school-level only.

The majority of the students who participated in this study originated from the relatively poor black and coloured suburbs around Cape Town where they had attended so-called previously disadvantaged schools. The problems at these schools were compounded by the fact that the education system seemed to be in perpetual disarray due to constantly changing policies, contradictory departmental statements and the uneven implementation of Outcomes-based Education (hereafter OBE). Since it was evident that not all errors can be attributed to first language influence, this research investigated a further variable – namely, the type of school that the students attended.

3.2.2 Theoretical underpinning

The main descriptors (error, error correction, World Englishes, distance education, academic writing skills) were identified and defined within the context of current research. Emphasis was placed on the controversial error-correction debate and the issue of marrying the exigencies of academic writing to the current research on World Englishes (particularly Black South African English). With this in mind, a working definition of ‘error’ within the context of this research was formulated. This definition, while not intended to be generally prescriptive, afforded a basis from which to discuss how many of these ‘errors’ are characteristic of Black South African English (BSAE) and (where possible) the other home languages represented, and to what extent these should be accepted in the context of academic writing.

Similarly, the error review, while based on Standard British English as currently used in academic writing in South Africa, is to be seen as a starting point from which to consider features of the students’ writing and should not be interpreted as espousing the deficit approach. Van Rooy (2011:1) cautions that when

...researchers adopt the world Englishes position, and turn their attention to variable data, they are confronted by the failure of formal linguistic paradigms to make available meaningful systems for the analysis of the data. In consequence, many well-intended analyses slide back into the terminology associated with what Kachru has termed the deficit approach.

Although it is acknowledged that the current review used terminology associated with conventional analysis (Ferris 2002) (see Appendix C), the researcher was of the opinion that in the absence of other ‘meaningful systems’ to meet the criteria of the target module, Ferris’s comprehensive system was appropriate as it covers features of importance to academic writing, which was the focus of the review.

From the outset, this research project was rooted in the belief that, sociolinguistically, local non-standard varieties of English should not be marginalised or stigmatised since they fulfill various social and regional communicative functions. However, it should also be borne in mind that students of the LSK0108 module aspire to mastery of a particular

variety of English in order to succeed in the academic environment. The challenge facing educators is to introduce this variety as an additive form of bidialectism (the use of more than one variety of a language) which will ensure that students enjoy the benefits of their local variety of English, as well as those that they will obtain from the confident use of the variety of English employed in academic writing. These issues provided a theoretical background to the critical evaluation of a selection of scripts, tentative explanations for language errors, as well suggested intervention strategies designed to address these errors appropriately.

3.3 Research method

3.3.1 Research instruments and data-collection techniques

The research assignments were written in the classrooms and, in some cases, the offices of the Parow Learning Centre of the University of South Africa. The activities were carried out as far as possible in the course of either the normal classes or the students' initial scheduled visits to the Learning Centre. In order to obtain a large enough sample of scripts, it was necessary to harvest data over a period of three semesters, namely at the beginning of the second semester of 2009 and the first and second semesters of 2010.

The assistance of two markers was enlisted for the purposes of ensuring reliability and accuracy. Both markers had extensive teaching experience, at both secondary and tertiary level, and were in possession of post-graduate degrees in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). Each marker received unmarked copies of the essays and marking was carried out independently, after initial consultation regarding the error types and categories. Each essay was first read through, and then the first 100 words of the essay were thoroughly marked for language errors, using a coding grid (see Appendix D). The errors were categorised as morphological, lexical, syntactical and mechanical errors as adapted from the research of Ferris (2002) (see Appendices C and D). If an error was repeated in the script, it was counted as a separate error. After an interval, the essays were reread, checked and alterations to the marking were made where necessary. During the marking process, consultation took place in order to clarify the definition and scope of certain error categories.

3.3.2 Data: population and sample

3.3.2.1 Sample group

The target student body comprised distance education students of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at the University of South Africa. These were students registered for *Language and Learning Skills* (LSK0108). The aim of the module is to improve students' reading and writing skills, specifically to enable them to read and write competently for academic purposes. Students came from a diversity of demographic backgrounds and in most cases English was not their home language (79% of the sample stated that English was not their home language and the remaining 21% cited English and another language as their 'home' languages). The minimal lecturer-student contact and lack of day-to-day classroom interaction exacerbated the difficulties encountered by the students.

3.3.2.2 Language groups

The distribution of home language groups of the participants in this study was calculated in percentages as follows:

Home language	% of total
Xhosa	52
Xhosa/English	2
Afrikaans	18
Afrikaans/English	16
Sesotho	2
Sesotho/English	1
Zulu	1
Shona	5
Shona/English	2
Russian	1

These figures show that some students declared that they had two 'home' languages. Initially, it was decided to categorise these students separately (as indicated above) and not to request that they choose a dominant home language. This was in order to determine whether there was any difference between the frequency and type of errors made by these students and those of students who chose only one of the home languages. Furthermore,

it was borne in mind that South Africa is a strongly multilingual country and thus it is frequently difficult to determine ‘home’ language.

3.3.2.3 Schools

For various reasons (such as the non-payment of fees and therefore the cancellation of the student’s registration), the researcher experienced considerable difficulty in obtaining the academic records of all the students surveyed; consequently, a smaller group of 34 students (the students registered for the second semester of 2010) was examined. Despite the relative smallness of the group, there was reason to believe that insights could be gleaned from the data in relation to the schools attended. This line of research could well be developed in future research.

Schools were divided into the broad categories of

- rural;
- “township” (which includes schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas on the outskirts of both cities and smaller towns);
- urban schools close to the City Bowl (schools previously under the auspices of the House of Representatives);
- schools in more affluent areas, previously catering for white pupils (popularly labelled ‘ex-Model C schools’);
- independent schools; and
- schools outside the borders of South Africa.

Data was processed in the same way as that of the language groups.

3.3.2.4 Data analysis

a. Interrater variance

A first consideration was the agreement and relative bias between the two markers, based on the total number of errors recorded by them.

A graph was plotted showing the totals of Marker1 (M1) against the total of Marker 2 (M2) in order to show the correlation between the two variables and whether there was any indication of bias. This was also tested by means of a one-sample t-test of the mean of the pairwise differences ($\text{TotalM1} + \text{TotalM2}/2$).

b. Language groups

After all the errors had been noted, the raw data was recorded and then statistically processed in order to reflect an accurate picture of the distribution of errors. For example, the number of errors per group was calculated in terms of an average score (mean) per student. The mean, in this instance, was obtained by dividing the number of errors per language group by the number of respondents in that language group. This prevented misinterpreting the data by considering merely the raw number of errors identified. If the data was examined in this way, it would appear as though the largest group made the most mistakes. This was not necessarily the case. Thus the number of errors per language group was calculated to indicate the average score per student in each language group.

The point could be made that even this process may be misleading, since one may ask whether it is possible to draw conclusions from the sample size. For example, how valid is the information about a group's language skills if there are only a few respondents for a language group? It was however decided, as an initial step, not to omit the smaller groups from the results since the group as a whole was representative of the demography of a typical LSK0108 class. However, it is acknowledged that it is not possible to extrapolate information on first-language influence on the basis of one or two students. Thus the study concentrated on the larger language groups represented. Furthermore, it is believed that the normalisation (obtaining an average score) could be considered an accurate reflection of the results since it provided a mean score per language group and was not calculated in relation to the group as a whole. However, to provide a more statistically accurate reflection of the results, a one-way analysis of variance was carried out with response variable Total and group variable Language Group.

c. Schools

Data was analysed to determine whether a relationship existed between the school attended and the number of errors per student. Initially, a summary was made of the

number of observations indicating the interaction between Schools and Languages (shown as School*Language in the data). However, because of the small number of known results for schools, the indications were that the pooling of classes was necessary in order to obtain a reasonably clear indication of trends. The second table thus contains a cross-tabulation of means of the variable Total.

In order to obtain a better idea of the School*Language relationship, a third process was followed, namely:

- The results of only the Model C, Rural and Township schools, Afrikaans, English/Afrikaans, and Xhosa language groups were extracted. These made up 25 of the 34 known schools.
- The Township and Rural groups were pooled.
- The Afrikaans and English/Afrikaans groups were similarly pooled.

The sample numbers indicate tentative trends only, and there must be reservations about the representativeness of the subsample. However, the thorough process followed aimed to indicate these trends as reliably as possible and succeeded in raising the possibility that language differences observed in the larger language groups may be attributable to schools in addition to home language influence. This possibility presents a worthwhile avenue for further research.

d. Specific errors

Specific errors were noted in the course of marking. The grid (Appendix D) indicates categories of morphological, lexical, syntactical and mechanical errors as well as subcategories within these main categories. Markers were provided with guidelines to be used in identifying these categories and subcategories. These included examples of errors (Appendix C). These guidelines were discussed prior to the marking and further clarification was provided when necessary during the course of the marking process.

Errors in these categories and subcategories were analysed by normalising the number of errors per language group in order to obtain an indication of their relative frequency. Of

particular interest was the question whether these errors were emerging features of BSAE or other regional varieties, or whether they reflected individual, possibly idiosyncratic, language use.

A further issue was that of intelligibility. The question was asked to what extent the errors affected communication and the degree of intervention necessary for these, as well as for errors that did not impede communication, but which may be obstacles to the academic aspirations of the student. Here, information from Seidlhofer's (2004) corpus, as well as from Van Rooy (2006) and Makalela (2004:359–360) was considered in relation to the errors made by the students in this research. This issue was discussed in the literature review (pp.47-50).

3.4 Limitations of the research

Wissing (1987:12) notes that, while it is relatively simple to identify an error, it is more difficult to classify it, and even more difficult to explain why it has occurred. The present study also experienced some problems regarding the classification and interpretation of data. This was particularly evident in the case of the subcategories of morphological and syntactical errors, especially where the student's writing verged on unintelligibility.

With this problem in mind, Wissing (1987) cautions against attaching too much importance to actual percentages or numbers and types of errors, believing that these should be viewed as "indications of relative types and frequencies rather than as absolute, empirically tested items" (12). While the present review attempted to categorise errors as accurately and consistently as possible, cognisance of this viewpoint was taken when considering the difficulties presented by classification.

The issue of intelligibility needs to be addressed as a significant problem experienced by the markers in their attempt to classify errors with accuracy. For example, the following passage was considered by both markers as difficult to mark, so much so that Marker 2 wrote the comment 'muddled' and asked the question 'How does one correct the incomprehensible?' in the margin of the script. This is an extract from the essay:

Death penalth is given by the court to allow you to stay away with the innocent people for the rest of your life. You have to stay in jail with the other prisoners. You just get visited no everyday or anytime. You have to stay away without your family or your friend or die.

When you do wrong things like stealing, killing, raping, doing froid so all the wrong doings to society you end up to jail. There are people that are rensponsible for the people who break the law like police, the colonise and the people from the area. (Script 15)

In the case of this script, there was a discrepancy of 5 errors between markers (Marker 1 recorded 18 errors and Marker 2 identified 23 errors). There was also confusion regarding error classification, with Marker 1 recording 4 errors of sentence structure in contrast to only 1 recorded error by Marker 2. On the other hand, Marker 2 classified many of these errors as ‘word choice’. The scripts, with comments and mark-ups, are included in Appendix E.

Another limitation was the size of the sample group and especially the small numbers of certain language groups such as Sesotho (2% of sample), Zulu (1%), Shona (5%) and Russian (1%). While these results were retained in the review, such small samples cannot be construed as representative of errors made by the specific language group. In fact, this is a valid criticism of the sample in general, although it is felt that the larger groups do provide examples of features of regional language varieties. The errors, however, should be seen as indications only and not as definite information about the demographic group as a whole. Much more research is necessary to determine the status and stabilisation of these features. It should also be remembered that the focus of this research is a review of students’ errors specifically in the distance-education context and that the sample group is taken from this heterogeneous target group.

The limitations of convenience sampling have been mentioned (see p.56), but it must be re-iterated that the findings are not considered to be representative of the population as a whole but only of the segment participating in the study. However, it is felt that insights gained by this research project will be of benefit to those teaching the module in question as well as similar courses in the South African TESOL field. Although care was taken not

to make statistical generalisations about the data, it is possible that educators will recognise many errors made by the target group as recurring regularly in the written work of their own students. The suggested intervention strategies based on these findings may assist these educators and stimulate further suggestions, discussion and research.

3.5 Ethical considerations

The researcher obtained consent from participants who took part in the study. This was done through the signing of a consent form (Appendix B), which was witnessed by a peer after a clear explanation of the purpose and range of the research. Before writing the essay, participants received a full and clear explanation of what was expected of them (although no formal language instruction was given) so that they could make informed choices as to whether or not to participate.

The parameters of the confidentiality of any information they supplied were also discussed with the potential participants during the information session. In this study, no names, addresses or student numbers were used. Each script was randomly allocated a number, such as “Script 1”. Students were, however, requested to write their home language at the top of their scripts.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the research design and methodology adopted in the error review. The chapter commenced with a discussion of the research design, the advantages and limitations of the sampling form, and the reasons for the choice of design. The theoretical underpinning of the research was also discussed and this was followed by a description of the research methods employed. This section on methodology included discussion of research instruments and data collection techniques, as well as a description of the target group and the process followed in the analysis of the results. Strategies to ensure accuracy and reliability included the use of two markers, the calculation of inter-rater variance and the statistical manipulation of results. The limitations of the research were acknowledged and avenues for further research suggested. The chapter concluded with an account of how the ethical considerations were addressed.

CHAPTER 4: OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

After a brief preamble mentioning the principal problems experienced by the research, this chapter continues by presenting a tabulation of the raw data and the average number of errors in each category and for each language group. Interrater reliability is then discussed in respect of the study as a whole. Correlation and bias are further examined during the discussion of specific categories.

The chapter continues with an examination of data according to language groups. General findings are presented, followed by a discussion of specific features found in the corpora. A subsample with the variables of Language and Schools Attended (indicated by Language*Schools) is then examined.

Finally, this chapter provides a brief overview of the features of South African English (SAE) and particularly of Black South African English (BSAE) as found in the data.

4.2 Preamble

As mentioned in the literature review (p.17), Wissing (1987:12) draws attention to specific problems of classification and interpretation of data that were manifested from the outset of his research, and points out that some of these could only be “imperfectly resolved”. He discovered that, while it is relatively simple to identify an error, it is more difficult to classify it, and even more difficult to explain why it has occurred (12). This was also apparent in the current study, although as far as classification is concerned, there was greater agreement and consistency between the two markers than originally anticipated. Areas of bias and inconsistency will be dealt with in the course of this chapter.

It is believed that the limitations inherent in the process of classification and interpretation do not negate the value of an error review of this nature, if one bears in mind Wissing’s caution against attaching too much importance to actual percentages or numbers and types of errors. These, Wissing believes, should be viewed as “indications

of relative types and frequencies rather than as absolute, empirically tested items” (12). This viewpoint is shared by the current researcher, although care was taken to quantify and present the findings as accurately as possible. In this context, it should be stressed that the focus of the research is pedagogical; therefore, the aim of the recording and tabulation of data is to assist in informing teaching practice. Thus “indications” can become useful guidelines when intervention strategies are formulated.

Louw (2006:36) points out the pedagogical purpose of error classification, noting that there are

...numerous classifications of errors that try to order errors on the grounds of *why* they occur. This is very difficult and often very subjective. In some instances it is very useful to know why errors occur, but for the purposes of providing feedback it is more important to classify errors in terms of the categories they fall into, so that something can be done to correct the problems in that specific category.

On the other hand, it can be argued that in some cases the source of the error can be helpful in formulating pedagogical policy; therefore, this study does include speculation on the reasons for errors, particularly in the broad areas of language groups and schooling. However, these reasons are secondary to the primary objective of assisting educators to focus on errors that could be found in the writing of their own students in a South African context.

