



**EXPLORING ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES OF
FIRST YEAR ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE
STUDENTS AT AN ODEL INSTITUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA**

by

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DECLARATION

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EXPLORING ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES OF FIRST YEAR ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE STUDENTS AT AN ODEL INSTITUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

I declare that this dissertation 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.

I further declare that I submitted the dissertation to originality checking software and that it falls within the accepted requirements for originality.

I further declare that I have not previously submitted this work, or part of it, for examination at UNISA for another qualification or at any other higher education institution.

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KEY TERMS DESCRIBING THE TOPIC OF THE DISSERTATION/THESIS

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KEY TERMS:

Academic writing, Academic writing challenges, Community of inquiry, English as an additional language, First year students, Open distance e-Learning, Theory of transactional distance

DEDICATION

THIS DISSERTATION IS DEDICATED TO MY PARENTS, MR MOLOKO PHINEAS NTSOPI AND MRS CHUENE MAGDELINE NTSOPI. YOU HAVE ALWAYS ENCOURAGED ME TO FURTHER MY STUDIES AND TO ALWAYS REMEMBER THAT EDUCATION IS THE ONE THING NO ONE CAN TAKE AWAY FROM YOU. WITH THIS:

“ALL THAT I AM, OR HOPE TO BE, I OWE IT TO MY PARENTS.”

- ABRAHAM LINCOLN

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EDITOR'S LETTER

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

CERTIFICATE OF EDITING

I, **Muchativugwa Liberty Hove**, confirm and certify that I have read and edited the entire thesis, **EXPLORING ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES OF FIRST YEAR ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE STUDENTS AT AN ODEL INSTITUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA**, submitted by **TUMELO JAQUILINE NTSOPI**, in accordance with the requirements for the degree of **MASTER OF ARTS** in the subject **ENGLISH STUDIES** at the **UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA**.

TUMELO JAQUILINE NTSOPI was supervised by **Professor K. Sevnarayan**, with co-supervisor as **Dr. D. Mkhize**.

I hold a PhD in English Language and Literature in English and am qualified to edit such a thesis for grammatical correctness, cohesion, and coherence. The views expressed herein, however, remain those of the researcher/s.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M.L. Hove', is written over a light blue horizontal line.

Professor M.L. Hove (PhD, MA, PGDE, PGCE, BA Honours – English)



ABSTRACT

The present research explores an Academic Writing module (EAW101), which is offered under the Department of English Studies in a South African Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) University. The EAW101 module is known for its high enrolment and a modest pass rate ranging between 50 - 70 per cent. This pattern shows that a large number of students who enrol for EAW101 module struggle with academic writing. Researchers continue to emphasise that academic writing is a hurdle in EAL teaching and learning contexts in HEIs (Humphreys, 2022; Lea, 2004; Lea & Street, 1998; Leibowitz, 2004; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Moutlana, 2007; Nelson & Watkins, 2019; Pineteh, 2014). It is therefore necessary to explore students' difficulties within this ODeL context and to suggest ways to improve their competence within the frameworks of academic writing tasks.

The research aims are designed to: (i) identify the particular writing challenges that EAL first year students face in the EAW101 module and (ii) explore why EAL first year students experience the writing challenges in the specified module and (iii) categorise the extent to which study resources and student support initiatives available enhance EAL students' academic English skills in the EAW101 module. The frameworks that were used to guide the study were the community of inquiry (CoI) theory by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) and transactional distance (TD) theory by Moore (1972). The study used a qualitative approach, and a case study research was applied as the research design. From a methodological perspective, the findings of the study were extracted from using focus group discussions (FGD), structured open ended evaluation questions and an observation schedule. Thematic analysis was used as the method to analyse the data extracted and to interpret the findings thoroughly. The findings of the study point to several academic writing difficulties that first year EAL students at the university struggle with in the EAW101 module. From the FGDs, it emerged that citations and referencing as well as construction of sentences and paragraphs are among the major difficulties students face. The findings derived from the open-ended evaluation questions suggest some of the following: students' lack of knowledge in academic writing, ODeL modality, and mastering the Harvard referencing style. Lastly, from an observation schedule, student support initiatives employed in the module effectively enhance students' knowledge in academic writing.

These findings are useful for students, lecturers, and managers in HEIs. Students could gain direct constructive feedback from lecturers, then lecturers can also change their mode of instruction to fit the online learning environment, while managers could strengthen the support systems for lecturers and students. Another imperative is that with committed efforts from stakeholders, students' academic writing abilities in EAL could be improved to increase student success and throughput in future.

KEYWORDS: Academic writing, Academic writing challenges, Community of inquiry, English as an additional language, First year students, Open distance e-Learning, Theory of transactional distance.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

Abbreviation and acronyms	Meaning
1. AET	Adult Education and Training
2. BICS	Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills
3. CALP	Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency
4. CAPS	National Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
5. CET	Community Education and Training
6. CHS	College of Human Sciences
7. Col	Community of Inquiry
8. COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
9. DE	Distance Education
10. EAL	English as an Additional Language
11. EAW101	English Academic Writing module
12. EFAL	English First Additional Language
13. EHL	English Home Language
14. FGD	Focus Group Discussion
15. HEIs	Higher Education Institutions
16. LMS	Learning Management System
17. NQF	National Qualifications Frameworks
18. ODeL	Open Distance e-Learning
19. PI	Practical Inquiry

20. PSET	Post-School Education and Training
21. SDPs	Skills Development Providers
22. TD	Transactional Distance Theory
23. TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
24. UoTs	Universities of Technology

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

“You don’t start out writing good stuff. You start out writing crap and thinking it’s good stuff, and then gradually you get better at it.”

- Octavia Butler

1.1 Introduction and Background

Academic writing is a problem commonly experienced in English Additional Language (EAL) teaching and learning in the international context in HEIs (Humphreys, 2022; Lea & Street, 1998; Leibowitz, 2004; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Moutlana, 2007; Nelson & Watkins, 2019; Pineteh, 2014). This challenge has roots in the history of the English language as a colonial mode of communication, imposed on the colonised as language of teaching and learning. For example, in South Africa, the Bantu Education Act provided a dual system of education to black people in 1953 (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2016), and poor teaching and learning practices that were evident in primary and secondary classes hindered black students’ experiences in HEIs. In addition to these historical issues is the question of the language of instruction in primary education. After the 1976 Soweto student uprisings that engulfed the country, Afrikaans was abolished as a medium of instruction in Black schools, with English remaining the only language of instruction (Mayekiso, 2023). Beyond this protest, not much was done to ensure that students receive good instruction in the English language. This under-preparedness extended to universities and created a situation where most Black students struggle with English for academic purposes in particular, notwithstanding the fact that even native speakers of English exhibit challenges with academic language since this academic English does not come naturally (Gee, 2014). It is established in several research that most EAL students lack basic writing skills, they barely write academically and are linguistically unprepared for the challenges in tertiary institutions (Jones, 2011, Van Dijk, Vivian & Malan, 2019).

The university in this study operates in English as a medium of instruction, and this creates spaces of inequality for other languages. The institution has attempted to address this issue as much as is practicable, but the parity of languages as enshrined in the Constitution has not been realised. Following the directive of the Open Distance

e-learning (ODeL) University Language Policy (2023), the medium of instruction is English, but the other 11 official languages can also be used wherever possible through translating the tutorial letters. Following the background of the academic writing difficulties experienced by EAL students, the next subtopic focuses on specific scholars' understanding of academic writing. This overview explores what is meant by academic writing given the fact that this 'academese' affects the majority of EAL students in the university.

Different scholars identify academic writing as an important component that has over the years undergone various changes. For students in higher education, Pineteh (2014) underlines its importance in facilitating discourse analysis. Barns and Sumartojo (2015) stress three essential features of academic writing: giving opinions, backing these ideas with proper reasons, and organising information that is presented. Aliotta (2018) further elaborates that academic writing is a specific mode used by scholars in an academic setting. From these definitions, it is feasible to conclude that academic writing entails presenting viewpoints based on data phenomenon in a precise and coherent manner. This skill is problematic for many students at the university level, as they hardly receive the necessary practice in earlier grades. Therefore, there is a need to identify how discourse analysis could be taught to students to improve their competencies in academic writing.

Academic proficiency is a core requirement for effective communication in HEIs (Holmes, Polman Tuin & Turner, 2021). However, several elements prevent most students from reaching this level of proficiency. For example, insufficient preparation for mathematics during previous years of learning, and poor English as a foreign language or second language (Dockrell, Marshal & Wyse, 2016; Graham, 2019; Nelson & Watkins, 2019). On this basis, the historical influence of the parallel education for Blacks has also complicated this matter of proficiency, cohesion, and coherence. Also, it is also worth noting that high level of spoken English does not equate to effective academic writing skills (Mendoza, Lehtonen, Lindblom-Ylänne & Hyytinen, 2022). A gap in the existing literature shows that limited research has focused on academic writing challenges faced by students in distance education contexts. This includes ODeL contexts in South African universities. This scarcity of research compels this study, especially when considering the unique characteristics

of distance education students, such as their older age, work and family commitments, and limited access to lecturers due to spatial and geographical spaces. This study fills the gap through identifying, categorising, and designing essential scaffolds for the development of competent skills in first-year university students in the prescribed model.

The findings of this study therefore dismantle the argument of Nelson and Watkins (2019) and Pineteh (2014) among other scholars, who argue that first year students' poor sentence production relate to general English language deficiency. Given the fact that writing is a feature commonly used in distance education (DE) and ODeL institutions, it is important that students and academic staff in these institutions be equipped with a full repertoire of academic writing skills. As for written materials in these non-face-to-face or DE institutions, technology only helps and enriches the educational process (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Letseka, 2015; Verde & Valero, 2021). Still, such students need induction and training because students who study in distance facilities learn mostly on their own: they have to use their own initiative, be responsible, and they are expected to sharpen their interpersonal as well as writing skills (Rotar, 2022).

Shahzad, Sarwat, and Kabir (2021) note that writing skills are important in students' academic achievements as they involve critical components such as evaluation and synthesis of intricate ideas. Sadly, EAL students often experience difficulties in the area of academic writing since their literacy level in the language of learning is low, which limits them in expressing their thoughts and proving their academic arguments (Botha, 2022; Jiang, Lee & Ang, 2022; Moses & Mohamad, 2019; Singh, 2019). To overcome these difficulties and to enhance the opportunities for EAL students to master academic writing skills, this study focuses on the students, the university, and the specific module under investigation. In this way, lecturers are expected to develop nurturing strategies that scaffold academic writing practices in which EAL students engage.

1.1.1 Contextual Focus of the Study

This study comprised EAL students in a South African ODeL university as the population for this research. This was because there is a huge number of students who exhibit poor academic writing skills offered by this HEI (Dafouz, 2020).

Since this is a university that uses English as medium of instruction, EAL students who have been brought up and educated in other languages other than English struggle with academic writing and language issues in their studies. Thus, the need to identify the difficulties that first year EAL students enrolled in the EAW101 module in a South African ODeL context experience in academic writing. It could assist lecturers and practitioners in modifying academic writing strategies and the way they teach such that, ultimately, the students learn how to close the current gap.

Bolton, Matsau, and Blom (2020) suggest that the SA education and training system is divisible into Basic Education and Post-School Education and Training (PSET). Compulsory education covers all types of education that one can receive, irrespective of the years of schooling. On the other hand, PSET comprises all the learning that takes place post-secondary school, irrespective of the years of schooling or enrolment periods. The PSET system is further divided into several sectors, including:

- Higher Education - Offered in three types of public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) - Universities, Universities of Technology (UoTs), and Comprehensive Universities - as well as private HEIs. Higher Education qualifications range from NQF Levels 5 to 10, inclusive.
- Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) - Offered in public TVET colleges and private colleges. TVET qualifications offer qualifications between NQF Levels 1 and 5.
- Community Education and Training (CET) - Provided by public CET Colleges. CET qualifications are between NQF Levels 1 and 4.
- Adult Education and Training (AET) - Currently being replaced by CET, covering qualifications below at NQF Level 1.
- Skills Development for Trades and Occupations - Offered by Skills Development Providers (SDPs), with qualifications between NQF Levels 1 and 8.

This study targets the Higher Education sector and an ODeL university that delivers vocational as well as academic courses. It is pertinent to recognise that this study focuses only on higher education sector, and the other sector of PSET, which includes the UoT or TVET colleges, are excluded from this study. My concern focuses on the difficulties of academic writing related to first year EAL students enrolled in an academic writing module at the institution to which the researcher is affiliated. This university is one of the largest ODeL universities in Africa, specifically located in South Africa, where the university annually registers approximately 389,876 students (ODeL University, 2021). This institution consists of eight colleges. The College of Human Sciences (CHS) hosts the Department of English Studies, where this study belongs. The choice of this particular university is relevant since this university has emerged as one of the major institutions providing comprehensive ODeL in both the national and continental African settings (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2018). It is also appropriate since students enrolled in the institution are spatially dislocated from the institution and their lecturers. This study focuses on exploring how EAL students in an ODeL context are exposed to the significant challenges associated with academic writing and how the lecturers scaffold the efforts of such students to attain both coherence and cohesion in their several tasks in the EAW101 module.

The module of focus in this research is called English Academic Writing (EAW101) and it is taught in the Department of English Studies. EAW101 is used as an acronym to ensure anonymity for both the module and students studying it and the tutors as well. EAW101 therefore serves the general purpose of enhancing students' skills in critical reading and writing in academic English. Furthermore, EAW101 helps undergraduate students with research-based essays, in terms of conventions, citation, and research skills (TUT101, 2021). EAW101 is one of the semester modules and this particular module is delivered in an online format. As a result, all study material, notes, assignment, and quizzes are strictly available and downloadable online as part of the execution of ODeL policy (Clause 4). Table 1. 1 presents the record of the performance in this particular module for the last five years.

Table 1.1: EAW101 performance history over a period of five years (2018-2022)

Year	2018		2019		2020		2021		2022	
Semester	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2
No. of students admitted to exam	±13 000	±9 800	±15 000	±18 000	28 000	24 233	2 410	23 585	15 376	13 645
Percentage passed	60%	61%	69%	60%	69%	51%	80%	70%	67%	74%
Percentage failed	40%	39%	31%	40%	31%	49%	20%	30%	33%	26%

As Table 1.1 illustrates, the pass rate for the EAW101 module over the period of five years ranges between 50% and 70% as extracted from the university's examination system. From the data, it is evident that the performance in the module is unstable because, in some semesters, students perform better than in others. For example, in semester 1 of 2020, the results improved compared to semester 1 of 2018 and 2019. The statistical overview of the module illustrates how students performed throughout the years. These statistics provide evidence that most students registered for this module struggle with academic writing, and they require intervention to assist them in achieving competence in academic writing.

For this qualitative study, first year EAL students were chosen as participants because they often face significant challenges in meeting the requirements of academic discourse in the language of teaching and learning (Nikolenko, Rebenko & Doronina, 2021; Rotar, 2022). From the observations above, first year students were selected as the study's participants because they are fresh from high school and are now exposed to academic literacies where most struggle with writing academic research-based essays. They were therefore the best candidates for this study, and their size gave opportunity to collect rich and thick data (Taherdoost, 2017).

This study focuses on an ODeL institution, where the students and lecturers are physically and geographically apart. Completed assignments and examination portfolios are submitted through the learning management system to facilitate the processes. Furthermore, technological online teaching aids are also used to help students practice academic writing. For the purpose of gaining an informed understanding of the nature of students' and lecturers' interactions in an ODeL context, the research utilised two theories: Community of Inquiry (CoI) and Transactional Distance theory (TD) as annotated in Chapter 2. The aim of the present study was to establish the difficulties that EAL students encounter in academic writing. In the South African context, academic writing continues to be a major challenge among students across many universities, leading to a high drop-out rate (Makoe & Nsamba, 2019; Mbirimi 2012). New students, especially first year students, tend to have more difficulties in writing academically because they have not been adequately taught how to write academically (Ankawi, 2020; Al-Mukdad, 2019; Banda, 2017; Mbirimi, 2012).

To support a CoI through teaching, cognitive, social, and emotional presences, as well as to alleviate TD in the future, practitioners of ODeL and DE institutions must understand their students' needs and prerequisites (Garrison et al., 1999; Moore, 1993; Swart & Macleod, 2021; Zhang, 2003). The subsequent section of this study further elaborates on the rationale of the current research.

1.1.2 Rationale of the Study

The rationale for this study stems from my teaching academic writing to first year students in EAW101 module. EAW101 is one of the modules in the Department of English Studies where it enrolls an average of 16 000 students per semester and has recorded a pass rate of 50 - 80%. Considering that the university employs English as the MoI, this has proven challenging to the EAL students in the module. Originality in academic writing is a skill that requires significant emphasis from both the student and lecturers as it promotes students' abilities to present their ideas and formulate content both cohesively and coherently (Shahzad, Sarwat & Kabir, 2021).

The present study is important in establishing the issues connected to academic writing that first year EAL students encounter in EAW101. In this way, lecturers in the module can reflect on what has been done to improve teaching practices and generate approaches to improve the calibre of academic writing among EAL students. The

implications of the findings from this study entail assisting the lecturers to recommend support initiatives for enhancing first-year students' academic writing skills specifically in an ODeL environment.

1.2 Statement of the problem

The poor literacy levels that are evident within EAL students in HEIs are worrisome (Barnes, Shwayli & Matthews, 2019). Many researchers have described students' difficulties experienced in academic writing (Al-Badi, 2015; Al-Mukdad, 2019; Ankawi, 2023; Mbirimi, 2012; Nikolenko, Rebenko & Doronina, 2021; Pineteh, 2014). According to Pineteh (2014), it becomes difficult for students to deal with concepts regarding academic writing, ways of identifying topics, and problems in constructing meaningful and coherent sentences. Al-Mukdad (2019) argues that due to learning the language in a formal university setting and comparatively having little or no interaction with native speakers and writers of the language, students run into a myriad of problems while writing in academic contexts. I concur with the findings from Pineteh (2014) and Al-Mukdad (2019) as these ideas are useful for the analysis of the context reviewed in this study.

In light of this, I seek to explore the academic writing challenges faced by first year EAL students. Many students have their own idiosyncratic writing styles, which makes it a challenge for them to transition into acceptable levels in academic writing. The EAW101 module aims to develop students' critical reading and writing abilities, which are crucial academic skills, and enhance their academic English competencies (Gee, 2012). To explore the challenges encountered by first year EAL students in academic writing, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of the issues at hand and potentially informs targeted initiatives to support these students in their academic journeys. Gee (2012:152) states that all people have 'ways of being', a discourse which is:

...composed of distinctive ways of speaking/listening and often, too, writing/reading coupled with distinctive ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, believing, with other people and with various objects, tools, and technologies, so as to enact specific socially recognisable identities engaged in specific socially recognised activities.

According to Gee (1990), a discourse is a socially recognisable identity or a way of being in the world. He further argues that our primary discourse is developed from our

early experiences in the home and community and that this shapes our everyday language and cultural identities. Gee (1990) adds that as we grow, we also acquire secondary discourses in more public settings, such as organisations and academic institutions. However, as most studies show, in many cases, students’ primary discourses are often marginalised in academic settings, potentially leading to poor writing development and inadequate academic writing skills (Esfandiari, Meihami & Jahani, 2022). For first year students who speak EAL, learning academic writing in HEIs can be challenging. HEIs are under pressure to transform teaching and learning, but academic writing is sometimes not given enough attention. This disadvantages first year students who are expected to exhibit academic writing skills upon entering university.

Street (1984) compares the two literacy models – the ‘autonomous model of literacy’ and the ‘ideological model of literacy’, as summarised in Table 1.2 below. These models play a crucial role in understanding the challenges first year EAL students face in developing academic writing skills.

Table 1.2: The difference between the autonomous and ideological models of literacy (Street, 1984)

Autonomous Model of Literacy	Ideological Model of Literacy
Consists of decontextualised self-contained skills.	Dependent on context and rooted in sociocultural practices and situations.
Teacher-centred – “school-centric” reading and writing.	Literacy is referred to as a social process – something we do to understand the world around us.
Sub-skills – learning about literacy as a subject. Product-oriented.	Process-focused with a purpose and an intention
Pre-determined and easily measurable.	Numerous literacies and using different texts that depend on place, purpose, and context.

According to Collin and Street (2014), the ideological model of literacy considers the sociocultural context in which literacy is learned, while the autonomous model focuses solely on the technical aspects of literacy development, such as grammar and punctuation, without considering the sociocultural influences on learning. Scholars like Baker and Street (1994) criticise the autonomous model for emphasising cognitive consequences while neglecting the social and economic development purposes of

literacies. The introduction of the ideological model was a response to the criticism of the autonomous model, as it recognises literacies as a social practice learned in specific cultural contexts and imbued with epistemological significance (Baker & Street, 1994). Contrary to the autonomous model of literacy, Baker, and Street (1994: 3453) state the development of:

...a more socially oriented view of literacy [and that] the 'ideological' model of literacy recognises above all the importance of context, seeing the skills of reading, writing, and enumerating 'as social practices, learnt in specific cultural contexts and imbued with epistemological significance.

The current study adopts both the autonomous and ideological models of literacies to recognise that knowledge construction involves both cognitive processes and social practices. Students' low literacy levels, writing difficulties, and under-preparedness present significant challenges for their academic writing competencies (Mavunga, 2014; Schutte & van Zyl, 2023). As students transition to HEIs, they are under pressure to adapt to new writing requirements. Under-preparedness is not solely the responsibility of students; lecturers also play a crucial role in teaching and improving academic writing skills. It is essential for lecturers to understand and address the academic writing challenges faced by first year EAL students. While various reasons contribute to first year students' under-preparedness (Nelson & Watkins, 2019), this study seeks to gain first-hand insights into students' challenges through rich and detailed descriptions of their experiences in the module.

1.3 Significance and Contribution of the Study

This study contributes to the advancement of knowledge about students' academic writing and the conditions in which the writing skills manifest. The above is essential especially in ODeL learning environments since students may feel they are stripped off the traditional ways of accessing university-related materials. As posited by Verde and Valero (2021), it is helpful to provide sufficient and precise enhancement strategies to advance the student's written communication, particularly for EAL first year students in ODeL universities. Moreover, this study brings the focus on how EAL students feel perceived by their lecturers and tutors and underlines appropriate strategies for academic writing introduction.

This is relevant to teachers, lecturers, and tutors in ODeL environments since it provides suggestions on areas where ODeL students need help in their writing. In this

respect, the study's reflexive nature enables its findings to offer directions on teaching academic writing to EAL practitioners and other stakeholders. In addition, the findings extend the existing literature on students' academic writing in ODeL settings to which efforts are made to publish the research outcomes and present them at conferences. Lastly, the study is useful for the Department of Higher Education and other policymakers in the field of literacies education which can make them aware of the need to identify effective means to systematically teach writing from the school level up to the university level. It is for this reason that academic literacies need to be taught earlier in a students' learning trajectory to ensure that they are prepared to meet the challenges in the higher institutions of learning where writing is applied in different assessments. In view of these goals and objectives, this study aims at gaining an understanding on students' difficulties in academic writing and make useful contributions to enhance the provision of academic assistance and the formulation of policies within ODeL.

1.4 Aim and Objectives

1.4.1 Research Aim

The aim of this study is to explore academic writing challenges in the EAW101 module that first year EAL students experience at one ODeL institution in South Africa.

1.4.2 Research Objectives

The following are the specific objectives of the study, designed to:

- i. Identify the academic writing challenges that EAL first year students encounter in the EAW101 module.
- ii. Determine the reasons for the academic writing challenges that EAL first year students encounter in the EAW101 module.
- iii. Establish if study materials and student support initiatives contribute to the learning of academic English in the EAW101 module.

1.5 Research Questions

The following are the research questions that guide this study:

- i. What academic writing challenges do first year EAL students encounter in the EAW101 module?

- ii. How do the EAW101 students experience academic writing challenges in the module?
- iii. How do study materials and student support initiatives assist students with their academic writing?

1.6 Definition of Key Concepts

1.6.1 Academic writing – in their description of academic writing, Barns and Sumartojo (2015, cited in Akrei, 2021:948) explain academic writing as developing an opinion that is justified with well-thought-out reasons which are organised in a logical manner. Furthermore, Aliotta (2018) defines academic writing as a type of writing style used by academic scholars within an academic context. Based on the definitions cited above, I understand academic writing as a type of writing where novice writers express their own opinion and then justify that opinion with reasons and evidence that is organised in a logical manner. Therefore, I concur with the definition made by Barns, Sumartojo and Aliotta because academic writing is needed at HEIs for students to demonstrate progress in their studies, especially in a writing module such as EAW101.

1.6.2 Academic writing challenges – refers to difficulties in academic writing, which may include incoherent and discordant grammar, insufficient vocabulary, and poor understanding of plagiarism that students may encounter (Rafikova, 2022). Based on this definition, I understand that academic writing challenges are difficulties with grammar, plagiarism, and insufficient vocabulary that students encounter in their academic writing journey.

1.6.3 Open distance e-learning (ODeL) – Open Distance e-learning is a type of learning whereby “students are assumed to have access to, and to be able to make optimal use of modern electronic technologies to access their study materials and to interact with their lecturers without necessarily being required to make physical contact” (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Letseka, 2015:4). This means that modern electronic technologies result in e-learning, open online learning, or digital learning through the use of remote electronic communication. Manyike (2017) refers to ODeL as a comprehensive open and distance e-learning platform that bridges the gap between the students and the institution, the students and the academics and the students and their peers. I adopt the definition by Ngubane-Mokiwa and Letseka (2015) as it relates to the teaching-

learning of the EAW101 module which uses digital technologies, such as Microsoft Teams, webinars, uploaded documents on the learning management systems (LMS) to communicate with students. Also, the module uses different student support initiatives that enhance teaching and learning of academic writing.

1.6.4 English as an Additional Language (EAL) – Oxley and de Cat (2019) refer to EAL as a phenomenon where students grow up speaking a language(s) other than English at home or in their community. For this study, EAL is used with reference to students who have an African-language background, that is, students who speak an African language or more than one African language in addition to learning English.

1.6.5 Distance Education (DE) – is a planned learning activity undertaken by individuals in different places, who communicate and interact with facilitators and each other by using technological tools (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). Bozkurt (2019) states that DE is an institution that employs online and offline technologies in its effort to provide an effective working solution for students who are separated in time and space from facilitators, students, and learning materials. From the above definitions, it is clear that DE refers to learning where some students do not necessarily need to be physically present at an institution or when students and lecturers are separated both in time and distance.

1.6.6 Academic Literacy – This concept refers to the ability of students to communicate competently, read, evaluate information, as well as present, debate, synthesise and create knowledge (Wingate, 2018). Academic literacy is not about mere reading and writing only, but rather the complex cognitive and social literacies that occur within a particular discipline or community of practice (Barton, Hamilton & Ivanič, 2000; Gee, 1991; Street, 2003). Academic literacy, which represents higher order thinking and learning, is crucial for both the development of students' own language and cognitive abilities as well as for knowledge generation and communication across fields (Flowerdew, 2013; Moje, 2015). This study adopts the definition by Flowerdew and Moje as academic literacy focuses on language use and how students and lecturers communicate to support teaching and learning purposes.

1.7 Research Methodology

1.7.1 Researcher's Identity and Positionality

Positionality in qualitative research describes the perspective and position a researcher holds regarding a research task and its social and political contexts (Foote & Gau Bartell, 2011; Savin-Baden & Major, 2023). My role as a researcher in this qualitative research was to explore the thoughts and feelings of the participants about a particular study phenomenon, i.e., the writing practices undertaken by the students and the specific challenges that they encounter in developing cohesive and coherent submissions. In undertaking this study with these specific participants, I also safeguard participants and their data. I hold the position of a junior lecturer in the Department of English Studies and am one of the lecturers in the EAW101 module. I have four years' teaching experience in the module; my role in the EAW101 module is to design and develop tutorial letters, set examination question papers, teach students through live streams, podcasts, vodcasts, online lessons and engage with and respond to student queries through the discussion forums. Since I am part of the module under study, I used triangulation¹ to maintain integrity and prevent bias in the study. This is discussed further in Chapter 3 of this study.

1.7.2 Research Paradigm

Hughes (2010) defines a paradigm as a way of viewing the world that scaffolds a research topic and changes the way in which a researcher thinks about a particular topic. Furthermore, Hughes (2010) states that any research is guided by a paradigm, as a way of viewing the world and making meanings out of it. The paradigm that a researcher chooses to adopt directs the investigation in terms of data generation and data analysis procedures. Since this current study explores the academic writing challenges of first year EAL students, the study is guided by an interpretivist paradigm. The study examines academic writing challenges, and such a focus aligns with interpretivist characteristics. Interpretivism states that truth and knowledge are subjective; they are culturally and historically positioned and are based on people's experiences and their understandings of their world (Gemma, 2018). Researchers

¹ According to Fusch, Fusch and Ness (2018), triangulation of research instruments in a qualitative study means revisiting social data that belongs to the same context utilising various instruments to seek depth and also to discover relevance.

must, therefore, keep in mind that their personal values and opinions undoubtedly influence how they generate, interpret, and analyse the evidence elicited from participants.

The advantage of using interpretivism in this study is that it allows the researcher to focus on the in-depth experiences of students through formal discussions and interviews (Husam & Abraham, 2019). The study makes an effort to comprehend the case of academic writing challenges from the viewpoints of first year EAL students by using semi-structured interview questions and open-ended evaluation questions. However, the disadvantage of interpretivism is that it is time-consuming, and the data generated is massive. To overcome this general limitation, I set a period for interpreting data. This was done within two weeks of completing the data collection process. In this regard, the interpretivism paradigm fits with this current study as it seeks to explore the participants' experiences, that is, the academic writing challenges faced by students registered for the EAW101 module.

1.7.3 Research Approach

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology to fully interpret the human behaviours and experiences of the participants. Qualitative research produces rich, in-depth information about a particular complex phenomenon (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015; Wilhelmy & Köhler, 2022). Cresswell and Poth (2018) state that qualitative research should be conducted in a natural setting to learn about a phenomenon, subject, event, or object from the research participants' perspectives. In addition, as a researcher, I am a key instrument in collecting and analysing textual and experiential data. In other words, I focused more on words, meanings, and experiences rather than numbers in the data generation processes. In this study, the focus was on the experiences of first year students' challenges and difficulties in acquiring academic writing skills.

The characteristics of qualitative research include reflexivity, natural setting, focus on participants' perspective, holistic, complex description, inductive and deductive analysis, and specific contextualisation of the study (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The strength of a qualitative study is that the identified meanings from the participants are represented accurately and effectively through thick descriptions. The weakness of a qualitative study is that generating data is often time-consuming and the researcher may be biased in interpreting the results because they are invariably influenced by the

researcher's own perspective. This study overcomes this limitation by focusing on what the participants have said and appreciating their experiences from their perspective.

The research approach chosen links with this study's aim and research questions as qualitative research enables the researcher to clarify trends in the thoughts and opinions of the participants because in this study, I explore the challenges that EAL students who are registered for the EAW101 module encounter when learning English academic writing.

1.7.4 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative case study approach. A case study is an intensive study on a group of people designed to make a generalised meaning about a particular phenomenon (Gustafsson, 2017). Mertens (2015) states that a case study is a qualitative investigative approach that critically describes a complex phenomenon to gain deeper understandings. A case study research method focuses on an individual unit; the study is descriptive and intensive; the phenomenon is situated in a context, and uses multiple data (Rose, Spinks & Canhoto, 2014). A case study enables the researcher to focus only on a small number of the targeted population whereby the insights that the researcher gathers regarding students' academic writing challenges are analysed.

Since this study explores the academic writing challenges of first year EAL students, an exploratory case study was employed. Yin (2003) clarifies that an exploratory case study explores those situations where the phenomenon evaluated has no defined set of outcomes. I opted to utilise an exploratory case study approach as Tumele (2015) maintains that it assists the researcher to interpret and describe data to find substantively meaningful patterns and themes. In this case, the study is designed to understand how and why first year EAL students struggle with academic writing. The strength of adopting a case study is that when completed, the findings are valuable, leading to new and advanced insights in the field (Cole, 2023). On the other hand, the weakness of a case study is that it is easier to be biased when data is interpreted (Cole, 2023). To avoid a biased interpretation of data, I asked participants who provided data to review the results to ensure that the interpretation was an accurate representation of their views and opinions.

1.7.5 Population

Levy and Lemeshow (2013) define population as a group of individuals or units under study from which samples are taken. Population is important in research in that a sample is made up of a small group which has the generally defining characteristics of that population. Asiamah and Mensah (2017:1615) define an accessible population as a “precursor of sampling.” Once the accessible population has been clearly defined and sorted, the process of sampling commences. There are three types of populations: general population, target population, and accessible population (Asiamah & Mensah, 2017). These scholars define a general population as the largest group of potential participants in a qualitative study; some information from the group is required to be established. There must be at least one characteristic of interest among the population. A group of participants with precise characteristics of interest and relevance is known as the target population (Creswell, 2003, cited in Asiamah & Mensah, 2017). The target population is more specialised than the general population since it lacks any attribute that might cast doubt on a research premise, context, or objective (Asiamah & Mensah, 2017). Lastly, an accessible population is a group of participants that is reached after taking out all individuals of the target population who may not participate or who cannot be accessed during the study period (Kotrlík & Higgins, 2001, cited in Asiamah & Mensah, 2017).

In this study, the target population was all the Semester 1 EAW101 students of 2023. EAW101 is a semester module and registers approximately 16 000 students per semester. The module comprises ten lecturers and approximately 34 markers. Since EAW101 is one of the modules with the largest number of enrolled students, and this is a qualitative study, it focuses on a small group that represents the entire population (Levy & Lemeshow, 2013).

1.7.6 Sample

Sampling is a procedure that researchers use to select a reasonable number of representatives from a bigger population to serve as participants in their study (Sharma, 2017). Since Yates (2004) claims that it is challenging to contact, identify, and study the entire population, I had to be aware of the participants’ availability to decide the appropriate number of participants for this study. Bernard (2000:178) contends that a maximum of 36 participants is appropriate for most qualitative

research studies. Therefore, this study selected fifteen first year EAL students registered for the EAW101 module.

Fifteen participants were deemed a suitable number because the sample size is contextual and dependent on the paradigm in which the investigation takes place (Boddy, 2016). Fifteen participants were chosen as they were deemed adequate to provide quality data that would represent the participants' opinions and experiences surrounding academic writing challenges and to demonstrate the link between the chosen sample and the methodology of this qualitative study. Researchers who design qualitative research studies seek to reach data saturation when interviewing their participants (O'Reilly & Parker, 2013; Walker, 2012). Although the concept of data saturation in research is useful, it does not provide any practical guidance for determining when data saturation is reached (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). Furthermore, depending on the population sample size, data saturation may be achieved with as little as six interviews. However, rather than focusing on the sample size, it was preferable to think of data saturation as rich and thick descriptions providing a full account of the phenomenon under consideration (Dibley, 2011). Just because a researcher has used up all of the available resources does not mean data saturation has been attained. Data saturation concerns the depth of the data rather than the numbers themselves (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012). Not all participants' responses are presented and analysed, but only participants' responses that fit within a particular theme are selected and analysed to ensure data saturation with regards academic writing challenges in this case.

This study used purposive sampling in answering research questions from the sample studied (Sharma, 2017). Purposive sampling is undertaken with a purpose in mind (Ames, Glenton & Lewin, 2019). Furthermore, Ames, Glenton, and Lewin (2019) state that purposive sampling is when a researcher purposively selects participants appropriate to the research design.

To use the sampling methods, the research questions, and how I selected the participants, this study found challenges that EAL students experience with their academic writing, the reasons behind those challenges, and ways to address them so that students master their academic writing skills. I chose the purposive sampling

approach because it provided me with insights and accurate data about the phenomenon of academic writing skills.

I selected participants using the following criteria: participants were first year students who spoke and wrote in EAL; they were registered in the EAW101 module; they had an African language background or spoke an African language. I chose 15 participants based on the aforementioned criteria, and it is important to note that students excluded from the sample do not necessarily imply that they were ineligible. It simply means that they were excluded as this is a qualitative study and it cannot accommodate a large number of participants. Once the participants were selected, they were requested to participate in this study via email and interviewed on the Microsoft Teams platform. The selected participants provided rich data; therefore, I gathered useful data from individuals who encounter challenges with academic writing expectation and that was information was not biased.

1.7.7 Research Instruments

The research instruments that I chose depended on the purpose and research questions of the study as recommended by Zacharias (2012). Data collection may take the form of direct data and indirect data. Direct data includes recordable spoken or written words, actions, and body language, whereas indirect data may be generated by a researcher (Whitehead & Whitehead, 2017). I used direct data generation in this study, such as recorded spoken and written words. Research instruments are important in a study because they are used to gather data from participants and the data collected are analysed to answer the research questions investigated within a study. This present study generated data using focus group discussions, structured open-ended evaluation questions on academic writing, and an observation schedule of the academic writing submissions of the students enrolled in this particular module. Table 1.3 below illustrates the research questions, and the data collection tools that elicited specific responses to the questions that guided this study.

Table 1.3: Research questions and instruments used in the study

Research Questions	Research Instrument
i. What academic writing challenges do first year EAL students encounter in the EAW101 module?	Focus group discussions (FGDs) on academic writing challenges encountered
ii. How do the EAW101 students experience the academic writing challenges in the module?	Structured open-ended evaluation questions on specific experiences of the students as they engaged in academic writing
iii. How do study materials and student support initiatives assist students with their academic writing?	Structured observation schedule of the content, outline, strategies designed to enhance the requisite academic writing skills in EAW101

An FGD is a qualitative data generation method that aims to identify and establish the experiences of participants in a small group setting (Stewart, 2018). Agar and MacDonald (1995) define FGDs as a structured meeting and conversation between the interviewer and participants in small groups. FGDs answered the first research question [(i) What challenges do first year EAL students encounter in the EAW101 module?] This method enabled me to generate and elicit rich data on specific challenges that students in EAW101 encounter with academic writing (See Appendix A).

With 15 student participants, I grouped participants into three groups of five participants each to obtain qualitative and manageable data. This is in accordance with the recommendations of Busetto, Wick, and Gumbinger (2020) who state that small manageable groups for FGDs are important so that the researcher may obtain control of the group and encourage the participation of all participants within each group. The FGDs took place on Microsoft Teams. With each group, the FGDs lasted for 45 minutes, and the contributions of each participant determined the amount of input in terms of the responses within each group. I collected data over a period of five weeks, which also depended on the availability of the participants. Participants were able to log into the link provided and they were keen to express themselves about the challenges they experienced in their academic writing skills. In this respect, the FGDs

gave me rich data that answered the research questions. During FGDs, I recorded and transcribed all the discussions so that later, I could cite the exact words of the participants.

The second research instrument that was used in this study was a qualitative structured open-ended evaluation question (see Appendix B). McLeod (2018) defines structured open-ended evaluation questions as a series of open-ended questions that enables a researcher to generate rich, thick descriptions from participants. The structured open-ended evaluation questions elicited responses to answer the research question [(ii) Why and how do these students experience the challenges the way they do in the EAW101 module? Open-ended evaluation questions are effective in collecting qualitative data as argued by Sevnarayan (2022) that student evaluations may give lecturers in HEIs useful information, such as the need to adopt and adjust teaching pedagogies and resources and to direct crucial decisions that take place in the delivery of a defined module. Hyman and Sierra (2016) state that open-ended evaluation questions are suitable for generating data in a large population or group and it is quick and inexpensive. Therefore, this enabled participants to answer questions and share their experiences on the challenges experienced in the module EAW101.

I opted for open-ended evaluation questions to gather flexible and prescient responses from the participants. The open-ended evaluation questions were posted on the Moodle Learning Management System (LMS) that is the online platform for the module under the 'discussion forum' section of the EAW101 Moodle site. The disadvantage of open-ended evaluation questions is that participants might misinterpret the evaluation questions (Kabir, 2016) and respond in ways that are at a tangent to the expectations of the research study. To overcome this, I was available on Moodle forums in case participants needed clarification on the questions and I was able to provide significant guidance regarding specific misconceptions.