Furthermore, issues such as avoidance strategies, although impossible to prove empirically, should not be forgotten when considering the results “lest concentration on errors at the expense of other ... considerations leads to false conclusions” (Wissing 1987:12). Against the background of these provisos, this chapter will now continue with a discussion of the findings arising from the data investigated.

4.3 Raw Data

After all the errors had been noted, the raw data was recorded and then statistically processed in order to reflect an accurate picture of the distribution of errors. Tables 4.1

and 4.2 contain the raw data of the total number of errors recorded for the various error types by markers 1 and 2. A key to the tables follows after the results of marker 2.

4.3.1 Results of marker 1

TABLE 4.1: TOTAL NUMBER OF ERRORS M1

Lang	Error Type																	Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	
X	53	67	24	146	24	2	189	29	45	12	15	135	48	9	224	137	1	1160
EX	0	1	1	7	1	0	9	0	0	0	0	4	0	0	6	6	0	35
A	9	16	17	11	6	6	40	8	21	1	8	27	7	9	61	37	0	284
EA	1	8	2	7	1	7	29	7	16	0	3	17	6	4	54	33	0	195
SES	4	2	2	6	1	0	10	1	0	1	0	4	5	0	3	4	0	42
SESE	1	0	0	4	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	2	4	0	17
Z	0	0	0	3	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	2	2	0	6	0	0	16
SHO	3	0	3	6	2	1	26	4	3	0	3	12	4	0	19	7	0	93
SE	0	0	0	2	0	1	7	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	4	4	0	19
RUS	0	0	1	4	0	0	3	0	0	1	0	3	0	1	2	3	0	18
Total	71	94	50	196	36	17	316	50	85	14	29	207	74	23	381	235	1	1879

4.3.2 Results of marker 2

TABLE 4.2: TOTAL NUMBER OF ERRORS M2

Lang	Error Type																	Total
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	
X	60	64	32	153	25	1	209	17	53	17	21	93	34	8	237	143	1	1168
EX	1	0	1	7	1	0	10	1	0	0	0	3	0	0	6	7	0	37
A	9	18	16	12	4	6	32	8	19	3	8	18	8	7	62	38	0	268
EA	2	13	4	6	2	7	33	7	16	1	5	14	7	3	50	32	0	201
SES	4	2	2	6	2	0	10	1	0	0	0	4	4	0	3	4	0	42
SESE	1	0	0	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	2	0	2	3	0	16
Z	0	0	0	3	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	2	2	0	6	0	0	16
SHO	3	1	3	6	3	0	32	4	2	0	4	12	4	0	18	7	0	99
SE	0	0	0	1	0	1	8	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	3	4	0	20
RUS	0	0	1	4	0	0	3	0	0	1	0	2	0	1	2	3	0	17
Total	80	98	59	202	38	15	339	39	90	22	38	154	61	19	389	241	1	1884

KEY TO THE TABLES

Vertical axis (Language)	Horizontal axis (Error type)
X = Xhosa	1. Tense
EX = English/Xhosa	2. Form
A = Afrikaans	3. Subject-verb agreement
EA = English/Afrikaans	4. Article/determiners
SES = Sesotho	5. Noun endings (plural)
SESE = Sesotho/English	6. Noun endings (possessive)
Z = Zulu	7. Word choice
SHO = Shona	8. Word form
SE = Shona/English	9. Informal usage
RUS = Russian	10. Idiom error
	11. Pronoun error
	12. Sentence structure
	13. Run-ons
	14. Fragments
	15. Punctuation
	16. Spelling
	17. Miscellaneous

4.4 Average number of errors

For group comparisons and other inferences, summary statistics such as averages or medians are needed.

An initial calculation of the average number of errors produced the results listed in Tables 4.3 and 4.4. These figures were refined in the course of statistical manipulation but are retained here in order to give a general overview of the results.

TABLE 4.3: AVERAGE NUMBER OF ERRORS M1

Language Group	Number of respondents	Total number of errors	Average number of errors
X	52	1160	22.31
EX	2	35	17.50
A	18	284	15.78
EA	16	195	12.18
SES	2	42	21.00
SESE	1	17	16.00
Z	1	16	16.00
SHO	5	93	18.60
SE	2	19	9.50
RUS	1	18	18.00

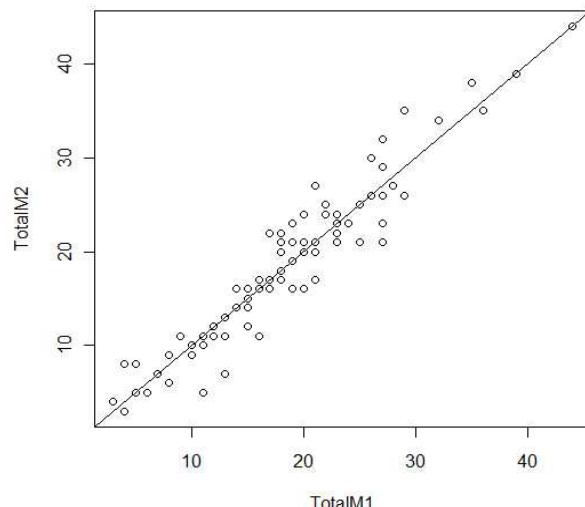
TABLE 4.4: AVERAGE NUMBER OF ERRORS M2

Language group	Number of respondents	Total number of errors	Average Number of errors
X	52	1168	22.46
EX	2	37	18.50
A	18	268	14.89
EA	16	201	12.56
SES	2	42	21.00
SESE	1	16	16.00
Z	1	16	16.00
SHO	5	99	19.80
SE	2	20	10.00
RUS	1	17	17.00

4.5 Interrater reliability

A first consideration was the agreement and relative bias between the two markers (henceforth M1 and M2 respectively). In the following graph (Figure 4.1), variables TotalM1 and TotalM2 are respectively the total number of errors recorded by the two markers. There are 100 pairs of TotalM1, TotalM2 values.

Figure 4.1 is a plot of TotalM1 against TotalM2. The straight line in this graph passes through the origin and has slope=1. The points cluster around this line with no indication of systematic deviation. The graph indicates a high correlation between the two variables; the correlation coefficient is 0.958, thus very high.

**Figure 4.1: Plot of Total M1 against Total M2**

The clustering of points around the (0, 1) line indicates that there is little bias between the markers. This can be tested more formally by means of a one-sample t-test of the mean of the pairwise differences (TotalM1-TotalM2). The mean difference is -0.05, standard deviation 2.350, $t(99) = 0.213$, $p=0.832$; so, the mean difference is not significantly different from zero, thus indicating very little bias.

Some bias was found in the sections dealing with morphological errors (notably verb forms) and syntactical errors. These differences will be discussed in the course of examining specific errors (pp.73–90).

4.6 Language groups

4.6.1 Xhosa, Afrikaans, Afrikaans/English

4.6.1.1 Overall results

The three largest groups of participants were Xhosa, Afrikaans, and English/Afrikaans (Eng./Afr.). It was decided to pool the English/Xhosa group as it was extremely small (2 students) and it was ascertained that Xhosa was the dominant language of these students. Thus the numbers of the three groups were calculated as Xhosa and English/Xhosa pooled (54), Afrikaans (18) and English/Afrikaans (16). Students of other language groups (12) were placed in a common category labelled ‘Other’.

Given the strong agreement between the two markers, it is possible to use Total= (TotalM1+TotalM2)/2 as variables characterising total errors. Table 4.5 gives a basic summary of the statistics for TotalM1 and TotalM2 as well as the totals. As mentioned, in this case, the smaller languages groups have been pooled into one called ‘Other’, and the two cases of English/Xhosa have been incorporated into the Xhosa group.

TABLE 4.5: SUMMARY OF STATISTICS FOR TOTAL-M1 AND TOTAL-M2 AS WELL AS THE TOTAL MEANS

Language group	Afrikaans	English/Afrikaans	Xhosa	Other
Number of Scripts	18	16	54	12
TotalM1 mean	15.78	12.19	22.13	17.08
Standard deviation	4.45	6.89	7.91	4.44
Total M2 mean	14.89	12.56	22.31	17.50
Standard deviation	3.98	7.42	8.42	4.87
Total mean	15.33	12.38	22.22	17.29
Standard deviation	4.13	7.10	8.06	4.57

The question is whether the observed mean differences between groups are statistically significant. As a first step, a one-way analysis of variance with response variable Total and group variable Language Group was performed. The result is an F-statistic $F(3, 96) = 10.42$, $P < 0.001$, showing that there are statistically significant differences between the means.

It was felt that the language group standard deviations are sufficiently different from one another to cause doubt about pairwise comparisons in the usual way – that is, assuming homogeneous variances. Thus pairwise Welch t-tests were performed to see which means could be considered statistically significantly different. The result is that the Xhosa mean is significantly greater than all three of the other means. The Other mean is significantly greater than the English/Afrikaans mean, but not with the same convincingly small P-value.

4.6.1.2 Specific errors

a. Morphological errors (indicated as Morph)

The problem of relative bias of the two markers arose in this category. The graph below shows more points above the (0, 1) line than below it.

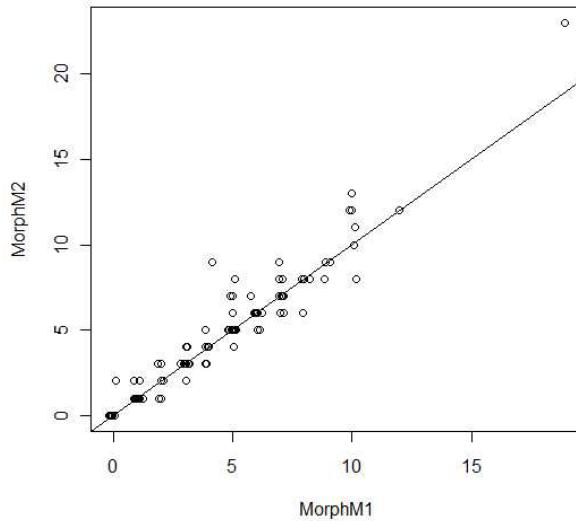


Figure 4.2: Plot of Total MorphM1 against Total MorphM2

The following is a summary of differences (MorphM1-MorphM2) and their frequencies.

MorphM1-MorphM2
-5 -4 -3 -2 -1 0 1 2
1 1 2 7 14 61 12 2

A t-test of the differences gives the following result:

t = -2.519, df = 99, P-value = 0.013, indicating a significant bias between markers.

The following tables (Tables 4.6 and 4.7) summarise the statistical findings in respect of MorphM1 and MorphM2. SD indicates standard deviation, SE the standard error of the mean and SE (pooled), the standard error of the mean based on the pooled group variances within the group, obtained from a one-way analysis of variance of Morph with Language as group variable.

TABLE 4.6: SUMMARY STATISTICS MORPH-M1

Language	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.	Xhosa	Other
Number	18	16	54	12
Mean	3.611	0.675	6.037	3.917
SD	2.547	1.408	3.302	2.503
SE	0.600	0.352	0.449	0.723
SE(pooled)	0.675	0.716	0.390	0.826

A one-way analysis of variance gives $F(3, 96) = 11.23$, $P < 0.001$, thus demonstrating significant differences between means. The Xhosa mean is significantly greater than both the Afrikaans and Eng./Afr. Means.

TABLE 4.7: SUMMARY STATISTICS MORPH-M2

Language	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.	Xhosa	Other
Number	18	16	54	12
Mean	3.611	2.062	6.389	4.000
SD	2.593	2.235	3.789	2.412
SE	0.611	0.559	0.516	0.696
SE (pooled)	0.766	0.812	0.442	0.938

A one-way analysis of variance gives $F(3, 96) = 9.09$, $P < 0.001$, thus significant differences between means. The Xhosa mean is significantly greater than both the Afrikaans and Eng./Afr. means.

The subcategories of morphological errors, namely nouns and verbs will now be examined in more detail.

i Verbs

An examination of the verb category demonstrated a real bias between the two markers. This can be seen in the plot of VerbM2 vs. VerbM1 where there are more points above the (0, 1) line than below it.

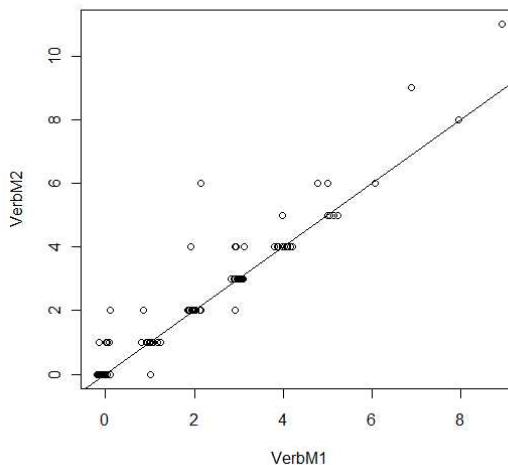


Figure 4.3: Plot of Total VerbM1 against Total VerbM2

The differences of VerbM1-VerbM2 were calculated. The following is a summary of their values:

VerbM1-VerbM2

-4	-2	-1	0	1
1	4	12	81	2

The results indicate 17 cases with VerbM1<VerbM2 and 2 with VerbM1>VerbM2. The mean of the differences is -0.22 and it is significantly different from zero at level P=0.001, showing a bias. However, although there is a significant bias, the correlation coefficient between the markers is still high at 0.952. Tables 4.8 and 4.9 give a summary of basic statistics for variable VerbM1 and Verb M2 respectively.

TABLE 4.8: SUMMARY STATISTICS VERB-M1

Language	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.	Xhosa	Other
Number	18	16	54	12
Mean	2.333	0.688	2.704	1.333
SD	1.715	0.873	1.987	1.497
SE	0.404	0.218	0.270	0.432
SE (pooled)	0.413	0.438	0.239	0.506

A one-way analysis of variance gives $F (3, 96) = 6.434, P < 0.001$, thus demonstrating significant differences between means. The Eng./Afr. mean is significantly smaller than the Afrikaans mean and also the Xhosa mean. The Afrikaans and Xhosa means are not significantly different.

TABLE 4.9: SUMMARY STATISTICS VERB-M2

Language	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.	Xhosa	Other
Number	18	16	54	12
Mean	2.389	1.188	2.926	1.417
SD	1.789	1.559	2.247	1.443
SE	0.421	0.390	0.306	0.417
SE (pooled)	0.470	0.498	0.271	0.575

A one-way analysis of variance gives $F (3, 96) = 4.194$, $P= 0.008$, thus significant differences between means. The Eng./Afr. mean is significantly smaller than the Xhosa mean.

Although there is a bias between markers, the trends in Tables 4.8 and 4.9 are much the same. The most striking difference between Tables 4.8 and 4.9 is that between the means of the Eng./Afr. group. These can be attributed to the differences in the classification and interpretation of data referred to (p.17). Examples will be given in the discussion of verb forms (pp.78–80) as this subsection seems to be where the greatest variance occurred.

- **Verbs: tense**

Tense includes “missing or erroneous verb tense markers, as well as modals when they clearly mark tense (*would/will; can/could*). It does not include mood (subjunctive / conditional) or voice (active/passive)” (Appendix C). The raw scores are presented in Tables 4.1 and 4.2. The mean of M1 and M2 in this category is 56.5 errors.

Past-tense markers presented the greatest number of errors in this category, particularly among Xhosa-speaking students. Typically, the past tense was not marked, either by the suffix ‘-ed’ or by changes required by the past tense of irregular verbs.

The example given as a tense error in Appendix C (“I attend my first year of high school”) is the type of error also found in the corpora. This would be conveyed in Xhosa as “Ndagena/ndingenile esikolweni esiphakamileyo kulo nyaka wolkuqala” (literally translated: “I entered school which is high in this year which was first.”). The first verb is in what is called the ‘remote past tense’, while the second is in the ‘long’ form of the past tense. This use of tenses possibly also explains the confusion about the sequence of tenses (Makalela 2004:360) which was a feature of the essays of the Xhosa-speaking students as demonstrated by the following example:

In recent years when a person commits crime or do something that is against the law, he was arrested and stay in jail until he or she gets a date

to appear in court where he or she will be judged by a magistrate or a judge. (Script 18)

The perfect and past perfect tenses did not pose significant problems apart from some examples of lack of concord, such as “she have gone”. The use of the progressive, cited as an emerging feature of BSAE (Makalela 2004:359; Van Rooy 2006, 2011) was limited in the corpora and therefore was not considered sufficiently representative to make a contribution to the debate on the stabilisation of this feature.

- **Verbs: form**

Form includes a wide range of errors in the formation of the verb phrase, excluding time and tense markings. Examples of these errors are the incorrect formation of the passive voice, conditionals, and subjunctives; as well as the misuse of modals, infinitives, and gerunds. The mean of M1 and M2 is 65.5. The largest discrepancy occurs in the difference between the means of M1 and M2 in respect of the Eng./Afr. group, with M1 noting a total of 8 errors and M2 recording 13 errors.

When the discrepancy was investigated, it was found that it could be attributed to differences in classification between the two markers. Some examples are:

- “Nobody … would wana be” (Script 54) was classified as informal usage by Marker 1, whereas Marker 2 classified it as an error of verb form as well as of informal usage (Appendix E).
- In the sentences, “With the death penalty in place, we as taxpayers will not have to bear the cost for the maintenance of prisoners” and “[Murderers] should be given the death penalty as it will curb the crime rate for our country” (Script 84), “will” was classified as an error of verb form by Marker 2 but not by Marker 1. Similar examples involving the use of “will” were found in Script 55 (Appendix E).

- **Subject-verb agreement**

Subject-verb agreement includes all errors in either noun or verb form leading to lack of agreement in person or number. This is frequently seen as a characteristic of Afrikaans

speakers, but is also found in BSAE (De Klerk & Gough 2002:6–9). In this review, all groups experienced problems with the Standard English rule of subject-verb agreement (see Tables 4.1 and 4.2, p.69). This can be attributed to home-language influence, as the languages represented in this study do not have the same concordial system as that of English, which involves agreement between subject and verb in terms of number and person, particularly in the first- and third-person singular form in the present tense.

In Afrikaans, the verb remains the same irrespective of the person and number of the subject, whereas in Xhosa concord is indicated by means of prefixes, changes within the word, and sometimes by voice tone as shown in the following examples:

- First-person singular (indicated by *ndi*): Ndithetha isiXhosa (I speak Xhosa); Umama uyandithanda (mother loves me).
- First-person plural (indicated by *si*): Sithetha isiXhosa (we speak Xhosa); Umama uyaſithanda (mother loves us).
- Second-person singular (indicated by *u*): Uthetha isiXhosa? (Do you speak Xhosa?).
- Second-person plural: Nithetha isiXhosa? (Do you [pl.] speak Xhosa?); Ndiyanithanda (I like you [pl.]).
- Third-person singular: UJen uthetha isiXhosa (Jen speaks Xhosa.).
- Third-person plural: Abantu bathetha isiXhosa (the people speak Xhosa.); Umama ubathanda abantu. (mother loves the people).

The difference between the second- and third-person singular is one of tone; that is, a high-tone u indicates second person (you), whereas a low-tone u indicates third-person singular (he/she/it). In written language, the meaning is determined by the context.

The differences between English, Afrikaans and Xhosa are indicated in Table 4.10 overleaf.

TABLE 4.10: SYSTEM OF CONCORD: ENGLISH/AFRKAANS/XHOSA

English	Afrikaans	Xhosa
I go	Ek gaan	Ndiyahamba
You go	Jy gaan	Uyahamba (low tone on u)
He/ she/ it goes	Hy/ sy/ dit gaan	Uyahamba (high tone on u)
We go	Ons gaan	Siyahamba
You (plural) go	Julle gaan	Niyahamba
They go	Hulle gaan	Bayahamba

ii Nouns

The two markers appear to be unbiased relative to each other. The mean (NounM1 - NounM2) is -0.05, and it is not significantly different from zero. A t-test gives $t = -0.685$, $df = 99$, $P = 0.495$. The variable Noun has been calculated as $(\text{NounM1} + \text{NounM2})/2$. The following table sets out the summary statistics of noun errors identified in the essays of the research participants.

TABLE 4.11: SUMMARY STATISTICS OF NOUN ERRORS

Language	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.	Xhosa	Other
Number	18	16	54	12
Mean	1.250	0.906	3.398	2.583
SD	1.638	0.987	2.131	1.395
SE	0.386	0.247	0.290	0.403
SE(pooled)	0.432	0.458	0.249	0.529

Result of one-way ANOVA: $F (3, 96) = 11.16$, $P < 0.001$.

The Xhosa mean is significantly different from the Afrikaans mean and also from the Eng./Afr. mean.

• Articles

The omission of the article has been cited as a feature of BSAE. This was supported by the evidence of the review, which noted that the omission and insertion of articles was a characteristic of the writing of Xhosa students in particular. In this case, the mean of the raw score of M1 and M2 is 149 total errors and the mean per student (based on 52

students) is 2.88 errors. If the Eng./Xhosa students are added to the total number of Xhosa students, the mean of M1 and M2 is 156.50 and the mean per student (54 students) is 2.90. This may seem relatively low until one remembers that these figures comprise more than 10% of the mean errors for this group.

Examples of use of articles include their frequent omission, for example “death penalty” instead of “the death penalty” as well as unnecessary additions, for example “the rape is high” and “the crime must decrease” (referring to crime in general). Frequently, both omission and the unnecessary addition of articles occurred in the same essay. This indicates confusion in the students’ developing language variety, possibly due to inadequate internalisation of rules taught at school in addition to the influence of the home language.

As mentioned in the literature review (p.49), Masters (1997) questions the necessity for intensive correction of incorrect articles, which he regards as of peripheral importance, especially given the time constraints of many writing courses. As noted (p.49), this is in agreement with the corpus of Seidlhofer (2004:220) and is of relevance to the development of BSAE (Van der Walt 2001). However, it was also pointed out that, although Van der Walt’s study confirms that BSAE is in the process of development, “it may take some time before an endonormative phase is attained” (5). In this context, Van der Walt (5–6) notes that levels of entrenchment vary in respect of differing uses of the article. The current research suggests that, while article use should not be over-emphasised, attention should be drawn to this feature, even if only briefly, especially in the case of academic writing (pp.49–50).

- **Noun endings (plurals and possessive)**

Errors in plural formation comprised the omission of the final “s” in the plural form. The omission of the apostrophe after plural nouns ending in “s” (for example, *teachers*) to indicate possession (*teachers’* staffroom) was a frequent feature, although the incorrect addition of the apostrophe “s” to indicate plural (for example *TV’s* and *wrongdoing’s*) was common. This was classified as a punctuation error (see Appendix C).

In Xhosa, the possessive is not indicated by an apostrophe. Thus, the sentence “My uncle’s death reminded me of my grandmother’s funeral.”(Appendix C) would be written as ‘Ukusweleka/Ukufa kwamalume kubendikhumbuza umfihlo kamakhulu’ (literal translation: “{The} death of my uncle {mother’s brother} reminded me of the funeral of {my} grandmother.”). In Afrikaans, possessive is indicated by the word ‘se’, for example “my pa se dood” (“my father’s death”).

b. Lexical errors (indicated as ‘Lex’)

As with the other errors, LexM1 vs. LexM2 was plotted, and this plot shows a slight bias, while the correlation between the two variables is high (correlation coefficient= 0.843). The mean of pairwise differences (LexM1 - LexM2) is -0.34 and it is significantly different from zero at level P=0.042. Although this bias is statistically significant, it is small relative to the overall mean number of errors, 4.94(LexM1), 5.28(LexM2); so, once again the calculation Lex= (LexM1+LexM2)/2 was made. The following graph and table provide details of this variable.

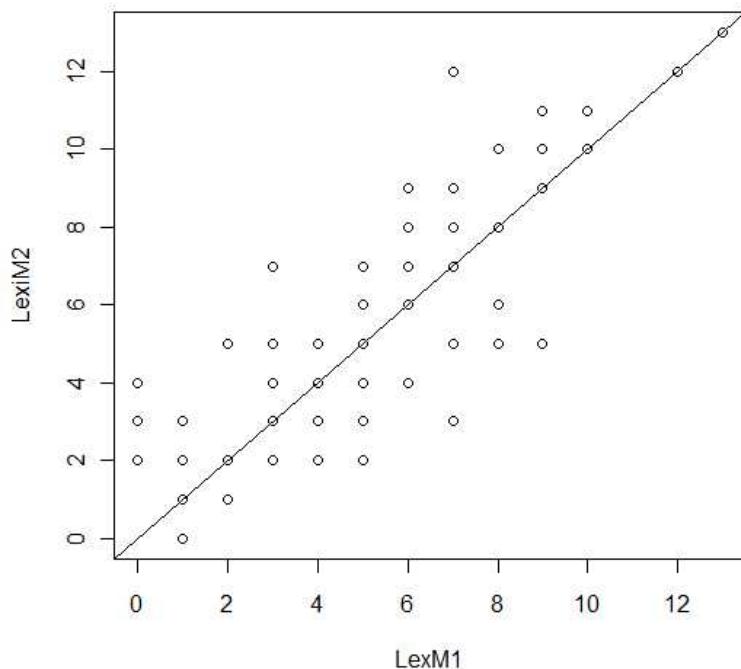


Figure 4.4: Plot of Total LexM1 against Total LexM2

TABLE 4.12: SUMMARY STATISTICS LEXM1 AND LEXM2

Language	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.	Xhosa	Other
Number	18	16	54	12
Mean	4.111	3.656	5.806	5.417
SD	2.233	3.118	2.692	2.627
SE	0.526	0.780	0.366	0.758
SE (pooled)	0.632	0.671	0.365	0.774

The result of a one-way analysis of variance of Lex with group variable Language is $F(3, 96) = 3.661$, $P= 0.015$, indicating significant differences between group means. The Xhosa mean is significantly greater than the Afrikaans mean and also significantly greater than the Eng./Afr. mean. The Afrikaans and Eng./Afr. means do not differ significantly.

i Word choice

Students demonstrated a limited vocabulary and only partially assimilated certain terms. This resulted in malapropisms such as “lethal injunction” as well as words such as “froid” (p.65) that markers found difficult to understand. The number of word-choice errors was considerably greater than that of the other lexical subcategories (see Tables 4.1 and 4.2, p.69).

In this subcategory, preposition errors were commonplace, especially in the writing of the black students. This is very possibly attributable to first-language influence. Xhosa uses two methods of expressing the meaning that is indicated by prepositions in English. These are the use of the locative and the enclitic ‘-nga-’.

Some examples of the locative are:

- Ndihamba esikolweni (I travel to/from/in the school).
- Ndihlala eMilnerton (I stay in Milnerton).
- UMax usebenza ekhaya. (Max works at home).
- Sihlala ngaseKapa (We stay/live near CapeTown).

Other uses of ‘nga’ include:

- indicating time, e.g. ngeli xesha (At this time);
- “by means of”, e.g. Bahamba nge-eropleni (They go by plane);
- “in” with a language, e.g. Uthini ngesiXhosa? (What do you say in Xhosa?);
- “for” after “thanks”, e.g. Enkosi ngokundincedisa (Thank you for helping me).

Sound changes/vowel coalescence explain the mutation from nga- to nge-/ngo.

Afrikaans-speakers have similar prepositional rules to English, but the choice of preposition differs. This can lead to confusion in a literal translation for example, “Hy het my met 'n klip gegooi” (“He threw a stone at me.”) is often translated as “He threw me with a stone”.

Wissing (1987:113) points out:

It should be evident ... that prepositions, whether literally or metaphorically used in idiomatic expressions, are language specific and must be learned as such. What is a prepositional word group in one language is rarely literally the same in another.

ii Word form

This subcategory included errors in which the word “was in the wrong lexical category for the context.” (Appendix C). In other words, errors of word form comprised incorrect parts of speech (not including verb-related errors). This category produced relatively few errors (a combined mean total M1 and M2 of 44.5) in comparison to those of word choice (combined mean of 327.5). The reasons for this difference were suggested in the previous section (pp.83 and 84) and would seem to be a result of low exposure to the target language.

iii Informal usage

Informal usage included slang and colloquial language; for example, ‘guys’ and ‘wanna’ as well as contractions such as *don’t* and *can’t* that are not accepted in academic English. While these contractions do not impede communication, it was decided to include them for the purposes of this research, as the target language variety is Standard Academic English. It is, however, acknowledged that these are relatively minor errors and would be accepted in less formal discourse.

Errors other than contractions were considered to be more serious as they affect the impression made by the student’s writing, particularly in an academic context. It is therefore believed that students do need to be made aware of the effect of slang and colloquialisms on meaning and register.

iv Idiom error

Errors in this subcategory were attributed to lack of exposure to the target language as well as first-language influence. Error in this category frequently overlapped with problems of word choice.

v Pronouns

The Black languages represented in this error review do not distinguish gender in the third-person singular (he/she/it) in the same way as in Standard English. Confusion in this aspect is a characteristic of BSAE and can be attributed to the influence of the home language.

Contrary to expectations, relatively few errors of this type were made by the target group. This is demonstrated in Tables 4.1 and 4.2 (p.69). These tables show the significantly lower number of pronoun errors relative to other lexical errors, particularly those of word choice.

c Syntactical errors (indicated as ‘Synt’)

The plot of SyntM2 vs. SyntM1, shown below, indicates substantial bias between markers. The following is a frequency table of SyntM1-SyntM2 differences. The number of positive differences is considerably greater than the number of negative differences (39 against 8).

The mean (SyntM1-SyntM2) is 0.700, and the result of a t-test of significance of difference of this mean from zero is $t = 4.8884$, $df = 99$, $P = 3.927e-06$, thus demonstrating clear evidence of bias.

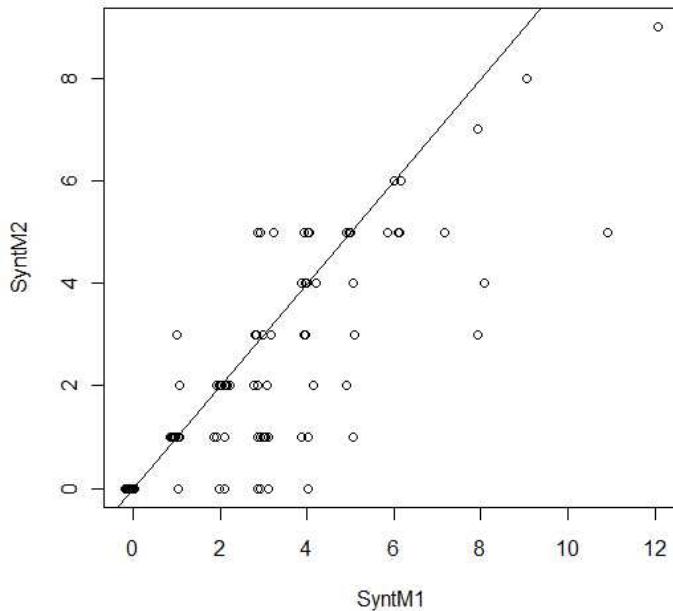


Figure 4.5: Plot of SyntM1 against Synt M2

TABLE 4.13: SUMMARY STATISTICS SYNT-M1

Language	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.	Xhosa	Other
Number	18	16	54	12
Mean	2.389	1.688	3.630	3.167
SD	2.062	1.401	2.505	1.992
SE	0.486	0.350	0.341	0.575
SE (pooled)	0.526	0.558	0.304	0.644

The result of one-way ANOVA: $F (3, 96) = 3.74$, $P= 0.014$, thus demonstrating significant differences between means. The Xhosa mean is significantly greater than the Afrikaans mean and also the Eng./Afr. mean.