The third research instrument I used was a structured observation schedule (see Appendix C). This instrument answered the research question (iii) Why and how do study materials and student support initiatives assist students with their academic writing? Marshall and Rossman (1989) state that an observation schedule is a description of the events, manners, and artifacts of a social setting. I chose this

instrument to collect data because first year students in EAW101 rely on additional support initiatives to learn the skills requisite for academic writing. The observation schedule played a vital role because it enabled me to review the student support initiatives to identify if they assisted students with their academic writing protocols. The advantages of an observation schedule are that it provides highly accurate information, and it is an appropriate tool as it offers the participants an opportunity to provide information in writing rather than verbally. However, the disadvantages of an observation schedule are that it is time-consuming and not everything is observable, such as feelings and emotions. I overcame this by focusing more on the responses elicited from the participants so that specific patterns and trends could be identified and synthesised.

Academic conventions covered in the EAW101 module's study materials and student support initiatives include paragraph writing, citation and referencing, essay organisation, writer's voice and expression, argumentation, syntactic patterns and variation, revision and editing, how to read and respond to short paragraph-based questions and summarising. I observed the Telegram² group, the module³ site, and live streaming⁴ sessions to investigate whether these assisted the students with their academic writing development. The structured observation took approximately three weeks. To collect data, I took screenshots of the interactions between students on Telegram, screenshots of the discussion forums where lecturers engaged with students, and screenshots of the live streaming sessions where lecturers were teaching academic writing.

I used these three methods of collecting data to ensure that the findings of the study were credible and replicable. To guarantee the credibility of the data, I was aware of biases when collecting data and analysing findings. Furthermore, records demonstrating a clear audit trail and ensuring that interpretations of data were

² Telegram is a cloud-based application that enables users to share any material saved on a server, including films, photos, and audio, without taking up space on their mobile device (Ghobadi & Taki, 2018; Abu-Ayfah, 2020). In the EAW101 module, we use Telegram to create a social environment for students to share their queries among themselves, lecturers also respond to those queries, and also direct them to the activities within the module.

³ The module site has assignment questions, study materials, announcements, lessons, a private chat function that students use to interact with a particular lecturer, and a discussion forum where students and lecturers interact with each other.

⁴ Livestreaming is scheduled classes where we cover orientation classes, assignments, and examination preparations.

consistent and transparent were kept. I used triangulation to validate the data collected. Triangulation was specifically used to analyse the findings of the same study using different methods of data collection (Nightingale, 2020). Triangulation aided me in validating my research findings by checking that different methods produced the same result.

1.7.8 Data Analysis

Data analysis entails summarising, describing, and synthesising data collected with the aim of identifying relationships, themes, patterns, and links (Flick, 2014; Schurink, Fouche & de Vos, 2013). This study applied thematic analysis to interpret and analyse the data collected from focus groups and structured open-ended evaluation questions. Thematic analysis refers to emerging themes in a qualitative study that present evidence for the central questions designed to appreciate the phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2016). Themes were formulated to create logically organised data. According to Braun and Clark (2012), a researcher needs to follow logical steps in the process of accurately transcribing online qualitative data.

A theme captures important details about the data in relation to the research questions and presents patterned responses in the data. The researcher employed an inductive thematic analysis approach. The inductive thematic approach derives themes from collected data (Varpio, Paradis, Uijtdehaage & Young, 2020). Braun and Clarke (2006) outline steps taken when analysing qualitative data, including specific focus on (1) knowing your data, (2) generating codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing your themes, (5) defining and naming themes, (6) producing the final report.

One advantage of thematic analysis is that it allowed me to examine the perspectives of different participants and highlight their similarities and differences. The immediate disadvantage is that it was a challenge to implement correctly because I needed to merge and organise themes in a meaningful manner and avoid replicating themes that were not generic. I overcame this by recognising the relationships of the responses from participants and coding data by labelling each set of data using a word or phrase. Thematic analysis was chosen because I interpreted data that the participants had provided and I was able to consolidate this in the final report, accomplishing an informed understanding of the challenges connected to academic writing amongst first year students in an ODeL environment.

During FGDs, I requested participants' permission to record the interview; keeping in mind that the participants' identities had to remain anonymous, and the information shared remained confidential. Once every participant consented, I recorded each interview to ensure accurate data transcription and analysis. Participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

Table 1.4: Summary of the research strategy and methodology

Research Strategy		
First Research question	Value	Data collection tools
What academic writing challenges do first year EAL students encounter in the EAW101 module?	To establish academic challenges that first year EAL students face with academic writing.	Focus group discussion
Second Research question	Value	Data collection tools
How and why do the EAW101 students experience the academic writing challenges in the module?	To gain an understanding of how first year EAL students experience those academic writing challenges	Structured open-ended evaluation questions
Third Research question	Value	Data collection tools
How do study materials and student support initiatives assist students with their academic writing?	To establish the effectiveness of study materials and student support initiatives in EAW101 that assist students with academic writing.	Observation schedule
Research design	Qualitative case study	
Participants	Purposive sampling: First year students who use English as an additional language and are registered in the EAW101 module.	
Data Analysis	Inductive thematic analysis approach	

1.8 Trustworthiness, Credibility, and Transferability

To ensure trustworthiness, I adopted Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria namely, credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability. These four criteria are crucial since they cover comparable viewpoints on the trustworthiness of research. With regard to credibility, it is the truth value of a study because the data collected was on tracing and clarifying academic writing challenges that the study set out to do. To ensure credibility, I used triangulation which Creswell and Miller (2000: 126) define as searching "for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to

form themes or categories in a study.” The importance of triangulation lies in its ability to identify main and minor themes by providing corroborating evidence obtained through multiple methodologies (Creswell & Miller, 2000). With regard to transferability, it is the application of the results to other settings. This means that transferability is dependent on the researcher fully describing the context of their study such that the study could be replicated in similar contexts (Hlatshwayo, 2018). Transferability was achieved by describing the criteria of the participants, the contexts within which the study was done, and the socio-cultural characteristics in the participants’ community. The sampling technique, the data collection methods and the data analyses that were employed in this research were made clear and therefore similar research in similar contexts could probably replicated.

With regard to confirmability, is the objectivity of the findings in a research study. I was able to extrapolate answers to the research questions such that the data on which I lay claim for the synthesis of claims or interpretations can be verified and confirmed from the archive. With regard to dependability, it is concerned with the consistency of the results from a study. According to Richards (2009:159), “to ensure dependability, questioning should cover topics like describing how the methodology relates to the study’s objectives, going through the data collection techniques and how they were really employed to produce the data, and going over the data analysis procedure.” In summary, employing the four criteria regarding trustworthiness as suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985), I was able to increase the fidelity of the study. This is further elaborated and discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

1.9 Limitations of the Study

Limitation of this study was that it focused only on first year EAL students registered in one module at an ODeL university. Since the EAW101 module has over 16,000 students, it was, therefore, impossible to include all of them in the qualitative study. I overcame this limitation by selecting a sample of students who were part of a larger group. Another limitation was that the data generation process was time-consuming because some of the participants were not available to take part in this study and I had to schedule another time that was convenient for the participants, especially for the FGDs. I overcame this limitation by ensuring that the gaps between the dates of

the FGDs were not too far apart so that I did not forget what other participants had said and that the data was not affected in any way.

1.10 Ethical Considerations

This study conformed to the ethical protocols of the institution under study. Research clearance involved an ethical clearance committee that analysed the researcher's aims and methodology to confirm that the research was done responsibly and ethically. I obtained ethical clearance and the consent processes with potential participants were completed, then data collection commenced (Appendix F).

Furthermore, I formulated an informed consent form that was signed by participants (Appendix D). This consent form provided participants with detailed information about the study so that they made informed decisions whether they would volunteer to participate in the study. Therefore, participation in the study was not compulsory and participants could withdraw from the study at any given time without consequence and without jeopardising the integrity of the research process. This study paid attention to the ethical principles of beneficence by showing the greater gains in participating, kindness to the research participants and non-maleficence as my primary responsibilities as a researcher. I ensured that participants were protected from harm; I did not in any way take advantage of their participation; and none of the participants experienced alienation for taking part in this study in any way (Pietilä, Nurmi, Halkoaho & Kyngäs, 2020).

To ensure the privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality of participants, I identified each participant by a code in the following manner: in Group 1, the first participant was labelled '1Ana; the second participant was labelled 1Bana, and so on. In Group 2, the first participant was labelled 2Ana; the second participant was 2Bana, and so on. This way, I protected the participants' identities or any other personal information. However, if participants showed any concerns about the use of their names being on record, I explained to the participants that their identities were concealed in the analysis of data, in the write up of the findings of the study, as well in subsequent publications by only using the codes with which they were labelled, and they were only identified through the codes allocated to them.

Before the interview commenced, I explained in detail to each group how the FGDs would run, how the responses generated during the discussions were used, and that they were recorded for quality and reliability purposes. However, if some participants did not want the FGDs recorded, I used field notes and after the FGDs ended, I showed the participants the field notes to avoid any manipulation of the responses generated from each participant. Concerning data management, I prepared and gathered all the notes during the data collection processes by uploading them in cloud storage. The responses from the open-ended evaluation questions were also stored in cloud storage. Furthermore, I reviewed the data to make sense of what they contained and then created themes and presented those themes in a logical and coherent submission. To maintain anonymity after completing the study, I am obliged to dispose data responsibly after five years.

1.11 Outline of Chapters

Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

Chapter 1 introduced and provided the background to the study. It provided a brief rationale, theoretical framework; Col and TD that guided the study, definition of key concepts and the statement of the problem on the observation that most EAL first year students struggle with academic writing in EAW101 module. Furthermore, the chapter discussed the significance and contribution of the study, research objectives, research questions, and offered a brief literature review. It also discussed the research methodology and research design, population that the study explores, the sampling procedure, data collection methods; FGDs, structured open-ended evaluation questions and an observation schedule. Lastly, it discussed the six-step steps of data analysis stages and phases, delimitations and limitations of the study, ethical considerations, and the outline of the chapters. The following chapter engages with recent and relevant literature pertinent to this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Chapter 2 is divided into two parts: literature review and theoretical framework. The first part discusses international and local recent and relevant literature on the challenges that first year EAL students face with academic writing. The purpose of this chapter is to explore challenges of academic writing as investigated by other researchers in the field of academic literacies. I reviewed research from other

countries about the experiences of EAL students who struggle with academic writing. Then, I narrowed the research to South Africa as the university under study is a South African ODeL institution. From the reviewed research of both international and local research, scholars have explored similar challenges with academic literacies, especially as it concerns writing. These challenges include limited vocabulary in English, problems with differentiating between written and spoken words, writing conventions, lexical patterning, stylistic choices, voicing in academic writing and the formality of discursive constructions. I reviewed both current and recent studies to identify perceptions and challenges regarding academic writing. The second part provides the theoretical framework that underpinned this study, that is, Col and TD. Col addresses issues of collaborative learning through meaningful interaction for ODeL institutions and may be complemented by TD which promotes successful online learning.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

Chapter 3 discusses the positionality and identity of the researcher, research paradigm, and the research approach. The research paradigm adopted in this study was a qualitative approach because the study sought to explore in depth, the experiences of first year EAL students regarding academic writing. Moreover, the research design for this study was a case study approach because the study focused on one specific group, that is, the EAW101 module. Furthermore, it discusses the research design, population, sampling, and the data collection instruments i.e., focus group discussions, structured open-ended evaluation questions and an observation schedule. Lastly, it discusses the research procedure, triangulation, research trustworthiness, and ethical considerations of the study.

Chapter 4: Data Collection, Findings and Discussion

Chapter 4 discusses the interpretation and analysis of the research data. It also presents detailed discussions of the findings. This chapter commences by discussing the data collected from the students' FGDs, open-ended evaluation questions, and observation schedule. In the discussion, themes that emerged from the raw data were analysed and discussed.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

Chapter 5 provides a summary of the study, recommendations, conclusions and identified areas for future research. I discuss the summary of the study and all the research processes that unfolded within the study. I further outlined some recommendations derived from the findings that may be considered by ODeL institutions to improve academic writing skills of students.

1.12 Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the research study. As mentioned in the chapter, research confirms that academic writing is a challenge for EAL teaching and learning contexts across the globe in HEIs. Academic writing holds particular importance in DE and ODeL institutions, where written materials play a crucial role in teaching and learning. The focus of the research study was on EAL students in a South African ODeL university. I was interested in exploring this topic as there is a prevalence of students who struggle with academic writing skills at HEIs. This study holds significant value in exploring the academic writing challenges faced by first year students in EAW101. Lecturers in the module could recalibrate and re-evaluate their teaching methods so as to develop strategies that enhance the academic writing skills of EAL students. The findings from this study are instrumental in guiding lecturers to provide targeted support initiatives for first year students in an ODeL context and improve their academic writing capabilities. In the next chapter, I focus on literature available on academic writing challenges of first year EAL students in a South African ODeL institution and theoretical frameworks that guided this study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

“Writing is thinking. To write well is to think clearly. That’s why it’s so hard.”

- David McCullough

2.1 Introduction

In Chapter 1, I provided an overview of academic writing and the challenges that first year students, who use English as an additional language (EAL), face globally and in South Africa. I noted that writing is an important skill that needs urgent attention as almost all forms of assessment are conducted through writing at universities, so students need to acquire this skill to excel in their academic studies. What emerged from Chapter 1 is that it is apparent that students’ challenges may go beyond just understanding academic writing conventions and language issues that impede their academic writing success. Academic writing is a facet of literacies that are connected to differentiating between written and spoken words, writing conventions, lexical patterning, stylistic choices, voicing in academic writing and the formality of discursive constructions.

This chapter is divided into two parts: literature review and theoretical framework. The first part provides a detailed discussion of literacies, new literacy, and academic literacy where new research shifted the theoretical development and pedagogical approaches to literacy. These concepts are the foundation for this study and a detailed discussion of them articulates the thinking behind the development of ideologies, and pedagogies by academic scholars. This chapter then reviews challenges that first year EAL students experience with academic writing globally and in South Africa. Lastly, I provide a discussion on academic writing, by beginning with a brief history of second language (L2) writing development. Since the participants in this study are students who speak EAL, it is fitting that this chapter focuses on the understanding of L2 writing development. Thereafter, several definitions of academic writing and the processes involved are reviewed. The first part of this chapter concludes with a discussion of the importance of feedback in teaching academic writing to students.

The second part of this chapter discusses the theories that guide this study. I discuss the Community of Inquiry (CoI) and how it links to this study. I conclude this second part by discussing the TD theory which also guides this study.

PART I: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.2 Review of Literature

This review of literature begins with a background to literacies, followed by academic literacy and discourse, overview of second language writing, and the reading and writing connections. Furthermore, the first part focuses on a discussion on academic writing, challenges of academic writing, perceptions about academic writing, and finally, the importance of feedback and academic writing.

2.2.1 Background to Literacies

Since the 1950s, research on reading and writing at university level has been a critical focus in terms of theoretical models and the refinement of pedagogical approaches (Rosenblatt, 2018; Coşkun Yaşar & Aslan, 2021). During this period, reading and writing has been dominated by paradigms from psychology that suggest there must be an understanding of reading, writing, spelling, and comprehension as cognitive and behavioural processes. Understanding writing and reading from such paradigms helps to facilitate improved teaching and learning of language (Bharuthram, 2006). Most researchers such as Konstantinidou, Madler-Charpentier, Opacic, Gautshi, and Hoefele (2022) have investigated the areas of reading and writing from this paradigm and they discuss literacy issues in relation to school-based and teacher education that saw a marked increase in the 1970s (Young, MacPhail & Tannehill, 2022).

The use of English language has caused significant controversy in South African higher education institutions, especially after the 2015-2016 #DecolonisingtheCurriculum and #FeesMustFall student-led protests (Mthombeni & Ogunnubi, 2021; Wassermann & Bentrovato, 2018). Research on reading and writing has received attention in the form of theoretical frameworks, pedagogical strategies, and research-based efforts designed to enhance the written and rhetorical students employ in their assignments. An argument by Bradbury (1993) notes that it is politically convenient to claim that the challenges black students encounter when they engage in learning in higher education institutions (HEIs) are caused by their status as EAL

speakers. As a result of this, the prevalent discourse regarding black students having difficulties in HEIs due to 'linguistic concerns of limited access' are liberal. This perception has permitted a purportedly admirable shift away from earlier apartheid explanations of cognitive dissonance and difference (Boughey & McKenna, 2016).

The description of what literacy is has changed over the years. In the 1960s, literacy was defined from a functional perspective that focused on ways in which literacy was used to achieve specific goals in different contexts (Bharuthram, 2006). In the 1980s, the notion of literacy grew much wider than mere reading and writing as it became clear that scholars started questioning the traditional views of literacy (Bharuthram, 2006; Gee, 2000). This shift led to the introduction of a new interdisciplinary study called the 'New Literacies Studies' (NLS) which represented a new movement in considering and reconceptualising the nature of literacies, focusing not so much on the acquisition of skills, as in non-dominant approaches, but rather on what it means to think of literacies as a social practice (Street, 1995). Definitions of literacy were refined and re-imagined by various scholars, thereby generating significant debates regarding what it means to demonstrate funds of knowledge and ways in which home languages become integral repertoires in mastering academic literacies.

Au (1995:20) describes literacy "as the ability and willingness to use reading and writing to construct meanings from the printed text, in ways which meet the requirements of a particular social context." Similarly, Street (2003:79) describes literacy as "the broader cultural conception of particular ways of thinking and doing about reading and writing in cultural contexts." These definitions put more emphasis on reading and writing as important components and practices of literacy. Literacy is viewed as a social practice, involving reading and writing. However, Stephens (2000) argues against this and states that literacy is not only about knowing how to read and write simple sentences, but rather about applying knowledge for specific purposes in various contexts. Furthermore, he emphasises that facilitators of literacy are engaged in the development of their students' cognitive capacities. To elaborate on this, Street (2003) states that the way in which facilitators and students interact with each other, affects the nature of literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by students in their position. As highlighted from the above discussion, two approaches

to literacy are based on the grounds of their theoretical foundation. Street (1984) compares the two literacy models which are the autonomous model of literacy and the ideological model of literacy (Table 1.2).

2.2.1.1 *Autonomous Model of Literacy*

In his study, Street (1993) emphasises that the analysis of the ways in which reading and writing instruction occurs, or the way in which literacy skills are assessed, can be placed within the autonomous model of literacy. Researchers such as Olson (1997) and Hill and Parry (1992) argue that within the autonomous model, texts are seen as having independent meaning which means that meaning is derived from the text itself with little attention to the cultural context in which that meaning is produced and interpreted. The autonomous model tries to assess and elaborate language's technical elements. It has been dubbed the autonomous model because it makes the implicit assertion that literacy is a set of universal skills that, once mastered, people may use in any situation (Liebel, 2020). According to Street (1995), the autonomous model of literacy is based on essay-text forms which are rooted in Western academic circles, and they present a specific model that is masked in claims of universalism. Street (1995) further argues that universalistic concepts of literacy in the autonomous models do not lift those who learn it out of their social context but suppress those who are under the ideology and social control of the teacher's class.

Horn (2016) states that supporters of the autonomous model interpret literacy as an independent variable that leads to success, while those who are non-literate, are viewed as lacking intelligence. Horn's view suggests that literacy develops separately from social and cultural contexts. However, the autonomous model of literacy has been criticised by various researchers such as Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000) and Cazden (1998) who argue that literacy is not autonomous, but rather it is embedded in social and cultural contexts. Street (1993) states that literacy is contested and ideological. Therefore, the criticism of the autonomous model of literacy introduced the ideological model of literacy which is more nuanced and robust compared to the autonomous model.

2.2.1.2 Ideological Model of Literacy

According to Gee (1990:61), the ideological model of literacy can be understood as “society’s social practices, economic conditions, social structure, and local ideologies.”

In addition, Baker, and Street (1994:3454) note that the development of:

a more socially oriented view of literacy [and that] the ‘ideological’ model of literacy recognises above all the importance of context, seeing the skills of reading, writing and enumerating ‘as social practices, learnt in specific cultural contexts and imbued with epistemological significance.

In other words, Baker, and Street (1994) contend that the ideological model of literacy demonstrates a culturally sensitive perspective of literacy practices because it differs from one context to another. It is therefore significant to note that according to the ideological model, literacy is not just a technical skill, but rather knowledge that one individual brings to the text. This ideological orientation recognises the student’s prior funds of knowledge, their existing literacies, and the prospects for mastering new experiences in diverse contexts. The ideological model of literacy comprises two very important concepts which are literacy practices and literacy events.

Literacy practices, as defined by Barton, Hamilton and Ivanic (2000), refer to cultural ways of using written language that people draw from their lives. In other words, it is what people choose to do with literacy. It can be noted that these practices are internal processes that cannot be observed because they involve one’s values, beliefs, attitudes, being, and social relationships (Barton et al., 2000). The literacy practices are also social processes that enable people to interact with each other because they draw from the common beliefs and attitudes of the people with whom they interact. On the other hand, literacy events refer to activities where literacy plays a role; these events can be observed from practices and are shaped by them (Barton et al., 2000).

Therefore, it is important to discuss academic literacies and discourse because learning in HEIs consists of students transitioning to new ways of knowing and new ways of understanding, interpreting, and organising new knowledge (Lea, 1998). This is also because the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, forced many higher institutions to consider online teaching and learning and students had to adjust to new ways of learning and making sense of the academic language writing requirements. Hence, it is through academic literacies that students can learn new information in different

fields of study, master new writing techniques and apply these in resolving the impediments to successful academic writing practices.

2.2.2 Academic Literacy and Discourse

Academic literacy is a construct of language competence that is used in an academic context. According to Sebolai (2019), academic literacy is a language competence that students need to master to cope with the demands of academic research and study. Research shows that most students struggle with academic language, whether they speak English as a home language or an additional language (Li, 2020; Shi, 2023). This may have to do with the fact that they may not have had enough exposure to English in general compared to their first-language speaking counterparts. However, this does not mean that exposure translates into academic language proficiency; it simply means that more exposure to English gives native speakers of English an edge over EAL students as oral proficiency has been found to contribute to academic literacy even though it is not a predictor (Gee, 1996). Whether students are home language speakers of English or EAL, they all need to be taught academic English so that they are exposed to new ways of learning, being and valuing (Gee, 1996) as required in academic literacies. Since the aim of this study is to explore academic writing challenges of first year EAL students, it is imperative to understand academic discourse in the ideological orientation already explicated above.

Scholars such as Patterson and Weideman (2013) focused their research on the nature of academic discourse. They argue that academic discourse is different from other types of discourse because it entails the ability to process evaluative, analytical, and logical thinking skills. Patterson and Weideman (2013:108) state that:

definitions of the ability to handle academic discourse that explicitly derive from an idea of what academic discourse entails, and how it differs from other types of discourse, are not only easier to engage with critically, but also potentially more useful.

In their (2013:126) study, Patterson and Weideman elaborate more on this point by arguing that:

... there is probably no better starting point than firstly to determine whether academic discourse is a distinct type of discourse and secondly, what it is that makes it different from other lingual spheres. By a lingual sphere, we mean a distinctly different kind of language that is used within a particular social institution, so that the language of business, for example, will differ from that of an intimate

relationship, or the language of worship will differ from the language of the court, or the language of literature will differ from the language of education.

Any attempt to define academic literacy must emphasise that the characteristic nature of this discourse originates from “the (unique) distinction making connections with the analytical or logical mode of experience” (Patterson & Wiedeman, 2013:129-130). Their argument of academic discourse and the literacy skills that students need to cope with the discourse, is very similar to Cummins’s (1984, 2008) studies respectively. Cummins’s work on BICS and CALP focuses on the types of language skills required for conversational language use and the language of teaching and learning in a university context.

In his studies, Cummins distinguishes two types of language competences as Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS pertains to the language skills needed for informal communication, while CALP pertains to the more advanced language skills necessary for academic settings (Lestari, Sabarun & Qamariah, 2023). This distinction that Cummins (1984) made between BICS and CALP encouraged Cummins and Swain (1983) to conclude that it is vital to differentiate between informal language use and the formal language and discursive patterns required in most academic contexts. Once we have understood the two types of language competence, writing becomes another skill that needs to be mastered so that students excel in their studies, most significantly in their ability to deploy CALP writing skills for the coherent and cohesive ideas that they seek to communicate.

2.2.3 Overview of Second Language Writing

This section gives a brief history of the development of second language writing in terms of theory and practice. To appreciate current theories in writing development, it is important to understand antecedent theories. Since the 1950s, various changes have taken place in our understanding of writing both in terms of theory and practice. Prior to and during the mid-1950s, the dominant approach to teaching was the behaviourist approach, focusing on the second language structure through a prescriptive structures-and-skills controlled practice (Btoosh & Taweel, 2011). As a result, writing was limited to drills such as fill-ins, substitutions, transformations, and completion. These were used to strengthen the application of grammatical rules, and

the language structures had to be rehearsed and memorised in decontextualised versions of textualisation (Derakhshan, 1996).

Writing is a very important communicative skill, and it plays a vital role in second language learning processes (Axatovna, 2022; Dutta, 2019). Writing has been a daunting task even for students who are proficient in other language skills. Researchers in the writing field have been looking for more practical and creative ways of improving students' writing skills (Hyland, 2021; Javadi-Safa, 2018). Writing has gone through enormous changes (Baresh, 2022; Yavuz-Erkan & İflazoğlu-Saban, 2011). Currently, such changes include the use of internet and digital platforms to expand the scope of writing beyond traditional media and enabling widespread sharing of content through emojis, GIFs, and memes (Ndlangamandla, 2022; Pulley, 2020).

Writing is characterised as a complex activity which involves cognitive, motivational, and linguistic processes (Al-Badwawi, 2011). The complexity of writing increases dramatically at university level because it requires students to learn how to argue their points, paraphrase, make inferences, synthesise ideas and refer to sources that consolidate perceptions and points-of-view (Hyytinen, Löfström & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2017). Writing in EAL is common in HEIs all over the world (Dofs, 2023; Ma, 2021). In this respect, prospective students enter HEIs and are exposed to new cultures, reading, and writing norms, demands and unconventional ways of trying to make meanings about certain discourses. First year students are required to learn new literacy practices that enable them to successfully provide and function in the context of higher education. Lea and Street (1998:158) therefore note that:

Learning in higher education involves adapting to new ways of knowing: new ways of understanding, interpreting, and organising knowledge. Academic literacy practices... reading and writing within disciplines...constitute central processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of study.

The following Figure 2.1 illustrate how Lea and Street' three models align with Gee's two models of literacy:

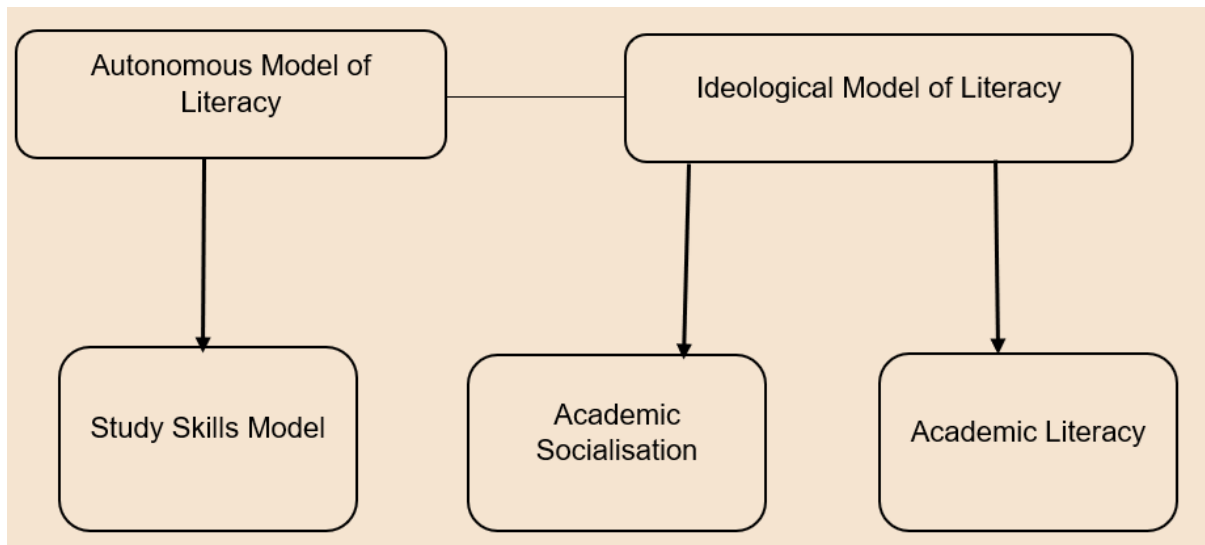


Figure 2.1: An illustration of the interrelation of Gee (1990) and Lea and Street's (1998) models

Lea and Street (1998) argue that student writing and literacy could be conceptualised using the three models which are: (1) a study skill model, (2) an academic socialisation model, and (3) an academic literacy model. With a study skill model, Lea, and Street (1998:157) state that it "is a set of atomised skills which students have to learn, and which are transferable to other contexts." A study skill model focuses on features of language such as grammar, tenses, punctuation, and spelling. This is aligned to Gee's notion of autonomous model of literacy. Students need to acquire this skill to assist them with their general writing.

The second model that Lea and Street (1998) outline is academic socialisation. They argue that academic socialisation is mainly concerned with students' culture into disciplinary and subject-based discourses and genres (Lea & Street, 1998). They further argue that disciplinary discourses and genres are comparatively specific and stable and when students have learnt the rules of a particular academic discourse, they can reproduce it without much difficulty. Therefore, Gee's 'ideological model' of literacies, which focusses the social and cultural dimensions of literacy acquisition is aligned with this model. There are inflections related to academic socialisations, inflections connected to specific phrasings and discourse markers pertinent to the discipline.

The third model is the academic literacy model which is concerned with “constructing meaning, identity, power, and authority and foregrounds the nature of what counts as knowledge in any particular academic context” (Lea & Street, 1998:158). This resonates in a much broader understanding of literacy as located within academic contexts and shares some of Gee’s sociocultural model of literacy and combines both individual skills and social practices. They map contestations between different stakeholders:

it is important to realise that meanings are contested among different parties involved: institutions, staff and students. Viewing literacy from a cultural and social practices approach (rather than in terms of educational judgments about good and bad writing) and approaching meanings as contested can give us insights into the nature of academic literacies in particular and academic learning in general.

Therefore, these three models play a vital role in understanding writing and other literacy practices in any academic context. As much as we do not deny the importance of other literacy practices such as listening, speaking, and reading, writing is an important aspect of academic literacy in any institution of higher learning, more so in an ODeL institution. This is mainly because in ODeL institutions, learning and teaching are largely dependent on written materials and writing – albeit in varying degrees. For instance, while in DE institutions, written materials and writing are dominant modes of delivery (Bozkurt, 2019), in ODeL, these are presented through various modes, including modern electronic technologies and other digital facilities to enhance and support learning and teaching (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Letseka, 2015; Sevnarayan, 2022).

2.2.3.1 Approaches to Writing

In exploring the history of writing, it is evident that among the different approaches practised in writing instruction, there are particularly two approaches that are influential: product-oriented and process-oriented writing. Research conducted indicates that the approaches mentioned above have both strengths and weaknesses, and they could complement each other for coherent and cohesive writing of texts (Knoch & Macqueen, 2019; Uzun & Zehir Topkaya, 2020). According to Harmer’s (2004) argument, there are different approaches that are practised in writing instruction and to be able to choose a suitable approach for students, lecturers need to decide which one works well for their students. Harmer (2004) further argues that

lecturers must decide whether they want their students to focus on writing processes more than the product itself, whether they want their students to study different writing genres (persuasive, argumentative, expository), or whether they want to boost their students' creativity (description and narrative) in writing (Harmer, 2004). Since this study explores academic writing challenges, it is imperative that lecturers focus on teaching students different writing genres and academic writing.

2.2.3.1.1 The Product-Oriented Approach

The product-oriented approach to writing focuses on the construction of the product at the end of the writing process (Kamali, Rajabi & Ahmadi, 2021). In other words, this approach concentrates on what students have produced at the end of the writing process. A study by Silva (1992) states that teachers who use the product-oriented approach focus more on the correct and accurate construction of sentences and paragraphs. Furthermore, Kadmiry, (2021) states that the product-oriented approach teaches their students formal aspects of writing such as grammar, vocabulary, cohesion, coherence, logical flow of ideas and so on. In this regard, students are prompted to copy and adhere specifically to White's (1988) model which is shown in Figure 2.2 below:

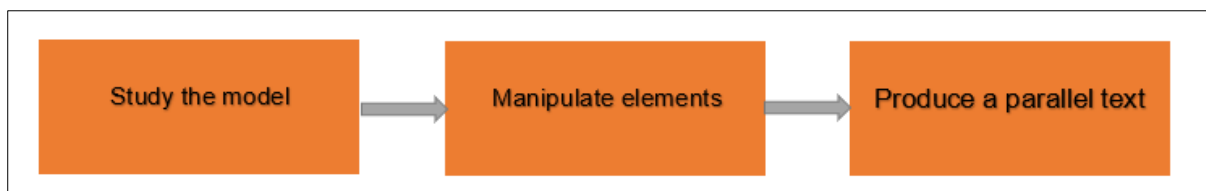


Figure 2.2: A model-based approach to teaching writing (White, 1998:5)

The model-based approach is one of the most important tools used to teach students about the structure of good paragraphs and different argument modes such as cause and effect; compare and contrast; classification and so on, and different discourse modes such as descriptions, persuasion, narration, and exposition (Hyland, 2002; Silva, 1992). White (1988) indicates that the characteristics of the model-based approach are: the sample text is taken as the starting point; the text's form, content and organisation are analysed and studied; linguistic items and rhetorical patterns are manipulated; and a new input is provided as a basis for parallel writing developed in the student's induction and maturation.

The model-based approach is well-known because organisation and expression of ideas in a text are difficult (White, 1988). This approach provides students with a finished sample text which they are required to replicate. In other words, the focus is on the product which is obviously someone else’s writing. This model has its downside because White (1988) argues that it does not determine how the writer arrived at that finished sample text. This means that there is no evidence that shows the writing as a process. While both the model-based approach and the product-based approach support students to get the picture of how the end product of a written text should be, they fall short of accounting for how the end product was created. In other words, the writing process is missing, which is a topic treated in the next section.

2.2.3.1.2 The Process-Oriented Approach

The process-oriented approach is discussed using Flower and Hayes’s (1981) cognitive model. The process-oriented approach focuses on how ideas are developed, organised, and formulated in writing (Kamali, Rajabi & Ahmadi, 2021). Flower and Hayes’s (1981) cognitive model are used in the field of education and especially in this writing approach. This approach is beneficial to this study in the sense that it enables students to develop their ideas, organise their arguments systematically and logically, and write in academically acceptable ways. The writing process involves three vital elements which are: the task environment, the writer’s long-term memory, and the writing processes. These are summarised in Figure 2.3 below.

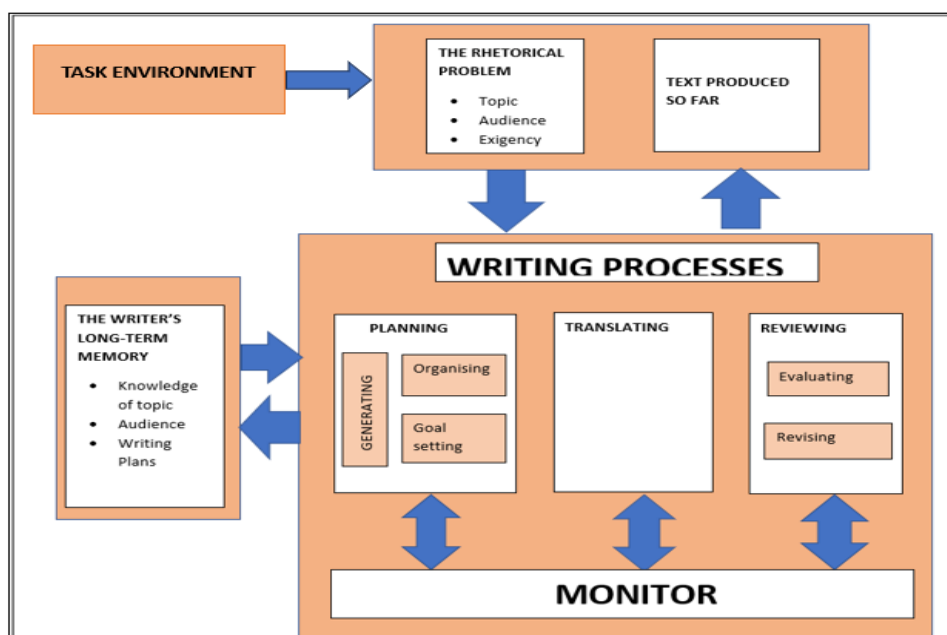


Figure 2.3: Writing process by Flower and Hayes (1981)

The first element is the task environment which comprises variables outside “the writer’s skin” (Flower & Hayes, 1981:369); these are the rhetorical problem or assignment and the emerging text. The second element is long-term memory that considers the writer’s knowledge, vocabulary, schemas, grammar, spelling, transitional markers, connectors, and facts (Bhat, Agashe, Oberoi, Mohile, Jangir & Joshi, 2023; Flower & Hayes, 1981). The last element is the writing process which comprises planning, translating, languaging protocols and reviewing. These are controlled by a monitor that enables writers to track their process and progress (Hayes, 2012; Imsa-ard, 2020; Kadmiry, 2021). In the next section, a summary of the processes involved in writing, that is, planning, translating, and reviewing is discussed.

2.2.3.1.2.1 Planning

Flower and Hayes’s (1981) model uses the term planning in a broad perspective and elastic semantic field. During the planning stage, writers formulate an internal presentation of the knowledge that they use in writing (Aripin, & Rahmat, 2021). According to Li (2023), planning involves the process of generating and organising ideas in a logical manner. The planning stage involves three sub-processes which are generating ideas, organising these into specific flagships and goal setting. Generating ideas means retrieving relevant information or knowledge from the writer’s long-term memory, especially if that information is well organised in the memory, but the writer must only generate a written text using ‘standard’ English (Flower & Hayes, 1981). When writers plan their texts, they must retrieve related information from their long-term memory and use the information from the task environment to establish the specific writing purposes and then design a writing plan (Kormos, 2023). Their writing purpose is realised in the process of translation which is discussed in the next section.

2.2.3.1.2.2 Translating

In simple terms, translating refers to taking ideas and transforming them into a language, but Flower and Hayes’s (1981:373) study demonstrated that they had chosen to use the term “translating” instead of using terms such as “transcribe” or “write” to put emphasis on the peculiar qualities of the translating task. The translation process entails accessing the funds-of-knowledge on a topic and reformulating one’s multilingual repertoires in generating meaningful structures for the set task.

It is significant to note that the information that was generated during the planning process can be presented using different symbolic systems other than language (Flower & Hayes, 1981). More so, Flower and Hayes argue that the planning process represents writers' thoughts in words, but the representation of those thoughts is unlikely to be in accordance with the syntax of written words in the English language. To that extent, the writer is required to translate meanings which are symbolised by keywords and develop an organised complex network of relationships to produce a linear piece written in English (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Therefore, once the translating process is concluded, the writer should review the text.

2.2.3.1.2.3 Reviewing

From Figure 2.3, it can be seen that reviewing comprises two sub-processes: evaluating and revising. Reviewing is a conscientious process whereby a writer might choose to read the text to further translate it or may evaluate and revise the text in what could be understood as editing for structure, cohesion, and coherence of the text (Flower & Hayes, 1981). Reviewing is a process that involves both reading and editing texts with the aim of improving the quality of work and editing to ensure that the text ultimately produced responds to the task in their writing purposes (Kormos, 2023). In their studies, Flower, and Hayes (1981) note that editing process can occur at any time during the writing process and reviewing is an attempt to improve the quality of the text after the translation process has completed.

As I have briefly discussed the writing processes and components involved, I seek the connection between reading and writing. This search contends that reading and writing are complementary processes, and one process cannot exist without the other. The importance of this is that writing (a productive construct) cannot occur without reading and vice versa.

2.2.4 The Reading-Writing Connection

It must be noted that while writing was discussed first, as it is the main focus of my study, the same emphasis should be given to a literature search on reading. Reading in this research is used as an important means to improve writing instruction and I argue that any writing strategy intervention should be supported by complementary reading activities. The following section provides a discussion of reading approaches

and clarifies the connection between reading and writing. I briefly discuss the aspects of reading that I consider to be relevant for the purpose of this study.