TABLE 4.14: SUMMARY STATISTICS: SYNT-M2

Language	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.	Xhosa	Other
Number	18	16	54	12
Mean	1.833	1.500	2.556	3.250
SD	1.465	1.366	2.212	1.913
SE	0.345	0.342	0.301	0.552
SE (pooled)	0.459	0.487	0.265	0.562

The result of one-way ANOVA: $F (3, 96) = 2.49$, $P= 0.065$, indicating weak evidence of lack of homogeneity of means. The Xhosa mean is marginally significantly greater than the Afrikaans mean; $P=0.060$.

The discrepancy between the two markers can be attributed to difficulties in classification and confusion arising from scripts that were characterised by unintelligibility (See Appendix E).

For example, in the case of ‘Script 15 (p.65 and Appendix E), Marker 1 classified the sentence “When you do wrong things like stealing, killing, raping , doing froid so all the wrong doings to society you end up to jail” as a syntactical error, specifically that of sentence structure (although other errors were identified as well). By contrast, Marker 2 did not identify sentence structure in this case but noted word choice errors not identified by Marker 1, such as “so all”, and “doing froid”(committing fraud?), an error that puzzled Marker 1 to such an extent that it was considered unintelligible and therefore unclassifiable. An alternative would have been to classify it as ‘Miscellaneous’.

i Sentence structure

It should be remembered when considering the pedagogical implications of the data that students attempting complex sentences risk making more errors than those who confine themselves to simple sentences. While errors should not be ignored, especially when they

affect meaning, students should be given credit for attempting more complex constructions. On the other hand, they should be encouraged to avoid unnecessary wordiness and circumlocution. Achieving this balance comes with practice and is a challenge to educator and student alike.

Unfortunately, in the corpora of this study, sentence structure was often so muddled that meaning was obscured. This can be seen in the examples on pages 65 as well as in Appendix E).

ii Run-ons and fragments

There was some overlapping of these categories with punctuation errors. Here is an example of a sentence that could have been categorised as a ‘run-on’, but could equally have been classified under punctuation errors:

Death penalty is when someone has committed a serious crime once that person is pleaded guilty the court decides maybe to hang the person or to torture him or her. (Script 6 – Xhosa-speaker) (Appendix E).

d Mechanical errors (indicated as ‘Mech’)

The MechM1, MechM2 correlation coefficient is 0.929, which is satisfactorily high. A test of the mean pairwise differences showed no significant bias between markers. Thus it was decided to work with variable Mech= (MechM1+MechM2)/2.

TABLE 4.15: SUMMARY STATISTICS MECHM1 AND MECHM2

Language	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.	Xhosa	Other
Number	18	16	54	12
Mean	5.500	5.281	7.093	4.708
SD	2.086	2.793	3.764	1.233
SE	0.492	0.698	0.512	0.356
SE (pooled)	0.745	0.790	0.430	0.912

According to the analysis of variance, there is lack of homogeneity of the group means, F (3.96) =3.069, P=0.032.

When one inspects Table 4.15 and notes the values of the standard errors, it is clear that the Afrikaans, Eng./Afr. and Other means do not differ significantly from one another. Their pooled value is 5.217391, which differs significantly from the Xhosa at P=0.004.

In general, spelling and punctuation were erratic. Students of all language groups showed a disregard of these conventions. It is unclear whether this was due to carelessness or ignorance, but in this case, one can speculate that errors are caused by variables other than home-language influence. For example, a significant variable could be the influence of the school system. It is notable that the Xhosa mean is higher than the others, but this is not necessarily attributable to features of the Xhosa language.

The raw scores of both markers (Tables 4.1 and 4.2) showed that the two subsections comprising mechanical errors, namely punctuation and spelling, produced very high numbers of errors in all language groups. In the case of both M1 and M2, punctuation errors ranked as the subcategory that produced the greatest number of errors (381 and 389 respectively, thus a mean of 385), while spelling was ranked as the third most frequent error category (235 and 241 respectively, and a mean of 238). The discrepancy between M1 and M2 as far as punctuation errors are concerned was a result of a more stringent attitude to the use of the comma in the case of M2 (for example, after the word ‘however’). The most common errors of punctuation were:

- capitalisation: omission of capital letters at the beginning of sentences, capitalisation of common nouns within sentences, no capitalisation of the first person singular ‘I’;
- omission of commas;
- incorrect use of the apostrophe (excluding those indicating possession).

Spelling was erratic, with words often spelt differently in the same essay. It was difficult to discern a pattern in the errors, but the words that gave the most difficulty were the following:

- ‘commit’ and ‘committed’ which were spelt ‘comit’, ‘comite’.’comitted’;
- ‘opinion’ was spelt ‘oppinion’;
- ‘received’ was spelt ‘recieved’.

It must be noted that raw numbers of errors should be approached with caution to prevent the skewed impression created by outdated systems of marking that penalised students per error. This would unfairly disadvantage students who attempt to use a more sophisticated vocabulary but make spelling errors in the process. One student, for example, used the word ‘hypethetically’ instead of ‘hypothetically’. While this was counted as a spelling error (for the purposes of the review), the use of this word was correct, which indicated that it had been assimilated into the student’s vocabulary. Unfair penalisation can be prevented by the use of the *ESL Composition Profile* grid mentioned on p.42 and provided in Appendix F.

4.6.2 Language groups: Black Southern African, Afrikaans, Eng./Afr.

In the following summaries, the Black Southern African language groups have been pooled, and the one Russian has been omitted. The following tables contain, in sequence, the number of students, the mean number of errors, the standard deviation, the standard error of the mean, the SE based on the pooled results within group SD. The F (2, 96) statistic resulting from a one-way analysis of variance is shown along with the corresponding P-value. The conditions for the P-value to be exact do not necessarily hold in all cases, but the F and P values are a useful guide for indicating lack of homogeneity of the group mean values. The value of F (2, 96) at the conventional critical P=0.05 is 3.09. Observed values of F (2, 96) much greater than 3.09 are reliable indicators of lack of homogeneity. Where this occurs, the result is confirmed by the relatively robust Welch version of the two-sample t-test.

Some of the previously reported results are used here. For example, the conclusions about bias between markers are accepted and the variable used in the examination of Total errors is m.Total, the mean of the score of the two markers.

Comments and observations regarding possible reasons for marker bias are also valid in the case of this grouping.

4.6.2.1 Total errors

The following table indicates the total errors recorded in these groups.

TABLE 4.16: TOTAL ERRORS: BLACK SOUTHERN AFRICAN, AFRIKAANS, ENG./AFR.

Language	Black Southern African	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.
Number	65	18	16
Mean	21.385	15.333	12.375
SD	7.802	4.130	7.103
SE	0.968	0.974	1.776
SE (pooled)	0.890	1.691	1.794

Key

SD: Standard deviation

SE: Standard error of the mean

SE (pooled): the standard error of the mean based on the pooled group variances within groups obtained from a one-way analysis of variance of Total Errors with Language as group variable.

$$F(2, 96) = 12.73, P= 1.247e-05$$

The ANOVA test indicates significant differences between means. The Black Southern African mean is significantly greater than the Afrikaans mean and also the Eng./Afr. mean. The Afrikaans and Eng./Afr. means are not significantly different from each other.

4.6.2.2 Specific errors

This section will apply the following key to all categories:

SD: Standard deviation

SE: Standard error of the mean

SE (pooled): the standard error of the mean based on the pooled group variances (within the groups) obtained from a one-way analysis of variance of the specific error category with Language as group variable.

a Morphological errors

The table below summarises the morphological errors found in the groups.

TABLE 4.17: SUMMARY STATISTICS MORPH-M1

Language	Black African	Southern African	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.
Number	65	18	16	
Mean	5.662	3.611	1.625	
SD	3.285	2.547	1.408	
SE	0.407	0.600	0.352	
SE (pooled)	0.365	0.693	0.735	

$F(2, 96) = 13.43, P < 0.0001$.

Every mean differs significantly from every other one.

TABLE 4.18: SUMMARY STATISTICS MORPH-M2

Language	Black African	Southern African	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.
Number	65	18	16	
Mean	5.969	3.611	2.062	
SD	3.708	2.593	2.235	
SE	0.460	0.611	0.559	
SE (pooled)	0.414	0.787	0.834	

$F(2, 96) = 10.46, P < 0.001$.

The Black Southern African mean is significantly greater than the Afrikaans mean as well as the Eng./Afr. mean. The Afrikaans mean is greater than the Eng./Afr. mean, but only at level $P=0.071$.

Noun errors found in the groups are indicated in the following table.

TABLE 4.19: SUMMARY STATISTICS NOUN ERRORS

Language	Black African	Southern African	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.
Number	65	18	16	
Mean	3.238	1.250	0.906	
SD	2.047	1.638	0.987	
SE	0.254	0.386	0.247	
SE (pooled)	0.229	0.436	0.462	

$F(2, 96) = 15.24, P < 0.0001$.

The Black Southern African mean is significantly greater than the Afrikaans mean as well as the Eng./Afr. mean. The Afrikaans mean is not significantly different from the Eng./Afr. mean.

ii Verb errors

The following table indicates the statistical findings for verb errors:

TABLE 4.20: SUMMARY STATISTICS VERB-M1

Language	Black Southern African	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.
Number	65	18	16
Mean	2.477	2.333	0.688
SD	1.977	1.715	0.873
SE	0.245	0.404	0.218
SE (pooled)	0.223	0.425	0.450

$F(2, 96) = 6.43, P = 0.002$.

The Eng./Afr. mean is significantly smaller than the Afrikaans mean and also the Black Southern African mean. The Afrikaans and Black Southern African means are not significantly different.

TABLE 4.21: SUMMARY STATISTICS VERB-M2

Language	Black Southern African	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.
Number	65	18	16
Mean	2.677	2.389	1.188
SD	2.202	1.787	1.559
SE	0.273	0.421	0.390
SE (pooled)	0.253	0.482	0.511

$F(2, 96) = 3.41, P = 0.037$.

The Eng./Afr. mean is significantly smaller than the Afrikaans mean and also the Black Southern African mean. The Afrikaans and Black Southern African means are not significantly different.

b Lexical errors

Lexical errors found in the groups are indicated in the table below.

TABLE 4.22: SUMMARY STATISTICS LEXICAL ERRORS

Language	Black Southern African	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.
Number	65	18	16
Mean	5.762	4.111	3.656
SD	2.677	2.233	3.118
SE	0.332	0.526	0.780
SE (pooled)	0.332	0.632	0.670

$F(2, 96) = 5.53$, $P= 0.005$.

The Afrikaans and Eng./Afr. means do not differ significantly from each other. Their pooled value is 3,897 which differs significantly from the Black Southern African mean, $P=0.002$.

c Syntactical errors

The following tables indicate syntactical errors indicated by M1 and M2 respectively.

TABLE 4.23: SUMMARY STATISTICS SYNT-M1

Language	Black Southern African	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.
Number	65	18	16
Mean	3.538	2.389	1.688
SD	2.431	2.062	1.401
SE	0.302	0.486	0.350
SE (pooled)	0.277	0.527	0.559

$F(2, 96) = 5.31$, $P= 0.007$.

The Afrikaans and Eng./Afr. means do not differ significantly from each other. Their pooled value is 2.059 which differs significantly from the Black Southern African mean, $P=0.001$.

TABLE 4.24: SUMMARY STATISTICS SYNTM2

Language	Black African	Southern African	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.
Number	65	18	16	
Mean	2.677	1.833	1.500	
SD	2.180	1.465	1.366	
SE	0.270	0.345	0.342	
SE (pooled)	0.243	0.462	0.490	

$F(2, 96) = 3.03$, $P= 0.053$.

The Afrikaans and Eng./Afr. means do not differ significantly from each other. Their pooled value is 1.676 which differs significantly from the Black Southern African mean, $P=0.007$.

d Mechanical errors

Mechanical errors found in the groups are indicated in the following table.

TABLE 4.25: SUMMARY STATISTICS MECH

Language	Black African	Southern African	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.
Number	65	18	16	
Mean	6.685	5.500	5.281	
SD	3.581	2.086	2.793	
SE	0.444	0.492	0.698	
SE (pooled)	0.403	0.765	0.812	

$F(2, 96) = 1.78$, $P= 0.175$.

Although the ANOVA test suggests homogeneity of the means, it is notable that the Afrikaans and Eng./Afr. means are very close to each other. Pooling these two groups gives a mean of 5.397 which is significantly different from the Black Southern African mean, $P=0.036$.

4.7 Schools

Data was analysed with the view to determining whether a relationship exists between the school attended and the number of errors per student.

Schools were divided into the broad categories of

- rural;
- “township” (which included schools in socio-economically disadvantaged areas on the outskirts of both cities and smaller towns);
- urban schools close to the City Bowl (schools previously under the auspices of the House of Representatives – abbreviated in the following tables to Urban-ex-House of Rep.);
- schools in more affluent areas, previously catering for white pupils (popularly labelled ‘ex -Model C schools’);
- FET (Further Education and Training) colleges;
- independent (private) schools; and
- schools outside the borders of South Africa, indicated in the table below as Belarus and Zimbabwe.

Initially, a summary was made of the numbers of observations in the School*Language classes. However, because of the small number of known results for schools, pooling of classes was necessary in order to obtain reasonably clear indications of trends. The second table contains a cross-tabulation of means of the variable Total. The following tables indicate the findings.

TABLE 4.26: NUMBERS SCHOOLS*LANGUAGE CLASSES

School	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr	Xhosa	Other
Belarus	0	0	0	1
Correspondence	0	1	0	0
FET College	0	0	1	0
‘Model C’	4	2	2	0
Rural	0	1	6	0
Township	1	2	7	2
Urban-ex-House of Rep	1	0	1	0
Zimbabwe	0	0	0	2
Unknown	12	10	37	7

TABLE 4.27: SCHOOLS: CROSS TABULATION OF MEANS OF VARIABLE TOTAL

School	Afrikaans	Eng./Afr.	Xhosa	Other
Belarus	N/A	N/A	N/A	17.50000
Correspondence	N/A	9.50	N/A	N/A
FET College	N/A	N/A	24.00000	N/A
'Model C'	15.62500	12.25	12.50000	N/A
Rural	N/A	17.00	23.83333	N/A
Township	17.50000	20.00	19.50000	15.75000
Urban-ex-House of Rep	13.50000	N/A	22.50000	N/A
Zimbabwe	N/A	N/A	N/A	22.50000
Unknown	15.20833	10.70	22.94595	19.85714

The Xhosa means are high compared with most of the others, in agreement with the previous results (pp.69–80). Within the Xhosa group, the Rural and Township means are greater than the Model C mean, a trend also seen (although less clearly) in the Afrikaans and Eng./Afr. language group.

A third process was followed in order to obtain a better idea of the School*Language intersection, namely:

- The results of only the Model C, Rural and Township schools, Afrikaans, English/Afrikaans, and Xhosa language groups were extracted. These made up 25 of the 34 known schools.
- The Township and Rural groups were pooled.
- The Afrikaans and English/Afrikaans groups were similarly pooled.

Table 4.28 shows the numbers of the combined groups. The corresponding means are in Table 4.29.

TABLE 4.28: SCHOOLS: NUMBERS OF THE COMBINED GROUPS

School	Afr. and Eng./Afr.	Xhosa
Model C	6	2
Township/Rural	4	13

TABLE 4.29: SCHOOLS: MEANS OF THE COMBINED GROUPS

School	Afr. and Eng./Afr.	Xhosa	Means
Model C	14.500	12.500	14.000
Township/Rural	18.625	21.500	20.824
Means	16.150	20.300	

The sample numbers are small (see Table 4.28) and there must be reservations about their representativeness. Consequently, the trends suggested by Table 4.29 should be treated with caution. However, it is clear that Township/Rural means are greater than the corresponding Model C means. This result raises the possibility that observed language differences in the larger sample may be attributable to schools attended.