2.2.4.1 Definitions of Reading

Several researchers such as Pearson and Stephens (1994) and Pretorius (1996) have presented their definitions and explanations of reading because there is no one singular understanding of the reading, noting that this receptive engagement can consist of various meanings depending on the context it occurs (Smith, 1971; Gustanti & Ayu, 2021). Grabe (1991), however, prefers to describe reading as a process. Grabe (1991:378) notes that an acceptable definition of reading must “account for notions that reading is rapid, purposeful, interactive, comprehending, flexible, and gradually developing.” Isaqjon (2022:94) argues that “reading is one of the interactive processes where language students understand and draw the big picture of the text by using different reading strategies and skills.” Nonetheless, for this dissertation, which is conducted within the academic writing context, I explore definitions from researchers and provide a rationale for one definition that I adopt for the purpose of my study.

Pearson and Stephens (1994) demonstrate that reading is a complex process that is constructive and orchestrated through which readers make meaning from a specific text. From this definition, it is safe to contend that literacy cannot be seen only as an independent event because literacy events can be determined by various contexts. The purpose of Pearson and Stephens’s (1994) study was to emphasise that students need to understand that knowledge is socially constructed, and, in this way, readers are able to read by themselves and with others so that they acquire information from the text and their diverse experiences of such texts. To understand the reading process, the study first elaborates the component processes involved in reading. Kaganang (2019) defines reading as a means of language acquisition, a way of communication, and of sharing information and ideas through text. Anderson (2012) indicates that reading is a process whereby readers demonstrate a mindful, fluent, and active interaction with texts through which the readers construct meanings from those texts. Rosenblatt (1994:1063) states:

Every reading act is an event, or a transaction involving a particular reader and a particular pattern of signs, a text, and occurring at a particular time in a particular context. Instead of two fixed entities acting on one another, the reader and the text are two aspects of a total dynamic situation. The “meaning” does not reside ready-made “in” the text or “in” the reader but happens or comes into being during the transaction between reader and text.

In relation to the above assertion, Pretorius (1996:36) notes from a different perspective that:

[reading is] a complex, multi-componential phenomenon that includes the rapid and simultaneous interaction of numerous processes. For example, it requires encoding or bottom-up oculomotor processes that direct the eye from one print element to the next, perceptual processes that encode the visual pattern of a word, lexical processes that access word meaning from memory, and various other linguistic processes that compute the semantic and syntactic relationships among successive words, phrases, and sentences. In addition, there are comprehending or top-down cognitive mechanisms that compute the semantic and logical relationships between successive sentences and paragraphs at text-level.

According to MideksaChikual (2021), reading is both a receptive activity and a psycholinguistic process because it begins with a writer’s linguistic surface presentation and concludes with the reader’s construction of meanings. From my understanding of reading, it can be defined as an active interaction between the reader and the text to find a meaningful messages encoded in and from the text.

2.2.4.2 The Component Processes Involved in Reading

In the next section, I briefly discuss the component processes involved in reading which are the bottom-up processes and top-down processes. These two processes are relevant because to master writing skills, students need to be aware that using reading strategies contributes to successful reading. Moreover, how they interpret and predict the text they are reading depends largely on their prior background knowledge of text, textualization and decoding protocols. However, before discussing these processes, the study outlines the schema theory so that readers understand the difference between the bottom-up and top-down processes clearly.

2.2.4.2.1 Schema Theory

Linguistics, psycholinguistics, and cognitive psychologists have all implemented the schema theory to understand key factors influencing students’ reading abilities. There is a belief that with the schema theory, the texts do not only carry meanings on their

own, but they assist readers in how they should construct meanings from those texts (Bharuthram, 2006; Pidduck, Busenitz, Zhang & Moullick, 2020). The importance of the schema theory regarding reading comprehension texts lies in how students use the knowledge they have acquired; this knowledge is referred to as schemata. The schemata are pre-existing knowledge structures that are stored hierarchically in the brain, generally from the top to the bottom (Cai, Wang, Gao & Chen, 2021; Gulacar, Milkey & McLane, 2019). This understanding leads us to two basic modes of information processing, namely, bottom-up and top-down processing (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983). To differentiate the two modes, the bottom-up is activated by information from the text, while the top-down starts with general experiential information to confirm those text predictions.

Just like other theories, the schema theory has been critiqued by scholars such as Sadoski, Paivo and Goetz (1991) who argue that the schema theory is too generalised and ineluctable. This has prompted theorists to propose different formulations of its features, operationalisation, and functions. Sadoski et al. (1991) further argue that in the schema theory, imagery and emotional responses during the reading process are often ignored or marginalised. This has led scholars to revisit the theory. As mentioned above, schema can be activated either through the bottom-up or top-down processes. The bottom-up process is briefly discussed below.

2.2.4.2.2 The Bottom-up Process in Reading

Chaudron and Richards (1986) state that bottom-up process starts from knowing individual sounds, words, clauses and then deciphering the message. On the other hand, Oliver, and Richards (2015) note that the bottom-up process is a decoding strategy where students need to be aware that using reading strategies contributes to successful reading as well as using bottom-up strategies such as re-reading the text and checking the meanings of the words. In addition, Abbott (2006) asserts that during the bottom-up process, the reader participates in tasks such as paraphrasing, breaking down words to make meanings, matching synonyms, and even using a dictionary during the reading process. Therefore, to sum up, the bottom-up process, is a process that is related to letters, words, phrases, and discourses to construct the meanings from a text.

2.2.4.2.3 The Top-down Process in Reading

Unlike the bottom-up process, the top-down process begins with the message and the structure of the text. Abbott (2006) describes it as a process that consists of techniques such as using prior experiences, background knowledge, integrating, skimming, and predicting information. In simple terms, it is how readers interpret and predict the text they are reading based on their prior background knowledge, essentially their funds-of-knowledge and the discrete repertoires that they bring to interact with texts.

To sum up the above two processes, it has been established that the top-down process is more important than the bottom-up process. Scholars, such as Perfetti (1995) and Eskey (2005) claim in their studies that poor readers and good readers use the top-down process; however, poor readers depend too much on the top-down because of their inadequate bottom-up strategies. On the other hand, Grabe and Stoller (1997) claim that the bottom-up process is necessary for a good reader. Research emphasises that readers may implement both processes to buttress and scaffold their integrated reading comprehension skills.

From the previous section's discussion of the reading-writing connection, it is evident that reading and writing have been studied by researchers to establish how this is initiated and develops into an artful skill. Pearson and Tierney (1984) and Kucer and Harste (1991) are some of the few researchers who have argued that reading and writing complement each other and should be integrated into the literacy curriculum. Reading and writing processes are not the same, but they share various similarities. One similarity that Cooper (1986) identifies is that the language process depends on students' oral language and background experiences where meanings can be generated and structured. In other words, reading and writing are processes that make meanings and there are active processes involved in their actualisation. Pearson and Tierney (1984) used a model to explain how the construction of meanings occurs through reading and writing connections. From their model, reading is an interactive space where readers become composers just as when writers compose to convey meanings. With reading, participants engage in dialogue with themselves about the purpose of the text and the meanings it strives to convey (Pearson & Tierney, 1984).

Reading and writing processes involve revision, re-reading, re-writing, and re-thinking. Kucer and Harste (1991) list the similarities in Figure 2.4.

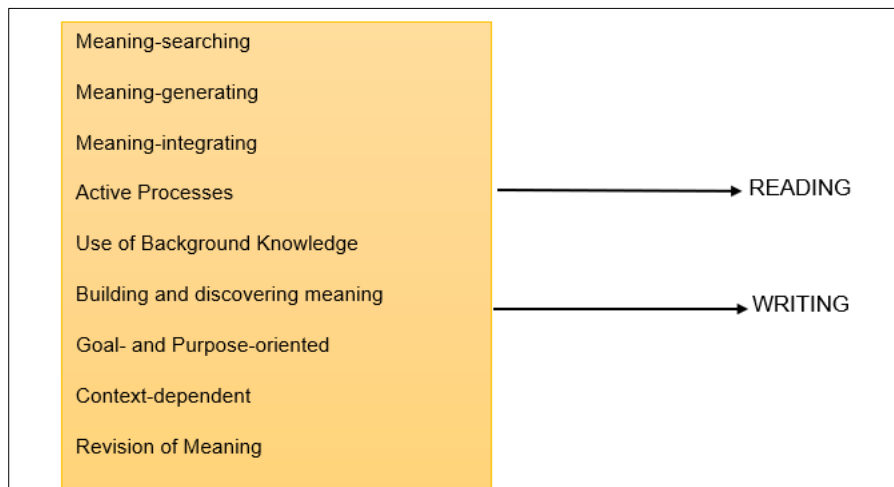


Figure 2.4: Reading and writing as common processes (Kucer & Harste, 1991:126)

From research on the reading and writing relationship, Stotsky (1983) indicates the following observation: better writers tend to be better readers; better writers tend to read more than poorer writers; and better readers tend to produce more mature writing than poorer readers. Since this study explores academic writing, it is important to include reading as one cannot exist without the other. After discussing the reading and writing processes, it is crucial to discuss academic writing and how this is understood in the context of this study. In the next section, I discuss academic writing and the challenges that EAL students face, which is the focus of my study.

2.2.5 Academic Writing

Since academic writing is the main focus of this study, it is important to discuss academic writing and the factors that contribute to the struggles that students who use English as an additional language encounter in academic writing. Research shows that academic writing is a challenge for EAL teaching and learning contexts across the globe in HEIs (Azmar & Razali, 2024; Ramzan, Mushtaq & Ashraf, 2023; Umar, Ajmal & Ajmal, 2023).

Many scholars have their interpretations of what defines academic writing. Aliotta (2018) also defines academic writing as a style used by academic scholars within an academic context, while Pineteh (2014) states that academic writing is a skill that is

important for students in the discourse analysis of subjects and disciplines in higher education. In my understanding, academic writing is where writers express their own opinions and then justify that with reasons and evidence that is organised in a logical manner. There are different types of academic writing, which are descriptive, analytical, persuasive, and critical academic writing. To understand academic writing, each form of writing is discussed in the following sections.

Descriptive academic writing focuses on describing a subject, people, or something. Kramer (2021) claims that descriptive academic writing involves implementing different strategies and making decisions that provide readers with a clear picture of the subject one is writing about. In other words, descriptive academic writing is a process of combining word choice, figurative language, comparison, and determining what to include and exclude from writing to achieve a specific aim (Kramer, 2021). In response to Kramer's claim, Jeffrey (2016) believes that although descriptive academic writing is significant, it can also be found in non-fiction works like memoirs. Jeffrey adds that through descriptive writing, authors give their audience a linguistic representation of people, places, or objects. Correspondingly, descriptive academic writing is similar to analytical academic writing.

Analytical academic writing includes descriptive writing. According to Steiss, Krishnan, Kim, and Olson (2022), analytical academic writing involves critically analysing a text and writing a convincing, interpretative argument about the text one is writing. As mentioned earlier, analytical academic writing includes descriptive writing that analyses the text and then re-organises interpretative information. In an academic context, not only are we required to analyse different texts, but to also persuade readers to support the arguments developed. As a result, there is a need to develop one's persuasive academic writing style.

Persuasive academic writing is where a writer examines a phenomenon, develops arguments that are supported by evidence, opposes countering ideas, and identifies claims (Hasani, Hendrayana & Senjaya, 2017). Many scholars note that persuasive academic writing is a challenge to university students because it is a complex genre that requires students to create meanings. Ferretti and Lewis (2019) found that students find it difficult to write persuasively to convince other readers, but they can write to produce reasons that support their stances or positions. It is crucial to keep in

mind that to convince the target audience, it is imperative to develop critical thinking skills.

Lastly, critical academic writing is generally complex and requires the writer to discuss, analyse and evaluate a specific phenomenon (Sailin & Mahmor, 2018). With critical writing, the writer engages with evidence, presents convincing arguments to dispute a finding, thinks about a specific problem, and provides an alternative approach. Students are encouraged to develop their ability to think critically when writing in an academic context. Despite the previous discussion of the various forms of academic writing, students still have trouble with it, especially those who are enrolled in an ODeL institution.

2.2.6 Challenges of Academic Writing

First year students struggle with academic writing as they have not yet been exposed to academic writing conventions (Teng, Qin & Wang, 2022). They are still familiar with school academic English rather than university academic English. Research has shown that first year students struggle to express themselves in a clear and logical manner through writing because they were not exposed to English language in their early development (Zhang & Zhang, 2022; Mendoza, Lehtonen, Lindblom-Ylänne & Hyytinen, 2022). Therefore, this gap has contributed to the academic writing challenges that the students encounter. Academic writing challenges are and continue to be a challenge for first year students globally, in Africa, and South Africa. In the following sections, I first discuss international studies and then follow this by focusing on Africa and South African studies.

2.2.6.1 International studies on academic writing challenges

Many scholars have researched the academic writing challenges of first year students at universities. Nikolenko, Rebenko, and Doronina (2021) conducted a study at the National University of Kyiv, Ukraine, to explore the academic writing challenges of first year Ukrainian students' errors in essay writing. Their findings illustrate that students face challenges in demonstrating high-level proficiency in most of their academic writing. The study further describes the main categories of errors and clarifies the causes of their production. Nikolenko, Rebenko, and Doronina (2021) found that the major types of errors committed in students' writing are word choice, spelling, verb

tenses, articles, and prepositions. From their investigation, Nikolenko, Rebenko and Doronina (2021) ascertain that the main reasons for errors are caused by native language interference, the lack of English academic writing knowledge, and insufficient English grammar, and functional practice.

Nikolenko, Rebenko, and Doronina's findings are similar to Seitova's (2016) study which investigated and found that the most common English language errors made by Kazakh and Russian students were: pluralisation, subject-verb agreement, omission or misuse of articles, wrong choice of words, omission or misuse of prepositions, and spelling. Another study by Phuket and Othman (2015) showed that the most frequent types of errors in the writing of EAL students were words translated from Thai, word choice, verb tenses, prepositions, and the comma. Lastly, a study by Al Fadda (2012) confirmed that the main challenges students encounter is differentiating between written and spoken words and phrases, reviewing grammar, including subject-verb agreement, and joining sentences together to make a coherent paragraph.

From the above discussion, it is clear that most errors that first year students make in their academic writing may be attributed to a lack of English grammar proficiency. From my observation, Nikolenko, Rebenko, and Doronina's study aligns with the current study as most students registered for the EAW101 module struggle with using correct word choice, spelling, and verb tenses in their essay writing. This confirms that lecturers need to reconsider their teaching strategies to assist these students.

The second international study that explores academic writing challenges that students encounter is by Al-Badi (2015); it was conducted at a university in Australia. In Al-Badi's study, it was revealed that the difficulties that students encounter are related to language use as well as coherence and cohesion. Other challenges are related to using their voice, finding relevant topics and sources, referencing, and citations. Al-Badi (2015) argues that the main factor that contributes to these difficulties is a lack of previous experience and knowledge about the conventions of academic writing and the expectations of the institution at which they are registered. The above argument is supported by Chou (2011) who concludes that the number of reasons why international students studying in an English-speaking country encounter a lot of stress and obstacles when writing their assignments. This is because students come from different cultural backgrounds where they are fully dependent on lecturers and

secondly, they may have not been trained to be critical thinkers and have lower expectations since they consider themselves second-language-speaking students. On the other hand, Shafie, Maesin, Osman, Nayan, and Mansor (2010) conclude that most students find it challenging to establish an effective discussion in their target language.

Al-Mukdad (2019) investigated academic writing challenges encountered by students at the Arab International University in Damascus, Syria. From the study, the findings suggest that students tend to perceive all aspects of academic writing as 'difficult.' One reason is that they poorly recognise the difference between academic and general English writing due to a lack of background knowledge about writing academically. Another reason is attributed to having problems with different linguistic elements even at this supposedly high proficiency level.

Scholars such as Alfaki (2015), Al-Khasawneh & Maher (2010), and Rabab'ah (2003) found that Arab students encounter problems in writing because they learn the language through formal instructions in an educational context since they have very limited possibility of using it with native speakers. Al-Mukdad further states that difficulties of academic writing go beyond the linguistic elements of the language to reach problems related to a library search: nonetheless, they are not in isolation in the cognitive part. For example, paraphrasing can be a source causing difficulties in writing because students read and then write in their own words, depending on their understanding of the text.

Concerning Al-Mukdad's findings, students poorly recognise the difference between academic and general English writing due to a lack of background knowledge. This is because most students are fresh from high school, and they are not familiar with academic discourse. This prompts them to approach writing their essays the same way they were taught in high school.

Ankawi (2020) conducted a study at the University of New Zealand and found that international students face academic writing challenges because they have limited English vocabulary to ask questions and they lack understanding of the writing conventions of western universities because they use English as a second language. Ankawi further revealed that academic writing requires students to write from an

academic perspective, apply rules related to writing and use the correct method of citation when providing evidence. The difficulty of referencing and citing is a struggle with first year EAL students registered for the EAW101 module. Students fail to acknowledge and correctly cite sources when providing evidence that supports their arguments. This further causes them to incorrectly reference their sources accordingly. Academic writing is a phenomenon that most HEIs struggle with, especially with EAL students. After an intensive search on academic articles about academic writing challenges of first year EAL students in universities, I found that more research is needed from a South African research perspective, especially from an ODeL lenses. Therefore, it is a gap that this study fills.

2.2.6.2 South African Studies

Academic writing poses significant challenges for first-year university students in South Africa, particularly those who use English as an additional language. A study by Magaba (2023) was conducted at a university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa to explore English writing challenges of first year students. In this study, the following areas cause first year students to struggle in academic writing: poor language skills; lack of proper coherence and consistency in arguing/supporting a point; poor organisation; paraphrasing. Many first year students have challenges primarily because of language barrier especially in writing. Even though most students are fluent in English, this does not mean they can deal with the writing discourse. The study concludes that mother-tongue linguistic features become a source of difficulty because they are part of the students' cognitive language processing, and this complicates efforts with English writing as the two languages have different syntactic structures. As a result, all these complexities in academic writing result in poor academic performance.

Tanga and Maphosa (2018) conducted a study at the University of Fort Hare, Eastern Cape, South Africa. The findings from this study show that the first-year students had a lot of academic difficulties in writing, citation, copying, language barrier and inability to work on computers. It was realised that students at the university experience numerous academic challenges due to poor socio-economic status and the low level of education that they acquired from apartheid-influenced system, which some schools continue to apply. The findings also suggest that there were certain academic

difficulties encountered by the undergraduate students at the university. The students in the study said that though they may know something in particular or they may see things in a certain way, it is always a daunting task to put down in writing what appears before them. They also stated that they get embarrassed by referencing since it involves tasks such as providing in-text citations and compiling reference lists at the end. What emerges clearly is the fact that students at this university are confronted with considerable academic challenges, arising from the fact that the majority of them have come from the poor socio-economic backgrounds and have been subjected to versions of Bantu Education or the poorly endowed system that replaced it in the aftermath of the Bantu Education (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2016). This is because they were educated in their first language and find it hard to be asked to write or even speak in English, especially the standard of academic English which is used at the university where it is the medium of expression. For this reason, these students experience many problems in writing due to the barrier of a high level of English that they are not ready to master.

Mbirimi (2012) conducted a study at a South African University which explored academic writing challenges faced by first year B.Ed.⁵ students. The main findings were that these students find it challenging to move from school literacies to academic literacies, and thus they need to be 'initiated' into academic literacies. Furthermore, the findings reveal that students need assistance with reading articles on which essays are based, understanding what essay questions require them to do, and quoting and referencing sources. A further finding is that some students resist being initiated into academic conventions. This finding is similar to Soundy, Mphahlele and Kashane's (2024) study which argues that first year students' high school experiences are often not replayed at university. Students experience a myriad of new challenges which require new (academic) ways of learning, and new ways of relating to peers.

Pineteh (2014) conducted a study at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), South Africa. The study revealed that the academic writing challenges of students are a consequence of students' linguistic and general literacy backgrounds,

⁵ B. Ed is a Bachelor of Education Degree programme that provides a well-rounded education and training programme which equips students with substantial subject content knowledge, educational theory and methodology that will enable them to demonstrate competence and responsibility as academically and professionally qualified teachers.

their attitudes towards academic writing, and the privileging of middle-class literacy practices in South African higher education. For example, Pineteh (2014) claims that undergraduate students are expected to possess excellent English language and high-order thinking skills such as logical and critical thinking as well as analytical and innovative skills. This puts pressure on students to be proficient in the English language, be able to write academically well, and express their thoughts logically and concisely. This pressure affects how students perform in an academic writing module.

From this discussion, various issues exert an impact on students' academic writing skills as identified in the literature. These factors are linked to the motivation of students who are not clear about the purpose and significance of their texts in their English language learning (Fareed, 2016). A South African study conducted by Banda (2017:18) indicates that:

students' lack of proficiency in English is a source of irritation and frustration for them. The confidence they have discussing essays in isiXhosa or isiXhosa–English code mix outside the classroom often comes to nothing as they are faced with examinations which they have to write in standard English.

From the quote above, it is apparent that students' challenges go beyond understanding academic writing conventions and language issues that delay their academic writing success (Maphoto, 2021). Furthermore, Maphoto reports that students are not well-prepared for distance learning, and they have limited language and writing proficiency. The main finding in Maphoto's (2021) study was that first year students in South African HEIs have difficulty expressing themselves through academic writing.

It was established that there are research gaps and challenges regarding the academic writing difficulties that first year EAL students experience as per the above studies conducted by international and South African scholars on first year EAL students. These challenges include the difficulties in crossing from school writing to university writing and more emphasis given to the difficulty because the individual has not been exposed to the writing style and standards applicable in the university. Clearly, early language development is central, since the students' future skills in English in terms of their capacity to speak the language clearly and methodically, are affected. Specific difficulties of academic writing investigated in various countries indicate that students and academics continue to face basic problems related to

interlingual and interference phenomena, and insufficient levels of practical writing skills. Cultural and linguistic backgrounds make it hard for students to accomplish and thus, there is a need to “induct” the students into academic literacies at the university level.

A research gap in the existing literature reveals that limited research has focused on the academic writing challenges faced by students in distance education contexts. Other similar gaps are motivation, purpose, and preparation for distance learning. Solving all of these issues requires broader approaches that are sensitive to language and cultural differences as well as prior learning experiences. As such, programmes like the targeted support programme, academic literacy initiation and bridging curriculum should be encouraged in order to ease the transition of writing among university students. Thus, this study fills the gap in the South African ODeL environment and the perennial challenges of refining academic writing.

2.2.7 Perceptions about Academic Writing

Writing proficiently in English is essential for undergraduate students, serving not only as a key to academic success but also as a vital skill for future career opportunities (Racca & Lasaten, 2016; Raoofi, Binandeh & Rahmani, 2017). First year students enter university with perceptions and expectations of what university life would be. Researchers such as Mah and Ifenthaler (2017) indicate that many first year students are not aware of what is expected of them at university and that they are unprepared academically. One of the most challenging concepts in academia is academic writing (AlMarwani, 2020; Pineteh, 2014), especially for students in EAL contexts (Flowerdew, 2019). In part, this is because students are not as proficient in English as they are in their mother tongue. According to Chokwe (2011), the perceptions and experiences of EAL students and practitioners towards academic writing call for appropriate and effective measures for improving students’ writing skills. It is necessary to understand various factors that impact academic writing which may be positive or negative.

Few studies reiterate the importance of understanding students’ perceptions when lecturers teach academic writing in an EAL context (Lillis, 2001; Lea, 2004; Nguyen, Nguyen & Hoang, 2021). These researchers argue that students’ perceptions and attitudes toward the instruction need to be considered in the teaching of academic writing. Bux (2021) conducted a study at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa

and the results indicate that students perform poorly in academic modules and cannot assimilate the knowledge processes and practices to provide their higher education qualifications successfully. Students need help to transition from a basic understanding of education expectations to a more context-specific academic discourse. The study found that academic literacy module is a useful source in terms of academic referencing techniques and avoiding plagiarism; and improving basic English language skills such as spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

Al-Badi (2015) investigated the challenges that students face when writing assignments in an ESL context in Australia. The study found that students struggle with academic writing because of language use, coherence, cohesion, showing their voice as well and selecting a substantial topic and relevant references. On the other hand, Budjalemba and Listyani (2020) investigated factors contributing to students' difficulty in an academic writing course based on students' perceptions at Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia. The findings from this study revealed that two factors affect students' academic writing; they are internal and external factors. Internal factors include lack of knowledge, feeling under pressure, and lack of self-confidence. On the other hand, external factors include lecturers' teaching styles, the classroom atmosphere, study materials, and writing aspects.

The above studies highlight students' perceptions of academic writing and the challenges they encounter during the writing process. From these studies, the writing context is a challenge for students, especially since they do not have prior training in academic writing when entering university. Therefore, there is a need to train first year students about the norms and practices of academic writing before we expect them to do a task.

2.2.8 Importance of Feedback in Academic Writing

From the above discussion of academic writing and the challenges that first year students encounter with academic writing, it is imperative to note that feedback is one of the most important concepts in teaching academic writing. Feedback is a tool that assists students with academic writing, and it needs to be acknowledged that lecturers' constructive feedback assists students to be aware of their strengths and weaknesses and to make changes where necessary (Thorne & Lantolf, 2006; Liu & Hansen, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978; Yu & Lee, 2015). Research has revealed that feedback focuses more

on language accuracy and organisation of structure, for example, the structure of an introduction and the development of sentence structures (Cohen & Singh, 2020; Hyland, 2019; Lumadi, 2021).

Students in ODeL contexts might demand enough constructive criticism, perhaps going beyond only language and structure. Students in ODeL need greater assistance and thorough feedback because they may feel excluded (Paterson et al., 2020). Much research has examined the crucial connection between meaningful and constructive feedback and academic writing. Maphoto (2021) conducted a study at an ODeL university, South Africa which focused on the significance of feedback in the context of academic writing. The study found that students are not satisfied with the feedback they receive and further argues that feedback is significant in an ODeL university which enrolls different students with diverse backgrounds in which English is used as an additional language. Although I am aware of the difficulties universities confront, I contend that large numbers of students can be successfully taught academic writing with the right feedback procedures.

Perceiving feedback in a different angle, Jones' (2011) study asserts that feedback is an essential part of teaching and learning in academic writing modules, making it a good starting point for the study of the association between feedback and academic writing. As noted by Jones in his study, students need a feedforward tutorial letter before they complete writing their essays. A feedforward tutorial letter is a written explanation regarding how each question should be handled. In its simplest definition, it is written material helping the students how to approach any set question in the assignments. In the opinion of Jones, this may be a better approach towards assisting the students to do their exercises and save them from failing even before they begin. Significantly, many studies have been conducted to establish the important link between constructive feedback and academic writing. As a first reference source, Jones (2011) undertakes the study, which postulates that feedback is a crucial element of teaching and learning in modules revolving around academic writing. Consistent with the Jones's study, students can only proceed to the submission phase of the writing process if they are first given a feedforward letter. This is probably a more effective approach to assisting students to complete the assignments and to spare them for failing right from the onset. The main concern as identified in Jones

(2011) is that students often do not reply to the last criticism they receive and instead take it as the finality of a job well done.

This study aligns with Jones's study because in the EAW101 module under study, students are given a feedforward tutorial letter before they write an assignment so that they have an idea of what is expected of them. The problem with students in the EAW101 module is that some of them do not engage with the materials that lecturers give them and when they have failed, that is when they write back to lecturers that they did not understand the task and what was required of them. This claim serves as a reminder that while lecturers are more focused on the objective of providing their students with high-quality feedback, students are more concerned with grades and evaluation.

The difficulties related to the general lack of success in South African schools were explored by Nyamupangedengu (2017). The study was inspired by prior student protests against fee increases. The issues, according to Nyamupangedengu, go beyond fee increases; universities fail to implement appropriate transformative initiatives to students. Data shows that the issue of numbers affects the quality of feedback while teaching academic writing.

Therefore, from the reviewed literature above, several gaps and directions for future research have been identified. Firstly, there is limited literature within the South African context particularly focusing on first year EAL students' academic writing difficulties in an ODeL institutions. Secondly, it is admitted that school-to-university writing transition is problematic and still, there is the need to do more research on how exactly this transition is problematic and what measures can be taken so that transition is easier. Finally, there is a hint about the use of technology in meeting the targets set in academic writing difficulties, however, lessons that may illustrate how technologies tools and online resources can aid EAL students in improving their academic writing skills, especially in ODeL platforms require further investigation. Thus, further research in these areas is considered necessary for enhancing the understanding of academic writing difficulties of the first year EAL students as well as for the design of effective initiatives, within the South African context. The next section deals with the theoretical framework.

PART II: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.3 Theoretical Framework

One of the aspects of educational research that is most carefully considered is the theoretical framework. According to Luft, Jeong, Idsardi, and Gardner (2022), a theoretical framework drives the research questions, guides the types of methods for data collection and analysis, informs the discussion of findings, and establishes the subjectivities of the researcher. When a researcher chooses a theoretical framework, it should be connected to every aspect of the study and support it by introducing a viewpoint that provides a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Luft et al. 2022).

In my understanding, a theoretical framework supports a theory that explains why a particular problem exists in a study. The purpose of a theoretical framework is to guide the researcher in terms of the research questions, methods for data collection and analysis, and informs the discussion of the findings (Luft et al. 2022). The many elements should be used as the foundation for creating a theoretical framework because they may have a direct impact on the research.

In the following sections, I introduce two theories that guided this study, i.e., community of inquiry and transactional distance theory.

2.3.1 The Community of Inquiry (Col) Theory

The Col theory provides a framework within which to analyse and understand inquiry extensively (Garrison, 2015). Col is an intentional process of learning. Before explaining the structure of the Col theory, it is necessary to discuss 'Col' and 'inquiry' concepts.

Communities of Inquiry

The phrase 'Col' was made popular by Matthew Lipman (2003) in the 1980s when he, together with his colleagues started to re-evaluate educational processes from the standpoint of a reflective paradigm. Lipman (2003) argues that John Dewey (1938)'s work and the idea of inquiry serves as the foundation for the reflective paradigm. Dewey (1938) stated that inquiry is essential to the educational transaction and vital to reflective thinking. Dewey saw inquiry as the process of knowledge production. Communities of inquiry offer intellectual challenges and a setting for people to expand

their scope and depth of understanding through co-operation (Garrison, 2019; Javier & Alianzas, 2022). Furthermore, the communities of inquiry are important in learning to adapt and succeed in a connected, knowledge-driven society.

Communities of inquiry use technological affordances of a rapidly developing digital society to set the scaffolds for continuous conversation in which richness of the collaboration and the scope of the available information might go hand in hand (Garrison, 2019). The integration of the digital world allows lecturers to engage students into constructing their ideas and learning (Archambault, Leary & Rice 2022; Garrison 2019; Guzzo, Boffo, Ferri, Gagliardi & Grifoni, 2022).

Focus is on the social dimension of inquiry through the notion of ‘community.’ The identification of the group members, not the group’s physical location, defines the community component in a technologically connected society (Garrison, 2019; Shea, Richardson & Swan, 2022). In other words, participants connect in a community of practice that displays the characteristics of common purpose, interdependence, collaboration, communication, and trust (Garrison, 2019). In his work, Garrison further elaborated that a connected community is crucial to sustained inquiry and the potential to realise the benefits of thinking and learning collaboratively. Finally, it creates the conditions for participants to engage in discourse, exchange ideas, and jointly create meanings (Garrison, 2019; Shea, Richardson & Swan, 2022).

Dewey (1938) acknowledges the interconnectedness of the private and public spheres and investigates this connection using the ideas of community and inquiry. Garrison (2019) argues that for an educational experience to be both socially worthwhile and personally meaningful, it needs to be manifested through reflection and discourse. Furthermore, Garrison argues that what connects the private (reflective) and public (collaborative) worlds is collaborative thinking. This is consistent with Vygotsky’s social constructivist ⁶approach to education and his “notion of learning as a process of inquiry” (Lee & Smagorinsky, 2000:6). As a result, this highlights the Col theory’s emphasis on collaborative inquiry and thinking. Since this study explores academic writing challenges of EAL first year students, Col as a theory provides an opportunity

⁶ Social Constructivism Theory was adopted by Lev Vygotsky in 1968. The theory states that language and culture are the frameworks through which humans experience, communicate, and understand reality. This theory will not be used in this study.

to better understand how the group of students used in this study articulate the challenges that they face in developing their academic writing knowledge and skills.

Inquiry

Inquiry is a co-operative problem-solving strategy that takes place in the context of reflective discourse and interactive questioning (Garrison 2019; Cleveland-Innes, 2019; Shea, Richardson & Swan, 2022). In line with Dewey, inquiry is a procedure for critical thought and discussion that is founded on the generalised scientific approach to problem-solving (Garrison, 2019). Inquiry is a non-linear process in which people switch back and forth between their individual worlds of meaning construction and their shared worlds of understanding in an imperceptible way (Garrison, 2019). While inquiry may be a pathway to understanding and knowledge, Garrison (2019) states that there is no certainty in resolving questions through inquiry, but it is socially situated and dependent upon a Col.

A learning community's embedded inquiry is concentrated on working together, tackling issues, creating meanings, and confirming comprehension (Garrison, 2019). The conditions for objective evaluation of individual ideas through on-going critical discourse are provided by inquiry embedded in purposeful learning communities, according to Garrison. In these communities, the depth of critical reflection and discourse and the breadth of information made available by the internet are combined (Garrison, 2019). In simple terms, inquiry may be defined as a means of thinking collaboratively where understanding is made more credible through critical thinking and discourse. Therefore, in the following section, I discuss the Col theory and how it underpins this current study.

Constructivism and theories of online teaching and learning in higher education serve as the theoretical foundation for the Col theory (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2010). Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (1999) introduced Col in their study when tracing discourse in a text-based and computer-mediated discussion forum. Swan, Garrison, and Richardson (2009:45), define Col as "a dynamic model of the necessary core elements for both the development of community and the pursuit of inquiry, in any educational environment." Col is grounded on a model of critical thinking and practical inquiry (Shea, Hayes & Vickers, 2010).

Col supports the e-learning experiences of first year students in ODeL and HEIs because the use of technological resources provides lecturers the opportunity to actively include students in collaborative thinking and learning activities. To better understand the Col theory, the two key concepts, 'community' and 'inquiry', need to be explained. Garrison (2019) defines 'community' as an interactive setting where teaching and learning processes occur and 'inquiry' as the constructivist philosophy whereby collaboration among students is purposely engaged. It is argued that it is through cognitive, teaching, and social presences that online academic staff and students develop a productive and conducive online learning environment (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 1999). Thus, it is an environment where lecturers and students work together to construct, share knowledge, and achieve set outcomes (Garrison, 2019; Miao, Chang & Ma, 2022; Wulandari, 2022).

In Col, the interdependent elements of a learning process are cognitive, teaching, and social presence (Stenbom, Jansson & Hulkko, 2016). Figure 2.5 and Table 2.2 below show how these elements are interrelated in an ODeL setting.

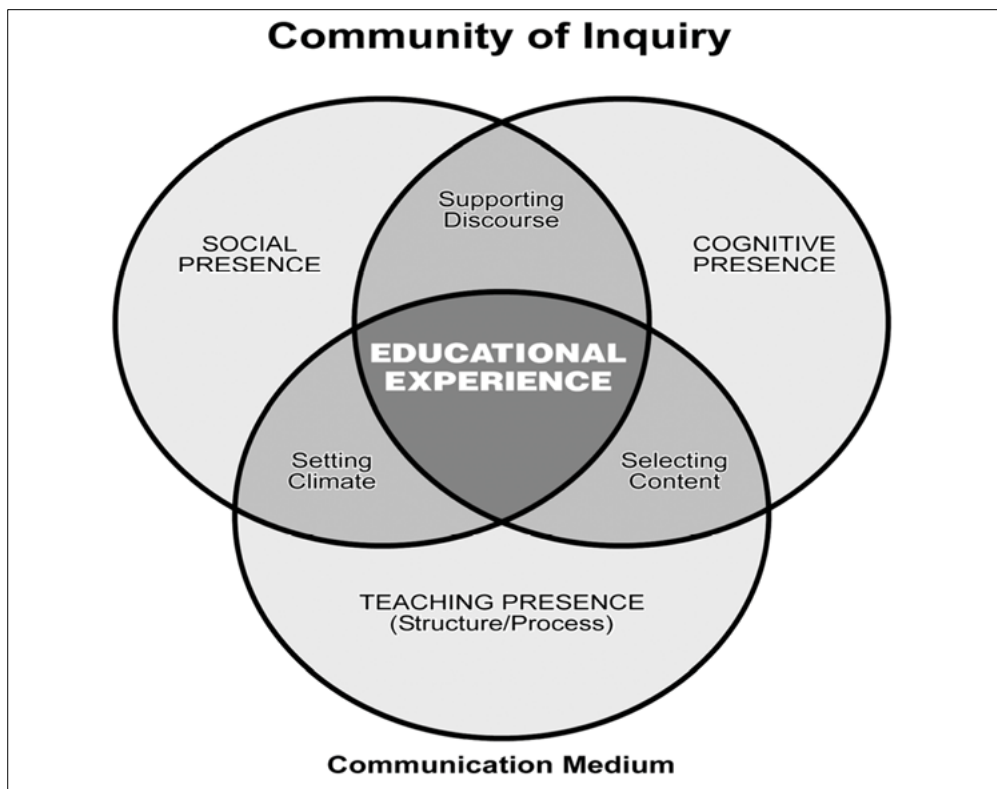


Figure 2.5: Col theory (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2010:6)

Table 2.2: Col Coding Template (Garrison, 2009:353)

Elements	Categories	Indicators
a. Cognitive Presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Triggering of Events• Exploration• Integration• Resolution	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sense of puzzlement• Exchanging of information• Connecting and applying ideas
b. Social Presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emotional expression• Open communication• Group cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Emoticons• Risk-free expressions• Encouraging collaboration
c. Teaching Presence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Instructional Management• Developing Understanding• Direct Instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Defining and initiating discussion topics• Share personal meaning• Focused discussion

The relationships between the presences within Col can be seen in Figure 2.5 and Table 2.2 above. According to Sevnarayan (2022), having a social presence refers to lecturers and students' abilities to demonstrate themselves as 'actual people' via a communication tool that supports online learning communities to increase interdependence, self-paced learning, and promote discussion among lecturers and students. The cognitive presence of students indicates that they can produce and validate meaning through reflection (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; (Chatterjee & Parra, 2022). The way lecturers convey the information determines whether students comprehend it intellectually. Thus, teaching presence is the act of generating, mediating, and directing social and cognitive processes.

2.3.1.1 Cognitive Presence

Cognitive presence is the extent to which students can construct meaning through continuous reflection and discourse (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001; 2004). The cognitive presence is operationalised through the Practical Inquiry (PI) model. For a student in a dyad and in a community, the practical inquiry process is assumed to be equivalent. Within this PI model, there are four phases: namely, triggering event, exploration, integration, and resolution (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001).

The first phase is a triggering event in an online learning session which includes the identification, conceptualisation, and formulation of a problem, as well as common marks when a given conversation changes direction (Stenbom, Jansson & Hulkko, 2016). They further note that a triggering event is logically what causes a student to

initiate a discussion which was expressed during an interactive conversation in stating a problem. The second phase is exploration which includes the review of the student's prior knowledge about the problem, brainstorming, and the exchange of information (Stenbom, Jansson & Hulkko, 2016). On the other hand, exploration can be characterised by the self-questioning doubt of the student's ability. The third phase is integration which consists of combining thoughts logically to make them operational (Stenbom, Jansson & Hulkko, 2016). The fourth stage is a resolution which refers to the actual solving of a problem identified and it involves both developing potential solutions and analysing them (Stenbom, Jansson & Hulkko, 2016; Tolu & Evans, 2013; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

Within this presence, the primary work of a lecturer during a learning conversation is to support students' learning experiences. In the context of this study, cognitive presence refers to how students can construct and understand meaning in an online learning context: lecturers must understand cognitive presence so that they can assist students with their learning.