The findings, although from a small sample, are corroborated by the comparative research studies of Pretorius and Ribbens (2005) and of Pretorius (2008). These studies examined literacy (with the emphasis on reading skills) in South African schools. These results were corroborated by larger studies on the international study of reading proficiency conducted by Mullis *et al.* (2006) and summarised by Howie *et al.* (2008). The bimodal pattern of distribution with significant differences between the schools studied is evident in the target group of this review and is similar to that found in these studies and also consistent with the findings of Fleisch (2008:2–3).

As noted on p.26, Van Dyk (2005:38–39) cites the following reasons for low literacy levels among students who have “high academic potential”:

- the unequal distribution of resources ;
- problems arising from changing syllabus paradigms; and
- the increasing preference of students to study in English, which is not necessarily their first language.

While this research does not claim to have examined the above factors in detail, the subsample does indicate influence on the student of the type of school attended. This raises the possibility that the factors mentioned by Van Dyk could have a negative effect

on the literacy levels of students from township and rural schools – groups that would possibly be the most affected by the problems highlighted by Van Dyk.

The subsample is merely an indication of trends found in the data. However, the thorough process followed aimed to indicate these trends as reliably as possible, and succeeded in raising the possibility that observed language differences in the larger language groups may be attributable to schools in addition to language groups. This possibility presents a worthwhile avenue for further research.

4.8 Overview of features of SAE and particularly BSAE

Grammatical features of BSAE are cited by De Klerk and Gough (2002:6–9), Makalela (2004:359), Van Rooy (2006) and Spencer (2011a:140–143). Some of these are shared by other varieties of South African English. The following were noted by this study:

- article omissions or insertions;
- no third-person indicative present;
- simplification of tense;
- tense sequences;
- past tense not always marked;
- noun phrases not marked for number.

These may be attributed to home-language influence and have been cited by the above researchers as features of an emerging language variety. They do not seriously affect meaning, although a case can be made for paying attention to them in the context of Standard Academic English and for purposes of satisfying current testing criteria (Spencer 2011a, 2011b).

Errors of concord, tense, the use of the apostrophe, spelling and punctuation were common to all groups in the study, but the evidence was not sufficiently consistent to indicate the dialectical convergence found by Mesthrie (2009) in his study of South African students (in this case, white, Indian and black female students at the University of Cape Town (UCT)). Many errors (e.g. “doing froid”) were idiosyncratic and others

demonstrated an incomplete internalisation of features of Standard English, resulting in inconsistencies within the same script.

Errors that impede meaning are more serious and warrant a great deal more intervention. The most noticeable of these were those of sentence structure and word choice. In some cases, errors of this type obscured the meaning to such an extent as to make the script almost incomprehensible. Intervention strategies should thus prioritise these errors.

Students seemed unfamiliar with written discourse and uncomfortable about expressing themselves in writing. Evidence of this was found in the muddled sentences and ‘stream of consciousness’ approach of many scripts. This is an impression that has not been empirically examined by this review, but has been dealt with in the context of reading skills (Pretorius 2008). The issue is worth mentioning as a suggestion for further research which could focus on the exposure of similar target groups to written discourse.

4.9 Conclusion

The evidence demonstrates that the means were greater in the Black Southern African language group, specifically among the Xhosa-speaking students who formed the majority of this group, than that of the other groups. The Black Southern African language group also seemed adversely affected by schooling (in terms of achieving proficiency in the target-language variety), with larger numbers of this group having attended township or rural schools. The means of these students were found to be higher than those who attended other types of schools. This finding raises the question whether errors could be attributable to schools attended rather than (or as well as) home-language influence.

Whatever the reason, the high number of errors, especially those affecting meaning, gives cause for concern and indicates that the pedagogical significance of these errors should be addressed as a matter of urgency with a view to developing intervention strategies.

CHAPTER 5: INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

“... what do we do in the meantime?”(Ferris 2004)

5.1 Introduction

This chapter commences with an overview of the theoretical background underpinning the research. This is followed by recommendations for intervention strategies with specific reference to the research findings. These intervention strategies include suggestions regarding the timeframe of the module, the content and format of learning materials (including the prioritising of errors and strategies in dealing with specific errors), and the attributes and implementation of effective feedback, particularly in the context of distance education (DE). Finally, other resources such as regional learning centres are briefly discussed.

5.2 Theoretical background

As indicated in the Literature Review (pp.19–25 and 31–42), the current research negotiates its way between two hotly contested issues, namely the World Englishes versus Applied Linguistics controversy and the debate on the value of feedback. These were examined in order to develop a pedagogical standpoint with reference to the target group of this study. In both cases, it was found that research is incomplete and inconclusive and the educator is faced with Ferris’s question “... what do we do in the meantime ...?” (Ferris 2004).

The examination of the World Englishes debate considered the opposing viewpoints of Quirk (1990) and Kachru (1990, 1991) from the perspective of developing norms of SAE versus the exigencies of academic writing. The question posed by Phillipson (1992:197) whether “periphery English-speakers” should adopt exonormative norms or “an institutionalized endo-normative model (based on an educated indigenous variant)” summarised the dilemma faced by the educator, particularly in the context of academic writing. Phillipson’s argument (198) that the question of intelligibility depends on

whether students need English for national or international purposes is a further factor to be considered when adopting a pedagogical standpoint in relation to the target group of the current review.

On the subject of international intelligibility, one should acknowledge Van der Walt's assertion (2001:7–8) that "errors are judged not only in terms of their effect on comprehensibility, but also in terms of the image that the learner projects". It was argued that, despite the subjectivity of the statement, language accuracy (as currently judged by criteria of Standard British or American English) is an important criterion of academic writing and that ignoring this fact would disadvantage students who aspire to writing skills in an academic context.

Under these circumstances, the researcher argues that an extreme liberationist (see Chapter 2, pp.23-25) view of language teaching could 'ironically' very well result in disempowerment, and that the student would benefit from an additive view of language proficiency (which strives to add a language or language variety to the students' existing repertoire) in both the local and international standard varieties of English. In other words, rather than present the student's own variety of English as deviant or inferior, the educator should aim to proffer the target language variety (which 'in the meantime' is Standard English) as part of a range of possible 'Englishes'.

Regarding the error correction controversy, the researcher adopts the position of Ferris (2002) and Yates and Kenkle (2002:30) that error correction should be continued until (or unless) it is demonstrated to be of little value. This is of particular importance in the case of DE with its minimal (or non-existent) face-to-face contact between students and educators.

The debate on the efficacy of editing was examined as an extension of the error-correction debate. Despite the compelling arguments in favour of having students revise and edit their own work, counterarguments note the lack of evidence of any long-term improvement. Spencer (1997:46) points out that "teacher intervention does not guarantee improvement, but it affords the learner an opportunity to practise, and in the process, reassert control over the text". The researcher agrees with Spencer's suggestion that students edit their own work because "by insisting on multiple drafts the teacher invites

the student to clarify and refine meaning” (46), a viewpoint confirmed and developed by Pienaar (2005) who stresses the need to empower the students to take ownership of and responsibility for their writing. Editing has therefore been promoted as an effective strategy for improving writing skills as well as fostering students’ sense of ownership of their written work. A further challenge is to avoid focus on form and the “discrete item, surface level approach” (Sheppard 1992:103) at the expense of organisation and content, while still paying the necessary attention to language issues.

Recommendations are also made regarding the timeframe of the module and the content of learning materials. The latter takes into consideration the issues raised by current research. The recommendations dealing with the prioritisation and treatment of errors are also applicable to written feedback, which is discussed later in the chapter (pp. 124-126).

5.3 Timeframe

A cause for concern is that the current timeframe of the LSK0108 module is only one semester (6 months). It is believed that writing skills develop over a period of time and that meaningful intervention cannot take place in the timeframe currently allocated to this module. Students should have much more time to practise writing skills and be given the opportunity to revise first drafts of their essays. This will enable them to become aware of features of their own writing and to develop a sense of responsibility and autonomy in relation to these.

More time is also needed for students’ interaction with lecturers and/or markers. Problems in this regard are exacerbated by the exigencies of DE, which include minimal interaction between students and lecturers, as well as logistical and administrative constraints. The minimum recommended period for this module is thus considered to be a year.

5.4 Study Materials

It should be stated from the outset that it is not the intention of this research to address the complex field of materials-writing in any detail. The focus of the recommendations remains the problems identified by the error review and the purpose is to offer

suggestions that can be incorporated into learning material designed for this and similar target groups. It is possible that the existing modules at Unisa will change in name and structure, but it is believed that the pointers provided in this chapter could be adopted and developed by any future courses offered to ESL students.

In the area of student support, Hyland's (2001) suggestions could be implemented for the target group. Hyland recommends that student support in a DE context should develop:

- written guides offering advice on learning strategies;
- mechanisms such as assignment cover sheets that give students an opportunity to discuss their requirements and problems.

Hyland's (2001) concern that students may overlook the institutional support being offered and thus jeopardise their chances of success is relevant to the target group. LSK0108 is a skills-based course, and students may be tempted to ignore the study material since it takes the form of guidelines and, unlike content-based modules, is not directly tested. The card system developed by Davis (1988) could be suggested to students as a way of keeping track of their own errors (see Chapter 2,p.38)

At present, the communicative approach adopted by the Learning Guide for LSK0108 is supplemented by tutorial letters, in particular *Tutorial Letter 103* which gives notes and exercises on specific language features. The idea is that students use *Tutorial Letter 103* to address specific language issues and problems they may experience. These would have been pointed out to them in the assignment feedback, which ideally should provide the reference to the particular feature needing attention. Unfortunately, logistical problems seem to be an obstacle, with study material arriving late and sometimes not at all. As noted (p. 50–51), this has proved to be a difficulty, especially in the case of *Tutorial Letter 103*.

The combination of the communicative approach with more specific form-based language instruction is beneficial as it allows the students to concentrate on those language features that need attention, without losing focus on content. This is in agreement with research such as that of Odlin (1994:1–19) in his discussion of the

motivations for pedagogical grammar. Odlin stresses the benefits of formal instructions for performance, the value of consciousness-raising, and the need to strike a balance between formal analysis and communicative activities. Another advantage of the approach is that students who do not need assistance with particular language features are not required to study these sections. In other words, students can decide for themselves which features they wish to concentrate on. This encourages autonomy and a sense of individual responsibility for and ownership of the text.

Unfortunately, as mentioned, logistical problems surrounding the delivery of materials have resulted in students attempting to fend for themselves as far as language usage is concerned. While a focus on form to the exclusion of content and organisation of ideas is not to be encouraged, students need to be assisted with the language features that they find problematical. In fact, research has found that they expect and desire such assistance (Spencer 1998:208; Louw 2006:7), particularly when the goal is to master academic English.

A recommendation is that notes on language features be combined, or sent together with, the Learning Guide. This would obviate the logistical problems and give the students more time to study both texts. Furthermore, the content of the Learning Guide and the tutorial letters could be expanded and adjusted. For example, in addition to the discrete language exercises included in *Tutorial Letter 103*, the material could give passages for editing in the argumentative essay context. These passages could combine certain language features and would be found at the end of the tutorial letter or learning guide, accompanied by suggested answers and explanations. This would place the language features into the context of the argumentative essay in particular and academic English in general. Furthermore, the issues of motivation and autonomy are important in the DE environment and these can be encouraged by carefully designed editing strategies.

If editing is to become an integral part of the LSK0108 module as recommended in Chapter 2, pp.50-53), it is essential that students obtain training in assessing their own work. It is not sufficient for them to be given a grid and then to be expected to edit their own assignments. Far more guidance needs to be given and this can be achieved by means of explanations and exercises in the learning material. Here, the idea of the cognitive apprenticeship framework and the related scaffolding technique examined by

Westbrook (2009), and discussed in the literature review (pp 51–53), should be employed. In fact, this approach could be adopted in all the learning materials for LSK0108, as will be illustrated in examples given later in this chapter.

For example, the following notes on editing (adapted from Venter & Ward-Cox 2008:52) could be amended further to suit the requirements of the LSK0108 module. Each aspect of editing can then be dealt with separately, and notes and exercises given in each case. The rest of the extract can be found in Appendix H and can be changed to meet the needs of the target group.

NOTES ON EDITING

Edit for success

After you have written a text, you should always edit it to make sure that it says exactly what you want it to say in the way that you want to say it. Editing also assists you to identify any language and spelling mistakes. This gives you an opportunity to correct these mistakes.

The importance of editing

Accurate language use and appropriate style are essential in the academic and business world because they reflect the image of the student or company. It is therefore essential to ensure that all written material is error-free as far as possible and is appropriate for its target market.

The editing process

It is easy to become confused when editing and then you miss errors. The best way to avoid this danger is to follow a step-by-step process, concentrating on one aspect of the text at a time. These are the aspects that you should check:

- layout
- spelling
- punctuation
- language
- readability and style.

Notes written by M. Ward-Cox

The notes and exercises provided on the various aspects of editing would act as revision to some of the language features already dealt with in the learning guide or tutorial letter. Another possibility is to incorporate the notes and exercises on language features with the notes on editing, using the aspects that deal with language as a framework to give

meaningful structure to the language notes. This would serve to contextualise these features and demonstrate the link between them and the important aspects of readability and style. Thus students would come to understand the importance of language features as part of an effective essay, and not as discrete items to be memorised decontextually.

The section could conclude with a checklist such as the one below (adapted from Venter & Ward-Cox 2008:58). Alternatively, a checklist can be developed based on the ESL grid in *Tutorial Letter 101*(Appendix G), provided that the insensitive comments have been removed as discussed (p.51).

Here is a checklist that may help you when you edit a document: Have I checked?		
	YES (Y)	NO (N)
Layout and format; correct presentation		
Diction (word choice) – is it suitable for the context and sensitive to the reader and the situation?		
LANGUAGE (SPECIAL CHECK!):		
• Concord (agreement between subject and verb)		
• Tenses		
• Sentence structure (syntax)		
• Word form		
• [More could be added here]		
Spelling		
Punctuation		
FACTS: are they		
• Correct?		
• Sufficient?		
• Logically presented?		
Unnecessary information – has it been omitted?		
Is this style suitable and appropriate? (Bear in mind that academic writing tends to be more factual and objective than creative writing.)		

Notes written by M. Ward-Cox

5.4.1 Format of study material

As is currently the case, answers or suggested solutions would be provided for all exercises. Louw (2006:61) points out that the “most favoured form of correction was ‘error indicated and cue for self-correction’ followed by ‘error and answer’ and using errors as examples in the classroom”. The latter is not possible in the DE context, but

self-correction could be achieved by providing exercises with answers. This would assist in motivation and consciousness-raising.

It is recommended that materials dealing with language features should include

- an explanation of the particular feature;
- exercises that include choosing the correct form of the word, cloze exercises and the correction of sentences or short paragraphs;
- longer passages for editing, combining the feature with other features.

An example of an editing exercise involving several features is found below.

EDITING EXERCISE

The crime is out of controll i think that death penalty should be reinstate people must become rensponsible for there actions. Too much murder, rapes and the children neglect. We see these in a dialy bases. Many of these criminal's are coming from the rural areas were they can't find jobs and after a wile they come involve into crime, drugs and prostitution human trafiking soon it's to late to Rehabilitate them and they are lost to the society.

These guys who steal rape or comit the other crimes go to the jail if they really do for a few years and get away with it. They should go to jail for ever and never came out they can rott there people must be safe from these killers they don't care just wanna be gangstas and show of. The poeple in the communitys and even the police is terrified of them. Nothing to do about it.

Exercise designed by M. Ward-Cox

5.4.2 Introduction to features of SAE (including BSAE) in study material

Another addition to the study material could be a simple explanation of selected features of SAE (including BSAE). Spencer's (2011b) conference paper suggests that students should be introduced to the difference/deficit debate and shown that two diametrically opposed views are possible. They should be asked to take a stand on specific grammatical forms, such as whether they think that the extension of the progressive form is an error, possibly as a result of overgeneralisation (addition of '-ing' suffix in the case of stative verbs) or as a reflection of the "Bantu language logic where verbal inflections do not play

an important role in the articulation of aspectual meaning” (Makalela 2004:359). It is vital that students are alerted to the fact that the same feature can be viewed in two totally divergent ways and that both views have pedagogical implications.

An explanation of this nature would prevent students from feeling that their particular variety of English is deviant, while at the same time acknowledging that in the specific learning context, Standard Academic English is the target variety. This would encourage diglossia, as referred to in Chapter 1, p.7.

If it is felt that LSK0108 students are not yet able to follow an academic argument of this kind, the option should be considered at a higher level. However, at the LSK0108 level, the concept can be introduced by giving students exercises on formal and informal language usage, which can include regional features. In these exercises, students can be asked to choose the appropriate answer from a list of words with similar meaning but for different registers and various contexts. This would sensitise them to the idea that no variety of English is intrinsically superior to others, but that correct usage is dependent on context.

Students could also be shown how language usage can give rise to unfortunate intercultural misunderstanding, for example. “My mother is late” said by a Xhosa speaker to indicate that his/her mother is deceased could be misinterpreted by a speaker of English as meaning that the person’s mother was not on time.

5.4.3 Specific language errors

The implication of Sheppard’s study (1992) that specific error types respond in different ways to error correction should be considered when recommending intervention strategies. A further factor is the prioritising of errors according to the effect they have on meaning.

The most important question to be asked when identifying errors, giving feedback and planning intervention, is whether communication is impeded. Another aspect to be borne in mind in the context of academic writing is that of the international arena. As Van der

Walt (2001:7–8) argues, “errors are judged not only in terms of their effect on comprehensibility, but also in terms of the image that the learner projects”.

For these reasons, while features such as those listed as not affecting meaning (p.48–49) should not be over-emphasised by the learning materials, they should be given some coverage. As Jenkins (2006:175) points out, one reason why attention should be drawn to these features, at least in the short term, is that current testing attitudes still consider them to be important. A further consideration is that since certain internationally accepted conventions apply in the case of Academic English, students should at least have these mentioned to them. For example, it could be pointed out that contractions (such as *can't* and *don't*) are acceptable in informal discourse but should be avoided in academic writing, even though they do not detract from meaning.

Markers could indicate these errors (possibly by means of a code), while drawing more attention to those that affect meaning (for example, by using a code and including a comment, referring the student to the relevant section of the learning material). Feedback strategies and techniques will be discussed in more detail in the section on written feedback (pp.124-126). What is important here is to stress that it is the student's prerogative to choose whether or not to use the provided materials and feedback. Once again, this approach would encourage autonomy and responsibility, especially if combined with the practice of editing first or multiple drafts. Errors that affect intelligibility, such as those of sentence structure, are more problematical and should therefore be given more attention than the relatively unimportant features mentioned.

To summarise, errors found in the corpora can be prioritised according to the degree to which meaning is affected. This will be borne in mind in written feedback as well as in the learning materials. In this context, three categories were noted, namely:

- errors that affect meaning;
- errors that occasionally affect meaning (but currently affect the impression made by the writing);
- errors that have little effect on meaning (but affect the impression made by the writing).

Before discussing the recommendations according to error prioritisation, it should be cautioned that, while these categories are useful as guidelines, too much reliance on them could risk over-simplifying a complex problem. As demonstrated by the examples given, unintelligibility can be caused by a combination of errors. Furthermore, it has been noticed that categories frequently overlap, especially when the marker is confronted by writing that is difficult to understand.

With this caution in mind, intervention strategies are discussed as follows:

5.4.3.1 Errors affecting meaning

In this category, sentence structure was identified as posing the greatest problem and thus the area where the greatest intervention was necessary. Word choice also presented the readers with difficulty.

a Sentence structure

Incorrect or unclear sentence structure is described as a problem of "structural irregularities that do interfere with communication" (Van Wyk 2002:227). The author points out that poor sentence structure can seriously affect understanding on the part of the reader as the writing becomes "difficult or impossible to understand". This is because the sentences do not adhere to "any standard sentence structure" and seem "out of control". As indicated in the findings of this research project, similar sentences were discovered in the corpora (see examples on p.65 as well as in Appendix E). A further problem is mentioned in Webb's (2002:54–55) research which indicates that in many cases the student had an understanding of the subject, but as a result of the poor quality of language, there "was no way in which these students could have succeeded in the examination". As Louw (2006:12) points out in his discussion of these studies, written language "is often the means through which students have to illustrate academic competence". Louw notes that, "If students cannot express themselves well enough to present their knowledge in a comprehensible way, they may find that their progress at tertiary level is affected adversely." (15).

Unfortunately, in the corpora of this study, students were seriously disadvantaged because their sentence structure was often so muddled that meaning was obscured. This can be seen in the examples on p. 65 of the findings as well as in Appendix E).

As mentioned in Chapter 4 (p. 87–88), while students should not be discouraged from attempting complex structures, they should be cautioned against unnecessary circumlocution which could adversely affect intelligibility. To prevent this, students should be advised to use shorter sentences initially before attempting more complex structures. They can introduce these once they have gained confidence and feel that they can control longer sentences.

The learning guide (2007:126) gives information on simple, compound and complex sentences and incorporates these notes with information on reading skills. This approach demonstrates how the two language skills of reading and writing can be integrated, and is reinforced by the exercises provided as well as by the reading assignment in *Tutorial Letter 101*. It is important to view the two skills as interrelated and not as hermetically sealed compartments. Indeed, this combined approach is recommended as far as all language features are concerned.

Although it can be argued that discourse analysis is not strictly speaking the focus of a review of language errors, some consideration of cohesion and coherence is necessary in the area of sentence structure. Using top-down (macro) and bottom-up (micro) approaches, one could help the students to understand how particular short stretches of discourse are constructed. For example, students could explore the functions of various referential links in the sentence. While this error review concentrated on sentence-level features, the material would obviously also include the links between sentences and paragraphs. As Van Rooy (2008b:240–241) points out:

The analyses often consider grammatical features only in their clausal or sentence context: they are seldom analysed in terms of the broader textual context. Thus, the syntagmatic aspect of language, particularly beyond the sentence, does not receive attention.

Cohesive links could be presented graphically to the students as follows:

The following extract shows the cohesive links between the different words in a paragraph. Study it carefully.

As life gets faster, food gets faster. More and more people are in a hurry and they do not want to waste their time, so they pick up a quick pizza, grab a bag of potato chips or pop a chocolate bar into their mouths. This kind of lifestyle is creating "junk food junkies, people who eat food which is high in sugar, salt and fat and has very few vitamins and minerals in it.

Notes designed by A. Harold and M. Ward-Cox

Similar examples could be given to demonstrate the use of conjunctions in the case of subordinate clauses.

b Word choice

As noted in the findings of the error review (Chapter 4, p.83–84), students demonstrated a limited vocabulary and only partially assimilated certain terms. The number of word choice errors was considerably greater than that of the other lexical subcategories (see Tables 4.1 and 4.2, pp. 69).

The LSK0108 learning material offers suggestions and exercises to encourage vocabulary development and expansion. These include notes on how to identify unfamiliar words in a particular context by using existing knowledge, word games, and suggestions regarding regular reading of newspapers and other material in the target language. This is a valuable approach as one of the problems identified was unfamiliarity with the target language, very possibly as a result of a lack of exposure to it. This is seen in the writing of the Xhosa students in particular and is reinforced by the subsample (Chapter 4, pp. 95–99) that examined the influence of the schooling system. This is further emphasised by comparative studies that examined literacy in South African schools (Pretorius & Ribbens (2005) and the situation of learners in print-poor environments (Pretorius 2008).

It was noted (p.83–84) that prepositions posed problems for all groups. The reasons are given in Chapter 4 (p.84) where the link between preposition use and idiomatic expression, and the fact that prepositions are language-specific, were also emphasised (Wissing 1987:113).

It would appear that exposure to the target language would be the ideal way of learning prepositions and, in fact, other language structures. Students should be encouraged to read as much of the target language as possible. For example, they could be asked to photocopy passages from newspapers, blank out the prepositions and then fill in the blank spaces with the correct preposition. They should then use the newspaper passage to correct their own errors and try to determine why these errors occurred. This would encourage students to read newspapers, thus increasing exposure to the target language. It would also contextualise the language feature, thus once again integrating form and process. Similar exercises could be used when dealing with other language features.

Notes and exercises such as those provided by Wissing (1987:114–117) could also be employed here. These include

- exercises to assist students in distinguishing between literal and metaphorical uses of one verb coupled with different prepositions or phrasal verbs, for example ‘bring along’; ‘bring out’; ‘bring in’; ‘bring about’, ‘bring round’, ‘bring up’;
- multiple-choice selection;
- modified cloze (or ‘missing words’) exercises.

These exercises would supplement the communicative approach suggested by the newspaper activity by focusing the students’ attention on the particular feature, thereby fostering consciousness-raising. Furthermore, the multiple-question reading activity prescribed as an assignment for LSK0108 could reinforce and contextualise learning of this feature by including questions on prepositions used in the reading passage.

The following are examples of exercises such as those proposed by Wissing (1987:114–117).

EXERCISE ON PREPOSITIONS

Choose the correct word or phrase from the underlined options:

I do not like studying in a noisy environment but I have to put up/put off/put up with it at/on the moment because I am living on/with/by my brother who has several young children. These children are always quarrelling with/under/amongst one another. I suppose that I cannot complain to/at my brother and his wife on/about/at the noise because I was brought out/brought through/brought up by them when our parents died.

Exercise designed by M. Ward-Cox

In the following exercise, a list of prepositions may be supplied and the students could be required to fill in the correct answers by choosing from the list. Alternatively, the students can be asked to supply the correct preposition without the benefit of a list.

I wrote ... Professor Jansen ...behalf ... the students to thank him ... his inspiring address. ... reference ... his subsequent letter ... the press ... which he praised the motivation ... the students, but criticised the arrogance shown ... the Department of Higher Education. I mentioned that we did not have to put ... with being treated ... this way. We should demand an immediate answer ... our concerns. Registration takes place ... 16 January... 20 February and we feel that a reply ... the Department should be forthcoming before we go ... holiday ... the end ... this year. ... fact, any date ... October or November would be ... order. I mentioned that we would appreciate his help ... this matter and asked if he would confirm ... letter or ... email if he is prepared to advise us ... this regard.

Exercise designed by M. Ward-Cox

5.4.3.2 Errors that occasionally affect meaning (but currently affect the impression made by the writing)

Here, verb tenses sometimes affected meaning, although it was usually possible to deduce meaning from the context. The same applied to many mechanical errors, although the ‘stream of consciousness’ approach adopted by some students often led to confusion.

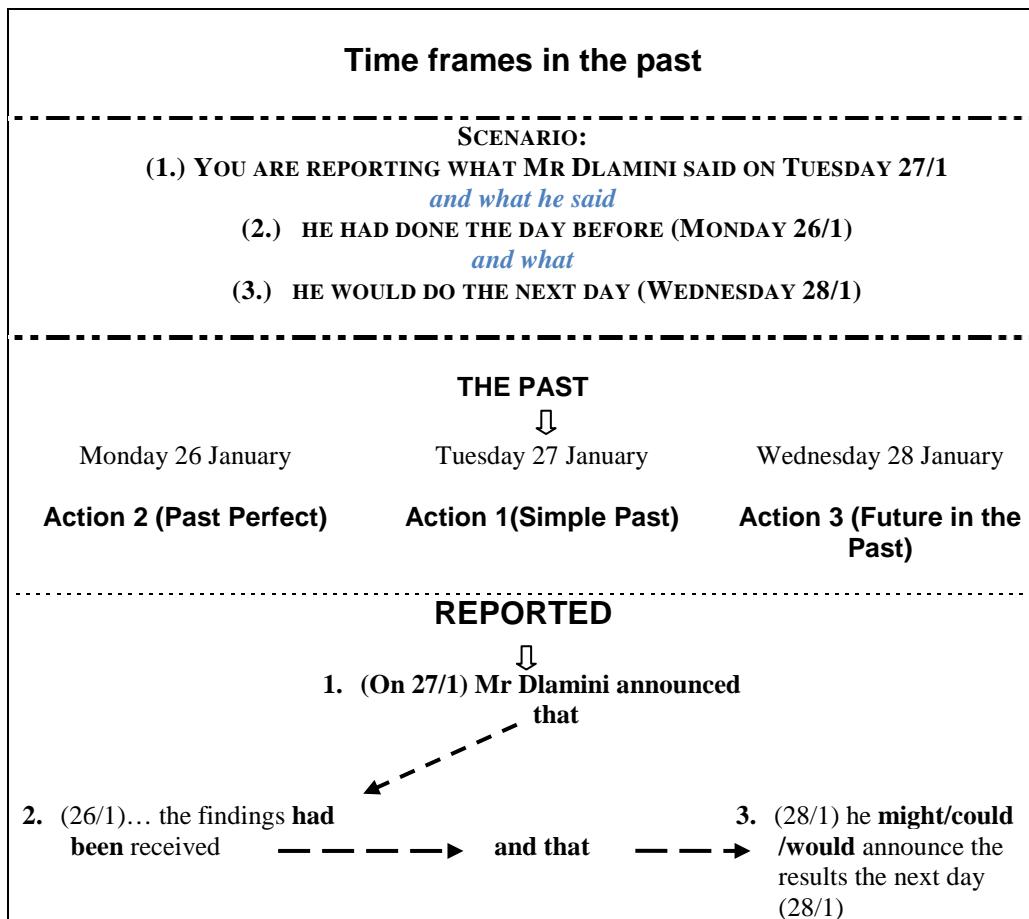
a Verbs: tense

Research examining the simplification of tenses as a feature of BSAE includes the studies by Gough (1996:62), Makalela (2004) and Van Rooy (2008b). For example, Makalela (2004) discusses the concept of “Bantu temporal logic”, claiming that this influences the tense sequencing of BSAE. According to Makalela, in indigenous Black South African languages, only the first verb in a sequence is marked as past tense and subsequent verbs are unmarked but interpreted as belonging to the same (past) tense. He argues that this feature is transferred to the English of the speakers.

In their examination of the institutionalisation of unmarked verb forms used in past frames of reference, Van der Walt and Van Rooy (2002) show that teachers frequently do not correct these forms. While this may indicate the growing acceptance of unmarked past-tense verbs, Van Rooy (2008b:240) notes that all research thus far fails to provide “a quantitative measure of how widespread the simplification of verb morphology is” or “determine if this is an occasional feature of the writing of a subset of BSAE speakers or a widespread feature”. Thus one returns to the question of ‘...what do we do in the meantime?’ in the case of the target group in particular.

Depending on the context, tense can obscure meaning. This has been noted in the example given on pp. 77–78. While tense sequence is classed by Makalela (2004:360) as an evolving feature of BSAE, tense confusion can give rise to uncertainty about the timeframe of an event or events. As mentioned in the findings (pp. 77–78), the lack of past-tense markers was a feature of the writing of students, particularly those whose home language was Xhosa.

Notes on time frames can be presented graphically as in Figure 5.1 below:



Notes designed by A. Harold and M. Ward-Cox

Figure 5.1: Graphic representation of three past-tense forms

b Verb Form

The use of modals proved to be a problem in both tense and form. Modals indicating tense are included in the previous graphic representation. The following is an example of an exercise that combines the use of modals to indicate tense as well as form.

EXERCISE ON MODAL VERBS

In an essay, we need to use some modal verbs to indicate a variety of meanings, for example to express ability and inability; weak possibility, average possibility and impossibility; advice; necessity or lack of necessity; and future action. You will find notes on these as well as a list of modal verbs on p. ... of your Learning Guide. After you have studied the list and notes, attempt the following exercise:

Now fill in each of the blanks in the following passage with a suitable modal verb. The word(s) in brackets will give you an indication of the relationship the modal verb should express.