2.3.1.2 Teaching Presence

Teaching presence possesses the same categories in a relationship as it does in a community: planning and organising, facilitating conversation, and providing direct instruction (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001). The job of a lecturer in an inquiry relationship is to assist students' critical inquiry. Outlining a specific inquiry is the aim of design and organisation, which includes choosing software to facilitate communication as well as deciding on learning objectives and instructional strategies. To encourage cognitive development, facilitating discourse entails a lecturer assessing students' performance. Finally, direct instruction is when a lecturer shares specific subject information with students and frequently includes procedural steps on how to advance the problem-solving process (Garrison et al., 2000; Stenbom, Jansson & Hulkko, 2016).

Although a lecturer is frequently assigned to this task, any member of a CoI might be regarded as supporting another person's inquiry (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). However, as peer teaching is not present in the current empirical case, students' teaching presence is excluded from the relationship of inquiry for this study. Furthermore, the organisation or facilitation of a discussion by a student is considered

a part of the cognitive process in this study. In my perspective, teaching presence refers to lecturers creating, designing, facilitating, and guiding students' cognitive and social processes to enhance meaningful learning outcomes. It is significant to understand teaching presence since students in this study rely on lecturers to assist and improve their academic writing skills.

2.3.1.3 Social Presence

Social presence in a relationship of inquiry refers to interpersonal aspects of the relationship (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 2001a). The current study accepts the changes made to Cleveland-Innes and Campbell's (2012) definitions of social presence, which includes an emotional presence and effect as well as social presence. Kumar and Ritzhaupt (2014:60) define social presence as "the way in which online students portray themselves as 'real people' in their online interactions in the absence of face-to-face interactions." Social presence in a relationship of inquiry relies upon open communication and relationship cohesion, both of which can be demonstrated by everyone in a learning dyad (Stenbom, Jansson & Hulkko, 2016). According to McCool (2023), social presence enhances teaching and cognitive presence to give both the lecturer and the students a more complete, richer, and fulfilling experience.

Open communication refers to participation in risk-free communication within a coaching session, including the involvement and acknowledgement of another person, as well as trivial expressions made in a conversation (Stenbom, Jansson & Hulkko, 2016). Relationship cohesion refers to the progressive development of a collaborative-constructive relationship between the lecturer and a student, which is facilitated by interpersonal connections made with the other individual. Social presence refers to how students identify themselves within a community, can communicate in a safe environment, and establish interpersonal relationships by showcasing their personalities. The module under study provides students with a platform to interact with each other on 'discussion forums' where they discuss challenges, amongst other things, relating to the module.

Various scholars have argued that there are also two additional presences within the Col, that is, student presence and emotional presence (Lam, 2015; Shea & Bidjerano, 2010; Anderson, 2018). These two presences were not included in Figure 2.5 and Table 2.2, but I see a need to discuss them in the next section.

2.3.1.4 Student Presence

Honig and Salmon (2021:100) define student presence as “an emergent construct involving thoughts and actions initiated by students in response to a particular learning environment.” Sevnarayan (2022) asserts that in addition to the cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioural dimensions that characterise an online student, student presence refers to one’s level of self-efficacy. The student presence concept was further developed by the students’ descriptions of their own thoughts and behaviours in respect to components of instructional presence, social presence, and cognitive presence (Honig & Salmon, 2021). In my understanding, student presence involves students’ perspectives related to how they perceive their learning environment.

2.3.1.5 Emotional Presence

Emotion is a crucial component of effective online learning. Emotions are viewed in educational contexts as multifaceted, co-ordinated psychological subsystems with emotional, cognitive, and motivational processes that interact to affect people’s learning and memory (Tyng et al., 2017). In my understanding, emotional presence refers to the emotions of students on how they relate to the learning materials that were designed and facilitated by their lecturers. In addition to the two presences that were discussed above, Figure 2.6 below illustrates how they are situated in the model:

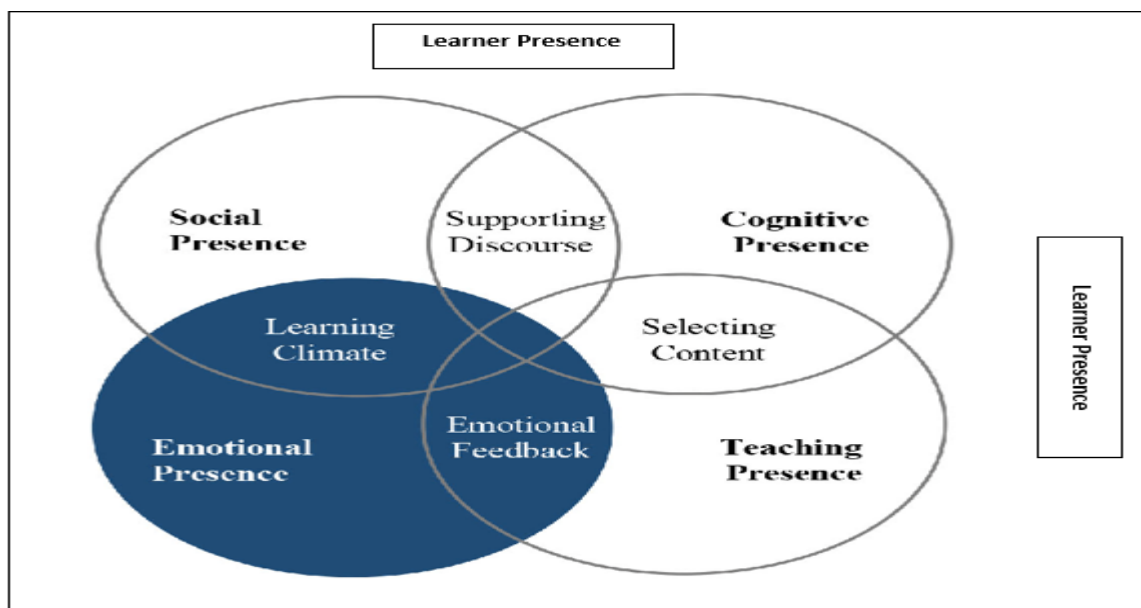


Figure 2.6: Col Model (Georgescu & Bogoslov, 2019:87)

From the above discussion, Majeski, Stover and Valais (2018) note that the Col model ensures that these elements: cognitive, teaching, social, student, and emotional are essential to successful learning experiences, and they purposefully strengthen each other. Therefore, cognitive, social, and teaching presence combine and reinforce each other to enhance the construction of the learning community while at the same time, impacting the community's satisfaction with the amount of learning achieved.

This current study seeks to understand the academic writing challenges of first year students in the EAW101 module and how these elements interrelate with each other. I chose to use this theory to better understand the challenges faced by students as they learn academic writing in the module whilst creating an environment to improve their academic writing skills.

Furthermore, this theory complements this current study because it aims to support students from a holistic point of view (Majeski, Stover & Valais, 2018) and it promotes integrated teaching and learning practices and experiences that are desirable for online study. This study anticipates academic writing challenges of EAL first year students in an ODeL institution where all three elements are interrelated. In cognitive presence, it encourages higher order thinking and learning; in social presence it proposes a sense of fitting or belonging for students; and in teaching presence, the role of a facilitator is in teaching and learning amongst the cognitive and social presences.

The Col applies to this current study because it enabled me to get insights into the academic writing challenges of EAL first year students registered for the EAW101 module in an ODeL institution. Many institutions chose to use digital technological advancements to contact students to close the educational gap. However, despite putting these advances into practice, many institutions of higher education were not entirely ready for online teaching and learning during the pandemic (Sevnarayan & Mohale, 2022). The ODeL university under study established its readiness long before the COVID-19 pandemic. This institution is one of the higher learning institutions using technology for effective teaching and learning (Msekelwa, 2022). To combat TD between lecturers and students, I found it befitting to also include the TD theory which complements the Col theory in this study. The TD theory is discussed next.

2.3.2 The Transactional Distance Theory

Michael Moore was the first scholar to encourage the essentials of transactional distance (TD) in the early seventies, although he did not attach it to distance education but only from 1980 as indicated by Stirling (1997). Moore and Kearsley (1996) assert that TD theory is grounded in the suggestion forwarded in John Dewey's learning school that any experience is exactly what it is due to a transaction that occurs between a person and a context. Further, it captures the peculiarities of pedagogy of a certain learning process between a lecturer and a student (Stirling, 1997). I explore the definition Moore (1993) gave to the phenomenon in the early 1990s to comprehend and make sense of the concept. TD was first described by Moore (1993) regarding the relationships that take place within a curriculum. These were referred to as functions of dialogue, structure, and student autonomy.

The TD theory promotes successful online learning and complements the Col theory as it also addresses issues of collaborative learning through meaningful interaction for ODeL institutions. The impact of Moore's TD theory on online learning is clear. It clarifies and measures the learning interaction between a lecturer and a student in an online learning setting where there is a great deal of spatial or temporal separation between them (Moore, 1972). ODeL is a pedagogical term, according to Moore's (1997) theory of TD, rather than solely a geographical separation of students and teachers. It is a notion that captures the reality of distance learning in terms of the relationships between students and lecturers that are bounded by place and/or time. The separation of students and teachers can seriously disrupt and impact instruction. TD is a psychological and communication gap between teachers and students, which depends on conversation, organisation, and student agency (Moore, 1993). The distance between the lecturer and the student is more than just a physical one. Due to their geographical isolation, it alludes to the lecturer and student's lack of interaction or odd kind of engagement. Therefore, TD is a distance between lecturers and students in an ODeL context.

For the study, students who are registered for the writing module (EAW101) at the ODeL university may struggle with academic writing, especially those who may still be accustomed to face-to-face tutoring. Online instruction may disrupt the teaching and learning of some students, but Moore's (1997) TD theory is essential in guiding and

managing complex teaching and learning challenges for distance learning. As mentioned above, TD theory is related to teaching and learning, and it consists of three variables: namely, dialogue, structure, and student's autonomy (Moore, 1997). Figure 2.7 below is the 3D model of Moore's (1997) TD variables.

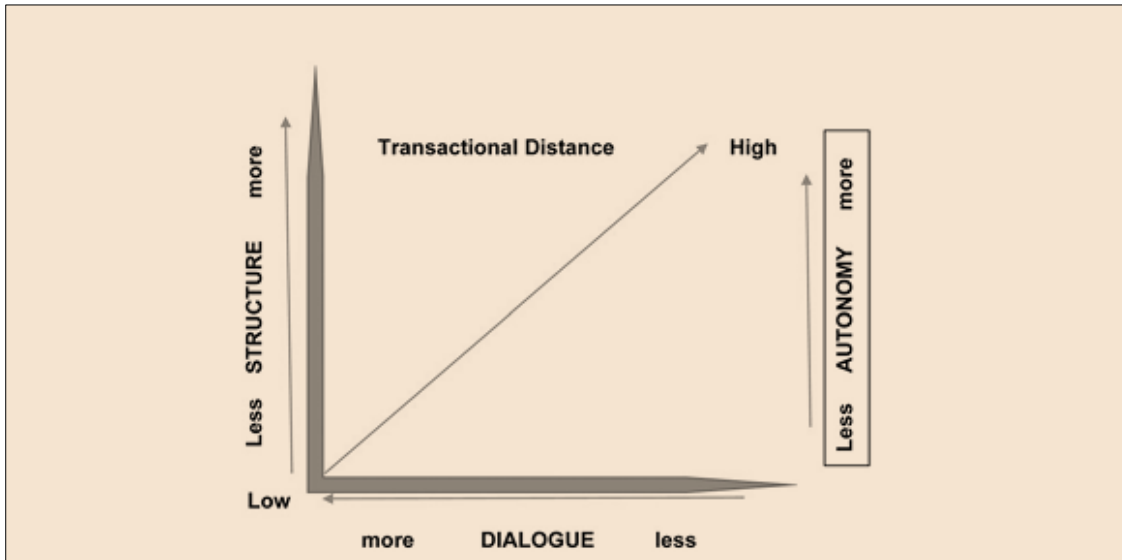


Figure 2.7: Illustration of Moore's TD theory (Sevnarayan, 2022:425)

Dialogue is developed by lecturers and students in the process of interaction that occurs when one transfers information and the other responds (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). The relationship formed between the lecturer and the student subsequently becomes purposeful, and constructive, and it is valued by both individuals (Aluko, Hendriks & Fraser, 2011). The quality of the dialogue is directly influenced by the programme's content, the delivery method, the philosophies and emotional traits of the lecturers and students, and the degree to which this variable is present determines whether or not TD is overcome (Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Orapin, Gray & Williams, 2007). In my perspective, dialogue refers to communication between students and lecturers in a learning context.

Structure refers to how the teaching programme is designed and typically reflects how flexible the programme's educational objectives, teaching strategies, and evaluation methods are, which in turn determines how much each student's differences are considered (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Thus, structure is largely a function of the teaching organisation and communication media (Garrison, 2000). Structure refers to how lecturers design and organise their teaching resources. Therefore, as the

dialogue increases, structure decreases and vice versa; this is illustrated in Figure 2.8 below.

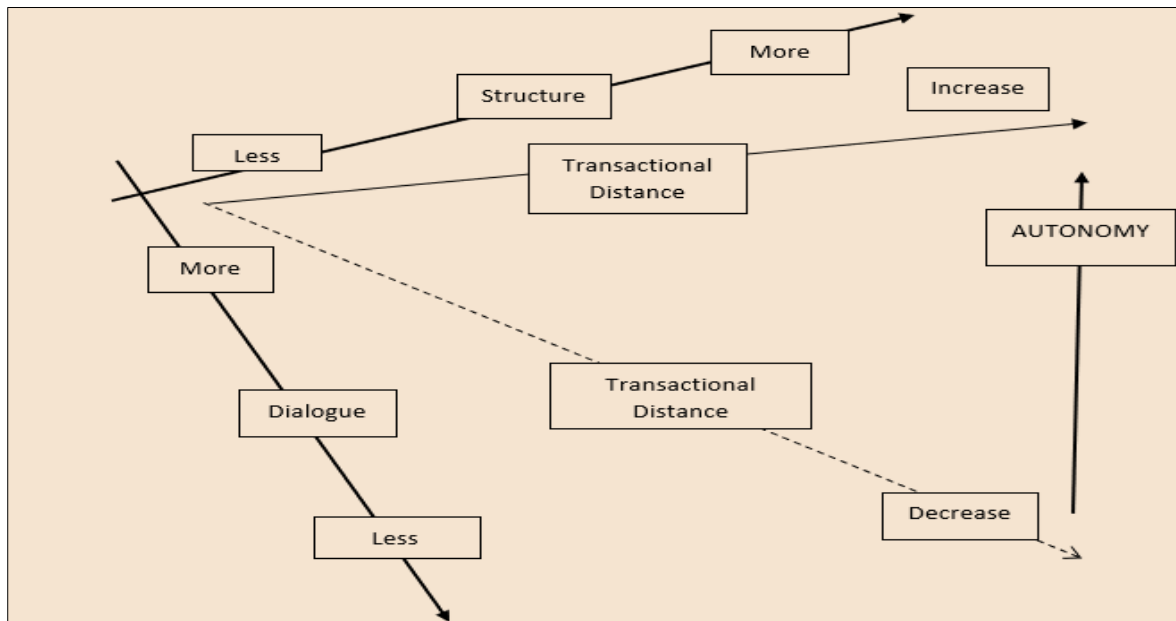


Figure 2.8: Moore's TD theory (1972)

However, according to the theory, the planned intervention between the learning materials and the student, based on the desired learning outcomes, would decide the extent of the structure. It may be claimed that any teaching programme needs to be structured because the latter refers to its organisation (Saba, 2003). More so, if the student needs more direct instruction, both the structure and TD increase, while both decrease as the student acquires expertise (Saba, 2003).

The third factor is the student's autonomy, which describes a situation in which a person is the subject of their education rather than the object of educational direction, influences, consequences, and obligations (Peters, 1998). However, since students have been taught to depend on the educational system, lecturers must help them because autonomy is impossible (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). As a result, the interactive nature of the medium is a key factor in determining dialogue in a teaching and learning environment. The independence of the student has to increase as the distance between the transaction and the lecturer increases. Thus, if it is previously known that the intended student desires to be independent, then the module could be crafted in this manner, for instance, by developing high structure and less dialogue to enhance TD. This concept is illustrated in Figure 2.9 below.

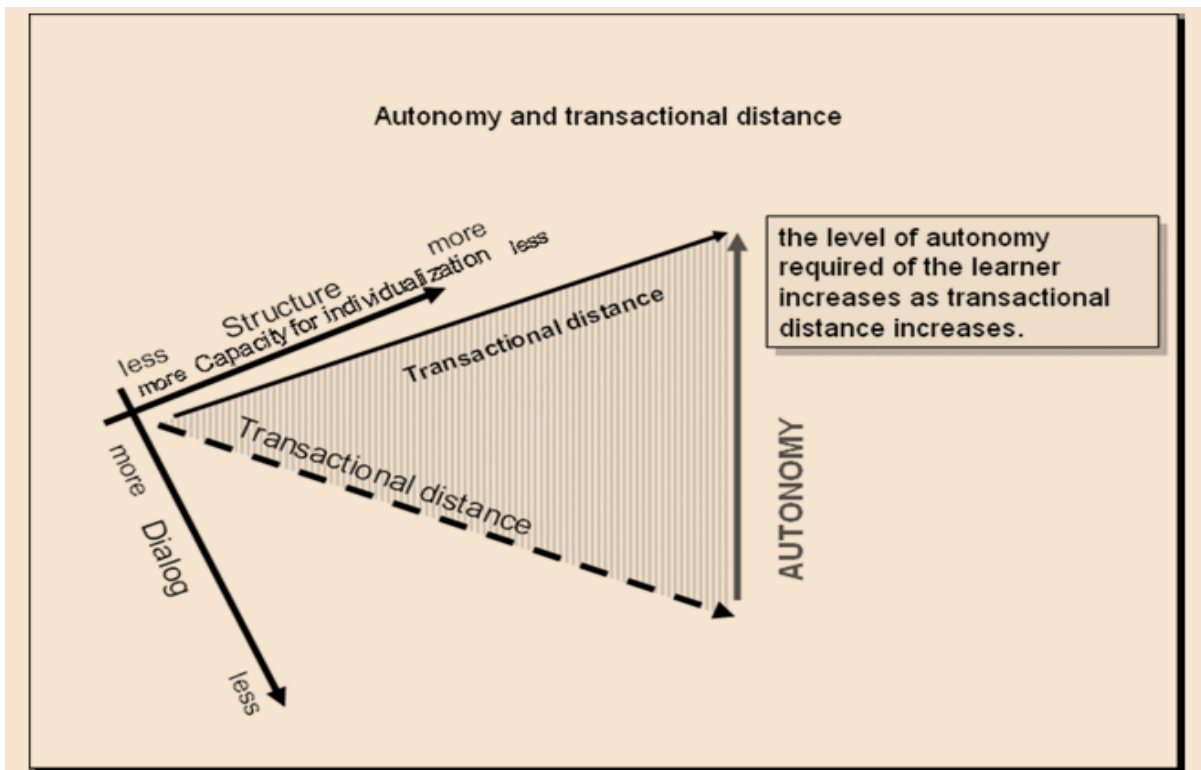


Figure 2.9: Moore's (1972) student autonomy

The TD Theory has been the subject of numerous investigations, according to Stein, Wanstreet, Calvin, Overtom, and Wheaton (2005). However, attempts to verify the concept of TD were made by Saba (2003), who later added the dimensions of the variables of student and lecturer control (Saba & Shearer, 1994). From Saba's findings, there are patterned relationships between TD, dialogue, and structure. Amundsen (1993) positively verified the hypothesis that the more distant the programme, the more autonomous the students who choose to participate. On the other hand, Gorsky and Caspi (2005) contend that the TD theory is a philosophical approach to ODeL practice and claim that it has never been a legitimate scientific theory. Even though it must be accepted that more work needs to be done at the macro level to establish its theoretical dimensions, Garrison (2000) maintains that Moore's work is still among the most appealing and well-known ideas within an ODeL context.

The TD theory suggests that the crucial distance in ODeL is transactional rather than spatial or chronological, which makes it applicable to this study (Gorsky & Caspi, 2005). The theory aids in defining and quantifying the delivery quality used in teaching and learning processes whereby the ODeL institution is characterised by a limited number of face-to-face interactions. However, online, or virtual communication

through learning management systems allows transactional dialogue and access to information (feedforward and feedback letters, podcasts, email queries, discussion forums, and the correction of written assignments and final written examinations). This becomes crucial since students now have the responsibility of creating knowledge. Learning symbolises the transition to the constructivist approach in distance learning by becoming more student-centred (Fraser & Lombard, 2002; Granger & Bowman, 2003).

To show the connection between the research questions and the two theories, I have created Figure 2.10 below:

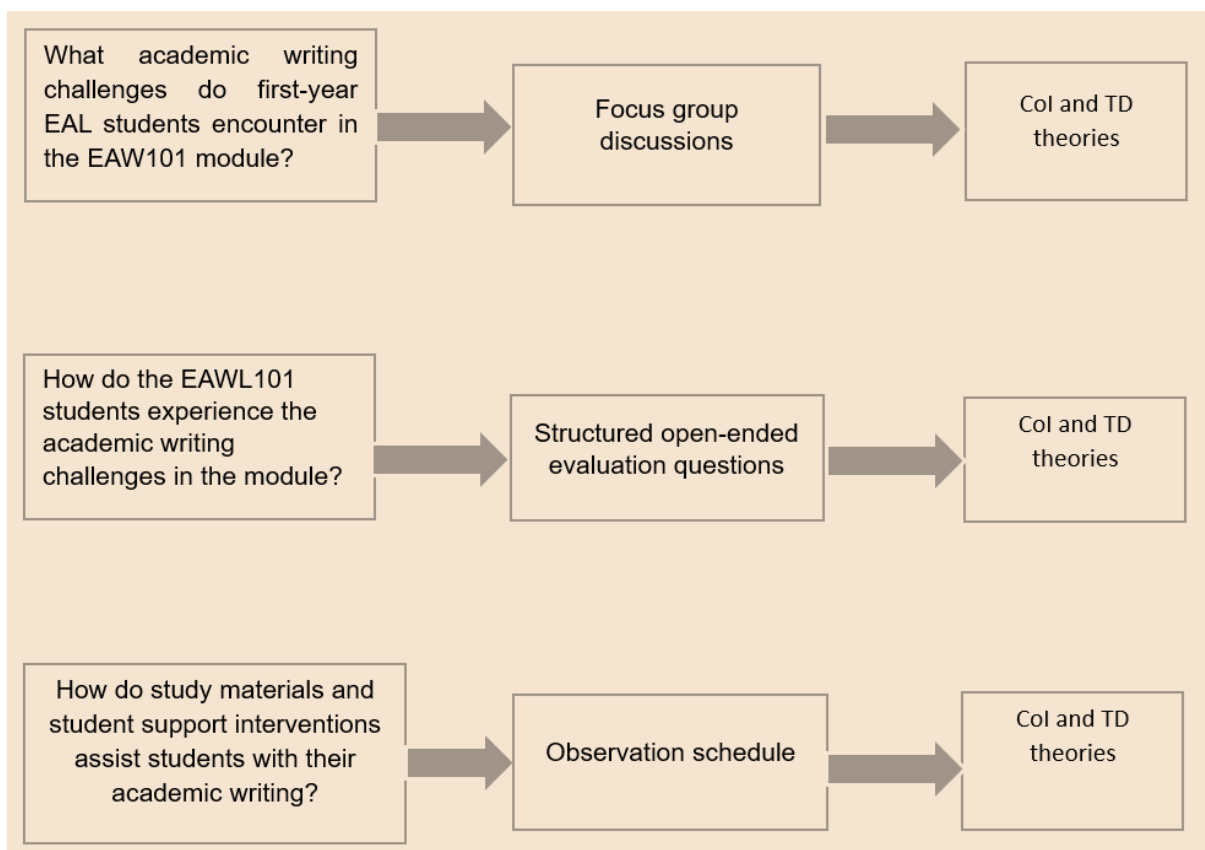


Figure 2.10: Connection between the study’s research questions and theories that underpin the study

From the diagram above, the illustration serves three purposes 1) it clarifies the key research questions, 2) it shows the connections between the research questions and theories and 3) it draws on all sources of data. The findings in this study emerge from all the research instruments applied. For instance, in the second research question that employed structured open ended evaluation questions, triangulation is central in

referring to FGDs as well as the observation schedule to validate the data. This approach increases credibility since when comparing the results of one source with the results of another, if they are similar, then it increases the validity of results. When using triangulation, not only are the outcomes considered credible, but the understanding of the subject of research is extended and, as a result, the outcomes are consequently more reliable.

The implication of both the Col theory and TD theory is that while online teaching is affected by problems, effective teaching is possible once these theories are applied. The Col and TD theories provide motivation for addressing the problems experienced in the module under study. I believe that not enough attention has been paid on applying specific aspects of the Col theory to qualitative research findings, which should improve our understanding of online EAL teaching in ODeL contexts. Lastly, Col and TD theories complement one another because they both call for higher-order thinking and in-depth learning via engagement, collaborative learning in ODeL institutions, an accurate interpretation, and significant reflection.

Despite that Col and TD theories have been used to underpin this study and are supportive of each other, they also have their limitations. With Col, it does not encompass the aspects of assessment and evaluation as these are critical in distance learning and online learning (Kebritchi et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2021). For that reason, failure to include such elements might distort the perception of the learning environment as given by the Col theory. On the other hand, TD is perceived as unfavourable facet since it restricts people's communication, especially within the context of online learning (Özbey & Kayri, 2023). Since it refers to the distance between students and lecturers in cases of online education, this perception may blind one from the various strategies as well as practices that may help to bring this gap closer to creating constructive interaction. However, the two theories work together to provide different perspectives on aspects of online learning. Considering that the Col theory establishes presence as its key element, it gives a sound framework for students' engagement and interactions; the TD theory draws attention to the importance of the psychological and communicative barriers.

2.3.3 Chapter Summary

The first part of this chapter began by discussing literacy, new literacies, and academic literacy. Within the literacy studies, it was revealed that the way literacy is understood has changed throughout the years. I explored the differences between the autonomous and the ideological model of literacy. Within the autonomous model, texts are seen as having independent meaning which is derived from the text itself and the cultural context in which the meaning is produced and interpreted. On the other hand, the ideological model of literacy is not just a technical skill, but rather the knowledge that one individual brings to the text. The ideological model introduced the concept of new literacy as a social process that involves engaging with the society and culture. I also discussed academic literacies which refers to language competence that students need to master for them to cope with the demands of academic study.

This was followed by a brief overview of writing development and the processes involved. Also, I explored the connection between reading and writing. To reiterate, reading and writing are not identical processes, but rather similar processes that complement each other. In other words, one process cannot exist without the other one. Thereafter, I discussed academic writing, the challenges that students face with academic writing, and students' perceptions of academic writing. I ended this section by discussing the importance of feedback in teaching academic writing.

In the second part of this chapter, I presented an overview of the theoretical frameworks that inform the study: the Col and TD theories. In brief, in Col, the interdependent elements of a learning process are cognitive, teaching, social, emotional, and student presences (Stenbom, Jansson & Hulkko, 2016). These five interdependent elements depicted above discuss sharing meaning, self-efficacy, academic exploratory mechanisms, and intellectual enhancement. Garrison (2009) describes social presence as participants' abilities to communicate clearly with the community and develop inter-personal relationships. Cognitive presence is described as the extent to which students can construct meaning through continuous reflection and discourse (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001; 2004). Teaching presence describes the design, facilitation, and direction of the social and cognitive processes to realise relevant learning outcomes (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Concerning TD Theory, it promotes successful online learning and complements Col

as it also addresses issues of collaborative learning through meaningful interaction for ODeL institutions. The next chapter discusses the qualitative research methodology employed in this study.

CHAPTER 3

A METHODOLOGY FOR EXPLORING ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES

“The skill of writing is to create a context in which other people can think.”

- Edwin Schlossberg

3.1 Introduction and Context

Chapter 2 was divided into two parts, that is, the literature review and theoretical frameworks. The first part discussed the literature review from local and international research on academic writing challenges of first year EAL students in HEIs. The gap identified in the literature review is that not enough research has been conducted in South African universities on academic writing challenges. This current study closes that gap since it explores academic writing challenges of first year EAL students in an OeDL in South Africa. The previous chapter emphasised the importance of students mastering their academic writing skills since it is one of the most important skills in higher education, especially in an ODeL institution.

The second part of Chapter 2 provided an overview of the theoretical frameworks that inform the study - the Col theory and the TD theory. In brief, in Col, the interdependent elements of a learning process are cognitive, teaching, social, emotional, and student presences (Stenbom, Jansson & Hulkko, 2016). The TD theory promotes successful online learning and complements the Col as it addresses issues of collaborative learning through meaningful interaction for ODeL institutions.

In line with the arguments from the previous chapter, this study explores academic writing challenges that first year EAL students encounter in EAW101 within the ODeL South African institution. The literature review revealed the importance of academic writing, the link between reading and writing, the writing process, and the importance of feedback as a tool to teach academic writing. These assisted me to gain an understanding in the field and address the study's research questions.

Chapter 3 focuses on the research methodology. It begins by explaining a researcher's positionality and identity, the research paradigm, research approach and research design. Furthermore, it discusses the population and sampling, followed by data collection instruments, the data analysis framework, and research procedure that were

employed to collect data. Lastly, it discusses the trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. This chapter is organised as follows:

- Positionality and identity as a researcher
- Research paradigm
- Research approach
- Research design
- Population
- Sampling
- Data collection instruments
- Research procedures
- Data analysis framework
- Research trustworthiness
- Ethical considerations

This is a qualitative case study research that employs three qualitative research instruments: namely, FGDs, structured open-ended evaluation questions, and an observation schedule. These instruments were vital in collecting rich data from participants in exploring the academic writing challenges they encountered in the EAW101 module. A focus group discussion was designed to answer the first research question (1) What academic writing challenges do first year EAL students encounter in the EAW101 module? Structured open-ended evaluation questions were designed to answer the second research question (2) How do the EAW101 students experience the academic writing challenges in the module? Lastly, an observation schedule was designed to answer the third research question (3) How do study materials and student support initiatives assist students with their academic writing? Figure 3.1 below provides a visual presentation of the methodology used in the study:

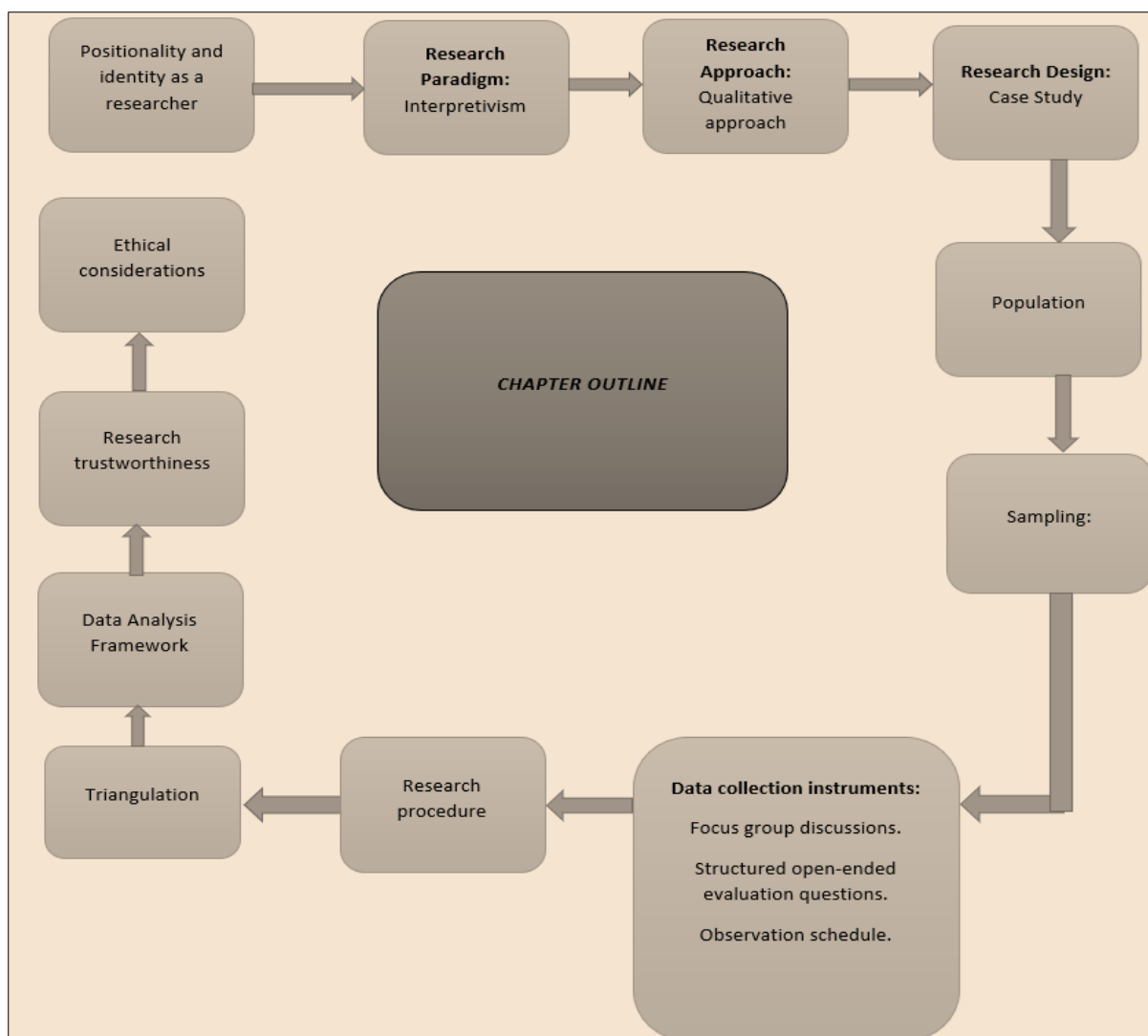


Figure 3.1: The research methodology used in the study

Chapter 3 begins with the positioning and identity of the researcher within the study.

3.2 Positionality and Identity of the Researcher

In academic research, positionality and identity highlight the necessity of considering qualities and characteristics that compromise ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status of the researcher and their ability to influence or be influenced by the environment and other people (Bolade-Ogunfodun, Richmond Soga & Laker, 2022).

I am a junior lecturer within the College of Human Sciences under the English Studies department. I have been part of EAW101 module for over three years and my duties include writing tutorial materials; setting examination questions; giving lectures through various online tools such as livestreams, podcasts, and vodcasts to promote students' interaction and support through the online platforms.

In this regard, enrolment in an academic writing module is necessary for first year students whose abilities to understand and engage with material would improve following delivery of the module. In addition, in the broader context of higher education, academic writing stands as one of the main sources for creating and sharing knowledge across various disciplines and increasing student's academic and professional competencies (Sala-Bubaré & Castelló, 2018). Thus, the EAW101 module requires students to perform and show improvement in academic writing skills for the completion of their studies. In observing students in the context of teaching EAW101 module, I have established that the students have challenges in grammar, verb tenses, syntactical patterns of sentences and of paragraphs, spelling and punctuation, and citation and referencing. These observations are supported by the research carried out by Al-Mukdad (2019), Burris-Melville (2020), and Sajjad, Sarwat, Imran, and Shahzad (2021) who argue that for most students, there is a massive confusion on what is required in writing academic English and general English due to their poor writing background. Their major difficulties are in selection of appropriate words, paraphrasing, citation, and grammar, mechanics, lexical level, and discourse.

I used triangulation, where the research procedure included the FGDs, structured open ended evaluation questions, and an observation schedule to validate the results (Coleman, 2022; Mwita, 2022). Moreover, the ethical considerations regarding this research were upheld with regard to participants' consent, anonymity, confidentiality, and participants' respect and fairness (Aluko-Arowolo et al., 2023). These are some of the ethical factors which help achieve neutrality and avoidance of bias arising from my line of duty as a lecturer in this study (Khoa, Hung, & Hejsalem-Brahmi, 2023; Mwita, 2022).

3.3 Research Paradigm

A paradigm is a wide framework of beliefs and assumptions that guides the direction of scientific research (Perera, 2018 cited in Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021). They act as a foundation that supports research (Bonache & Festing, 2020; Kumatongo & Muzata, 2021). These paradigms capture a triad of critical concerns: ontology, epistemology, and methodology. Ontology considers the nature of the social phenomenon that is investigated that include the nature of reality (Scotland, 2012; Ugwu et al., 2021). In the context of a specific research approach, epistemology addresses the methods

used for knowledge acquisition, how truth is determined, or what constitutes acceptable knowledge (Krauss, 2001). Methodology on the other hand, is a broader term that refers to research paradigms approaches, designs, methods, and procedures planned systematically for a research study with the objective of generating new knowledge (Keeves, 1998). That is why the ontology, epistemology, and methodology assist in the analysis of a phenomenon, the impediments connected to it and how to effectively collect the necessary data.

Research paradigms include positivism, post positivism, and interpretivism. Concerning positivism, the empirical findings of knowledge is limited to the theological and metaphysical meaning, and it can only engage with areas that involve sensory experience (Blaikie, 2000; Karupiah, 2022). It is for this reason that those theories that cannot be observed, do not qualify to be scientific theories (Godfrey & Hill, 1995). The goal of positivism in the conduct of research is limited to explaining social occurrences as a way of predicting and even managing them (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). On the other hand, there are some scholars who use post-positivism to refer to research paradigms that arose as reactions to positivism (Karupiah, 2022). This includes critical rationalism which, like positivism, recognises a shared ontology as well as other approaches which do not recognise existence of a reality beyond the researcher such as constructivism (Karupiah, 2022). However, when considering the research questions of this study which focuses on the diverse aspects of first year EAL students' academic writing challenges, the choice of the interpretivism paradigm is quite deliberate. It can therefore be said that there is a clear compatibility of the interpretivist paradigm with the objectives of this study.

The interpretivism paradigm makes the researcher take an introspective look at the values and opinions that she brings into the research process. The researcher is fully conscious of the link between these issues and the qualitative nature of the work involved in data gathering, processing and analysis. Thus, the research methods are designed specifically for the interpretivist paradigm that include open evaluation criteria such as evaluation questions, FGDs in which participants are encouraged to discuss their experiences; and the observation schedule to capture the academic writing difficulties as experienced by students. Since my focus is to capture first year EAL students' views, interpretivism best facilitates in-depth description of the

challenges faced by the participants when writing academically in EAW101 module. It emphasises the fact that one has to accept and value the variety of the learning backgrounds and views of these students in the context of academic writing.

3.4 Research Approach

The historical development of research approaches including quantitative and qualitative research methods, represent a complex mission because the two became prominent at different periods across different disciplines (Mulisa, 2022). Quantitative research is characterised by number-based information and the strict adherence to the actual values and statistics standards (Baran, 2022; Leavy, 2022; Mulisa, 2022). On the other hand, qualitative research is oriented exclusively on non-numerical data, depicting a significantly higher degree of a dialectical and methodological relativism (Antwi & Hamza, 2015; Maxwell & Reybold, 2015, Mulisa, 2022). The quantitative approach has unique strengths, the efficiency of data analysis with the help of specialised computer programs, such as the statistical software package SPSS (White & Millar, 2014). However, this study excludes the use of the quantitative research paradigm because the researcher explores academic writing challenges faced by EAL first year students, how they perceive them, and determine how student support initiatives enhance the teaching of academic writing.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, this study adopts the qualitative research paradigm. Qualitative research methods comprise investigative procedures based on the application of non-numerical, non-hierarchical research procedures in the collection, analysis, and synthesis of data (Baran, 2022; Leavy, 2022; Mulisa, 2022). The open-ended approach is pertinent to the analysis of contextual experiences, especially participants' socio-emotional experiences, language, and cultural and historical contexts (Bhangu, Provost & Caduff, 2023; Cresswell & Poth, 2018). I am aware and realise my position and direct bearing on the research process. Considering my role as a lecturer in EAW101, a qualitative approach seems appropriate when one aims to perceive the 'grey shades' of first year EAL students' experiences. It allows me to move through the context of higher education, not only from the sidelines but as a participant who is equally an interpreter of the challenges that these students encounter. This way, in this qualitative process, I endeavoured to project my student participants' voices in an effort to build up a big picture of their academic writing

difficulties. This fits well with the goals of this study regarding sensitisation and the generation of new knowledge and to contribute towards improving students' knowledge.