Effective Studying Needs Good Organisation

Many people think that effective studying does not need any advance planning, which explains why so many students fail to draw up an action plan for themselves. However, as the volumes of work at university increase, students are increasingly beginning to realise that they 1. _____ (**future action**) achieve success only if they go about planning their studies systematically.

First, before you sit down to study, you 2. _____ (**advice**) ask yourself what you want to achieve. Of course, studying is a personal matter and your goals 3. _____ (**possibility**) differ from one course to another, but by trying to define your study aims you 4. _____ (**future action**) most likely become more actively involved in your studies.

Now, where 5. _____ (**advisability/advice**) you study? You 6. _____ (**possibility**) decide to do all your studying at home, but it 7. _____ (**possibility**) also be a good idea to become used to working in the library. You 8. _____ (**necessity**) however try to study in the same place most of the time and ensure that there is nothing to distract you. This means that you 9. _____ (**advisability/advice**) not listen to music while studying. Similarly, you 10. _____ (**advisability/advice**) not sit in front of a window where you 11. _____ (**possibility**) be distracted by outside activities. Above all, your place of study 12. _____ (**necessity**) be comfortable, spacious and quiet. While it 13. _____ (**weak possibility**) not always be possible to work in quiet surroundings, you 14. _____ (**possibility**) try to avoid disturbances as much as possible.

Next, you 15. _____ (**advisability/advice**) try to follow a proper study time-table and let your friends know that they 16. _____ (**necessity**) to respect your decision to do so. You 17. _____ (**necessity**) never study for long stretches at a time without taking regular breaks. Plan to work for about 40-60 minutes, and then take a 15-minute break; however, you 18. _____ (**possibility**) want to shorten your study sessions if you find that you are feeling tired. While you do not have to spend the same amount of time on each subject, it 19. _____ (**possibility**) be a good idea to ensure that you spend enough time on all of them and that you do not neglect any particular subject. You 20. _____ (**advisability/advice**) also try not to shy away from difficult sections of work by concentrating the easier sections instead.

Exercise designed by A. Harold

c Lexical errors

Lexical errors relating to word form, informal usage, idiom error and pronoun errors can be dealt with by means of notes and cloze or substitution exercises similar to those given in the other sections of this chapter. It is important to repeat that these should be integrated in editing exercises in order to contextualise them in a communicative approach.

d Mechanical errors

Mechanical errors can sometimes lead to ambiguity. Another important consideration under current circumstances is the poor impression they create and how this can adversely affect the student's academic and business career. With this in mind, notes and exercises should be given in the learning materials in order to sensitise students and promote consciousness-raising.

One should bear in mind that intervention seems to be effective in the case of punctuation in particular. Chandler (2003:269) points out that in Sheppard's (1992) study "... the only measure on which there was a statistically significant difference between the gains of the two groups was on percentage of correct punctuation".

As pointed out in Chapter 4 (pp. 88–90), spelling and punctuation were erratic in the students' writing. This applied to all groups. The reasons for this are unclear but could possibly be attributed to factors other than home language influence. Some of these could

be the influence of the mass media and in particular electronic social networking sites, but this was not empirically investigated in the review.

In connection with spelling, it was cautioned (Chapter 4, p. 90) that raw numbers of errors should not be used to disadvantage students “who attempt to use a more sophisticated vocabulary but make spelling errors in the process”. This should be borne in mind by markers.

The following examples of possible notes and exercises could be used to raise consciousness of the mechanical features. Once again, it is important that these are later contextualised by providing editing exercises.

NOTES ON SPELLING

Incorrect spelling in a document creates a very poor impression of the writer and of the organisation that he/she represents. It is easy to overlook spelling errors when editing a document, so go through it more than once, checking every word. It is a good idea to ask a friend or colleague to double-check your work as well. **Do not merely rely on the spellcheck facility on your computer.** Here is a list of some of the most commonly misspelled words

Across	Lonely
Accommodate	Losing
Acquisition	Necessary
Among	Ninety
Apparent	Occasion
Argument	Occurred
Answer	Opinion
Beautiful	Precede
Believe	Possession
Breathe	Privilege
Business	Recommend
Careful	Referring
Carrying	Rhythm
Conscious	Sincerely
Dining	Succeed
Embarrass	Suppose
Environment	Swimming
Exaggerate	Tomorrow
Fascinate	Wednesday
Height	Women (plural form of <i>woman</i>)
Interest	Writing

[Others can be added, especially those occurring frequently in students' writing]

Notes designed by M. Ward-Cox

NOTES ON PUNCTUATION

We discussed punctuation in Lesson x, where you were also advised to consult reference works if you were unsure of the basic punctuation rules. A recent and entertaining book on this subject is *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* by Lynne Truss (see list of references at the end of the lesson). It is easy to be careless about punctuation, but, as she light-heartedly points out, incorrect punctuation sometimes leads to misunderstanding! For example, consider the following two sentences from Truss's book (2003:9):

*A woman, without her man, is nothing.
A woman: without her, man is nothing.*

[Some other amusing examples of the effect that punctuation can have on meaning can be added to these notes. Lighter content can make material more user-friendly.]

[Editing or proofreading exercises containing errors of spelling and punctuation can then be given.]

Notes designed by M. Ward-Cox

e Run-ons and fragments

As noted in Chapter 4 (p. 88), there was some overlapping of these categories with punctuation errors. These can be therefore dealt with in conjunction with punctuation.

5.4.3.3 Errors that have little effect on meaning (but affect the image of the student's writing for academic purposes)

These included errors of concord and articles, which are features of SAE and BSAE in particular. While these errors are entrenched in many students' writing, and may be characteristic of a developing variety, research has shown that (particularly in the case of the article), these features have not developed sufficiently to warrant an endonormative approach (see Chapter 2, p. 49). The fact that academic writing has an international readership and that a poor impression is created by these 'peripheral' errors also means that some attention should be paid to them. These features could be explained, exercises

given as suggested (p. 108) and then contextualised by including them in the passages given for editing.

a Subject-verb agreement (concord)

Errors of concord include all errors in either noun or verb form leading to lack of agreement in person or number. This is frequently seen as a characteristic of Afrikaans-speakers, but is also found in BSAE (De Klerk & Gough 2002:6–9). In this review, all groups experienced problems with the Standard English rule of subject-verb agreement (see Tables 4.1 and 4.2, p. 69). This can be attributed to home-language influence, as the languages represented in this study do not have the same concordial system as that of English.

As pointed out in Chapter 4 (p. 77-80), in the home languages of the black students, tense and concord markers do not indicate the relation between person, number and tense, as found in English, particularly the first-and third-person singular form. In Afrikaans, the verb remains the same irrespective of the person and number of the subject, as indicated in Chapter 4 (p. 80).

This lack of subject-verb agreement appears to be entrenched in the writing of students of all language groups represented in the review. Although lack of concord seldom resulted in meaning confusion in the students' essays, it could currently contribute to the impression made by the writing. It is therefore felt that some attention should be paid to it for the reasons already given. Explanations could be linked to the discussion dealing with sentence structure (p. 111–113). It is noted that concord becomes a particular problem in the case of long sentences.

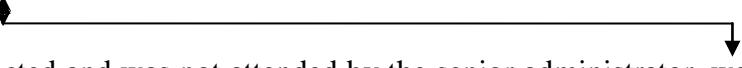
Notes could include the following:

Note to student: Be aware of concord. In other words, make sure that the verb agrees with the subject of the sentence [a brief explanation of these terms can be given here].

A graphic approach to the explanation is often effective as shown in Figure 5.2 below.

Be careful of longer sentences in which the subject is separated from the verb by a number of words, for example:

The students (**SUBJECT**) at the very stormy protest meeting, which started much later than expected and was not attended by the senior administrator, were (**VERB**) angry that their grievances were not addressed.



Notes designed by M. Ward-Cox

Figure 5.2: Graphic representation of an example of subject-verb agreement

b Articles

The omission of the article has been cited as a feature of BSAE. This was supported by the evidence of the review (Chapter 4, p 80–81), which noted that the omission and inappropriate insertion of articles was a characteristic of the writing of Xhosa students in particular.

As noted in the Literature Review (Chapter 2, p. 49), Masters (1997) questions the necessity of spending excessive time on the teaching and correction of the standard English article which he believes is of peripheral importance. Reference has been made (Chapter 2, p. 49) to Van der Walt's (2001:5-6) survey in which the omission of the article and the interchangeability of the indefinite and the definite article were found to enjoy a degree of acceptability among the target groups. However, Van der Walt's finding that levels of acceptability varied and that there were signs of “confusion and inconsistency” in the survey indicates that an endonormative phase has not yet been achieved. The point was made in the literature review (Chapter 2, pp. 49–50) that, although article use should not be overemphasised, some attention should be paid to this feature, especially in academic writing. Furthermore, it can be argued that, while these errors may be becoming entrenched as features of a variety of English and do not interfere with communication, they should be dealt with briefly at present to prevent students from being penalised in their academic work (Jenkins 2006:174–175).

The following is an example of an exercise on articles (which also incidentally addresses idiomatic language usage by giving some examples). Brief notes would be given first.

EXERCISE ON ARTICLES

In the following passage, fill in the blank spaces—**if necessary**—with *a*, *an*, or *the*:

... student with motivation and initiative will succeed. However, ... students who do not apply themselves to their studies from the beginning of ... year, may regret it later as they run ... risk of failure. We must remember that we live in ... competitive business world, and that we need ... suitable qualifications in order to find ... employment. Therefore, it is wise to make sure that you increase your chances of obtaining ... job by studying hard to become qualified.

Moreover, ... students should ask themselves what ... skills they have to offer. While some skills may be seem more valuable than others in certain fields, ... employer does not focus on these only. ... ability to work efficiently, resolve problems quickly and creatively, and maintain ... good human relations will always stand you in good stead.

Exercise designed by M. Ward-Cox

The following exercise reflects some of the errors found in the corpora and has relevance to the argumentative-essay genre that the students are required to become proficient in for the examination.

EXERCISE ON ARTICLES

In the following passage, fill in the blank spaces —**if necessary**— with *a*, *an*, or *the*:

Many people argue that ... death penalty (or ... capital punishment) should be re-instated. This is because ... crime rate is so high. While most people who support ... reinstatement of ... capital punishment agree that it should be applied to ... murderers only, others argue that ... rapists should also be punished by ...death. They argue that statistics show an alarming increase in ... violent crimes such as ... rape and ... domestic violence, and that these potentially life-threatening crimes should be punished by ... death. On ... other hand, there is ... danger that ... innocent people may be wrongfully convicted of ... crimes, and would then be unjustly put to ... death.

Exercise designed by M. Ward-Cox

As suggested in the discussion of prepositions (pp.114–115), students could also be asked to photocopy passages from newspapers, blank out the articles, fill in the empty spaces with the correct article, and then refer to the article to correct their own errors.

c The apostrophe

This is another error that should not be prioritised, but some attention should be paid to it in the light of its widespread omission or incorrect use in the corpora (Chapter 4, pp. 81-82), as well as in consideration of testing requirements and the exigencies of academic writing (Jenkins 2006; Spencer 2011a, 2011b). Once again, notes and exercises should be used to encourage consciousness-raising and these could be later contextualised in the longer editing exercises. The following is an example of an exercise on the apostrophe indicating possession.

EXERCISE ON THE APOSTROPHE

Fill in each of the blank spaces in the following passage with the correct form of the possessive (if required). Replace or shorten the phrases in brackets by using the apostrophe or an adjective as appropriate.

(The dream of Mpho) ... was to obtain a degree. (The members of the family) ... admired this ambition, but many of them did not think it was possible because (the finances of the family) ... were insufficient to afford the (fees of the university). ... (The disappointment of the family) ... was great when (the father of Mpho) ... told her that she had no chance of going to a university even though her Grade 12 marks were higher than (the marks of the other learners) ... Then the (principal of the school) ... suggested that Mpho apply for one of the (bursaries of the university) ... Imagine (the joy of Mpho) ... when she heard that she had been awarded one of these bursaries and that she had been accepted by the university!

Exercise designed by M. Ward-Cox

5.5.5. Written feedback: Suggestions for implementation

The definition and importance of written feedback, as well as the quality and type of response to student, was addressed in Chapter 2 (p. 41-48). It was argued that written feedback should be interactive in nature and that editing was a useful technique to foster student autonomy and ownership of written work.

Spencer (1998:185) found that “lecturers are perceived by 80.8 per cent of the students in a judging role, albeit by the majority of those students as a benign expression of that role”. This is particularly the case with students who failed the examination.

Furthermore, Spencer’s (2005:220) finding that there is a disproportionate emphasis on form in tutor commentary presents the researcher with the challenge to avoid this overemphasis while drawing sufficient attention to language issues in the students’ academic writing. It should be reiterated that form cannot be ignored completely as currently 50% of assessment in the ESL marking profile (Appendix F) is based on linguistic proficiency under the heading ‘language’.

The standardised and computerised correction code (or tag system) suggested by Louw (2006:18) presents a possible solution to this dilemma. Louw avers that this system constitutes “the first step towards answering questions on consistency, accuracy and clarity and effectiveness”. While it is not within the scope of this dissertation to discuss the complex and technical area of computer-assisted learning and online education, it should be noted that the system discussed by Louw (2006) warrants consideration as a potential solution to problems experienced in DE feedback.

Louw (2006:17) describes the system as follows:

The lecturer uses a special computer interface and a ‘comment bank’ to provide feedback on the learners’ writing assignments. This comment bank contains some frequently used comments that are supposed to be clear and appropriately detailed to be easily understood by the students. This is an example of a correction code – the method found by Spencer (1998) to be the most effective way of providing feedback [of the five she researched; see Chapter 2, p.47], as well as the method preferred by students.

This system would shift the focus from form to errors that affect meaning, and organisation. Codes could be used to mark language errors and the commentary would highlight errors affecting meaning, logic and other organisational problems. If the language error is persistent or so serious that meaning is adversely affected, a brief comment and a page reference to the relevant section in the learning material should be

given. The system would also prevent the confusion caused by untidy marking, described by Louw (2006:84) as being “scribbled all over the text, making the feedback and text illegible”. As Louw (17) points out, Wible *et al.* (2001:303), corroborate the efficacy of the tag or code system which is claimed to save marking time in addition to being easy to use.

A computerised system such as that developed by Louw (2006) would have the benefits of

- saving marking time while giving attention to language features;
- improving marker consistency;
- shifting the focus from form to content and organisation;
- enhancing the readability of comments.

Furthermore, this response system would encourage students to use automated spell and grammar checks (with the caution that these are not infallible). This is in line with the increasing requirement for students to submit assignments electronically.

If it is not practicable to introduce a sophisticated electronic system in the short term at Unisa, codes could still be used by markers. These have in fact been introduced for the use of both markers and students (for self- and peer evaluation), and are similar to those provided in Appendix D. A simple explanation of fairly easily understood codes such as these may assist students, but are not as comprehensive as those of Louw (2006:207), which are arguably of more assistance to markers (Appendix I). It is extremely important that markers are able to use these codes consistently, especially when marking the writing of Unisa students. This is because the assignments are not necessarily marked by the same person every time (assuming that more than one assignment is required). Thus, the discussion of marking techniques, as well as the training and monitoring of markers, needs to take place at the outset to avoid confusion and inconsistency. This will obviate the differences in the feedback of individual tutors pointed out by Hyland (2001:233), which are exacerbated in DE. Students must also have the system clearly and thoroughly explained to them, possibly in *Tutorial Letter 101*, which gives details of the assignments.

Finally, students and markers should be aware of the link between feedback and the learning materials. This link will help to ensure that students use the materials and furthermore will increase student involvement.

5.6 Other resources

Although online support and regional centres offer valuable assistance, the latter are currently not widely used by students (see Appendix A) and the former is not accessible to all of them. Therefore, while these resources can play a supplementary role in intervention, and should be expanded to become more inclusive, the present research is compelled to concentrate on learning materials and written feedback as being of immediate assistance ‘in the meantime’.

5.7 Conclusion

This chapter examined intervention strategies against the theoretical background of related research, as well as of the findings of the review. Suggestions in respect of learning materials and feedback were then made. In the course of the discussion, the treatment of specific errors was addressed and errors found in the corpora were prioritised according to their effect on meaning and on the impression they made, particularly in an academic context.

Furthermore, the attributes of effective feedback were discussed, with particular reference to interactive feedback and the challenge of addressing form adequately while avoiding overemphasis on form at the expense of content and organisation. Finally, other resources such as online support and regional learning centres were acknowledged, although it was noted that these do not yet enjoy widespread access.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

This chapter sums up what the previous chapters have dealt with. It commences with an overview of the theoretical background that informed the current review, and continues with a summary of the findings. This is followed by a discussion of the intervention strategies that were recommended as a result of these findings, bearing in mind the contentious issues raised by the literature studied. In this regard, the approach developed by the researcher is reiterated. Finally, the limitations of the current research are mentioned and suggestions for further research are made.

6.2 Objectives of the review

The primary purpose of the current review is to make observations that will be helpful to educators of target groups similar to the LSK0108 cohort who participated in the research. It was hoped that a classification of the errors (as defined by the relatively narrow field of standard written academic English) made by this group would assist the beleaguered educator at the ‘chalkface’ in designing appropriate intervention strategies. In this context, the review has endeavoured to highlight errors made by the heterogeneous LSK0108 target group and has made careful recommendations based on these findings as well as on previous research. In her discussion of error treatment, De Witt (2007:111) states that

... although it may be a somewhat complicated and time-consuming activity, quantifying the most persistent errors in each learner’s output ... , then establishing which of these appear most commonly in the group’s output, may give invaluable insight into communal acquisition difficulties, which could then inform subsequent pedagogical procedures.

De Witt (2007:111) adds that “too often assessment outcomes are merely quantified according to answer keys and prescribed rubrics and entered into the mark book, which

does not provide meaningful insight into why learners repeatedly battle with certain material during the acquisition process”.

With these comments in mind, the researcher believes that the objectives of the review have been met. These entailed quantifying the errors (as defined by the research) made by the target group, and extrapolating the findings to teaching practice. Care was taken to record the errors accurately and to ensure that the statistical manipulation of data provided a reliable reflection of the findings. Although certain limitations of the research were identified (see section 6.7, pp.135–136.), the findings were considered sufficiently accurate to form a springboard to the recommendations for intervention, relevant to the target group. Furthermore, the study of theoretical debates on language teaching enabled the researcher to clarify a pedagogical position in relation to current research.

6.3 Theoretical background

The two contentious debates that formed the background of this review were the error-correction controversy and the issue of World Englishes. It became obvious that, in both cases, research is ongoing and inconclusive. The question asked by Ferris (2004) (“... what do we do in the meantime?”) came to mind in connection with both debates and developed into a refrain throughout this dissertation.

Relevant as these hotly contested topics are, the point was made that “in the meantime” (Ferris 2004) there are students to be educated and that interim strategies are therefore essential to meet the exigencies of the academic course and of students’ expectations.

The research has examined previous international and national studies, including those that dealt with the teaching of L2 students at tertiary institutions in South Africa. Research in the DE environment has also informed many of the observations made in the course of the review.

6.3.1 The error correction debate

As far as the error correction debate is concerned, it is the researcher’s opinion that this issue is far from resolved and, in fact, that it is doubtful if a solution will ever be found.

Currently, educators and researchers are faced with a “catch-22” dilemma (Ferris 2006:16). The problem described by Ferris is that long-term improvement cannot be tested by a single revised draft, while a long-term study can be nullified due to the number of divergent factors that can influence the result. Thus, having studied the debate for the purpose of assisting the LSK0108 target group, the researcher concurs with Ferris (2002) and Yates and Kenkle (2002:30) that error correction should be continued until or unless it is demonstrated to be ineffective. It would obviously be pedagogically and ethically unacceptable to implement an unproven theory, especially a radical one that advocates no error correction at all. The consequences and ramifications of such a decision could be very serious and far-reaching, impacting on the future of students and ultimately on their socio-economic status. This is of particular importance in the case of DE students who rely almost exclusively on written feedback, in contrast to their peers at full-time tertiary institutions where there is regular face-to-face interaction between educators and students.

As implied by the previous comments, the “catch-22” situation also applies to the editing debate. However, although it seems impossible to prove long-term improvement, the researcher shares the belief (see Chapter 2, p.40) that having students edit their own work is an effective strategy for consciousness-raising, “clarifying and refining meaning” (Spencer 1997:46), fostering interaction with the marker, and promoting student autonomy.

6.3.2 The debate on World Englishes

The opposing viewpoints of deficit and liberationist linguistics were considered, with the purpose of achieving a balance between the emerging features of SAE (including BSAE) and the exigencies of academic writing. This raised the question of intelligibility – firstly, in the national and, secondly, in the international domain. Phillipson’s (1992:197) viewpoint that criteria judging intelligibility should depend on whether students are being trained to write for a national or international audience is of seminal importance to this debate. The researcher recommends that an additive approach be adopted, which implies that students should be aware that their own local variety is not inferior or ‘deviant’, but that their linguistic range is being expanded to include the academic variety of writing in order to further their academic goals, including that of meeting the present testing

criteria. In this context, Van der Walt's (2001:7–8) opinion that “errors are judged not only in terms of their effect on comprehensibility, but also in terms of the image that the learner projects” influenced the recommendations arising from the findings of the current error review.

The importance of intelligibility should be stressed as a step in the direction of self-empowerment in a complex world increasingly linked by means of standard varieties of spoken English (which do not form the focus of this research) and a standard variety of written English, which, although arbitrary, has sufficiently wide acceptance to provide a benchmark to assess students' work in the given context. It should be clearly understood that deeply entrenched ‘non-standard’ grammatical, syntactical and lexical items may result in miscommunication, and that authentic learning materials will familiarise the student with the main features of the more standard varieties within the global village. Students need to realise the importance of local and national intelligibility, that they are members of a local community within other clusters of multi-ethnic and multicultural communities, as well as members of a global language community. Thus the subtractive view of local varieties of English as being degenerate and inferior should make way for an additive view of bidialectalism as a sociolinguistic reality and part of the rich empowering fabric of South African society.

Furthermore, it seems that developing features of SAE (which includes BSAE) have not yet stabilised sufficiently to the stage of the adoption of endonormative criteria in the assessment of academic writing (pp. 21–21). In addition, acceptance of these features by lecturers and students seems inconsistent (pp. 22–23).

So far, research on World Englishes and on error correction has yielded no conclusive answers to the question of how to respond to student writing and even to whether error correction and feedback have any long-term effect. The point was, however, made that the educator cannot ignore the fact that, while the debates rage, students must be educated. Once again, Ferris's (2004) question “...what do we do in the meantime?” should thus be asked in connection with both of these issues.

6.4 Identifying errors

In order to identify errors with a view to planning meaningful intervention, the research adopted the working definition suggested by Louw (2006:33) that an error is considered to be “language use that is in violation of the conventions of the target variety”.

For the purpose of this review, the error classification of Ferris (2002:113–116) (see Appendices C and D) was used as a springboard to the formulation of observations about the writing of the target group and against the background of the specific aims of the module, namely to develop and foster academic literacy.

6.5 Findings

The findings suggest a need for urgent intervention, especially in the case of Xhosa-speaking students from rural and township schools. The data suggests that errors can be attributed to home-language influence as well as to inadequate schooling. It should be acknowledged that a plethora of other factors, including poverty, urbanisation and dysfunctional families, could also play a part in the situation (Abadzi 2006) although these were not empirically investigated in this research. Furthermore, a lack of exposure to written discourse was indicated, but also not empirically investigated. In many cases, the writing was unintelligible and showed little knowledge of the language conventions of the target variety. In particular, errors of sentence structure and word choice frequently impeded meaning to such an extent as to render the writing almost incomprehensible (see Appendix E). The problem is exacerbated by the expectations of the students and the pressure exerted by the timeframe and logistical constraints of the module. Against this background, the question can well be asked if the debates on error correction and the status of BSAE could be perceived to be relevant to an educator struggling to cope with this difficult situation. Thus, “in the meantime”, intervention strategies are suggested.

6.6 Intervention strategies

Recommendations included the timeframe of the module, the content and format of learning materials, the prioritising of errors, strategies in dealing with specific errors, and the attributes and implementation of effective feedback, particularly in the context of DE.

Finally, other resources such as regional learning centres were mentioned, but these were considered of limited value at present.

6.6.1 Error treatment

The treatment of students' errors should avoid emphasising form to the detriment of meaning, while at the same time assisting students to improve language use. A holistic, communicative approach was recommended, although it remains necessary to highlight frequent or serious language errors, then explain the feature and finally point the student to activities or exercises.

It was pointed out (pp.125-126) that a modified version of the standardised and computerised correction code (or tag system) suggested by Louw (2006:18) could prevent over-emphasis on form at the expense of meaning. This system should be carefully examined and evaluated in the context of DE, and in fact could be developed in the context of the increasing movement towards online marking that is being encouraged at Unisa. Even if the advanced electronic marking system advocated by Louw (2006) cannot be introduced in the short term, certain features could be profitably employed in the interim. Codes could be used to indicate language errors, thus obviating the time-consuming process of manual marking, and thereby giving the marker the opportunity to concentrate on meaning, logic and other organisational issues. The researcher of the current review suggested that in the case of persistent language errors, as well as those that impede meaning, a personalised comment and a reference to the relevant section in the learning material should supplement the code.

As mentioned, (p.126) markers should be trained to use these codes consistently, especially since it is possible that a student's assignments are not marked by the same lecturer or tutor every time. The creation of an essay database bank as recommended by Louw (2006:180) could operate as a record and serve to highlight areas of consistency (or inconsistency) between markers. In addition, it is essential that the system is clearly explained to the students to avoid confusion.

Finally, for any feedback system to succeed, it is essential that students and markers are aware of the link between feedback and the learning materials provided. By referring the

student to a relevant section of the material, markers will ensure that this material is profitably used.

6.6.2 Learning materials and assignments

A contextualised, communicative approach to language learning, supplemented by notes and exercises dealing with specific language features, was recommended for the learning materials. Students would be referred to these more discrete language exercises only when necessary (they could also choose to study this feature in the course of their revision). If interaction between student and markers is maintained, possibly by means of editing drafts of the essay assignment, student motivation would be encouraged because the student would view the study of language features in his/her writing as having a purpose. The suggested editing exercises in the learning materials would place the feature back into the context of the communicative approach. These editing skills would then be employed as part of the assignments.

As pointed out in Chapter 2 (pp.51-52), if students are to derive optimal benefit from editing their own work, they should obtain adequate training. This can be achieved by means of exercises of increasing complexity provided in the learning materials, following the cognitive apprenticeship framework examined by Westbrook (2009). The approach is described by Westbrook (143) as drawing on “schema theory with the emphasis on explicit teaching (modeling), guided practice (scaffolding), and literacy strategies (heuristics) that allow students to internalize new information”.

It was suggested that all learning material should make use of this framework, particularly modelling and scaffolding techniques. These techniques explain the feature and then give students support as they progress towards fluency and ultimately gain control of their own academic writing. Examples include cloze exercises (or modified cloze exercises) and graphic representations (such as those on p.113 and p.116). The latter are particularly beneficial to students whose home language is not English and who may struggle to understand paragraphs of explanation in the target language. It should also be remembered that many students seem to have experienced limited exposure to written discourse, even in their own language (Pretorius 2008).

In keeping with these ideas, learning materials dealing with language features for the target group could be sequenced as follows:

- an explanation of the feature;
- exercises followed by answers for self-correction (for example, choosing the correct form of the word, cloze exercises and the correction of sentences or short paragraphs);
- longer editing exercises, combining various language features.

These recommendations were discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

6.7 Limitations of research

While the correlation between the score of the markers was generally very high, occasional problems regarding the classification of errors arose. This was similar to Wissing's (1987:2) findings that it is fairly simple to identify an error, but more difficult to classify it. In the current review, problems of classification were evident only in certain subcategories, particularly those of morphological and syntactical errors, and occurred mainly in cases characterised by unintelligibility.

Despite this limitation, errors were carefully and accurately recorded and it is believed that the findings reflect the true state of the students' writing ability. Furthermore, the researcher agrees with Wissing's (1987:12) caution against an over-emphasis on percentages, types and numbers of errors, and concurs that these should be seen as "indications of relative types and frequencies rather than as absolute, empirically tested items".

A further limitation was the size of the sample group, particularly that of the very small numbers of certain language groups. It should be stressed that small samples of this nature cannot be considered as representative of the particular demographic group, nor is the entire target group meant to represent the population as a whole, but reflects errors made by the heterogeneous group of LSK0108 students who participated in this study. However, educators may recognise most of the errors as 'typical' of similar L2 groups.

Therefore these results can be extrapolated to other contexts and the suggestions for intervention could assist educators and stimulate further suggestions, discussion and research. Furthermore, the statistical processes adopted by this review attempted to present as accurate a picture as possible by firstly recording the raw data and then highlighting the main groups and combining or ‘pooling’ groups to examine data from different angles.

6.8 Suggestions for further research

Apart from the ongoing research on error correction, much more research is necessary to determine the status and stabilisation of World Englishes, particularly in the present context of SAE (including BSAE).

Further research could also focus on the influence of the type of school attended by the student. This could include private (independent) schools and Further Education and Training (FET) colleges (it was noted that there was one student from an FET college, but this was far too limited a sample to be of any relevance). Of particular interest would be a comparative study of black students who attended previous Model C schools and those who were enrolled at township and rural schools.

The degree of exposure to written discourse became a matter of speculation during the course of this review, but this factor was not empirically tested. Further studies examining exposure, not only to written English, but to writing in the student’s home language, would corroborate or refute the perception that young black students, in particular, experience little exposure to written discourse (Pretorius 2008). This is a matter of concern as limited exposure would exacerbate the struggle to attain accuracy and fluency in academic writing.

The influence of township slang and also that of the electronic media could also be studied in order to gain an understanding of the linguistic milieu of the target group. The results of these studies may provide reasons for the difficulties experienced by students when striving to meet the stringent criteria for academic writing with its specific conventions of language and style. Other factors such as gender, as well as the socio-

economic variables previously mentioned (p.132) could provide further productive avenues of research.

6.9 Conclusion

This chapter has summed up the research conducted in the course of this dissertation. The chapter commenced with a discussion of the relevance of the theoretical background to the error review conducted in the study. It continued with an overview of the research findings, after which the practical implications of the research were examined. This led to an explanation of the recommended intervention strategies, including the treatment of errors and the approach that could be adopted in the learning materials. Finally, the limitations of the research were discussed and ideas for further research were suggested.

The study as a whole has examined language errors made by a heterogeneous group of students in a tertiary DE situation, has studied current theories on error treatment and, in response to the findings that urgent intervention seems necessary in order to assist students to attain their academic goals, has provided some answers to Ferris's (2004) pressing question, "... what do we do in the meantime?". It is the researcher's strongly held belief that English is an invaluable and shared national and international resource, and that the principles of bidialectism should underpin the ideal of local and international intelligibility, however relative this may be, to empower users of English to use its communicative resources in order to foster a climate of *intranational* and *international* communication based on mutual acceptance and respect. This implies that students have the right to know *how* and *when* to use the conventions of the target language, while still acknowledging the value of their own variety. It follows that it is the educator's task to empower students by extending their linguistic repertoire and consequently their ability to choose the appropriate variety judiciously. It is this approach that is truly liberating.

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