This research reveals the challenges that first year students face in EAW101 module towards achieving the desired academic writing skills. This is an area where the qualitative approach assists the lecturers and students to explore the unknown territories (Neely & Ponshunmugam, 2019). Using this approach benefits me as the researcher in noticing differences that characterise each participant's response while considering their interactions within a context. Therefore, this study highlights experiences of first year students within the ODeL context (Savin-Baden & Major, 2023. Table 3.1 below (Kandel, 2020:3) shows the differences between qualitative and quantitative research methodologies.

Table 3.1: Differences between qualitative and quantitative research

Qualitative Approach	Quantitative Approach
Naturalistic and uncontrolled observation	Controlled and obtrusive observation.
Subjective in nature, findings can be influenced by the researcher's attitude and interest.	Objective in nature, no chance of being influenced by the researcher.
Emphasis is on causes, meanings, interpretations, and implications.	Emphasis is on precision in describing events, quantitative scores, measurements, and statistical and mathematical analysis.
Conducted on a small scale of the population.	Conducted on a large scale of the population.
Focuses on words, behaviours, and natural settings	Focuses on numbers, meaning and controlled setting.
Process and meaning oriented.	Product and result oriented.
Flexible and holistic in nature	Rigid and specific in nature.
Discovery oriented and inductive.	Verification oriented and deductive.
Analysis proceeds by extracting themes or generalisations from evidence and organising data to present a coherent and consistent picture.	Analysis proceeds by using statistics, tables, charts, and analysis, to show the variables' relations to hypotheses.
Examples: phenomenological, ethnographical, heuristic, case studies, historical studies, philosophical studies	Examples: experimental, quasi-experimental, surveys, co-relational studies and so on.

Qualitative and quantitative research methodologies are briefly compared in Table 3.1 above. Concerning the objectives of this particular research, which aims at identifying academic writing difficulties faced by first year EAL students in the EAW101 module, the utilisation of the qualitative research approach strives to get at the depth of genuine interpretations within the real ODeL setting of participants.

3.5 Research Design

According to Yin (2003), a research design bears the definition of methodical framework linking empirical data and the initial research question and, in the end, research findings. A research design is the foundational element of any research project defining the researcher’s selected approaches and tools. From here, the choice of this study’s case study approach is considered and planned as a specific part of this study’s research method. However, it is of crucial importance to refrain from ignoring the wealth of other research designs that can be seen in the illustration provided in Figure 3.2 below.

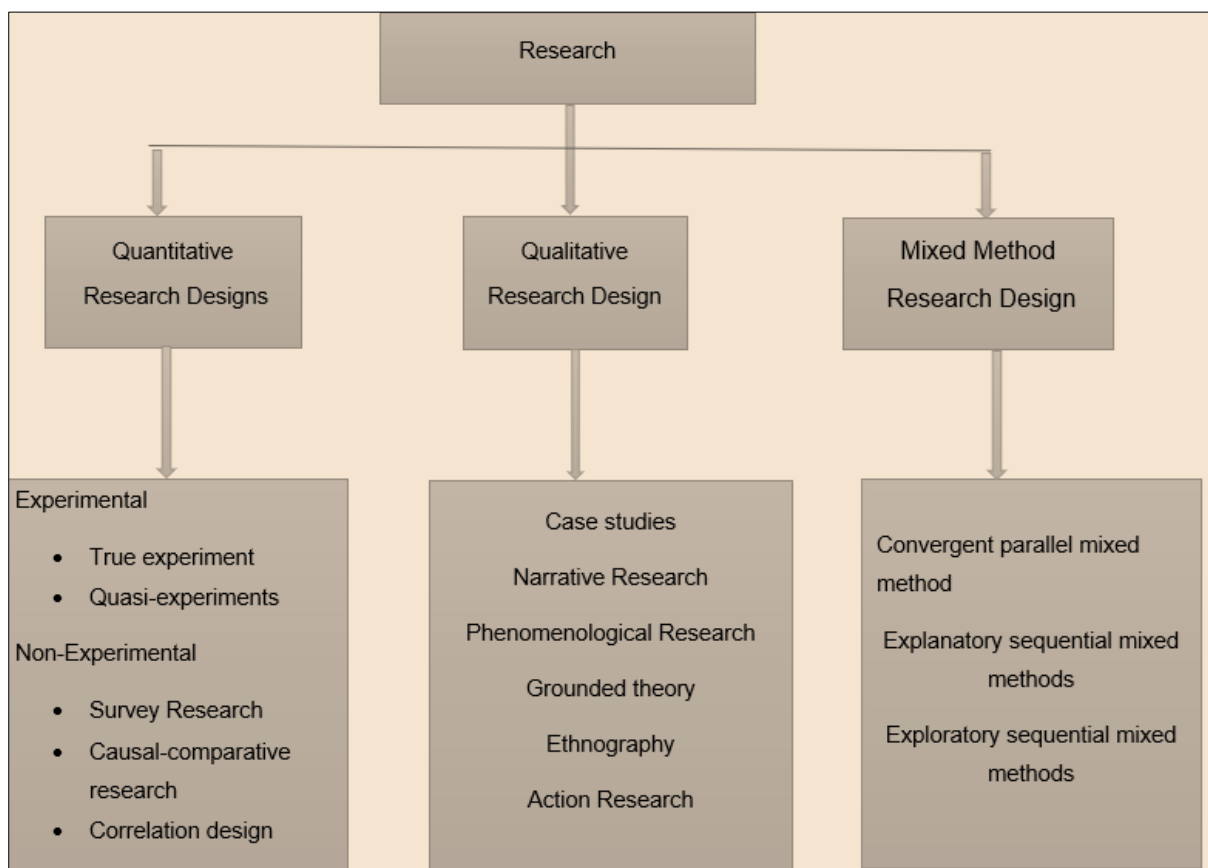


Figure 3.2: Summary of research design types (Asenahabi, 2019:78)

Figure 3.2 above presents a continuum of research designs that present a range of the methodological options. Yet, amid this array, the researcher narrows the focus to one design which is a case study. In academic research, case study aims to develop understanding from their intense examination of a given sample of people (Gustafsson, 2017). Mertens (2015) defines the case study method as a research technique that affords insights into the complexities of a given phenomenon through thick descriptions. In an effort to seek and discover meanings of academic writing difficulties experienced by first year EAL students, I embarked on an exploratory case study (Yin, 2003). Tumele (2015) rightly concludes that an exploratory case study is an appropriate tool to interpret the data patterns and themes.

The selection of a case study approach in this research is justified by the fact that it allows a systematic decision upon a group to recognise details. Sedlmair, Meyer and Munzner (2012) and Yin (2003) have pointed out that one of the distinct features of case study as a method of qualitative research entails the use of multiple sources of data to enhance trustworthiness of the findings. This study can therefore approach the gathering of data about the nature of academic writing difficulties from several perspectives and afford polyphonic findings. Furthermore, the case study research design allows gathering sociocultural information which consist of language use, participants' background information, and activities, and it applies this method of data organisation to provide rich and genuine information and a deeper understanding of the topic under study. To employ a case study design for this study is based on the ability of the approach to combine several qualitative data sources that include FGDs, structured open-ended evaluation questions, and an observation schedule. A plethora of works, for instance, by Lune and Berg (2017), and Zainal (2007), has examined the flaws of the case study approach. These studies argue that most case studies tend to focus on a small group, and often address one or two phenomena, which are considered adequate for providing insight into trends within relevant contexts.

3.6 Population

Population is defined in terms of subjects or objects possessing desired qualities and traits (Sugiyono, 2019, as cited in Sukmawati, Salmia & Sudarmin, 2023). The term transcends the aspects of mere quantities and tries to unlock the qualities that could be latent in these subjects or the objects. According to Asiamah, Mensah, and Oteng-

Abayie (2017:1615), accessible population is the first stage in the sampling procedure. Sampling procedures are carried out once the available population is defined and classified in the study. This concept involves three distinct stages: the general population, the target population, and the accessible population (Asiamah, Mensah & Oteng-Abayie, 2017). According to Levy and Lemeshow (2013), a population is defined as a total group comprising the individuals or objects studied while sample is selected from the population in question. From the point of view of Levy and Lemeshow (2013), when the whole set of possible individuals is defined, the researcher can proceed to sampling.

The target population for this study were all first year EAL students from EAW101, class of 2023 in semester 1. EAW101 is offered as a semester-based module and currently registers an approximate of 16,000 students per semester. The module comprises seven lecturers including the researcher and about 25 markers. This group became the subject under exploration and was a rather sensible decision within the framework of the present research. It is not just about numbers but about the qualities and defining characteristics these students brought to the fore. These students provided firsthand information on their experiences in producing academic writing within the context of ODeL. Furthermore, their responses contained perceptions that assisted in enhancing the skills in academic writing.

3.7 Sampling

It can be difficult to choose the sample size especially when dealing with many numbers but researchers from various fields have recommended regulating the issues relating to sample size (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022). Sukmawati, Salmia, and Sudarmin (2023) propose that a sample is an intersection of quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the whole population. However, when the population is large and practically impossible to take a sample from that population, then using a sample from a sectional demographic population is recommended. Regarding this study's constraints, I am a lecturer within the module and thus have unrestricted access to the list of enrolment of the students. Furthermore, I sought approval from the Chair of the Department (CoD) that helped me gain access to the targeted student population of the EAW101 module to determine the sample.

Table 3.2: Sampled participants

Sampled students	Group	Pseudonyms	Gender	Race
	Group 1	1Ana	Male	Black
		1Bana	Female	Black
		1Cana	Female	White
		1Dana	Male	Coloured
		1Eana	Female	Black
	Group 2	2Ana	Female	Black
		2Bana	Female	Coloured
		2Cana	Male	Black
		2Dana	Female	Coloured
		2Eana	Female	White
	Group 3	3Ana	Male	Indian
		3Bana	Male	Black
		3Cana	Male	Black
		3Dana	Female	Indian
		3Eana	Male	Black

Non-discriminatory process and inclusion were considered crucial in this study. Nobody was excluded based on gender, race, social background or status, sexual orientation, religious or cultural differences. However, for the purposes of this study, I chose 15 student participants and out of the 15 respondents, 7 were female while the remaining 8 were male and this way, I was able to get an equal amount of data from both genders. Furthermore, out of the 15 participants, they were divided into three groups as indicated in Table 3.2. Each of the groups comprised of five participants. To choose the students, it was required that they are first year students, EAL students, enrolled in the EAW101 module and have an African language background or speak any African language. Those students who were identified were contacted via e-mail and invited to participate in the study.

3.8 Data Collection Instruments

Kabir (2016) describes data collection as the process used by the researchers to acquire and analyse data relative to certain variables of interest. Data collection instruments' primary function is to respond to research questions, examine

hypotheses, and evaluate research findings. Zacharias (2012) concurs and stresses that the choice of research instruments depends on the objectives and research questions relevant to a particular study. In this current study, the chosen research instruments employed FGDs, structured open-ended evaluation questions and an observation schedule. Within the framework of this research, the usage of qualitative tools for data collection was deemed appropriate as it allows for the capturing of different aspects of students' experiences; in particular, their attempts to cope with writing difficulties within the framework of the EAW 101 module. Data collection can take two primary forms: direct and indirect data. Direct data entails observable spoken or written words, actions, and body language, while indirect data is generated through the researcher's efforts (Whitehead & Whitehead, 2017). In the present study, the approach used directly captures spoken and written words. For the current study, data was collected by conducting FGDs, structured open ended evaluation questions, and an observation schedule.

3.8.1 Focus Group Discussions

A focus group discussion (FGD) is one of the research methods in the collection of qualitative data aimed at presenting insightful experiences of the participants during a group discussion (Stewart, 2018). According to Agar and MacDonald (1995), these FGDs are defined as small, planned discussions with the interviewer or researcher and the participants. The FGDs effectively addressed the first research question, which centred on the challenges faced by first year EAL students in the EAW101 module (refer to Appendix A).

As recommended in the best practices, I divided fifteen participants into three small groups, and each of the groups had five participants. This is in accordance with the directions recommended by Busetto, Wick, and Gumbinger (2020) that suggest forming workable groups for FGDs. Small groups are not only beneficial in terms of the control that the researcher has but also promote interaction among the members (Duea, Zimmerman, Vaughn, Dias & Harris, 2022). As highlighted by Agar and MacDonald (1995), the strength of using FGDs lie between a structured meeting and a mere conversation, in the sense that there is some level of planning and purposeful organisation of the discussions and yet the participants are free to add on to what has already been said by other participants in the discussion. On the other hand, there is

a disadvantage in using the FGDs, in which some of the participants are introverts and they may feel shy to speak or may find it difficult to make contributions towards the set discussions. To mitigate this flaw in this research, I encouraged these participants to give their perspectives and that there is no right or wrong answer. This way, these students were directly encouraged to input and express their views in relation to specific prompts given to them.

The FGDs were administered using Microsoft Teams. Each group had two meetings and the first meeting with the group was an orientation lasting 20 minutes. The second one was the session where this research question for this study was raised and it took about 45 minutes depending on the responses of each participant. Some participants were not available at certain times, while some declined last minute, hence making the data collection process last over five weeks. Before proceeding with the analysis of the conducted FGDs, it is necessary to mention that the discussions were designed in detail regarding the days of the week and the quantity of FGDs per week, while one focus group conducted two sessions in a week. This arrangement preserved the integrity and focus of each of the FGDs. The FGDs were recorded then transcribed with the permission of the participants. During the FGDs, the participants were also keen throughout the discussion as they understood the questions I asked. This provided me with an opportunity to collect rich and extensive data which is important in addressing the research questions.

3.8.2 Structured Open-ended Evaluation Questions

The second research tool used in this study was the qualitative structured open-ended evaluation questions (see Appendix B). McLeod (2018) describes structured open-ended evaluation questions as a set of open-ended questions which result in a detailed explanation from the participants. These structured open-ended evaluation questions were instrumental in addressing the second research question, which sought to understand why these students experienced academic writing challenges in the EAW101 module as they did. The advantage of using open-ended evaluation questions is that they are useful in collecting qualitative data that can empower HEIs with knowledge from the basic need to innovate and enhance the teaching methods and materials used in learning to the strategic application of specific choices within a module. According to Hyman and Sierra (2016), open-ended evaluation questions are

most recommended when dealing with large population or groups as they are simple to administer and allow participants to expound their views or experiences within a short time and at a negligible cost (Rivano & Hagström, 2017).

It was intentional to utilise open-ended evaluation questions so as to obtain versatile and appropriate responses from the participants. These questions were posted on Moodle Learning System under the EAW101 site 'discussion forums.' However, open-ended evaluation questions must not be disregarded because they might have a significant drawback. It is sometimes difficult to foresee how participants react on them and therefore, they can supply irrelevant answers (Kabir, 2016). With regard to this limitation, I engaged more in the Moodle forums and provided precise answers to the participants where they were unclear. I ensured that I was able to rectify misconceptions and that the data collected was valid and accurate.

3.8.3 Structured Observation Schedule

The third research instrument used is the observation schedule (see Appendix C). This instrument was useful in responding to the third research question, which focused on how student support initiatives and study materials enhance students' writing skills. Marshall and Rossman (1989) defines the observation schedule as a mechanism for recording an event, behaviour, and object of a particular social environment. The schedule was based on the observation that first year students in the EAW101 module rely more on additional learning facilities to improve their writing proficiency. The observation schedule was used to assess these student support initiatives for the purpose of the research in a critical manner for evaluating their effectiveness concerning the development of students' academic writing in an open distance learning environment. The observation schedule has advantages such as its ability to capture accurate information. In addition, the participants shared with the researcher written information important during further analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). Its disadvantages include it being time-consuming, and some aspects of the participant's feelings and emotions may not be observed. To overcome this limitation, I concentrated on the responses and the interactions of the participants to understand the efficacy of the support initiatives available in the module.

Both, the study materials, and support initiatives exist in the module EAW101 to promote students' academic writing. These resources cover essential academic

conventions, including paragraph writing, citations, referencing, essay structure, and encouraging a distinct voice in writing, among others. To assess the effectiveness of such sources, I looked at the Telegram group of the module, the site of the module, and livestreaming. This observational process took about five weeks (April – May 2023) and I took screenshots at different instances that depict the interaction of the students in the Telegram group, discussion forums where the lecturers were interacting with the students, and the academic writing instruction which was done through livestreaming. Students were notified prior that their interaction would be used as part of this research and consent was granted. The screenshots I used concealed any information on identity of the students as a part of ethical research conduct.

Table 3.3: Instruments and the specific research questions used in the study

Research Questions	Research instrument
i. What academic writing challenges do first year EAL students encounter in the EAW101 module?	Focus group discussion
ii. How and why do the EAW101 students experience the academic writing challenges in the module?	Structured open-ended evaluation questions
iii. How do study materials and student support initiatives assist students with their academic writing?	Structured observation schedule

3.9 Research Procedure

Research procedure refers to interlinked steps and stages in conducting research (Singh, 2019). This enables the researcher to methodically organise and execute the research plan through sequential and logical stages. The following are phases that I implemented to collect data.

PHASE 1

Step 1: I began by posting structured open-ended evaluation questions on the Moodle LMS under the EAW101 module site in the discussion forum folder. This was followed by an announcement requesting students to answer the structured open-ended evaluation questions. I delayed data collection for five days to ensure that students had sufficient time to respond to the evaluation questions.

Step 2: To gather rich and valid responses from students, I sent an email invitation to 15 students who answered the structured open-ended evaluation questions to participate in FGDs. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the sample for this study was 15 students. Students who were first year students with EAL background, enrolled in the EAW101 module, and had an African language background or were speakers of an African language expressed interest. They subsequently returned their signed consent forms and allowed me to proceed to schedule the FGDs.

Step 3: I observed student support initiatives within the module, including podcasts, vodcasts, livestreaming recordings, discussion forums, and Telegram, to explore their effectiveness in improving academic writing in the EAW101 module.

PHASE 2

Step 1: I posted the structured open-ended evaluations on the module site with more than 16,000 participants and then downloaded the responses based on specific criteria. These criteria involved selecting first year EAL students who were enrolled in the EAW101 module and having an African language background or being speakers of an African language. I chose 15 participants adhering to these criteria and emphasised that exclusion from the sample did not imply disqualification. Instead, it reflected the qualitative nature of my study which could not accommodate a larger number of participants.

I analysed the completed structured evaluation open-ended evaluation questions and kept them safely by means of downloading them and saving them on my hard drive encrypted with a password.

Step 2: With the FGDs, participants were divided into three groups. The first group discussion was scheduled. In the first meeting, I used the first 15 – 20 minutes as an introductory session where I introduced myself to the participants and the participants were also given the opportunity to introduce themselves. The reason for this introductory session was to discuss the aim of the study, ensure that students were comfortable with me and to reiterate that whatever responses they put forward would be neither correct nor incorrect. After the session, we scheduled another meeting for the next day, where we discussed the research questions. The same process was followed with the next two groups.

All the FGD recordings were transcribed by the Microsoft Teams application, recorded, reviewed, and kept safely for ethical research purposes.

Step 3: The student support initiatives such as podcasts, vodcasts, livestreaming recordings, discussion forums, and Telegram were screenshot, and the images were kept safely in the hard drive encrypted with a password.

PHASE 3

In this final phase, I familiarised myself with my data. I decided what to code, what to employ, and which codes best represented my study. After coding my data, themes emerged from the three instruments, that is, FGDs, structured open-ended evaluation questions, and an observation schedule. Themes were generated from the codes and according to how participants responded during the data collection processes.

3.10 Triangulation

To ensure credibility in this study, I used triangulation as defined by Creswell and Miller (2000:126) as a process of getting “multiple and different sources of information to develop themes or categories in a study.” Triangulation is used in research in identification of both first and second-order themes with support from other methods of research. It is used in the research process to amalgamate many processes or data sets to get a holistic view of the phenomenon studied (Crick, 2021). I chose to triangulate the results across three data collection instruments: FGDs, structured open-ended evaluation questions and an observation schedule. Engaging the variety of data collection techniques enhanced the interconnectedness of the methods applied. This was the case especially since most student participants provided supporting views and experiences that enriched triangulation of their data. Besides improving the internal validity, the systematic use of these multiple sources of data improved the study’s credibility and dependability (Santos et al., 2020). Thus, this approach was a protective mechanism against possible bias and helped achieve a deeper analysis of the data.

3.11 Data Analysis

The nature of qualitative analysis of content is described as systematic, well-structured, and iterative (Ravitch & Carl, 2019). As a result, the process may become lengthy and hectic at times. Consequently, qualitative researchers should choose the

analysis methods that are situated between organising of the collected data, the goals and objectives of the study, the issues of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, and the inductiveness of the qualitative analysis (Bingham, 2023). Accordingly, this research employed a thematic analysis approach to connect with the research questions following the guidelines recommended by Castleberry and Nolen (2018). According to Braun and Clarke (2021), thematic analysis is a methodical approach to create, analyse, and provide meanings for patterns and themes in the data set. In the context of this study, themes were generated to enable logical conclusions drawn from the data. Below are the six steps of Braun and Clarke’s (2021:2) thematic analysis procedure:

Table 3.4: Six-step thematic analysis procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2021:2)

Phase	Examples of procedure for each step
1. Familiarising oneself with the data	Transcribing data; reading and re-reading; noting down initial codes.
2. Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data systematically across the dataset, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for the themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work with the coded extracts and the entire dataset; generate a thematic ‘map.’
5. Defining and naming themes	On-going analysis to refine the specifics of each theme; generation of clear names for each theme.
6. Producing the report	Final opportunity for analysis selecting appropriate extracts; discussion of the analysis in relation to the research question or literature; produce the report.

3.11.1 Focus Group Discussions

The FGDs were conducted using Microsoft Teams. In these settings, I recorded the participants’ statements and in situations where the responses were ambiguous or incomprehensible, I asked follow-up questions. After that, the

research data collected was systematically sorted in a logical and easily understandable flow. In addition, following the procedure used for structured open-ended evaluation questions and guided one-on-one interviews, the FGDs were subjected to Braun and Clarke's (2021:2) six steps thematic analysis. From the FGDs, the following codes were generated:

- formal writing style;
- citing and referencing sources;
- thesis statement construction;
- confusion about academic writing; and,
- English not being a home or first language.

The following is a visual illustration of the FGDs process:

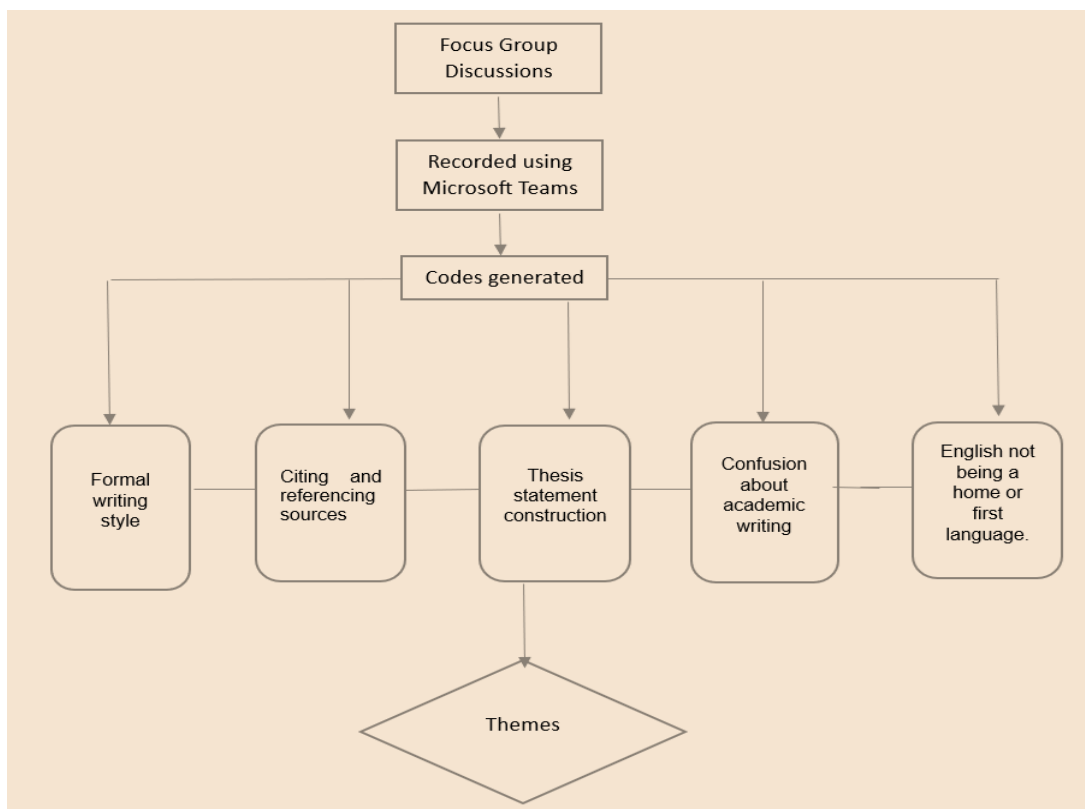


Figure 3.3 Focus group discussion process

3.11.2 Structured Open-ended Evaluation Questions

In view of Braun and Clarke's (2021) model of thematic analysis and Creswell's (2003) argument that it is crucial that a researcher follows certain procedures when transcribing online qualitative data effectively, I grouped the generated themes

accordingly. I developed categories and themes from the evaluation questions analysis. Lastly, where some aspects proved ambiguous, the participants were asked for elaboration with the intention of getting as much insight as possible concerning the difficulties experienced by students with academic writing. From the structured open-ended evaluation questions, the following codes were generated:

- first time in distance learning;
- not enough time to read resources;
- writing an academic essay with citations;
- first year students; and,
- time management.

The following Figure 3.4 is a visual illustration of the structured open-ended evaluation questions process:

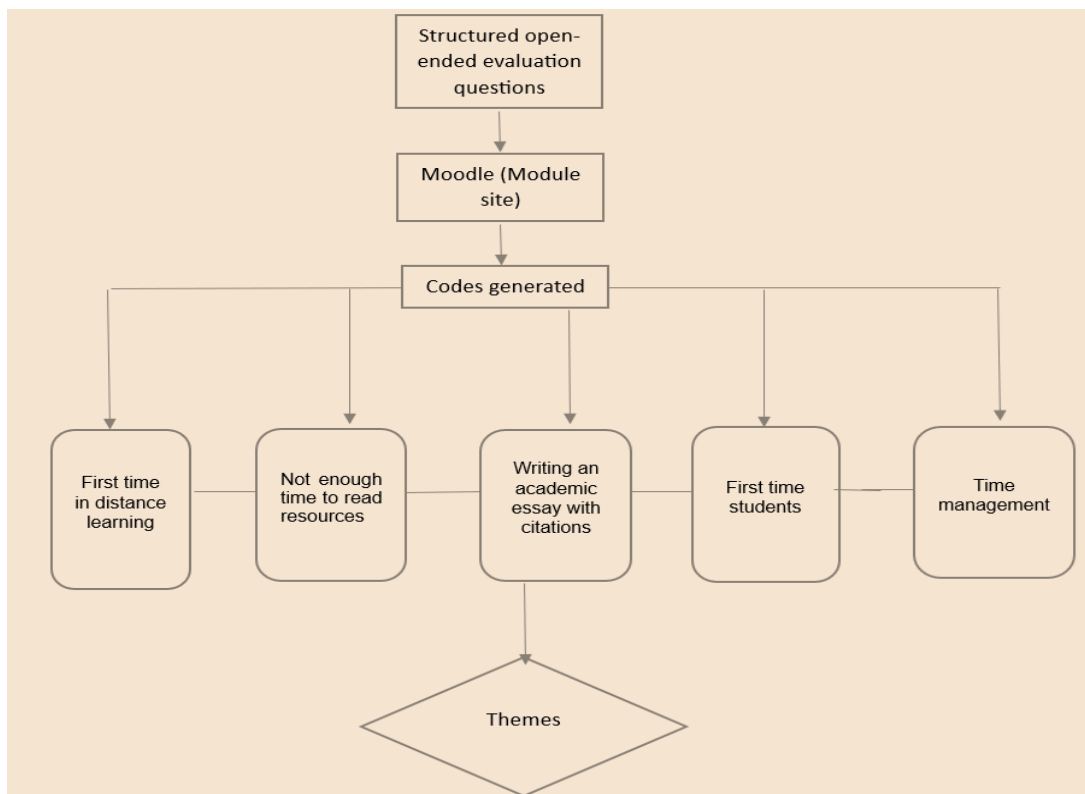


Figure 3.4: Structured open-ended evaluation questions process

3.11.3 Structured Observation Schedule

An observation schedule requires the observers not to influence the events of the observed factors but only note the event occurrences (Cohen, Manion & Morrison,

2007:397). I chose an observation schedule because of the decision-making involved in the collection of the data that was very precise. This way, there was maximum generation of directly observed data for the purpose of reliability instead of using only reported data (Mhlongo, Khoza & Skosana, 2023).

The study observed the students' support initiatives in the first semester of the academic year (May and June 2023). During this time, I joined the discussion forums and the Telegram group while students were working on their Assignment 2, which was a research-based essay. From the structured observation schedule, the following codes were generated:

- use of Telegram;
- loadshedding and network;
- livestreams;
- links not working;
- Moodle; and,
- not enough time.

The Figure 3.5 is a visual illustration of the observation schedule process:

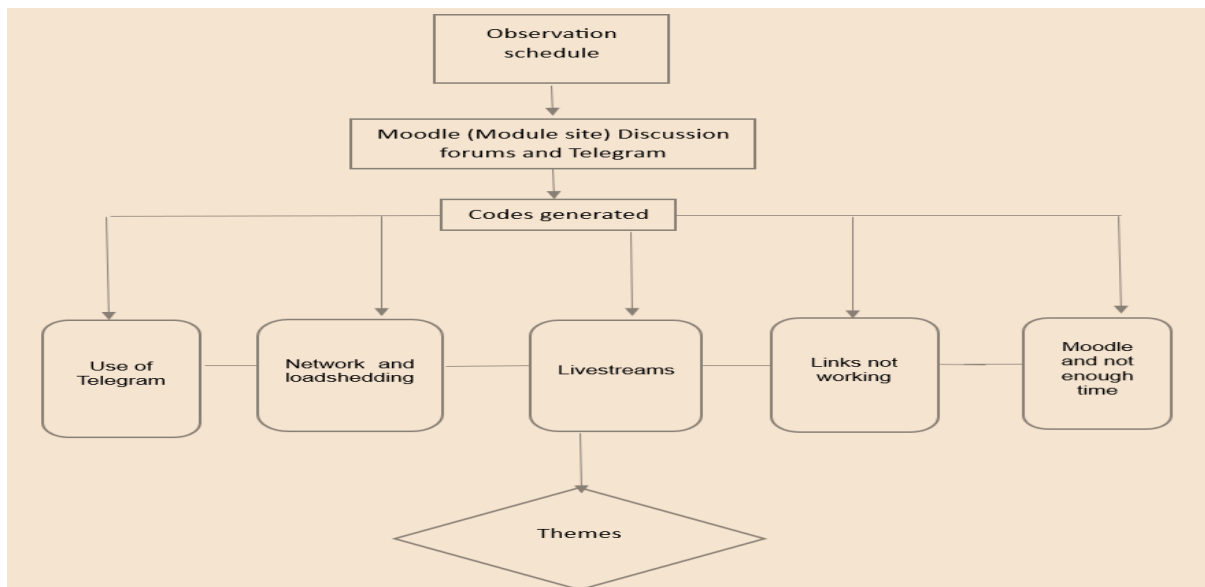


Figure 3.5: Observation schedule process

3.12 Research Trustworthiness

3.12.1 Credibility

According to Ospina, Esteve and Lee (2018), credibility is concerned with the accuracy of the representation of participants in a study. Credibility is about the true value of a study. Credibility of qualitative research translates into the ultimate fidelity whether the findings are consistent with reality (Junjie & Yingxin, 2022). I ensured that the responses generated from the structured open-ended evaluation questions and FGDs were true representations as registered for the EAW101 module, and participants' responses were from the research questions tabled in the study. To ensure trustworthiness, triangulation was implemented to reduce the effect of bias (Gunawan, 2015). According to McGannon (2021), trustworthiness refers to the element of trust between participants and the researcher (McGannon, 2021). To ensure that participants were psychologically and physically safeguarded, I was aware of how critical it was to establish trust with the participants early in the data collection process. To increase credibility, I made sure that no one participated in the study against their will and that everyone who did received assurance that the information they supplied would only be utilised for the purposes of this study. I used pseudonyms to protect and conceal the identity of all participants as recommended by McGannon (2021).

For the credibility in this study, I ensured that the findings were true representations of the data that was collected from participants, and I only analysed and reported data collected from participants registered for the EAW101 module and the student support initiatives available for the module.

3.12.2 Transferability

According to Mtisi (2022), transferability is the capacity of research results to be generalised to other contexts. Qualitative researchers describe their studies and findings in such a manner that other researchers can replicate the study using the same methodology. Transferability is also partly embedded in the rationale concerning the sample, geographical context, and characteristics of participants (Johnson et al., 2020). Transferability implies the findings of current study could be replicated in similar settings (Hlatshwayo, 2018). I am certain that similar results can be achieved if the same sampling techniques are applied in some other setting (Daniel, 2019).

3.12.3 Validity

Validity does not mean the same thing in qualitative research as it does in quantitative research (Creswell, 2016). While generalisability and external validity play a significant role in quantitative research, they are less important in qualitative research. While qualitative reliability is the consistency of the researcher's methodology across projects and between various researchers (Macphail et al., 2016). Qualitative validity refers to the researcher's employment of particular methodologies to assess the findings (Fitzpatrick, 2019). To verify the accuracy of the data collected and the conclusions achieved, validity in this study was achieved through the use of three instruments: FGDs, structured open-ended evaluation questions and a structured observation schedule.

3.12.4 Reliability

In the view of Rose and Johnson (2020), reliability is the validity of the research as it pertains to the methodologies used in a study and the manner in which these were deployed. FGDs explored participants' views and understanding. The structured open-ended evaluation questions also complemented the FGDs as there are more normative questions generating precise information. This methodological triangulation ensured that the research questions were answered from several perspectives which increases the reliability of the conclusions made.

3.13 Ethical Considerations

Researchers face ethical predicaments in undertaking research, particularly in the way they seek to safeguard the participants. Developing prevention strategies to address the inevitable conflict between collective benefits and individual interests is notably challenging, especially when targeting the general population (Battistuzzi, Papadopoulos, Hill, Castro, Bruno & Sgorbissa, 2021; Ford, Shepherd, Jones & Hassan, 2020).

This study adhered to the ethical principles of the institution. This study was cleared by the ethical committee of the institution, and I obtained an ethical clearance certificate. The ethical clearance committee assessed the researcher's objectives and procedures to ensure the best practice was observed. When I received ethical clearance, the consent processes with the potential participants were done as indicated in Appendix F and then data collection commenced.

Based on the principles of ethical practice, I compiled an informed consent form that was completed by participants (refer to Appendix D). This form served the purpose of briefing the participants on the study and as such they could consent or refuse to participate in the study. This consent was voluntary. This means that there was no compulsion and participants could withdraw from the study at any time. This study ensured that the principle of beneficence was observed by being kind to research participants. I avoided the principle of non-maleficence by knowing that as a researcher, my duty was to ensure that my participants did not suffer harm in any way (Pietilä, Nurmi, Halkoaho & Kyngäs, 2020).

To ensure the privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality of participants, I identified each participant by pseudonyms in the following manner: in Group 1, the first participant was labelled 1Ana; the second participant was labelled 1Bana and so on. In Group 2, the first participant was labelled 2Ana; the second participant was 2Bana and so on. This way, I protected the participants' identities or any other personal information. I explained to the participants that their identities were concealed in the analysis of data, in the write-up of the findings, as well as subsequent publications.

Before the interview commenced, I explained in detail to each group how the interview would run, how the responses generated during the interview would be used, and how the interview would be recorded for quality and reliability purposes. However, if some participants did not want the interview to be recorded, I used field notes and after the interview ended, I showed the participant the field notes to confirm the true reflection of their input. With regards to data management, I gathered all the notes taken during the data collection processes by safeguarding them in cloud storage. The responses from open-ended evaluation questions were converted into soft copies and stored in cloud storage. Furthermore, I reviewed all the data to make sense and then created themes and presented those themes in a logical manner. To ensure anonymity following the completion of the study, the data was securely stored in compliance with guidelines that require it to be retained for a minimum of five years. Students on the Telegram group consented that by joining the group, they were comfortable with data from the group being used for research purposes. Students were explicitly aware that screenshots would be taken as part of this research. They were informed that their identities would be concealed to ensure their privacy and protect their anonymity.

3.14 Chapter Summary

This chapter described the strategies used for data collection. It started with a description and justification of the researcher's role and identity, then, the rationale for adopting the qualitative paradigm and the particular choice of case-study approach. The chapter analysed the research paradigm, population, and purposive sampling. Furthermore, the instruments utilised which include FGDs, structured open ended evaluation questions, and an observation schedule were clarified. Moreover, the chapter highlighted the research procedure applied in the study and triangulation to collaborate the findings. Lastly, it focused on the analysis of thematic data and the ethics followed throughout the study. The next chapter presents the analysis of the findings.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES OF STUDENTS

“Every writer I know has trouble writing.”

- Joseph Heller

4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 provided a detailed overview of the methodology employed to gather qualitative data. In particular, it covered the qualitative research approach, the research design (a case study), the research paradigm, the study’s target population, and the research tools utilised, which includes FGDs, structured open-ended evaluation questions, and an observation schedule. In addition, ethical considerations relevant to the study were addressed. To ensure systematic and consistent data interpretation, the study implemented Braun and Clarke’s (2021) six-step analysis procedure to establish coherent themes. Furthermore, to validate the data generated from the research instruments, triangulation was employed. This strategy aimed to mitigate the limitations associated with qualitative research findings and enhance their credibility by adhering to questions for each research instrument.

This fourth chapter discusses the themes generated from the research instruments. I discussed the themes that were extracted from the codes in Chapter 3 provided interpretations of these findings. A case study was selected as a suitable research approach for this study because it provided a means to gain a comprehensive understanding of the academic writing challenges encountered by first year EAL students and how student support initiatives in EAW101 contribute to enhancing their academic writing skills. This chapter proceeds to present the data and engage in discussions related to it. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the study’s research questions are as follows:

- i. What academic writing challenges do first year EAL students encounter in the EAW101 module?
- ii. How and why do the EAW101 students experience the academic writing challenges in the module?

- iii. How do study materials and student support initiatives assist students with their academic writing?

The TD theory and Col serves as a guide for processes like teaching and learning at a distance (Garrison, 2000; Moore, 1997). Moore's (1997) theory holds significant relevance and applicability within the context of this study primarily because it highlights that 'distance' in DE is transactional, rather than spatial. Moreover, considering that teaching and learning at an ODeL university involves limited face-to-face interactions, this theory is especially pertinent.

This chapter is structured as follows:

- Research questions.
- Analysis and interpretation of themes emerging from each research instrument.
- Conclusion.

4.2 Findings from the Focus Group Discussions

Research Question 1: What academic writing challenges do first year EAL students encounter in the EAW101 module?

The first research question sought to investigate academic writing challenges that first year EAL students face in the EAW101 module. To determine the major writing challenges, I collected qualitative data from FGDs which were conducted through the Microsoft Teams meeting platform. The data pertinent to this research question established the following themes:

4.2.1 Unclear Understanding of Academic Writing

Before students are required to master their academic writing skills, we first need to establish their understanding of what academic writing means to them. In the FGDs, I asked participants to explain what academic writing is in their own words. Some participants indicated:

According to me, academic writing is [a] formal writing that is used in a university [levels]. It can be articles, journals or even essays (3Eana, 2023 Focus group discussions).

According to my understanding, academic writing is a certain way in which you write your work. Your work should be formal (2Cana, 2023 Focus group discussions).

[AW] is [a] formal language that is allowed in English writing (2Bana, 2023 Focus group discussions).

[AW] is where you put your English in a very simple and understandable way where your grammar is perfect and formal (1Dana, 2023 Focus group discussions).

The above responses indicate that even though the participants may not fully appreciate the definition of academic writing, they do have a relatively basic idea of what it entails (1Dana, 2Bana, 2Cana & 3Eana, 2023 Focus group discussions). When students register for a writing module, they are expected to learn how to write academically though they may not fully understand what academic writing means. This can disadvantage first year students because the expectations of the university are that they possess academic writing skills from the onset because lack of preparedness for universities has led to high dropout rates in South Africa (Mbirimi, 2012). The Col can be aligned to the following participants' verbatim responses outlined above (3Eana, 2Cana, 2Bana & 1Dana, 2023 Focus group discussions). In terms of cognitive presence, participants' responses show that they have a basic form of cognitive presence. However, they are able to illustrate critical thinking skills and express their ideas regarding academic writing. Their responses show that there are differences in the cognitive processes when it comes to answering questions. The specificity of some participants is related to formality in the writing, while others stress simplicity and grammar related to academic writing. This diversity points more to the fact that within the community of relevant practitioners, there is an on-going questioning and search for evidence. In social presence, the sharing of everyone's personal opinions on academic writing assists in creating the social presence of the group. In each case, part of the knowledge created by each individual is incorporated in the thought process of the other participants which demonstrates the social construction of knowledge. The participants' debates in the FGDs encourage peer interaction in the participant's own words. It plays a vital role in social learning because this is how people communicate, teach, and train one another through shared experiences.

Teaching presence entails one acting as a researcher and therein, my duty was to encourage the participants to think of what they understand about academic writing. This is important for teaching presence as it makes students reflect on what they are doing and hence engage themselves more in the content. I assume that after going through these lessons, the students would be capable of writing academic English

even if they have no clear idea about the term. This sets the specific learning aim for the learning community and provide direction on what needs to be done. This also serves to underscore the fact that students need to realise that knowledge is constructed socially, and thus they (the readers themselves and with others) can read to gain information from each other (Pearson & Stephens, 1994). The Col theory provides the means for identifying the trajectories of the development of understanding within the learning community as construed by Shea, Hayes, Uzuner-Smith, Gozza-Cohen, Vickers and Bidjerano (2014). If lecturers acknowledge the existence of cognitive, social, and teaching presence, then they can develop relevant initiatives that enhance collaborative learning, especially with academic writing.

4.2.2 Struggling with Paraphrasing, Citations and References

During the FGDs with participants, twelve participants (80%) indicated that the major challenge they experienced was the use of in-text citations and referencing as well as paraphrasing. With citing and referencing, many students explained that they did not know how and where to put the sources in the body section of their essays. Some also explained that they struggled with paraphrasing information from the internet and writing information in their own words. In the FGDs, participants indicated:

I really struggle with using Harvard style of referencing because we were never taught in high school (1Ana, 2023 Focus group discussions).

Citing and referencing sources is very confusing for me (3Bana, 2023 Focus group discussions).

Lecturers have not explained properly about how we should cite and reference our sources (2Eana, 2023 Focus group discussions).

From the above responses, students indicated that they are struggling with using Harvard style of referencing because they were never taught in high school (1Ana, 2023 Focus group discussions). This assertion is aligned with Teng et al. (2022) who argue that these struggles are caused by the transition from high school to university writing expectations and the lack of initial training in formats such as Harvard referencing. 3Bana and 2Eana (2023 Focus group discussions) argue that referencing is confusing, and lecturers have not explained the concept properly.

It is important to note that academic writing is a procedure that be mastered at a university (Mendoza et al., 2022; Seyoum, Yigzaw & Bewuketu, 2022). First year students' writing skills are weak particularly in academic writing because they have not

been trained on rules of writing academically (Teng et al., 2022). TD investigates the psychological and communication context that cuts the student from the lecturer in distance education environment. As highlighted above, by encouraging dialogues, structures, and student-autonomy, TD could be reduced. It was evident from the various remarks made by the participants concerning how they are struggling when it comes to in-text citations and referencing which could mean that there may be a communication breakdown. Statements such as “I think that lecturers have not explained properly” (2Eana, 2023 Focus group discussions), attest to poor clarity in the lecturers’ communication thus contributing to the increase in the TD between students and lecturers.

Skills of citing sources and paraphrasing are not fully dependent on the student’s actions in many cases. The participants’ challenges may be attributed to a transition from high school learning environment which is more rigorous within the university learning environment which the students need to master (Teng, Qin & Wang, 2022). TD deems it necessary to have support mechanisms that help in closing the gap in TD. Regarding referencing, lack of direction on Harvard style of referencing, as postulated by participant 1Ana (2023 Focus group discussions), can cause an increase in TD if the students feel deserted. Participants used references and paraphrasing with uncertainty, suggesting inadequate teaching and cognitive presence. This includes arranging the tasks and dialogue so that it supports learning, facilitates reasoning and comprehending the requirements concerning academic writing.

The responses of participants signified the relevance of social presence. Facilitating a space where students can narrate their struggles with referencing and paraphrasing also suggest the need to develop a group in which they can seek clarification and share various strategies (Verde & Valero, 2021). In response to the participants’ perceptions of the module lacking ample instruction (2Eana focus group, 2023), improving teaching presence appears pertinent. This involves giving clear instructions on referencing and paraphrasing as a way of improving mastery of the practices. The integration of TD theory and CoI theory provides an integrated solution to the difficulties observed in the processes of referencing and paraphrasing. To improve teaching presence, communication, and stimulating the cognitive presence, the

lecturers could build conducive environments of the online learning that would enhance mastering academic writing skills.

4.2.3 English Language as a Barrier

A recurrent theme that emerged from the FGDs is the perceived barrier posed by English being a non-native language for these students. Some of the verbatim responses from participants were:

Using English to write is one of the reasons why I encounter academic writing challenges because it is not my home language (3Dana, 2023 Focus group discussions).

For me, English is the most difficult language in the world and lecturers do not give enough explanations and examples (2Bana, 2023 Focus group discussions).

Lack of understanding of grammar, less explanations, and examples from lecturers (3Dana, 2023 Focus group discussions).

These responses are relevant to the Col and TD, including the cognitive, social, and transactional factors that EAL students encounter in their academic writing. When analysing the students' responses, there is evidence of the-nine elements of Col as described in the theory. This is a cognitive dimension where the students themselves see English as not their home language, thus, making them face writing difficulties. There is heightened emphasis on the mental fight one has to undergo to accommodate a language that is unfamiliar, and their inherent limitations in writing without full assurance. The FGDs generate social presence in that the students speak out and express their difficulties freely. This is supported by the FGDs where participants stated the 'foreign language hurdle' as some of the responses show: "Lack of understanding, less explanations, and examples from lecturers" (3Dana, 2023 focus group discussions). This is in line with BICS, the level of interpersonal communication and competency of social language (Cummins, 1984). The concerns that were raised in the context of being clueless about English grammar and inadequate explanation by the lecturers draws attention to teaching presence. Engagement with the instructional strategies and use of clearer language in the teaching through the development of friendly explanations can supplement teaching presence and also tackle existing language barriers experienced by the EAL students. This also correlates with CALP, the kind of language used in an academic context that is essential for university success (Cummins, 1984).

Therefore, when implementing the TD theory, it is vital to consider the difficulties encountered by the disadvantaged students, especially EAL students. The responses from 2Bana and 3Dana (2023 Focus group discussions) align with both the dialogue and structure components of TD theory. These responses (2Bana & 3Dana, 2023 Focus group discussions) increase the TD between them and the lecturers because they lack interaction with lecturers, and this alone reduces opportunities for students to ask for clarification and explanations. According to 3Dana (2023, Focus group discussions), their response indicates that since most of the students have English as a second language, the cognitive load is even more challenging as it creates a TD between the students and their study materials. Students' difficulties with grammar and language are associated with the component of student autonomy whereby students are compelled to solve all these on their own (Moore, 1997).

The attitudes of the students towards English as an obstacle show that they are psychologically distanced from mastering this non-native language (Muthuswamy & Varshika, 2023). This distance affects self-confidence, enthusiasm, and academic progress of students to a certain extent. This study also draws our attention to the predicament of EAL students when it comes to transition from one teaching and learning environment to another. This is consistent with the TD theory which states that extra efforts are needed when one is in new contexts which may explain why students in this study feel that academic writing is challenging (Pineteh, 2014). Cognitive, social, and transactional dimensions of experiences can be resolved through intervention. For instance, this could be positively addressed by enhancing teaching presence, to establish effective social presence and the logical psychological distances required for academic writing in a second language.

4.2.4 Engaging Learning through Model Texts

Students in the FGDs indicated that they encountered academic writing challenges because lecturers did not provide them with exemplars of essay writing (1Eana, 1Dana & 3Cana, 2023 Focus group discussions). They were asked to explain how they would like their lecturers to address the academic writing challenges highlighted, and the following were their verbatim responses:

I would want my lecturers to provide ...like an example. The lecturer should write his or her essay to show us how to write it ...so that we can know and do the correct things (1Eana, 2023 Focus group discussions).

I also wanted to say what [1Eana] has said 'cause most of us we learn quickly when we see something physically when it is done then we understand better (1Dana, 2023 Focus group discussions).

The quickest answer that comes to mind would be to really ask for an example of a perfect essay and a perfect explanation. I would analyse with them about the structuring of an essay and why it is perfect. At the end of the day, they know better and we learn better when we see something (3Cana, 2023 Focus group discussions).

The data analysis also involved synthesising the information obtained from the participants' responses, which included the following: some of the questions asked posed information that showed that students had already provided a suggestion for lecturers to solve the challenges they identified. In the students' opinion, lecturers should think about demonstrating the process of writing an essay (1Eana, 1Dana & 3Cana, 2023 Focus group discussions). The students insinuated that through this process, it would be easier for them to understand how to write good academic English and put their thoughts, ideas, and feelings into context. In addition, one participant (1Eana, 2023 Focus group discussions) referred to a learning approach in which a model of the task is demonstrated, followed by an activity that tests one's understanding. The students' recognition of the need for application is aligned with cognitive presence in Col. They pointed out that they wished to be given exemplars that would help to clarify the processes of academic writing. While students showed interest that the lecturers write to explain matters of concern, they preferred real-life exemplars to be given to demonstrate how to write effectively.

This preference reveals the students' wish to decrease psychological distance, thus eliminating it where possible, as reflected by their desire to see a task physically done. As such, they expect that the process of observing how such a paper is produced would lower the distance that they feel between themselves and the task of writing academically. Communication gaps are identified in the students' focus on seeking perfect exemplars of essays and failing to obtain sufficient explanations. This has dual implication in TD theory as it raises a point on how students can ensure that minimal psychological distance separates students from what is taught in class. The students' proposal for exemplars show that they require a more practical style of learning. According to Harmer's (2004) view, several strategies are used in the writing

instruction. As for the approach that would suit students, lecturers need to identify which of the methods best fits the needs of their students. Harmer (2004) maintains that lecturers have to make choices whether they wish to prioritise their students' focus on the writing processes over the final product, whether they want students to explore diverse writing genres, or if their goal is to enhance their students' creativity in writing (Harmer, 2004).

4.3 Findings from the Structured Open-ended Evaluation Questions

Similar inquiries were posed in the structured open-ended evaluation questions as those presented in the FGDs. This methodological alignment serves the purpose of cross-validation, to enhance the reliability, credibility, and trustworthiness of the data gathered (Cabitza et al., 2021). Employing consistent queries across different data collection methods, the study seeks convergence in participant responses to reinforce the strength of the findings.

As Denzin and Lincoln (2018) assert, employing multiple data collection methods and triangulating findings enhances the credibility and dependability of qualitative research. In this context, the convergence of responses from both FGDs and structured open-ended evaluation questions contributes to the reliability of the study's findings.

Research question 2: How do the EAW101 students experience the academic writing challenges in the module?

This question sought to elicit how EAW101 first year students experience challenges in academic writing. Students were given evaluation questions on the discussion forum on the Moodle LMS. Themes were generated and are discussed below.

4.3.1 Challenges of being a First year Student in an ODeL Institution

Students indicated that they experienced academic writing challenges in EAW101 because they were first year students and novices to the ODeL context. The following are some of their responses on the structured open-ended evaluation questions.

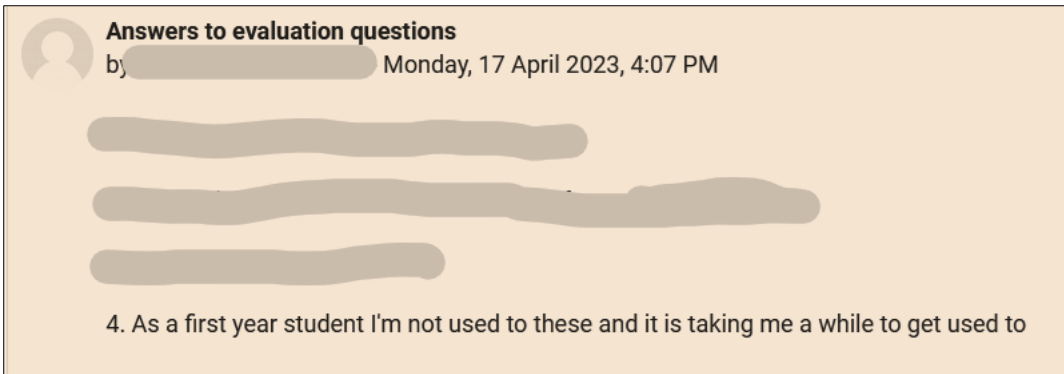


Figure 4.1: Verbatim response from 2Ana (2023 Evaluation questions)



Figure 4.2: Verbatim response from 1Cana (2023 Evaluation questions)

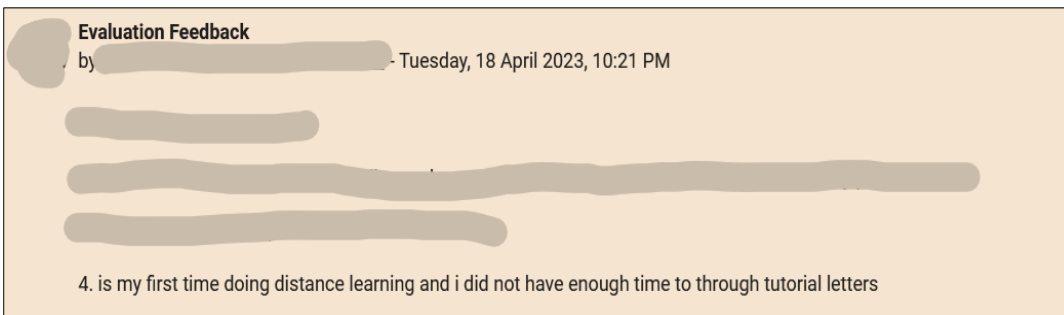


Figure 4.3: Verbatim response from 2Eana (2023 Evaluation questions)

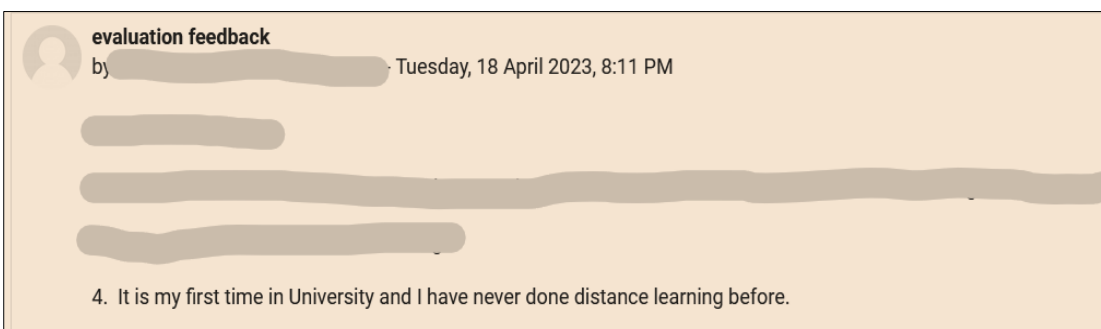


Figure 4.4: Verbatim response from 3Dana (2023 Evaluation questions)

It can be noted from these responses that participants attribute their academic writing difficulties within the module to their being first year students in the ODeL university.

Participants indicated that they are not used to long-distance learning (2Ana, 1Cana, 2Eana & 3Dana, 2023 Evaluation questions). The change of learning context to a new type of learning platform could affect the behaviour of students and their self-confidence. This is supported by Al-Mukdad (2019), Ankawi (2020), Banda (2017) and Mbirimi (2012) who posit that first year students have difficulties in their writing skills because lecturers have not taken time to introduce them to different writing styles to qualify them for higher learning which contributes to high dropout rates. The difficulties include lack of time to thoroughly study the tutorial letters and ineffective communication of expectations. A weak interpretation of guidelines causes TD which shows is the urgent need for an interface that minimises such a gap. The situation demonstrated by the first year students highlight the hurdle of transitioning to a new context of learning.

Linked to the first year challenges, cognitive presence quantifies students' engaged process of making meanings out of the contexts in which they are learning. It is possible to provide productive interactive discussion, talk or group assignments which would in turn provide some knowledge on how to manage distance learning effectively (Archambault, Leary & Rice, 2022). From the study, social presence is an important determinant of ODeL, particularly at the first year of study. For first year students, this increased interaction with peers as well as lecturers reduces social isolation, creates purposeful learning environment, and self-confidence. To create an online community with other students through which vulnerable students can talk to their peers, learn about each other's experiences, and find mutual support is crucial, since isolated students is a key issue in students' mental health (Onat & Bertiz, 2022). Besides, it contributes to reducing loneliness and promotes the development of a comprehensive sense of belonging to an academic community. The presence of a teacher is essential in guiding first year distance learning students (Anderson et al., 2001; Zhang et al., 2022). A set of strategies can help lower the possible TD specifically; lecturers should set out the conditions, provide students with easy access to materials, and make the students feel comfortable with the new learning modalities. The combination of analysis in TD theory and the Col theory explains the difficulties that first year students in ODeL encounter. Through research, ODeL institutions learn how to reduce psychological distance, communication barriers and enhance feelings of community that help in the adaptation of first year students to the institutions.

Most of the participants in the structured open-ended evaluation questions indicated that they encountered academic challenges which contributed to their phlegmatic performances in the EAW101 module.

4.3.2 The Learning Curve of Academic Writing

Most of the participants in the structured open-ended evaluation questions indicated that they encountered academic challenges which contributed to their poor academic performance in the EAW101 module. The following are some of participants' verbatim responses:

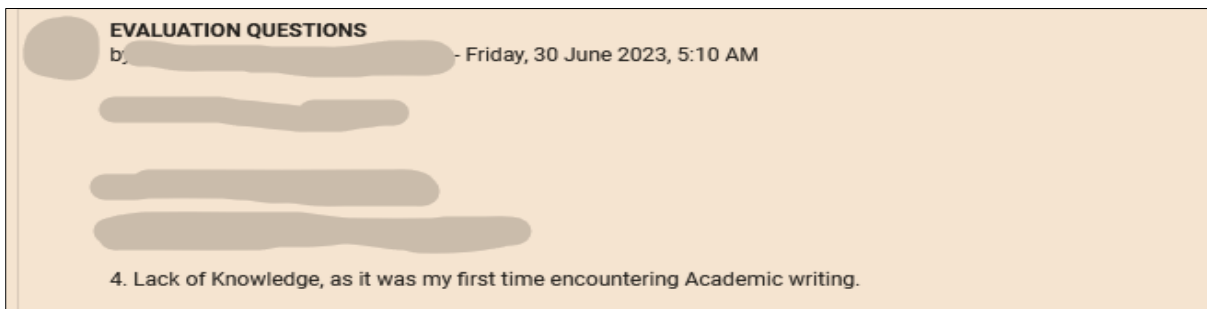


Figure 4.5: Verbatim response from 3Ana (2023 Evaluation questions)

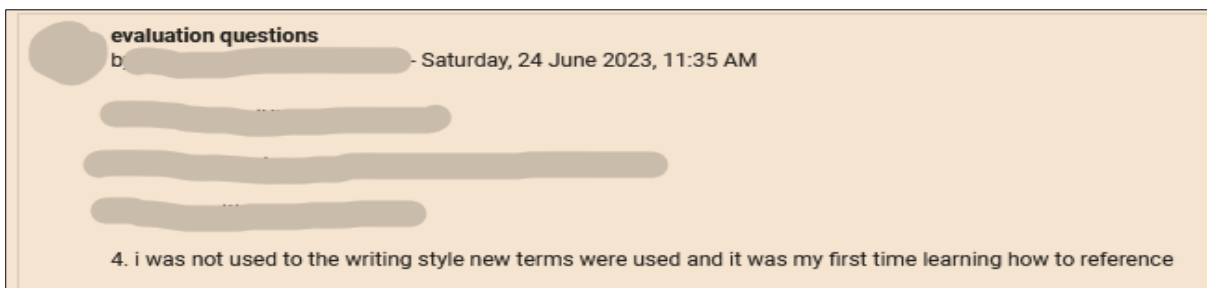


Figure 4.6: Verbatim response from 2Cana (2023 Evaluation questions)

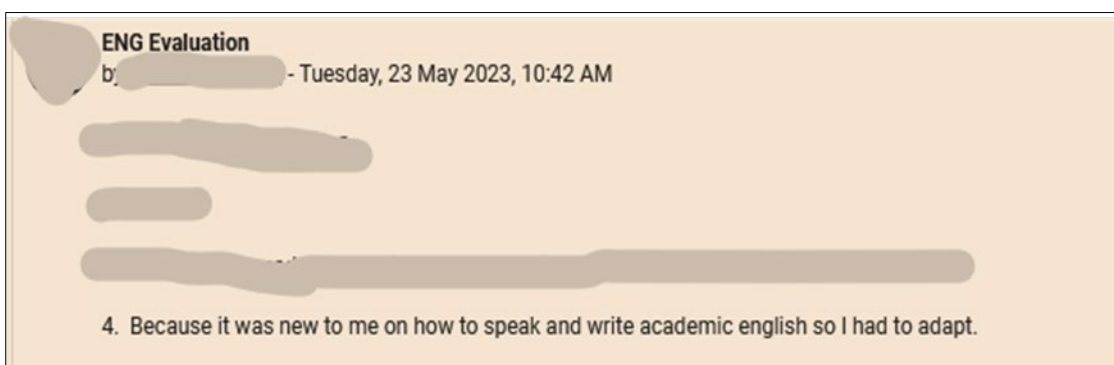


Figure 4.7: Verbatim response from 1Bana (2023 Evaluation questions)

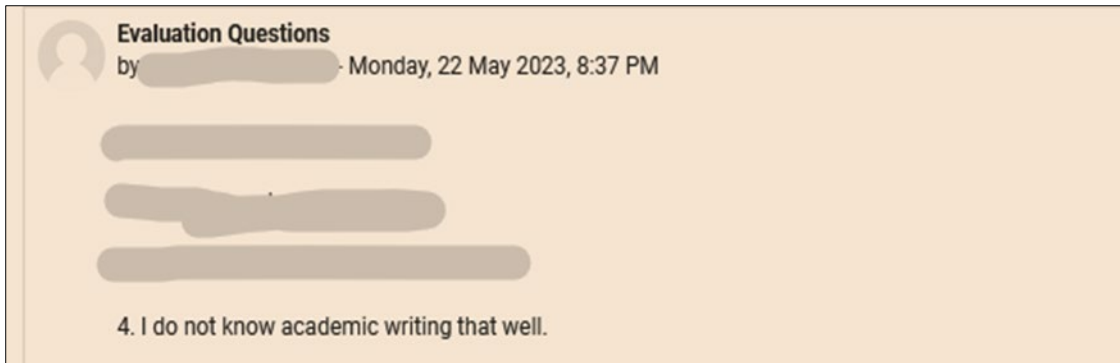


Figure 4.8: Verbatim response from 1Eana (2023 Evaluation questions)

Students indicated that they found it difficult to write in an academic format due to lack of experience. According to 3Ana and 1Eana (2023 Evaluation questions), their challenge was that they encounter a format of writing that they have never used prior to entering university. 2Cana (2023 Evaluation questions) identified lack of knowledge of the writing style, new words and how to reference as some of the areas of concern while 1Bana (2023 Focus group discussions) observed that most of the time was spent adjusting to speaking academic English and writing as well. While reviewing the responses from 3Ana, 2Cana, 1Bana and 1Eana (2023 Evaluation questions), the primary challenge is embedded in that academic writing is new to students and the process is quite challenging when it comes to mastering general rules of writing. This assertion is aligned to what scholars such as Mendoza, Lehtonen, Lindblom-Ylänne & Hyytinen (2022) and Zhang and Zhang (2022) have argued that first year students struggle to express themselves in a clear and logical manner through writing because they were not exposed to English language in their early development. Furthermore, first year students struggle with academic writing as they have not yet been exposed to academic writing conventions (Teng, Qin & Wang, 2022).

Students' lack of knowledge and the introduction of new terms require cognitive presence in the Col (3Eana, 2Cana, 1Bana & 1Eana, 2023 Evaluation questions). Social presence is a factor that can help students cope with specific demands related to academic writing. To encourage students to engage in conversations and participate in group activities is central to creating an environment that reduces the sense of isolation but would rather cultivate a climate of co-learning. In terms of teaching presence, it is essential to the first-time academic writers' interactions. Lecturers take an additional responsibility to increase their students' understanding by

explaining, giving exemplars, and providing resources. This proactive teaching approach is helpful in preventing alienation in the learning process (Garrison, 2019) and this gives students efficient tools to manage the challenges provided by academic writing.

The responses also show some psychological distance on the part of the students as they have never written any academic texts before enrolling for this module. According to Sebolai (2019), academic literacy is one of the language skills which should be developed to handle all the challenges related to learning. Research reveals that it is a common phenomenon that most first year students suffer from an academic language because English as medium of instruction is their second language (Mutepe, Makananise & Madima, 2021; Mphasha, Nkuna & Sebata, 2022). This implies that the students have to understand new modes of writing, becoming, valuing, and believing (Gee, 1996).

The students' problems with writing assignments point to the rise in the extent of TD, especially in 'structure'. Their ignorance of the academic rules and regulation as illustrated from 2Cana and 1Bana (2023 Evaluation questions) depict a sort of a structure in the learning process whereby there are limited directions on writing style, specific language and referencing, making the learning process difficult. The level of autonomy needed to operate in these academic conventions when lecturer-face is insufficient, or in the form of didactic teaching, non-directiveness, elaborated guidance or feedback. Teng et al. (2022) posit that first year students are often novices to writing academic content to an extent that they place a high cognitive load and require direct in writing instruction to overcome the TD that exists between them and the writing expectations they are likely to encounter academically.

Col and TD theories assert that higher teaching presence and increased social presence can help to decrease the TD and increase the cognitive presence, and in particular, assist first year students in their struggle with practical academic writing. Instead of assigning tasks, expressing ideas, and encouraging the interaction of students and lecturers, more opportunities of structured communication can be offered through enhanced interaction with learning materials to help students become familiar with academic requirements.

4.3.3 Lack of Knowledge of the Harvard Style of Referencing

Citation and references are important components of academic writing. Citing and referencing in an academic writing module acknowledges scholars' contribution of knowledge in a particular discipline. Students in EAW101 struggle with Harvard style of referencing and the following are some of the participants' verbatim responses from the structured open-ended evaluation questions.

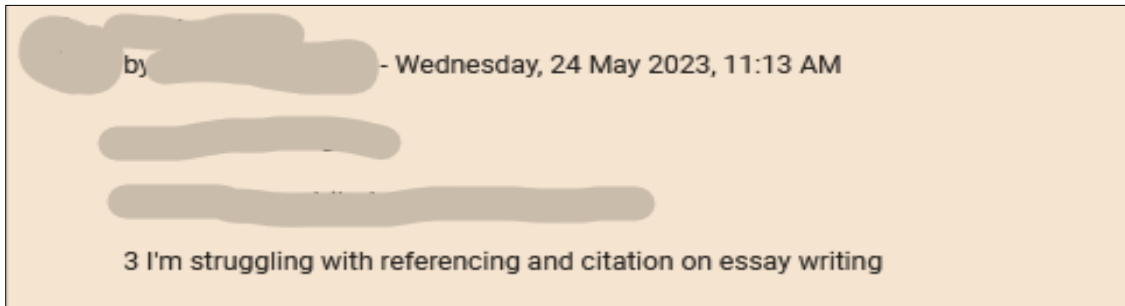


Figure 4.9: Verbatim response from 2Bana (2023 Evaluation questions)

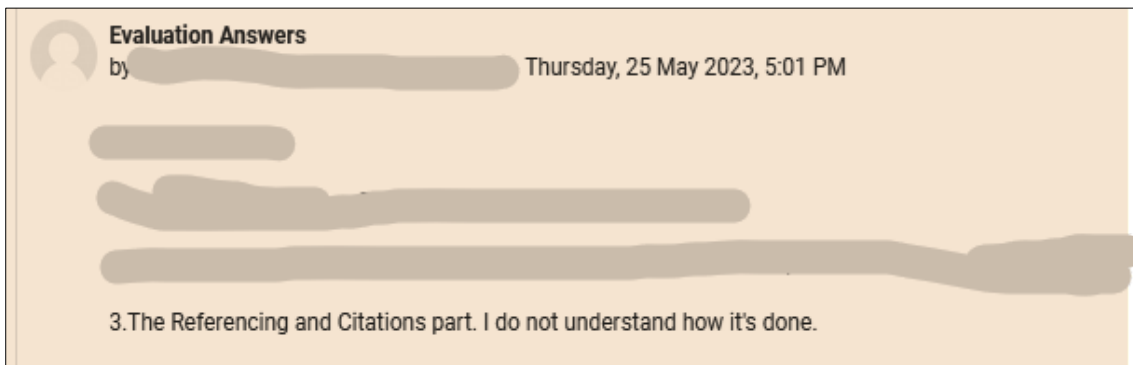


Figure 4.10: Verbatim response from 2Dana (2023 Evaluation questions)

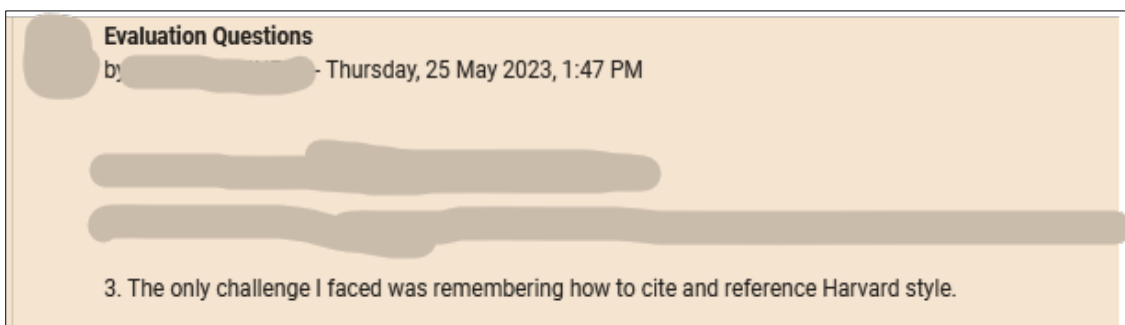


Figure 4.11: Verbatim response from 1Ana (2023 Evaluation questions)

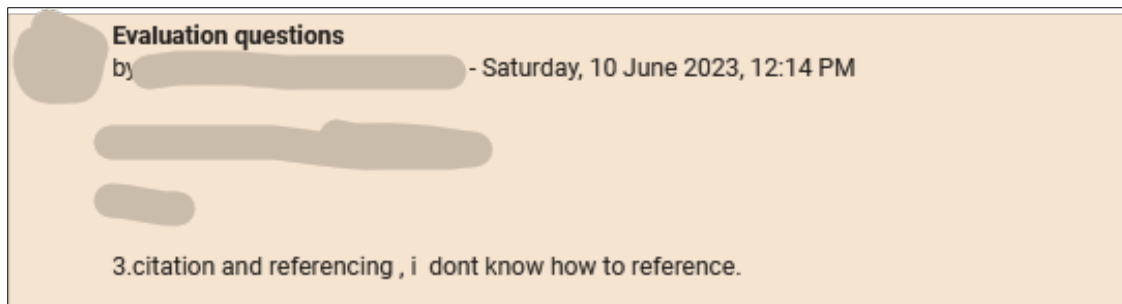


Figure 4.12: Verbatim response from 1Dana (2023 Evaluation questions)

From the responses above, it is evident that students face tremendous concern with regards the referencing and citations, more specifically with the comprehension, or implementation of the two. From the FGDs, 2Bana and 2Dana (2023 Evaluation questions) reported challenges of referencing and citation while 1Ana (2023 Focus group discussions) reported challenges in remembering on how to use the Harvard style correctly. In the same way, 1Dana (2023 Evaluation questions) confessed to not knowing how to reference at all. These responses indicate lack of adequate practice and that citation and referencing continue to be a concern for these students in general.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, most first year students struggle with academic writing because they have not yet been exposed to academic writing conventions before (Banda, 2017; Mbirimi, 2012; Al-Mukdad, 2019; Ankawi, 2020). From the above responses, it can be inferred that the difficulties noticed in citations and referencing imply the need for cognitive presence (Nkateng & Makoko, 2021). Students in higher learning institutions are trained on different skills such as writing. One of the most crucial features of academic writing skills consists of citations, where the authors' ideas are recognised in the academic community. Arsyad, Zaim and Susyla (2018) argued that citations and references are academic writing requirements that are necessary because knowledge in various fields has been created by other academic scholars whose principal goal is to broaden readers' understanding of a specific subject. Students in EAW101 module often quote other people's opinions without credible citation or ignore the reference sections completely. One can surmise that the instructional paradigm has failed to adequately educate students about proper academic referencing standards.

Students' challenges with referencing and citations can be resolved through the lens of the Col theory in terms of teaching presence and cognitive presence. Teaching presence, which encompasses guidance and structuring of learning, seems not to be effective in meeting the students' needs of developing proper referencing and citation. From analysing the responses above, these students have difficulties with regards to how to refer or recall given citation styles (2Bana, 2Dana, 1Ana& 1Dana, 2023 Evaluation questions). This also impacts on the cognitive presence of students since they are unable to attend to the task of writing because of the cognitive load of either remembering how to reference or learning how to reference. Thus, it may be challenging for the students to construct meaningful knowledge in their writing if a teaching presence is not sufficiently present to provide clear instruction, exemplars, and practice with citations.

These challenges can be argued to have led to the TD in structure and dialogue. The absence of specific directions and feedback on how to use referencing formats such as Harvard does not enable students to overcome this area of writing. Since students never learned these conventions from the lecturers, they have to learn them on their own as they are in an ODeL institution. To close this transactional gap, there is a need for the use of more instructional approaches that would assist with the necessary skills of referencing and citing.

4.3.4 Transition from Everyday Language to Academic English

Most first year students in South Africa and around the world are fresh from high school and transitioning to using academic English language is a challenge (Soundy, Mphahlele & Khashane, 2024). The following are some of verbatim responses from students indicating challenges of transitioning from everyday language to academic English:

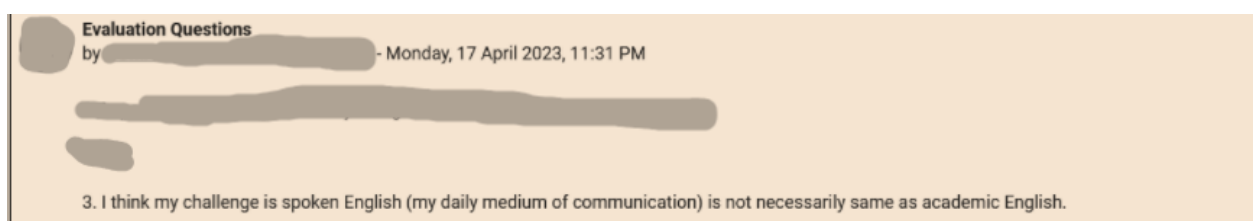


Figure 4.13: Verbatim response from 3Bana (2023 Evaluation questions)

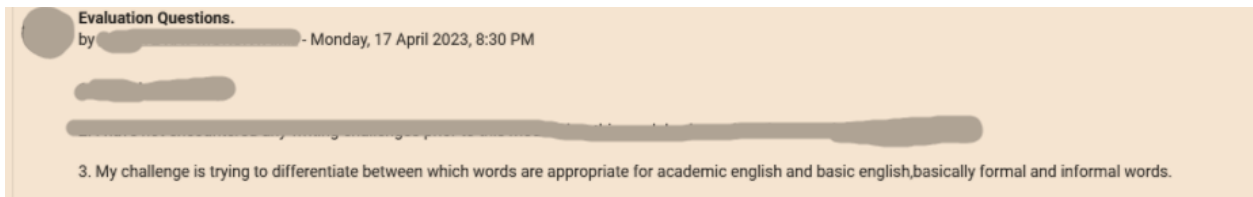


Figure 4.14: Verbatim response from 2Cana (2023 Evaluation questions)

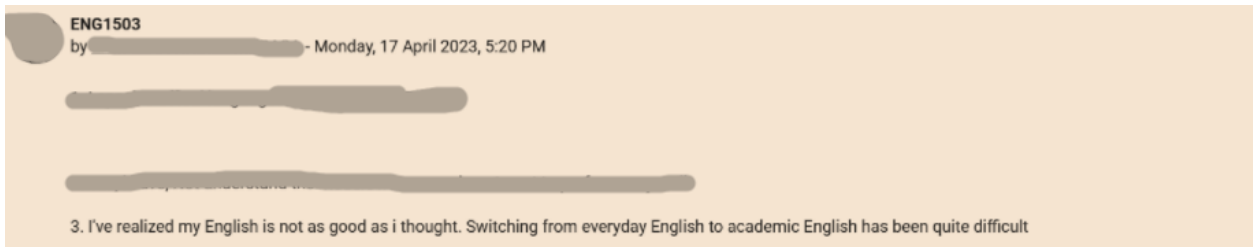


Figure 4.15: Verbatim response from 1Eana (2023 Evaluation questions)

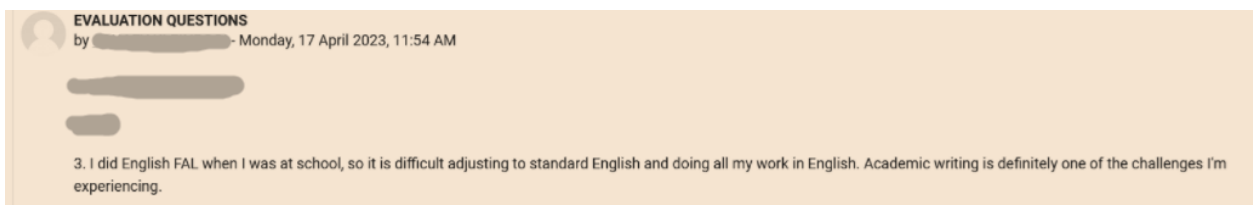


Figure 4.16: Verbatim response from 2Eana (2023 Evaluation questions)

Students' verbatim responses draw attention to their difficulties in transitioning from informal English to academic English. Both 3Bana and 1Eana (2023 Focus group discussions) admitted that their spoken or informal English is different from the formal and formulaic academic English hence the challenge in the transition. Similarly, 2Cana (2023 Evaluation questions) misinterprets the differences between the formal and informal language required in an academic setting. 2Eana (2023 Evaluation questions)'s experience of having learnt English as the First Additional Language (FAL) at high school level makes it challenging to write standard English for academic purpose complicating even more to the task of effectively tackling academic writing exercises. These responses suggest a more pervasive problem of students' pragmatic shift which requires employing English in a more scholarly way in academic context.

In terms of the autonomous and ideological models of literacy postulated by Street (1984), the autonomous model perceives literacy as a technical process not related to social context. This model perceives academic English as a list of procedures a student must go through. On the other hand, the ideological model argues that literacy

practices are social and cultural by nature, as well as having relations to power and identities (Street,1984). This model concentrates on the circumstances within which language is employed and the attitudes linked with different types of literacies. For example, 3Bana (2023 Evaluation questions) refers to the practice between spoken English and academic English addressing the meaning of the autonomous model concerning linguistic skills. On the other hand, 2Cana (2023 Evaluation questions) negotiates the opposition between the formal and informal register, which is securely anchored in the ideological model, as such distinction is constructed by the norms of sociability and academic practice. Likewise, 1Eana (2023 Evaluation questions)'s concern, translates into a realisation about the impossibility of switching between the everyday language and the academic language corresponds to the ideological model, which means having to change between the particular social contexts. Finally, 2Eana (2023 Evaluation questions) consistently said, though she learnt standard English as an additional language, it took her some time to adapt to using standard English. This also supports the ideological model that considers social and cultural aspect of language in use.

The difficulties stated by 3Bana and 1Eana (2023 Evaluation questions) can possibly diminish cognitive presence because problems with language learning interfere with the students' capacity to think in depth about the provided materials. 2Eana (2023 Evaluation questions) to some extent changes the teaching presence as teachers need to accommodate student's backgrounds with a focus on comprehending the standard English used. According to Moore's TD theory, students and lecturers' psychological and communication gap can either be a barrier or an enabler of learning. Therefore, the higher levels of TD mean that students must be more independent and self-assured. The outcomes of 3Bana and 1Eana (2023 Evaluation questions) indicate higher TD, language mediated potentially requires more independent learning processes and lecturers' assistance. 2Cana and 2Eana (Evaluation questions) experience TD as their writing contains linguistic mistakes that must be addressed through individual guidance to close the gap between the students' abilities and the academic demands.

Cummins (1979) identifies between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS means language used

in social interdisciplinary situations while CALP is the language used in the classroom (Lestari, Sabarun & Qamariah, 2023). With 2Cana (2023 Evaluation questions), differentiation between the two types of vocabulary is work that has been done regarding the difference between BICS and CALP, academic language expectations of the precise and formal languaging. This is evident through 1Eana (2023 Evaluation questions)'s difficulty of translating from informal English, the register used in her daily interactions, to more formal academic English, typical of the CALP mode. 2Eana (2023 Evaluation questions) finds challenges in adjustment issues also linking with CALP because academic language entails complex academic language processing. The students' impression reveals both the convergence and the interconnection of various literacy and language learning models and theories. To overcome such difficulties, instructional strategies should respond to different aspects of Academic English as to technical knowledge and as to practical circumstances, which includes social and cultural contexts. Lecturers therefore have a role of teaching their students how the gap between BICS and CALP could be closed, where TD is minimised and the development of the community of inquiry is facilitated.

4.3.5 Poor connectivity issues

In an ODeL institution, students and lecturers are physically and geographically apart and utilise technological online teaching aids to assist students with academic writing. However, there are challenges with online study materials such as poor connectivity. The following are verbatim responses of students who indicated that poor connectivity affects their academic writing performance:

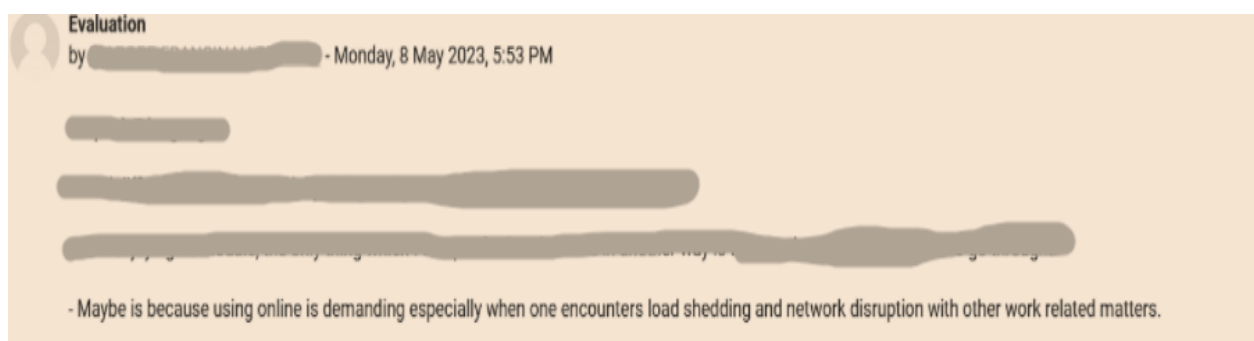


Figure 4.17: Verbatim response from 1Eana (2023 Evaluation questions)

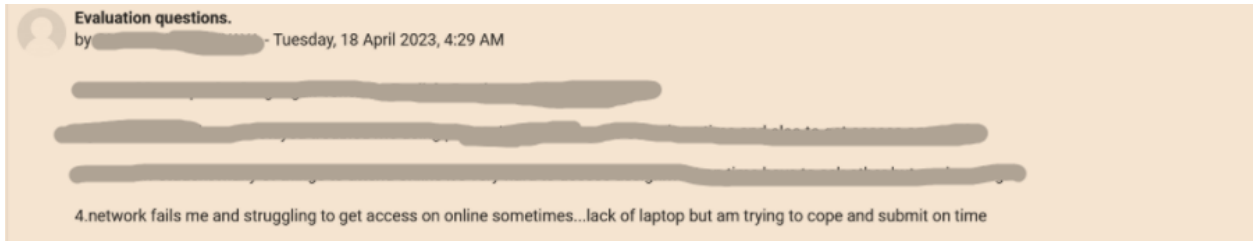


Figure 4.18: Verbatim response from 3Bana (2023 Evaluation questions)

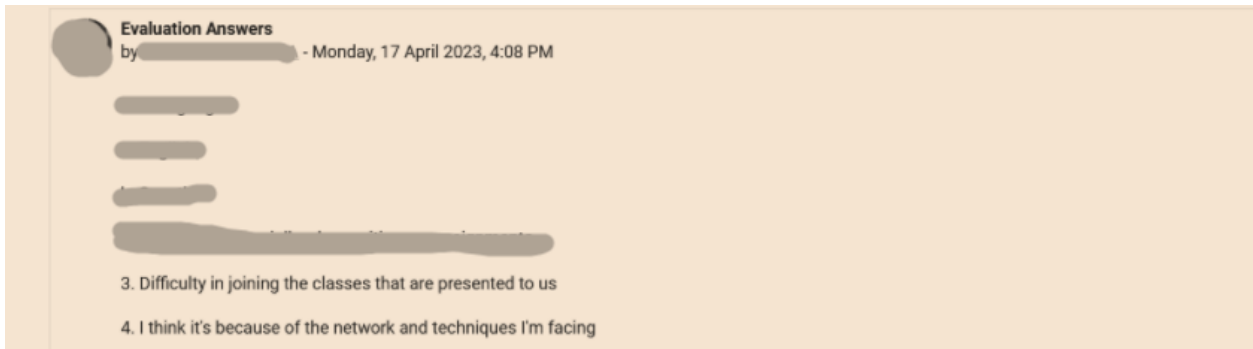


Figure 4.19: Verbatim response from 2Ana (2023 Evaluation questions)

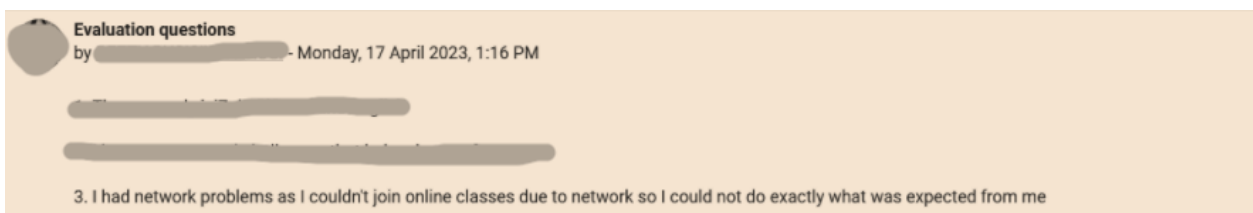


Figure 4.20: Verbatim response from 2Bana (2023 Evaluation questions)

From the students' responses, external factors which affect their access to online learning include loadshedding and network interruptions. 1Eana and 3Bana (2023 Evaluation questions) stressed how persistent network problems and power cuts hindered their engagement in online learning alongside other concerns resulting from work-related matters. 2Ana and 2Bana (2023 Evaluation questions) also experienced network issues which made them unable to access lectures through the online classes. Further, 3Bana (2023 Evaluation questions)'s failure to own a laptop contributed to such difficulties because they struggled to submit their assessments on time.

Since the 1990s, the world has seen significant changes in education because of the influence of technology (Barrot, Llenares & Del Rosario, 2021). One such development is the adoption of online learning across different learning contexts, whether formal or

informal, academic, and non-academic, and residential or remote (Barrot, Llenares & Del Rosario, 2021). Many students experience problems due to poor internet connectivity in online education (Khalid, Aman, Javed, Asim, Jabbar & Salman, 2023). This is evident in the responses from the students (1Eana, 3Bana, 2Ana & 2Bana, 2023 Evaluation questions) above. These include poor Internet service, loadshedding and unfavourable home learning environment which were aggravated when students are marginalised in remote areas (Barrot, Llenares & Del Rosario, 2021).

In this context, the CoI posits that effective online learning environments are built upon three interdependent elements: cognitive, social, and teaching presence that are outlined by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000). Cognitive presence pertains to the learning ability of students to build and verify meanings through ongoing reflection and discussion, social presence is the capability of students to establish themselves as personalities, while teaching presence involves the implementation of requisite learning and interaction processes. 1Eana's (2023 Evaluation questions) concern with disruption of network hinders her from getting engaged online affects cognitive presence because only timely connection provides for consistent reflective discussions. 3Bana's (2023 Evaluation questions) inability to access the online platforms, no access to a laptop impacts on social presence since it constrains her from effective participation in the learning community. 2Ana and 2Bana's (2023 Evaluation questions) network challenges are correlated to teaching presence since they miss important directions and support from lecturers due to inability to attend classes (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). The TD theory postulates that psychological and communication separation between students and lecturers can affect learning (Moore, 1993). In ODeL, technological factors can lead to high TD, which implies increased student self-directedness and communication proactivity from the lecturers. The experiences of 1Eana, 3Bana, 2Ana, and 2Bana (2023 Evaluation questions) indicate that many challenges, such as network difficulties, mean that it is necessary to design effective and self-learning tools and ensure that lecturers come to students' aid more often (Moore, 1993). Cummins (1979) makes a distinction between BICS, and CALP. BICS concerns the spoken language in social contexts and CALP is the language required for learning. With regards ODeL, students have to cope with not only the language load of academic English but also with the use of terminology related to the tools and technologies of distance learning. 1Eana and

3Bana (2023 Evaluation questions) conceived written essays in network disruption and limited access to technology so although they may have BICS, their CALP remains in the developmental stage. Difficulty experienced by 2Ana and 2Bana (2023 Evaluation questions) to join their online classes through a network constrained them, limiting their chances to develop CALP.

ODeL calls for support infrastructure and dependable technologies if learning experiences are to succeed. The students' responses stress the importance of having access to technology and reliable internet connections while enrolled in the ODeL system. Internet interruptions, the absence of devices, and issues with the infrastructure hinder their chances of participating in online classes and submitting tasks. Thus, 1Eana and 3Bana's (2023 Evaluation questions) difficulties with network and device access demonstrate massive structural problems in ODeL, which are compounded by socio-economic differences. Technological challenges when working and learning from home as 2Ana and 2Bana (2023 Evaluation questions) do point to the fact that internet connection is a crucial component of students' day-to-day; however, technological issues are a part of life and frequently disrupt educational processes. In the case of 2Ana and 2Bana (2023 Evaluation questions), a stable connection to the Internet would allow them to attend online classes, lectures and submit cogent assessments. An analysis of the students' responses confirms problems faced in the ODeL are not only technical but also affect the socio-economic and infrastructural arrangements in terms of the model of literacies. Using the Col and TD theory, one can understand how these barriers impact the cognitive, social, and teaching presence categories along with the psychological distance between students and lecturers. The distinction of BICS and CALP helps to explain how the environmental conditions hinder students' academic language development. These issues have to be solved through a multifaceted approach that implies the enhancement of the technological platform, the provision of access to gadgets, and the primary focus on assisting the students exposed to the discrepancy between the didactics of the online learning environments and their cognitive development.

4.3.6 Supportive Non-sanctioned tools

Students in ODeL institutions require more support as they are geographically apart from their lecturers. Non-sanctioned tools assist students with their academic writing

skills. EAW101 module has various non-sanctioned tools such as Telegram, podcasts and vodcasts for students to utilise in the module. The following are some of verbatim responses from students about how supportive non-sanctioned tools have contributed to their learning:

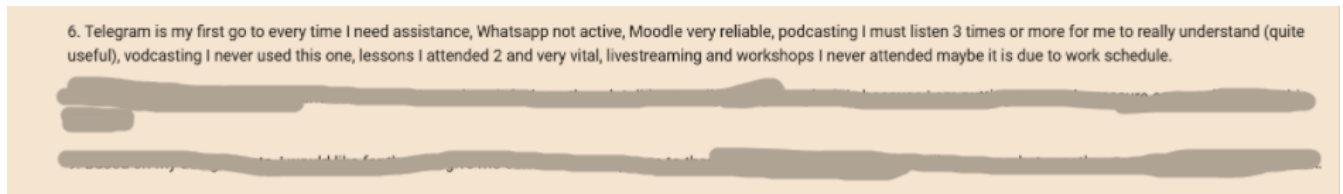


Figure 4.21: Verbatim response from 1Ana (2023 Evaluation questions)

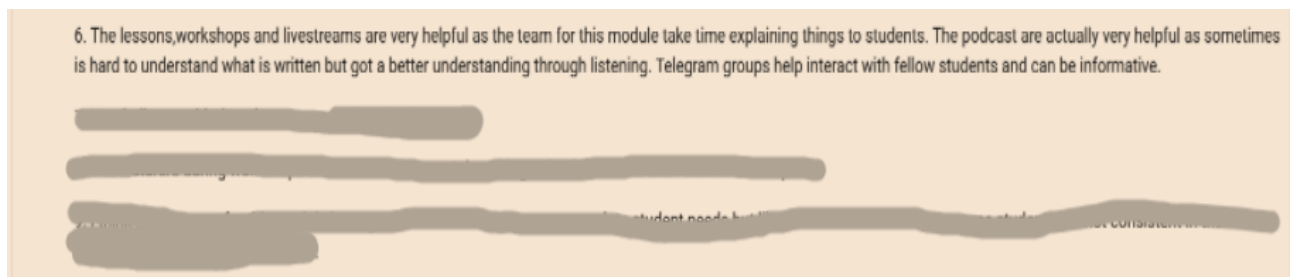


Figure 4.22: Verbatim response from 2Bana (2023 Evaluation questions)

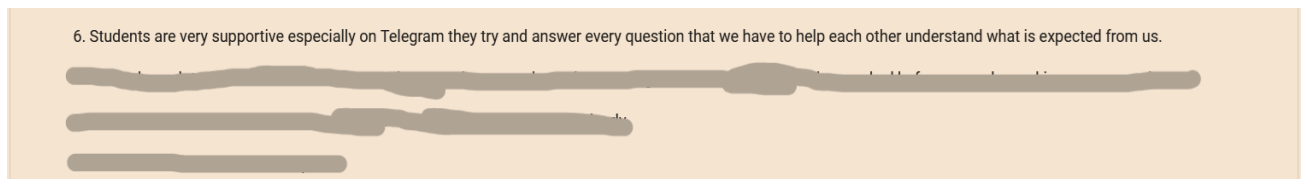


Figure 4.23: Verbatim response from 3Cana (2023 Evaluation questions)

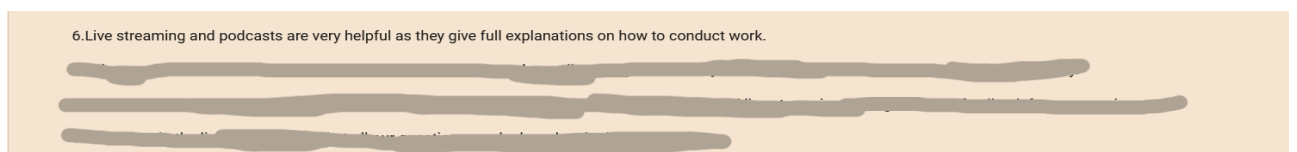


Figure 4.24: Verbatim response from 2Dana (2023 Evaluation questions)

The responses above indicate the usefulness of diverse online learning tools and platforms. 1Ana (2023 Evaluation questions) indicated that Telegram and Moodle are the most dependable platform for assistance. Podcasts and vodcasts are beneficial and the information presented has to be listened to several times for full understanding. On the other hand, 2Bana and 2Dana (2023 Evaluation questions) indicated that livestreams, workshops, and podcasts are beneficial in grasping the

concepts wherein 2Bana (2023 Evaluation questions) likes the way lecturers explain each step. Telegram's openness to communication and working with others was highlighted by 3Cana (2023 Evaluation questions) who further elaborated that it provides opportunities to interact with their peers.

In the ODeL context, and in the context of this study, non-sanctioned tools are defined as the digital tools, platforms, applications, and resources not recommended by the learning institution used in learning process. Texting using the mobile phone, particularly, Short Messaging Services, and other messaging apps like WhatsApp or Telegram were often included in planning for the support and facilitation of education at a distance as was the case with the various strategies listed by Jordan, Damani, Myers, and Zhao (2023). This concurs with the responses from the students, where they highlighted a major use of unsanctioned apps such as Telegram as supportive instruments in learning activities. 1Ana and 3Cna (2023 Evaluation questions) clearly point out how important Telegram in the context of their education is where 1Ana (2023 Evaluation questions) refers Telegram as her first point reference for assistance. Students are relying on Telegram, which is not an LMS, let alone an approved one like Moodle, means that students are on the lookout for additional resources to augment their language learning and effective writing protocols. Non-sanctioned tools also tend to fill what seems to be missing in the sanctioned tools and resources in terms of accessibility and versatility, such as in the use of Telegram. For instance, 2Bana and 2Dana (2023 Evaluation questions) recognise the benefits of podcasts and livestreams and 1Ana's feedback demonstrates her difficulty in absorbing the content of the podcasts without replaying them. This challenge of 1Ana's (2023 Evaluation questions) points to the fact that recommended tools are helpful but may not meet the needs of all the students, especially those who need complex and sensitive tools to support their learning.

These verbatim responses from the evaluation questions indicate the usage, in some capacity, of different educational tools and platforms in different capacities, which shows the discrepancy of their interactions with students. For instance, students consider Telegram as an important tool of communication when it comes to students support and quick help (1Ana and 3Cana, 2023 Evaluation questions). This correlates with the Col theory since the levels of social presence are fundamental in the learning

that takes place in online learning environments. Through group announcements and channels, Telegram helps students interact with one another and as a result care, practicability, and social presence are fulfilled as suggested by Garrison et al., (2000). At the same time, the responses raise a question of applicability in TD theory, to which dialogue, structure, and student autonomy contribute to distance in educational interactions (Moore, 1993). The failure to actively engage on the platforms such as WhatsApp or the limited participation of some students in the live sessions as posted by 1Aana (2023 Evaluation questions) could also lead to an increase in TD and hence the learning outcomes. The feedback on using content delivery media such as podcasting, vodcasting and live streaming also corroborates the kind of TD. 2Bana and 2Dana (2023 Evaluation questions) confirm audio and live video projects as useful noticing that podcasts and livestreams make concepts easier to understand. This is in line with the thinking that, in order to minimise the TD, other student-centred approaches need to be adapted, providing for variety in learning styles. But 1Aana (2023 Evaluation questions)'s experience of listening to podcasts only once or twice to grasp the materials implies higher TD is mainly because there is no direct communication as proposed by Moore (1993). This could be resolved by incorporating contesting features into these instruments, including flow or surveys that may improve involvement and understanding.

Some students like 2Bana (2023 Evaluation questions) are able to perform daily workshop and livestreams, but there are also students like 1Aana (2023 Evaluation questions) who cannot interact with these types of materials due to time difference. This has implications for lecturers who must consider both the Col theory as well as TD in their design of online programmes. When the module delivery is targeted to compensate for differences in the students' availability and the mode of learning, the TD would be reduced, and the elements of cognitive and social presence improved.

However, as mentioned, non-sanctioned tools support students in EAW101 module in as much as they also have their own challenges. Some responses are illustrated below.

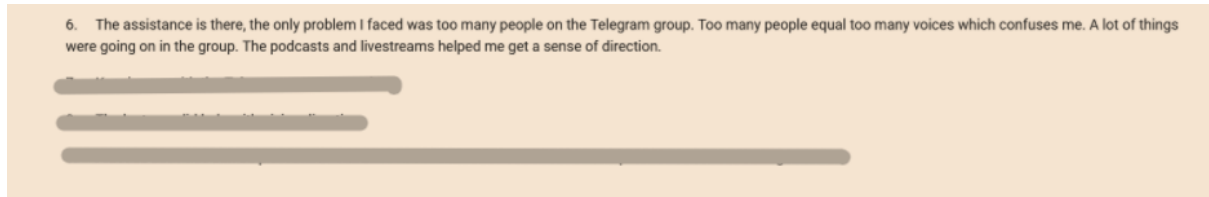


Figure 4.25: Verbatim response from 2Ana (2023 Evaluation questions)

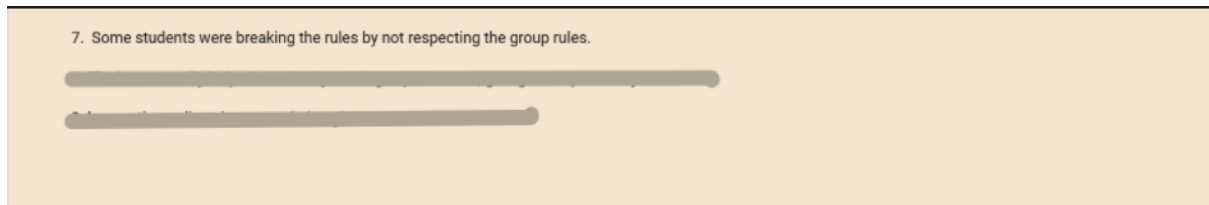


Figure 4.26: Verbatim response from 2Eana (2023 Evaluation questions)



Figure 4.27: Verbatim response from 2Cana (2023 Evaluation questions)

The above verbatim responses from 2Ana, 2Eana and 2Cana (2023 Evaluation questions) share sentiments that as supportive as non-sanctioned tools are, they may also be problematic, especially if they lead to misinformation and confusion. Most of these platforms are unmonitored from educational institutions, and therefore, can turn into sources of misinformation, which results in misunderstandings that affect the students' academic performance. Furthermore, the lack of quality assurance and conformity to module learning outcomes may cause students to attend to low quality or inaccurate content that may take them from the intended learning targets.

4.4 Findings from the Observation Schedule

To observe student support initiatives available for EAW101, I went through podcasts, vodcasts, the Telegram group, discussion forums, and lessons to see how these initiatives assist students with the teaching and learning of academic writing. Moreover, I observed students' thoughts regarding those initiatives and generated themes.

Research question 3: How do study materials and student support initiatives assist students with their academic writing?

This question required me to go through the student support initiatives available for EAW101 module to explore how they assist students with their academic writing. Themes generated from the structured observation schedule are discussed in the sections which follow.

4.4.1 Supportive Student Support Initiatives

The primary purpose of the EAW101 module is to develop students' capacities to read and write critically and improve their usage of academic English. Furthermore, this module assists students to understand various academic writing styles and academic context that includes research-based essays which follow certain conventions, citation and referencing skills (ODeL University, 2021). The EAW101 module is a semester module that is offered fully online. Therefore, all study materials are available and downloadable on the module site, and assessments are submitted online. Lecturers in EAW101 compile student support initiatives that help the students with academic writing. Such activities involve podcasts, vodcasts, virtual classes (livestream), a lecturer-student module group on Telegram messenger, and group discussions on the module site. The following are screenshots of some support measures for students that exist in the module.

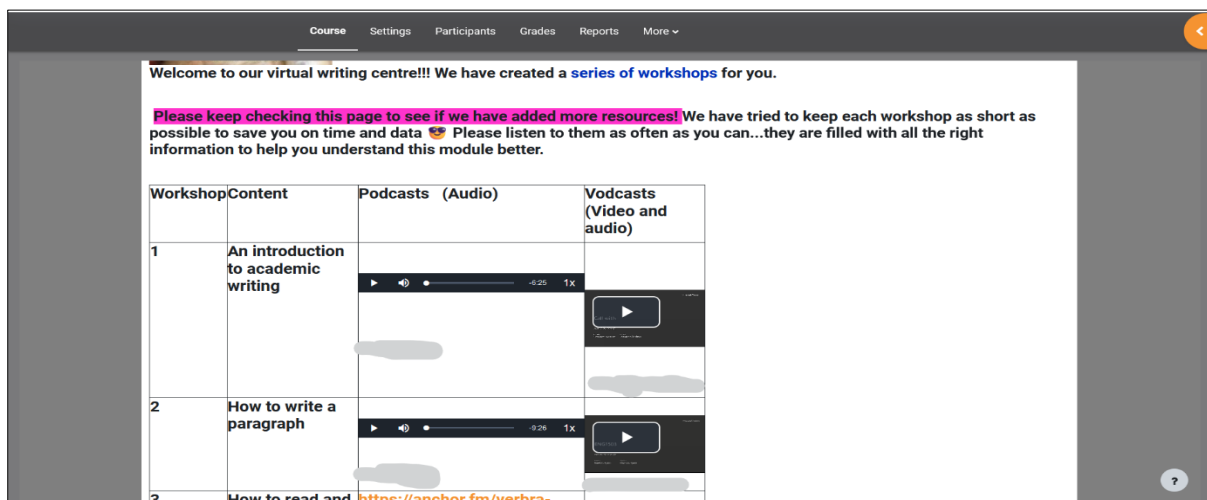


Figure 4.28: Screenshot of EAW101 podcasts and vodcasts

Figure 4.28 illustrates podcasts and vodcasts available in EAW101 which provide supplementary assistance to students with various components of academic writing. These include an introduction to academic writing, guidance on writing effective paragraphs, how to read and answer short paragraph questions, how to edit and proof

read, how to develop an argument, how to use the Harvard style of referencing for citations and referencing, and how to write a research-based essay.

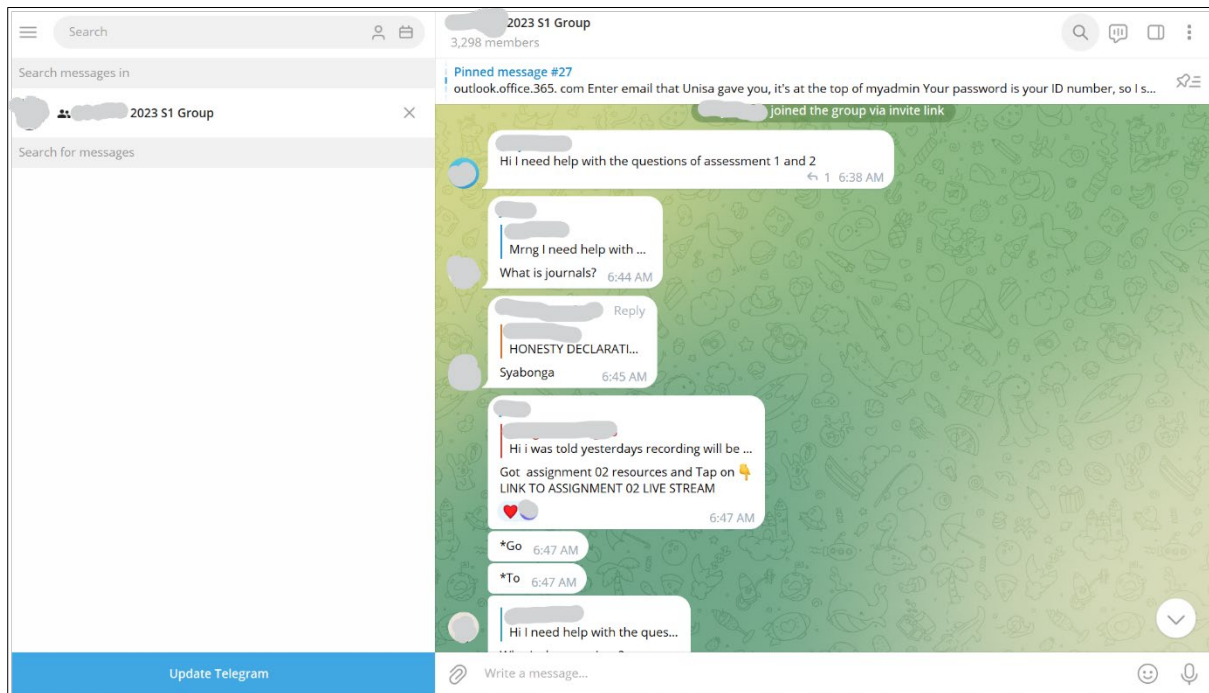


Figure 4.29: Screenshot of the EAW101 Telegram group

The EAW101 lecturers have established a Telegram community to encourage a social and interactive space for students that is both user-friendly and convenient. The group, which boasts over 3000 participants, comprises both students and lecturers. This Telegram platform serves as a significant resource for academic writing support, as students can easily share challenges by posting queries on the group. In turn, they promptly receive responses, not only from their peers, but also from lecturers. Telegram encourages active interaction and collaboration with students in ODeL context and this is aligned with Col theory. A social presence is achieved in the real-time group discussions, the cognitive resources are shared and through a quick feedback and guidance from the lecturers. Telegram eliminates TD as it enables the continuity of communication between students and lecturers and that eliminates isolation in distance learning approaches (Moore, 1997).

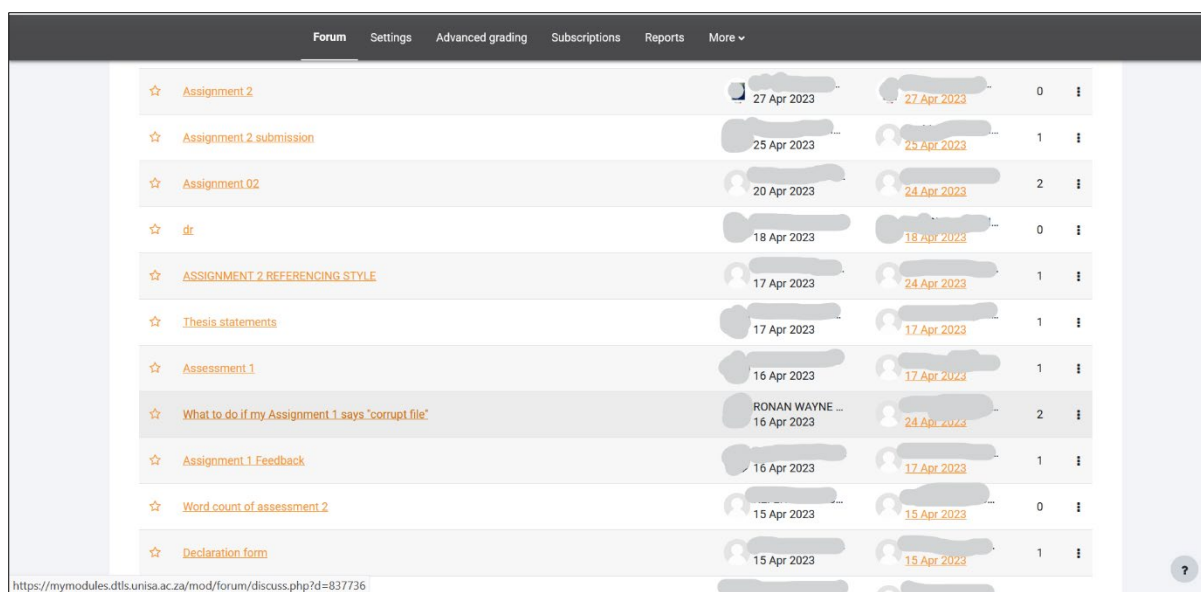


Figure 4.30: Screenshot of the EAW101 discussion forums

Figure 4.30 is a discussion forum where students registered for the EAW101 module interact with one another to ask questions and get clarity and assistance from fellow students as well as lecturers. Online discussion forums are the most important components of ODeL environment where students engage actively and intensively with each other as well as with the content of the module. In the CoI, discussion forums enhance the social, cognitive, and teaching presences in an online module. Students can converse with other students and lecturers and create a learning community through learning communications and collaborations known as social presence. Students are required to reflect on their own learning experiences and that of others as well as evaluate and deepen their understanding through purposeful and meaningful learning interactions of a cognitive nature (Anderson et al., 2001). According to the concepts of the TD theory, discussion forums minimise the psychological and communication divide between students and lecturers. Asynchronous discussions allow forums to continue discussion, while the student does not experience loneliness within the learning process. This equally enhances student independence (Moore, 1997). For the first year students particularly, these platforms are useful to create confidence, enhance participation, and establish the students as part of the learning community.

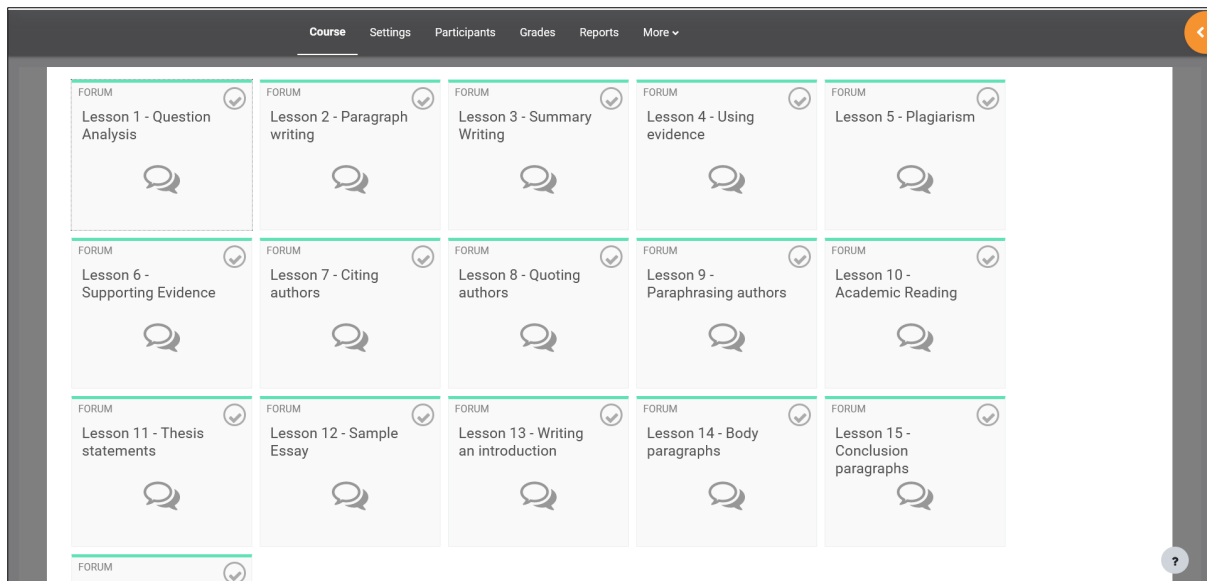


Figure 4.31: Screenshot of the EAW101 Lessons

Lecturers design lessons to help students on academic writing. Structured online lessons help first year students to enhance their learning process. These lessons in Figure 4.31 promote teaching presence within the Col theory as these convey understanding, content and directions that support students' learning processes (Garrison et al., 2000). They also increase cognitive presence since they allow the students to work with the materials to encourage deeper learning and critical thinking. According to the TD theory, online lessons make it easier for the students and lecturers to overcome the TD by ensuring that the content is available, consistent, and easily accessible for students to go through at their own time (Moore, 1997). Such flexibility enables first year students be self-directed and at the same time, remain in touch with what they are learning and who is teaching them.

4.4.2 Students' Challenges with Student Support Initiatives

The ODeL context comes with its own challenges. Students mentioned that the significant challenge in EAW101 is primarily related to poor network coverage and technical problems. The following are some of the observations from students' challenges with student support initiatives which are illustrated in Figures 4.32 and 4.33.

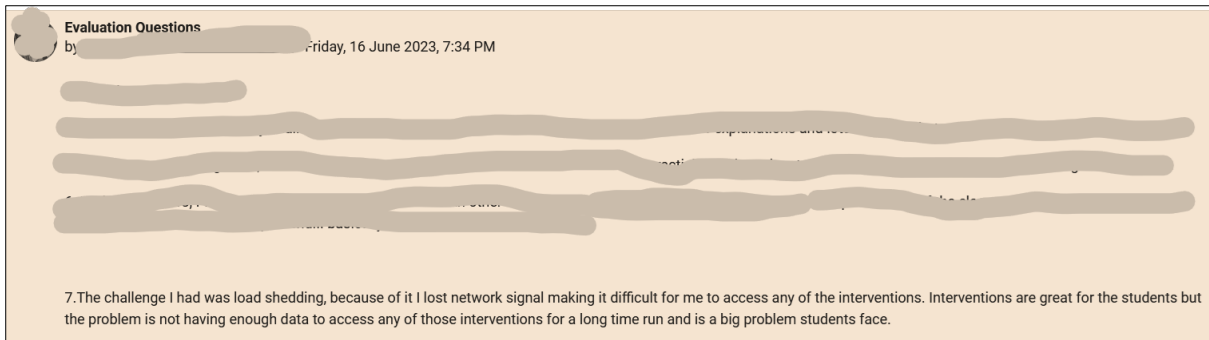


Figure 4.32: Screenshot of students' posts regarding challenges they encounter

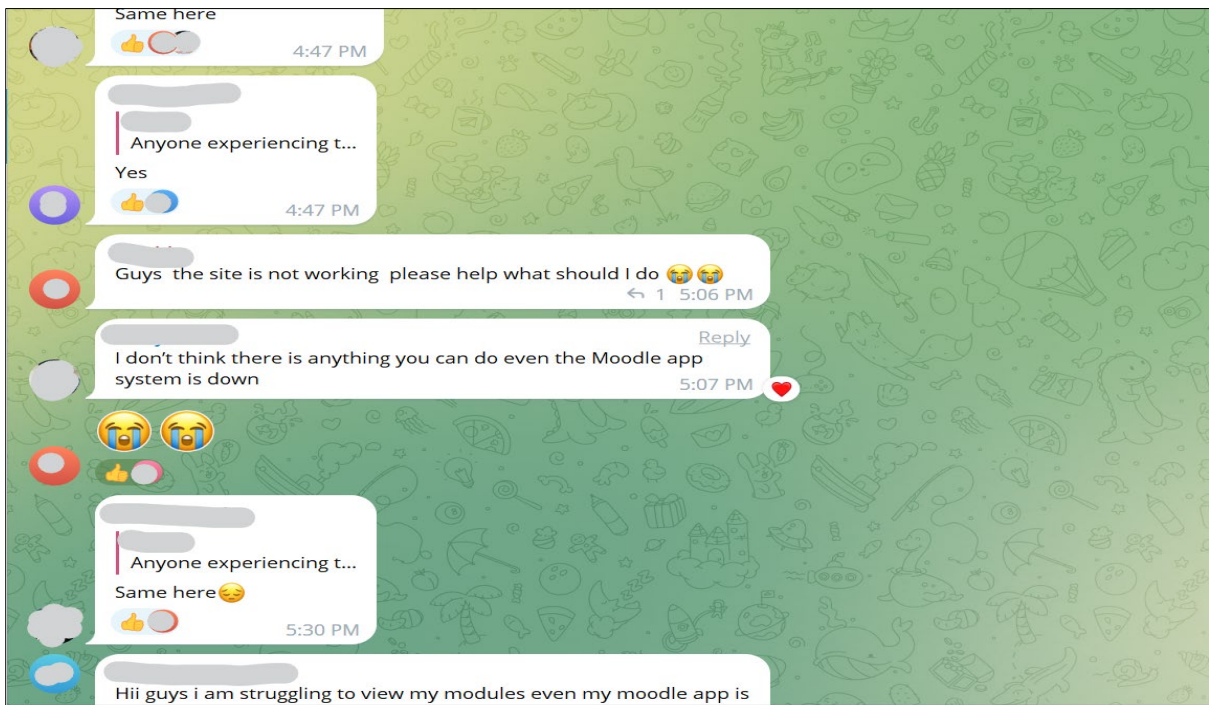


Figure 4.33: Screenshot of students' challenges with student support initiatives

The responses of the participants are illustrated in Figures 4.32 and 4.33 which shows that some challenges with student support initiatives include network problems and system crashes. Scores of technical challenges encountered by the students namely lengthy and interrupted sessions of downloading highlight the TD inherent in the digital learning platforms (Mohale, 2023). The argument presented asserts that these are not just timeliness strains but reality and transactional realities that disrupt the smooth flow of information. From the perspective of CoI, I found that the hardships of students from low background rural environment as a blatant social presence concern. The difficulties they experience in getting connected to the Internet lead to social interactions that enhance group identity and thus, a context of constraint with regards

access to information on the web and stability of the networks. Nevertheless, this common adversity is another threat to the cognitive presence – their direct participation in the content learning process. It is pertinent issue to substantiate these technical concerns as not only logistical but as the hindrances to communication and cognition in the learning process.

According to research studies by DHET (2021), Lentz (2020), Myende and Ndlovu (2020), Nadhianty and Purnomo (2020), Raaper and Brown (2020), there are systemic challenges of students from underprivileged rural backgrounds. The technical issues, as illustrated in Figures 4.32 and 4.33 highlight a specific issue with education equity. The critical reflection here is that radical changes and essentials of system enhancements and effective networks have been identified as critical to successful digital learning performance. It is not a simple call to provide resolutions to the problems affecting daily technical operations; it is a call to eliminate structural factors that hinder students' access to education especially from rural areas.

4.4.3 Acquiring Knowledge through Discussion Forums

Another student support intervention that assists students with their academic writing challenges is the discussion forums. A discussion forum is where students registered for the EAW101 module interact with one another on the Moodle LMS to ask questions, get clarity and assistance from fellow students, as well as lecturers. Some interactions between students and lecturers are illustrated in Figures 4.34 and 4.35 below:

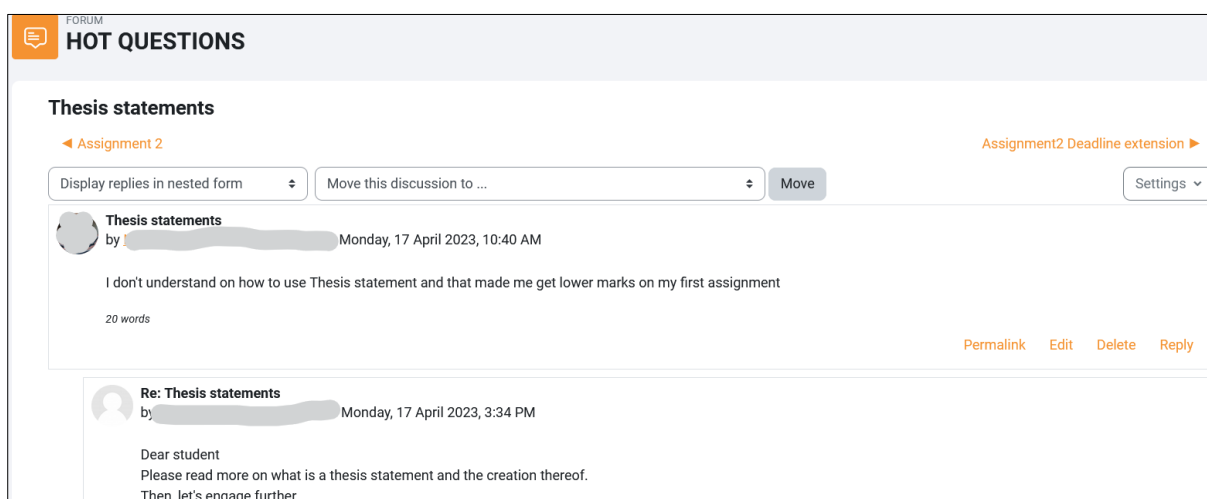


Figure 4.34: Screenshot of a student-lecturer interaction

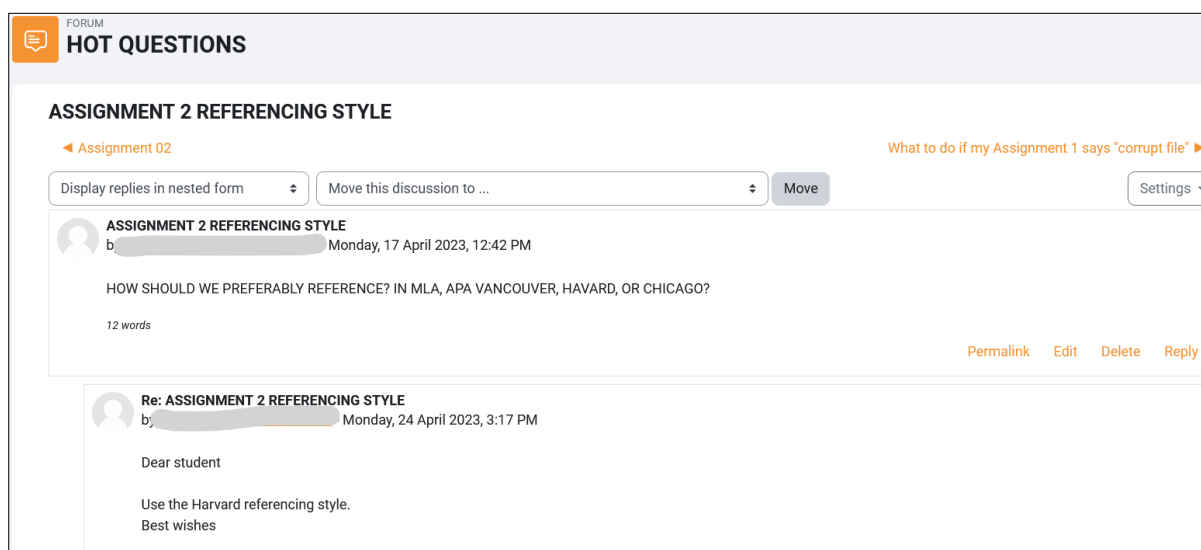


Figure 4.35: Screenshot of an interaction between a student and a lecturer

Online communication between lecturers and students as shown in Figures 4.34 and 4.35 is a critical feedback and input channel in ODeL since it increases students' satisfaction in the absence of a face-to-face contact. Withing Col, these interactions represent teaching presence where lecturers participate in discussions, give feedback, and actively steer the learning process using either synchronous or asynchronous communication channel. Furthermore, online interactions increase aspects of social presence and humanisation of distance learning environment that is crucial for first year students who may experience a sense of isolation while studying. Constant use of online discussion forums reduces the TD between students and lecturers (Moore, 1997). The responses given by lecturers through constant dialogues may be through e-mailing, live streams and online messaging apps and these help reduce misunderstanding, ensuring that the content in the module is perfectly understood. Being virtually present in other individuals' interactions is not only a sign of productivity, but a prerequisite for building a positive learning climate (Majeski, Stover & Valais, 2018).

4.4.4 The Transformative Potential of the Telegram Messenger

In this study, I understand sanctioned or non-sanctioned as tools that are commonly used in higher education, especially in ODeL contexts. Sanctioned tools are recognised, and official tools used by a university whereas non-sanctioned tools such

as Telegram are not officially recognised. The Telegram group was established to create a social environment for the EAW101 module, and many students have utilised Telegram to assist them with any inquiry regarding the module. Figure 4.36 depicts an interaction between students using the Telegram app.

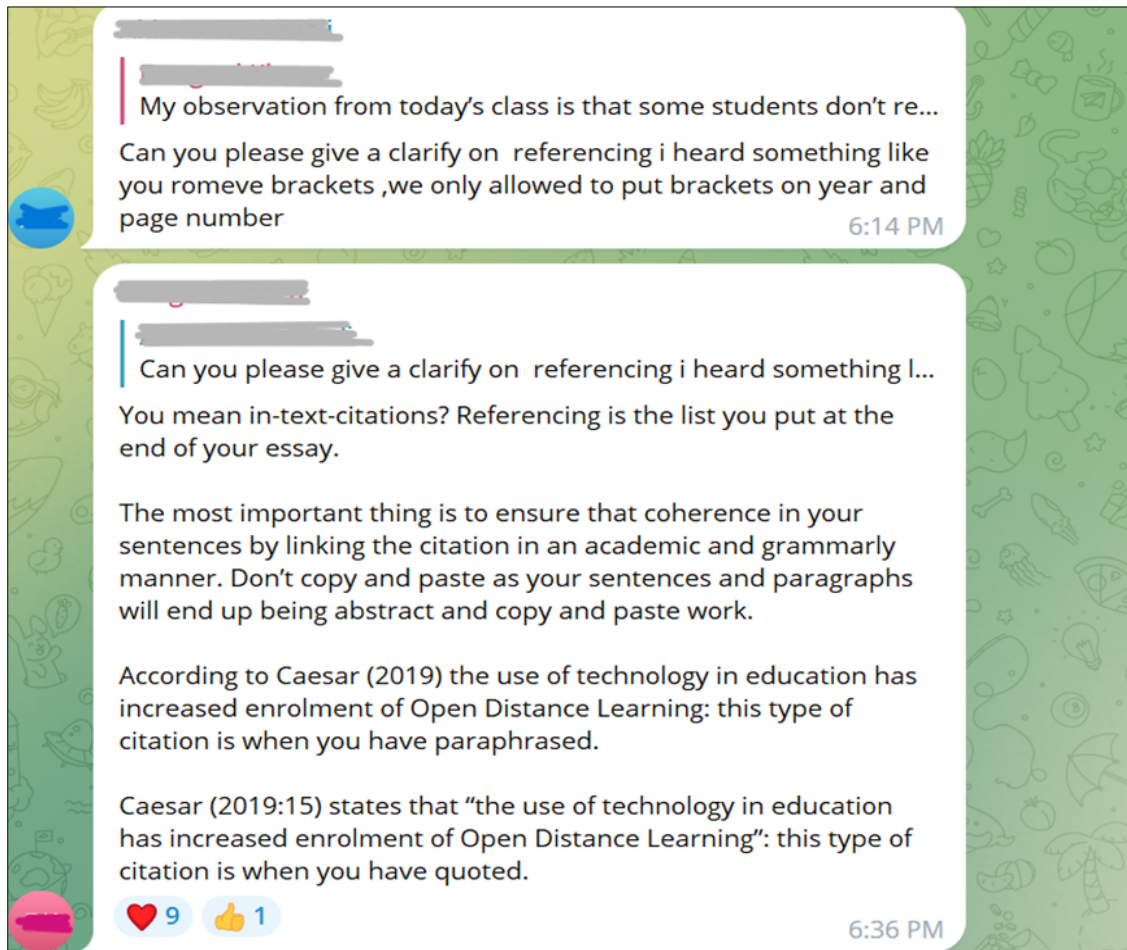


Figure 4.36: Screenshot of students' interaction

Students in EAW101 frequently participate in the Telegram group throughout the semester as it is easily accessible and available. Students prefer the Telegram group to the Moodle LMS since they spend most of their time on social platforms; hence, Telegram becomes a social context in which the EAW101 students and lecturers discuss issues concerning EAW101 content. The lecturers participate among more than 3000 users who are in the Telegram group. In this aspect, Telegram helps students in their academic writing, especially when a student encounters a challenge, and they raise it in the group and immediately get responses from other students and even lecturers. Students' interaction illustrates that Telegram is easy to use and is

quite useful in their studies as indicated in Figure 4.36 which describes a student seeking clarification on how to reference sources in their writing. The second student was quick to respond with exemplars, within less than 30 minutes from the time the question was asked. Such interaction proves that Telegram is a suitable and useful digital application that assists EAW101 students to improve their skills in writing. These findings are aligned with studies that have argued that the support of integration of educational technology and social media application in teaching academic writing (Sevnarayan, 2022; Sevnarayan & Mohale, 2022; Wong, 2022). As an effective communication tool as well as a versatile one, future prospects of Telegram point to its capacity to overcome geographical barriers and connect students from around the globe (Aghajani & Adloo, 2018; Aladsani, 2021; Swartz, Valentine & Jaftha, 2022). The majority of the students in EAW101 module find it useful to be informed via Telegram in terms of announcements that are posted in the module site. Another example of a screenshot illustrates students' activities in Figure 4.37 below.

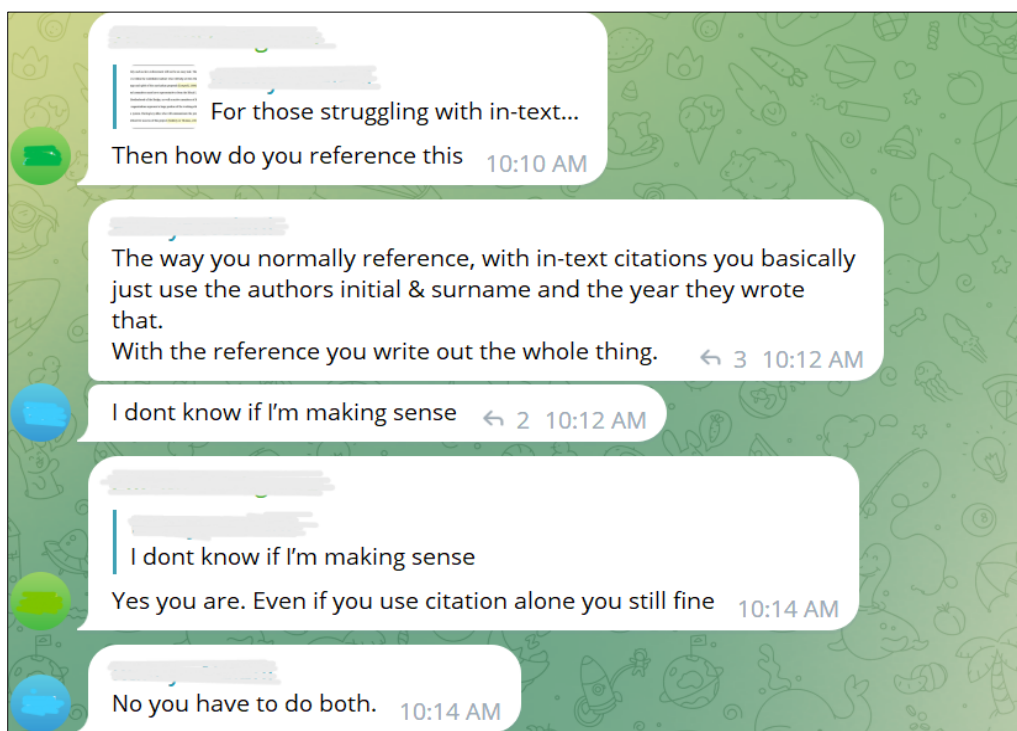


Figure 4.37: Screenshot of students assisting each other

The screenshot in Figure 4.37 shows students participating in the Telegram group and helping each other with their assignments without waiting for their lecturers to attend to them as captured in Col and TD. Students who assist each other show elements of

social presence of the Col theory. The student-student communication that is passed through the newly created Telegram group complements a community that has students communicating with others. This setting minimises the sense of loneliness and enhances the learning programme since it is done in groups. It must be noted that the lecturers have a role to monitor the interactions among students and offer clarity on some points. From a TD perspective, the students' early and organised tackling of queries can be regarded as a strategy that reduces the level of TD (Moore, 1997). Students who provide support to each other eliminate both psychological and communication barriers. However, the fact that lecturers are still a part of the group monitoring the interactions and responding to the queries makes this platform a strategic one for tackling any possible misunderstanding that may arise.

As much as the basic concept of student assistance on the Telegram group enhances a learning community and active participation of students, it is necessary to question how efficiently and effectively this interactive platform meets the needs and learning preferences of all students. Others might require direct instruction more when issue covered is rather difficult or vague.

4.4.5 Other Non-sanctioned Tools as Supportive Resources

According to students' activities on the module site, many comments reflect that the available initiatives such as Telegram, podcasts, vodcasts and discussion forums have positively impacted their performance in the module. Figures 4.38 and 4.39 are some of the responses from students:

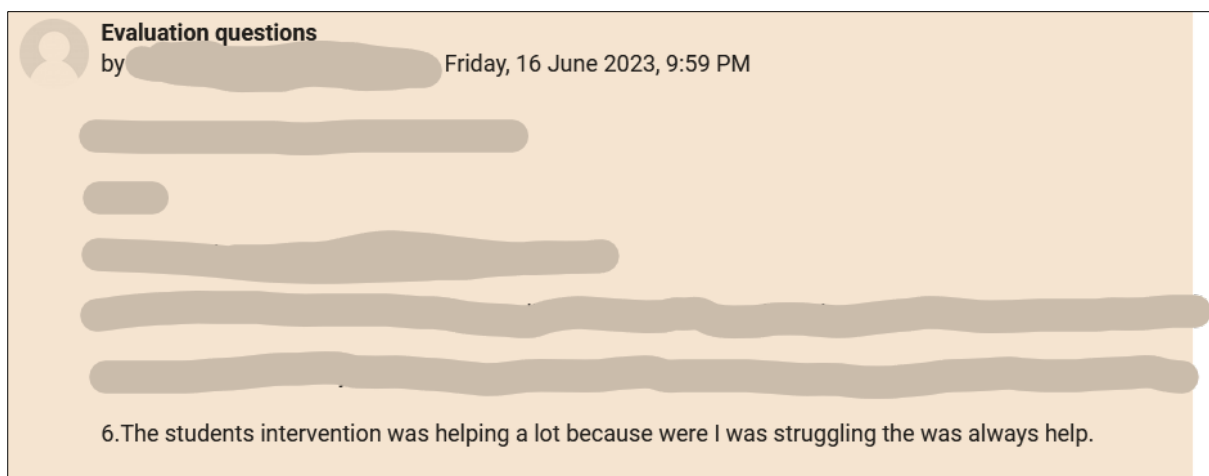


Figure 4.38: Screenshot of student indicating that student support initiatives assist them

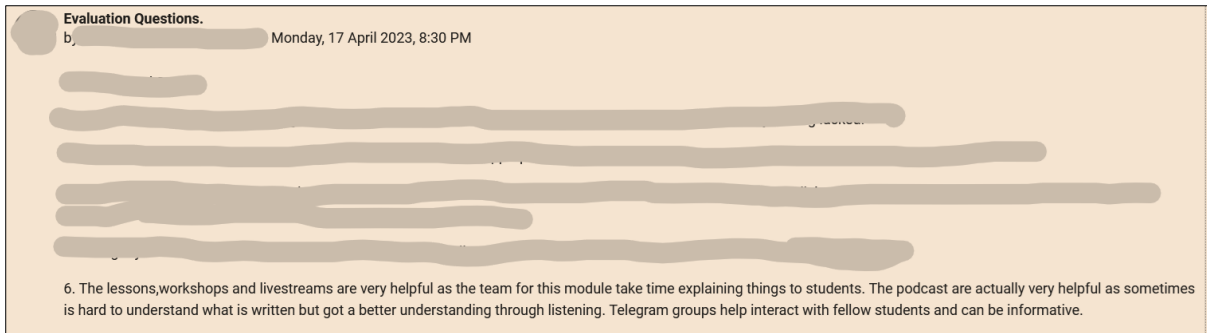


Figure 4.39: Screenshot of student explaining how student support initiatives have been beneficial

Student support initiatives such as Telegram podcasts, vodcasts and online forum discussion enhance students' academic writing skills. This is supported by responses from students in Figures 4.38 and 4.39 respectively. For example, to use Telegram group, it is easy for students and lecturers' communication as instant feedback on queries promotes the teaching and social presence within Col (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). On the other hand, online discussion forums promote reflective writing, peer reviewing and the sharing of ideas among the participants. These forums also assist in decreasing the TD between the students and lecturers as they engage in an asynchronous discussion and students do not feel isolated as pointed out by Moore (1997). In general, these initiatives enhance students' writing skills and, in particular, help first year students to adapt to academic writing at the tertiary level. This assertion draws focus on the pass rates in the five years of the EAW101 module which is illustrated in Table 5.1 below.

Table 4.1: Pass percentage of EAW101 from 2018 - 2023

Year	2018		2019		2020		2021		2022		2023
Semester	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1	S2	S1
No. of students admitted to exam	±13 000	±9 800	±15 000	±18 000	±28 000	±24 233	±12 410	±23 585	±15 376	±13 645	±15 000
percentage passed	60%	61%	69%	60%	72%	51%	80%	70%	67%	74%	84%
Percentage failed	40%	39%	31%	40%	31%	49%	20%	30%	33%	26%	16%

From Table 4.1 above, the performance analysis of the EAW101 over a period of five years was obtained from records of the university examination showing that the pass rate has been ranging between 50 percent and 80 percent. The data indicates that the module pass rate fluctuates. The pass rate in the first semester of the year 2020 was significantly higher in comparison to the same period of the years 2018 and 2019. This statistical analysis provides an idea of the students' performance over the years which supports the contention that a good number of students who register for this module find the process of writing challenging. Therefore, such students need assistance to obtain the appropriate level of mastery of the module in question. From Table 4.1 above, the year 2023 Semester 1 shows that performance of the EAW101 students has improved to 84%, which is the highest since 2018.

4.5 Discussion

Research question 1: What academic writing challenges do first-year EAL students encounter in the EAW101 module?

The first research question speaks to several academic writing difficulties experienced by first year EAL students in EAW101 module. The themes that emerged from this research question include unclear understanding of academic writing, struggling with paraphrasing, citations and references, English language as a barrier as some of the challenges students face. While students provide definitions that indicate formality, simplicity, and grammar in connection with academic writing, it is apparent that they do not have a holistic understanding of academic writing and its rules. This limitation in their writing ability can prove disadvantageous to first year students as they are expected to write at the university standard right from the start. The Col theory emphasises cognitive and social presence in their responses and the need to encourage students to develop a learning climate in which they can acquire critical assessment skills during knowledge creation processes that occur in the group (1Dana, 2Bana, 2Cana, & 3Eana, 2023).

Secondly, difficulty in handling paraphrasing, citation, and reference was another challenge mentioned by the students, where most of them appeared confused or frustrated in handling such aspects. These difficulties are attributed to the transition from high school to university writing expectations and lack of initial training in formats such as Harvard referencing (Teng et al., 2022). This lack of awareness highlights the

significance of teaching presence in mitigating TD and enhancing comprehensibility and clarity from the lecturers (Mendoza et al., 2022; Seyoum, Yigzaw & Bewuketu, 2022). These challenges are in consonance with the Col and TD theories because they assist in enhancing the instructional practices as well as the cognitive and psychosocial developments of students (1Ana, 3Bana, & 2Eana, 2023).

With regards English being a language barrier, these students are second language speakers which is a significant barrier because they fail to understand the poor explanations given by the lecturers. This issue is even more sensitive to EAL students because they experience heavy cognitive loads when learning in a language they hardly understand as non-native speakers (Cummins, 1984 as cited in Lestari, Sabarun & Qamariah, 2023). Some of the EAL students identified taking EFAL in high school as one of the reasons they struggle with academic English. There is an apparent link pointing to possible poor teaching of academic English in the schools where EFAL is offered partly because it is not taught systematically and explicitly (Pretorius & Murray, 2023). In addition, what these students suggest is that the distinction between English Home Language (EHL) and English First Additional Language (EFAL) is problematic as it creates the impression that EHL and EFAL are two distinct types of English with unequal expectations, which is not necessarily the case as shown by the approaches to teaching English in both EHL and EFAL (CAPS, 2011).

Furthermore, evidence that the two version of the English language curriculum are not necessarily distinctive comes from Makalela's (2023) study on critical evaluation of EHL and EFAL. The distinction between EAL and EHL may inadvertently perpetuate inequality and the CAPS curriculum seeks to ensure that 'the educational imbalances of the past are redressed, and that equal educational opportunities are provided for all sections of the population' (CAPS, 2011:4). Moreover, evidence that the distinction between EHL and EFAL may possibly perpetuate inequality is shown by the unequal allocation of learning and teaching hours for all the phases, with EHL allocated more hours than EFAL except in Grades 10-12 (CAPS, 2011:6). This is particularly disturbing because research shows that EFAL students tend to be those who do not speak English as a home language (Harmse & Evans, 2017). In other words, people

who are supposed to be exposed to more English in general and academic English in particular are getting less of the English.

It is clear that applying the Col theory through its cognitive, social, and teaching presence makes it easier to overcome barriers caused by different languages in promoting a better and more welcoming classroom atmosphere. Concrete actions and exemplars can help minimise the psychological remove and give an improved perspective where students need to discover how writing procedures occur in practice (3Dana, 2Bana, & 3Cana, 2023). Techniques like explaining the instructions and using exemplars could assist EAL students in managing scholarly writing challenges (Muthuswamy & Varshika, 2023; Pineteh, 2014). However, the reliance on model texts also raises concerns about the potential for rote learning, where students may focus more on replicating the provided exemplars rather than developing their own critical and analytical writing skills. Therefore, while model texts can be valuable teaching tools, it is crucial that they are integrated into a broader pedagogical strategy that encourages students to understand and apply writing conventions independently.

Triangulation ensured that the findings of this study are credible and trustworthy. The theme of struggling with paraphrasing, citation and references can be triangulated with the lack of knowledge of the Harvard style of referencing theme from the findings of structured open-ended evaluation questions (*refer to section 4.3.3*). The data from both the themes enhanced the credibility of the study which is important for the trustworthiness of this study. Figures 4.9 and 4.10 are screenshots from the structured open-ended evaluation questions which provided exemplars of the data that triangulated this theme. The fact that in both data sources the students expressed concerns about these mechanical issues of writing suggests that although these issues may be considered basic, and students' challenges of referencing and citation can be overcome through the lens of the Col theory in terms of the teaching presence and the cognitive presence. Teaching presence, which encompasses the guidance and structuring of learning, seems ineffective in meeting the students' needs of developing proper referencing and citation. From analysing the responses above, these students have difficulties with regards recalling and applying specific citation styles. From the perspective of TD theory, these challenges have led to the TD in structure and dialogue. The absence of specific directions and feedback on how to

use referencing formats such as Harvard does not enable students to overcome this area of writing. Since students never learn these conventions from the lecturers, they have to learn them on their own as they are in an ODeL institution.

The findings from this research question offer useful information about the academic writing difficulties of first year EAL students. Furthermore, it reveals major deficiencies in the approach used in instruction. This is a view that has necessitated enhanced elaborate forms of instruction, which is also specific, sustained, and constructive. Active student involvement in the process of comprehending relations between new information and prior knowledge in academic writing at university level must be encouraged. Using the ideas of Col and TD allows addressing these challenges. However, it is important to think about proper support of students' cognitive, social, and linguistic development to successfully implement these ideas in distance learning. These findings add to the body of literature comparing the effectiveness of support initiatives to improve students' academic performance as well as completion rates in higher education, especially among EAL students.

Research question 2: How do the EAW101 students experience the academic writing challenges in the module?

The second research question utilised structured open-ended evaluation questions to elicit how first year students struggle to write academically within an ODeL context. Themes that emerged from this research question include challenges of being a first year student in an ODeL institution, the learning curve leading to successful academic writing, lack of knowledge of Harvard style of referencing, transition from everyday language to academic English, poor connectivity issues, and supportive non-sanctioned tools.

These structured open-ended evaluation questions are aligned with questions used in FGDs to increase the reliability and credibility of the data obtained based on the convergent nature of both questions and participants' responses (Cabitza et al., 2021; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). These questions identify some challenges first year students face because of their non-academic writing skills and the ODeL modality (Al-Mukdad, 2019; Ankawi, 2020; Banda, 2017; Mbirimi, 2012). Cognitive presence in the framework of the Col plays a central role in students' ability to create meaning and ask

critical questions as well as to reason within new knowledge constructs. Furthermore, establishing a positive social network helps to overcome loneliness and improve the students' activity and eagerness (Archambault, Leary & Rice, 2022; Onat & Bertiz, 2022).

Another major challenge that the research identified is that students struggle a lot with the conventions that are related to the writing of academic work, with citation and referencing using the Harvard style highlighted as the most impervious aspects. This challenge is worsened as students have not been writing academically before joining the university as pointed by Banda (2017) and Al-Mukdad (2019). This is aligned with the observation by Makoe and Nsamba (2019) that such difficulties arise because students receive little direction concerning other writing modes necessary for academic study.

Triangulation ensured that the findings of this study are credible and trustworthy. The theme of poor connectivity issues can be triangulated with the theme of students' challenges with support initiatives from the findings of an observation schedule (*refer to Section 4.4.2*). The responses from students in both themes suggest similar challenges. Figures 4.32 and 4.33 are examples of screenshots that triangulated the theme. Students in both data sources indicated that external factors affect their access to online learning, including loadshedding and network interruptions. I found that the hardships of students from low background rural environment point towards a blatant social presence concern. The difficulties they experience in getting connected to the Internet lead to social interactions that enhance a group identity and thus, a context of constraint with regards to access to information on the web and stability in networks.

The responses suggest that because students' academic English abilities appear to be an issue particularly in relation to the teaching presence, there is a need to increase instructional support. As such, to minimise TD and enhance students' management of these challenges, lecturers need to facilitate communication while providing the requisite support. The Col theory can be used to promote the cognitive, social, and teaching presence by enhancing the level of support towards first year ODeL students, hence improving the teaching and learning outcomes (Garrison, 2019, Cummins, 1979).

Research question 3: How do study materials and student support initiatives assist students with their academic writing?

The third research question highlights the need for student support initiatives such as podcasts, vodcast, the Telegram group, discussion forums and the lessons provided for EAW101 in the context of academic writing. They are intended to give clear instructions on how to write different aspects like the development of a paragraph, how to edit, how to proofread, how to cite and how to reference (ODeL University, 2021). For example, the podcasts and vodcasts provide additional materials which can be used for students' explanations of specific writing strategies and the use of Telegram as an option for instant communication between students and lecturers. These combined asynchronous and synchronous support systems assist in mitigating psychological and cognitive disparities manifest in online learning environments (Sevnarayan, 2022; Sevnarayan & Mohale, 2022).

Another problem with students, particularly those in low-income or rural settings is network and technical difficulties. These challenges contribute to a systemic issue in the online learning environment, as infrastructural problems negatively influence the information and support flow (Nadhianty & Purnomo, 2020). Also, there is a notion that the instructions, especially in such delicate issues as citation and grammar, are inadequate. This calls for clear guidelines, additional detailed information, and more individualised approaches in delivering information as students markedly differ in their ability to comprehend the material (Raaper & Brown, 2020). These peculiarities and fluctuations in the pass rates in the module call for further and more intensive support initiatives to eliminate disparities in pass rates (Wu et al., 2022).

The theme of other non-sanctioned tools as supportive resources is triangulated with the supportive non-sanctioned tool's theme from structured open-ended evaluation questions (*refer to Section 4.3.6*). Both the themes enhanced the credibility and trustworthiness of this study. Figures 4.23 and 4.24 are screenshots from the structured open-ended evaluation questions which provided examples of the data that triangulated this theme. The two themes emphasise the positive impact of digital platforms such as Telegram, podcasts, vodcasts and discussion forums in improving student performance and writing skills. With the geographical distance between students and lecturers, these tools enhance social presence, decrease feelings of

isolation, and reduce transactional distance (Moore, 1997). While some students such as 1Ana (2023 Evaluation questions) get problems in listening to podcasts with content many times, other students like 2Bana and 2Dana (2023 Evaluation questions) feel that livestreams and workshops help in understanding the concepts. Collectively, these initiatives enhance performance in modules such as EAW101 where pass rates have increased to 84% in 2023.

It can be noted that, while the prior student support initiatives have been effective for many EAW101 students, there is room for improvement. Improving the performance of these initiatives to tackle technical issues and provide better information can also lead to reduction of transactional and psychological distances (Aghajani & Adloo, 2018). Moreover, it is important to always maintain a firm teaching presence that is characterised by clear instructional directions as well as timeous feedback for the students (Majeski et al., 2018). In correcting these problems, both the lecturers could achieve better results through the support provided to the students and exert some positive impact in the improvement of academic writing skills among the students of the cohort (Swartz, Valentine & Jaftha, 2022).

4.6 Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed findings from FGDs, structured open-ended evaluation questions, and a structured observation schedule. The study established that the major problem faced while writing academic text is referencing and citations. These findings reveal that students require support concerning citations and references as participants lacked exposure and knowledge of the Harvard referencing style. Moreover, because the participants are first year students at an ODeL university, they experience challenges since they are new to writing formal academic texts. The physical absence of their lecturers is a palpably new experience and students have to accommodate this novelty. Finally, research also highlights that support initiatives in the module helped the students with their writing. A more common type of support intervention mentioned by participants is Telegram because it is convenient. The study suggests that, for ODeL practitioners, there is a need to rethink teaching academic writing to first year students so that the cohort masters their academic writing skills. In the context of ODeL, it is necessary to close the TD gap between the lecturer-student by creating activities that might allow the students and lecturers to dialogue and

minimise the isolation of the students. Additional research besides this one with ODeL students should be conducted with first year face-to-face students in South African universities to establish whether those students also experience similar difficulties in academic writing.

Therefore, teaching students academic writing is a continuous process and not just a process of informing students. Consequently, lecturers need to remind the students that academic writing is a long-term process calling for consistent practice for full mastery. In Chapter 5 of the study, a summary of the FGDs, results and findings from the open-ended evaluation questions and the observation schedule are discussed. The chapter terminates with a conclusion and proffers recommendations derived from the study. Each of the recommendations for each research question are explored in Chapter 5, with detailed guidance for improvement and implementation.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUSION

“The expert in anything was once a beginner.”

- Helen Hayes

5.1 Introduction

In the past ten years, scholarly research into student writing in higher learning institutions has been produced (Lea & Street, 1998). This is because there is palpable recognition that current students lack academic writing skills. It is, therefore, the reason I began this study, expecting to gain knowledge of the problems in academic writing that first year EAL students encounter in one academic writing module. Chapter 1 was a background chapter on writing difficulties of first year EAL students in an environment peculiar to a South African ODeL context. Further, it presented the first year students' pass rates in the EAW101 module for the years 2018-2023 to show the fluctuating performance over the years. This chapter provided an understanding of the contextual framework of the study; the research questions postulated; the problem explored in this study; why the study was considered necessary; positionality of the researcher; and the method used for this specific research study.

Chapter 2 was divided into two parts: a literature review and a theoretical framework. The first part contextualised the study, offering a review of the literature based on global and local studies on the writing difficulties experienced by first year EAL students. The second part of the chapter elaborated on the theoretical literature used as the epistemological foundation for this study. The reasons why these students have difficulties with academic writing were covered using the notions of the Col and TD theories.

Chapter 3 was dedicated to the qualitative research methods. The study utilised three qualitative research instruments which includes FGDs, structured open-ended evaluation questions and observation schedule to obtain and analyse data. The research instruments used for gathering data in the current study were appropriate in eliciting the perceptions of students about the academic writing difficulties faced in the EAW101 module. FGDs answered the first research question (What academic writing

difficulties do first year EAL students experience in the EAW101 module?), structured open-ended evaluation questions were used to answer the second research question (How do the EAW101 students experience the academic writing challenges in the module?), and an observation schedule was used to answer the third research question (How do study materials and student support initiatives assist students with their academic writing?)

Chapter 4 analysed and discussed data collected using the qualitative research methods explained in Chapter 3. I generated themes from the findings of the study, discussed the findings and conclusion. I applied triangulation to enhance trustworthiness of my findings across all the research instruments.

Chapter 5 summarises the conclusion drawn from the findings from FGDs, structured open-ended evaluation questions and observation schedule. In addition, it deals with the implications of this study for the teaching of academic writing in ODeL contexts in particular as well as the recommendations for improving academic writing in these contexts. Furthermore, the chapter suggests prospective future research and then ends with a brief conclusion.

This study highlighted academic writing challenges that first year EAL students face in the EAW101 module in an ODeL context. Academic writing is a complex skill that has not received enough attention in ODeL contexts despite the significance of academic writing in these contexts. According to Leibowitz's (2004) research on the problem, the current literature reveals that the EAL students from South Africa experience challenges in writing to convey their thoughts and concepts coherently. This causes a void that affects their performance in academic writing in the higher learning institutions. As a result, there are several limitations and barriers in EAL, especially academic writing skills. Nevertheless, language lecturers possess adequate writing competencies and content knowledge to capitalise on potential difficulties observed in students' academic writing. They also can embed additional facilities into DE that would enhance the results of EAL students and help them to achieve their academic writing goals (Derakhshan, 2021; Zhang, 2020).

Following the analysis of the data, I was able to determine that first year EAL students enrolled in the EAW101 module struggle in the area of academic writing. In addition,

many of these students are not fully aware of the requirements of academic writing, which is why lecturers underline the need to pay attention to this aspect. The findings of this study echo those of Nikilenko, Rebenko and Doronina (2021), Al-Badi (2015), and Pineteh (2014) who argue that language usage influences the EAL students' academic writing skills. Moreover, the study's findings support the notions of Nkateng and Makoko (2021) who noted that citation and referencing pose a significant challenge to students when writing academic papers. The findings of this study confirm that the students do not manage academic writing tasks well due to the low appreciation of the concept of writing academic work and their expectations when they join a higher learning institution.

The difficulties of first year EAL students in the academic writing domain of the EAW101 module can be discussed in relation to Street's (1984) autonomous model and ideological models of literacy. These models provide a way of conceptualising the student and processes involved in literacy using a paradigm that emphasises the fact that literacy is not singular experience but a constellation of processes that is new and socially determined. Secondly, literacies are a combination of the student's linguistic ability, cultural-endowment, and a specific socio-economic situation.

The autonomous model of literacy stresses on language mastery as crucial for writing in academic contexts (Hill & Parry, 1990; Olsen, 1977). Students highlighted technical issues such as referencing, citations, suggesting that the students view writing as a mechanical process, which ties to the autonomous model. This study established that a considerable number of EAL students do not possess such understanding, and this points to the need for effective improvement of their language skills. The emphasis provided by lecturers on mastery of academic writing correlates with one of the key features of the autonomous model, namely individual skilled performance. According to the literacy model, literacy can be also learned separately by a consistent and practical usage of academic language.

The ideological model of literacy denotes the effects of cultural and social realities on students' literate practices. It is herein that the difficulties encountered by EAL students can be explained in relation to their culture and prospective socioeconomic possibilities. The findings regarding citation and referencing difficulties are also connected with the given ideological model, which does not deny that the written

literacy practices, and that is, the rules concerning the structuring of a piece of academic writing for a specific culture, reflect those ideologies promoted by a given academic culture. Based on the ideological model, the difficulties in academic writing are not only of a linguistic (grammatical) nature but also ideological because of the kind of writing which is required at the academic level.

According to Moore (1972), the degree of TD between the students and lecturers determines the quality of learning. Neglecting to actively interact with module materials and lecturers can result in increased TD to adverse consequences, such as poor achievement, failure to understand the materials and difficulties in obtaining assistance, coupled with low levels of motivation. The Col is connected with the TD theory, and mainly in the aspects that concern interaction and communication. Among the measures to avoid the negative impacts of TD, lecturers need to develop effective communication channels during online classes, provide timeous responses to students, and engage the students in online class discussions.

It emerges clearly from this study that first year EAL students in EAW 101 caught up in challenges are many and diverse. To use the autonomous model of literacy and the ideological model of literacy, the lecturers and institutions should consider the crucial factors affecting the students' academic writing skills. To apply these models can help create a better support system for first year EAL students in terms of the linguistic and ideological approaches to writing, along with a more culturally sensitive learning environment. The need to always encourage and support the students to enhance their academic writing in the EAW101 module supports the Col TD theories. What these theories provide is information on interaction, collaboration, and support in the online learning environment. This is in concord with the Col theory's social presence component where the focus is on encouragement and support. To elaborate further on social presence, it entails ensuring that students feel they belong to the module as well as lecturers. To encourage social presence, it is possible to increase students' motivation and activity levels. The Col theory emphasises the relationship of three essential presences. The last two, being participation and collaboration, come under social presence since students engage not only with other students but also with their lecturers. Discussions of the assignment, shared activity on the tasks, and other group-based work enhance community and co-learning. Teaching presence is another

part of the Col theory which involves continuing interaction with the lecturers. Lecturers' interaction entails not only disseminating knowledge but also responding to the students, a guiding figure, and a stimulus for creating a favourable climate.

5.2 Summary of Key Findings

This study revealed that it is significant to explore academic writing challenges that first year EAL students encounter especially in an ODeI context; how they experience those challenges; and how available student support initiatives assist them with their academic writing skills. Figure 5.1 is a visual diagram of the summarised research findings as discussed in Chapter 4:

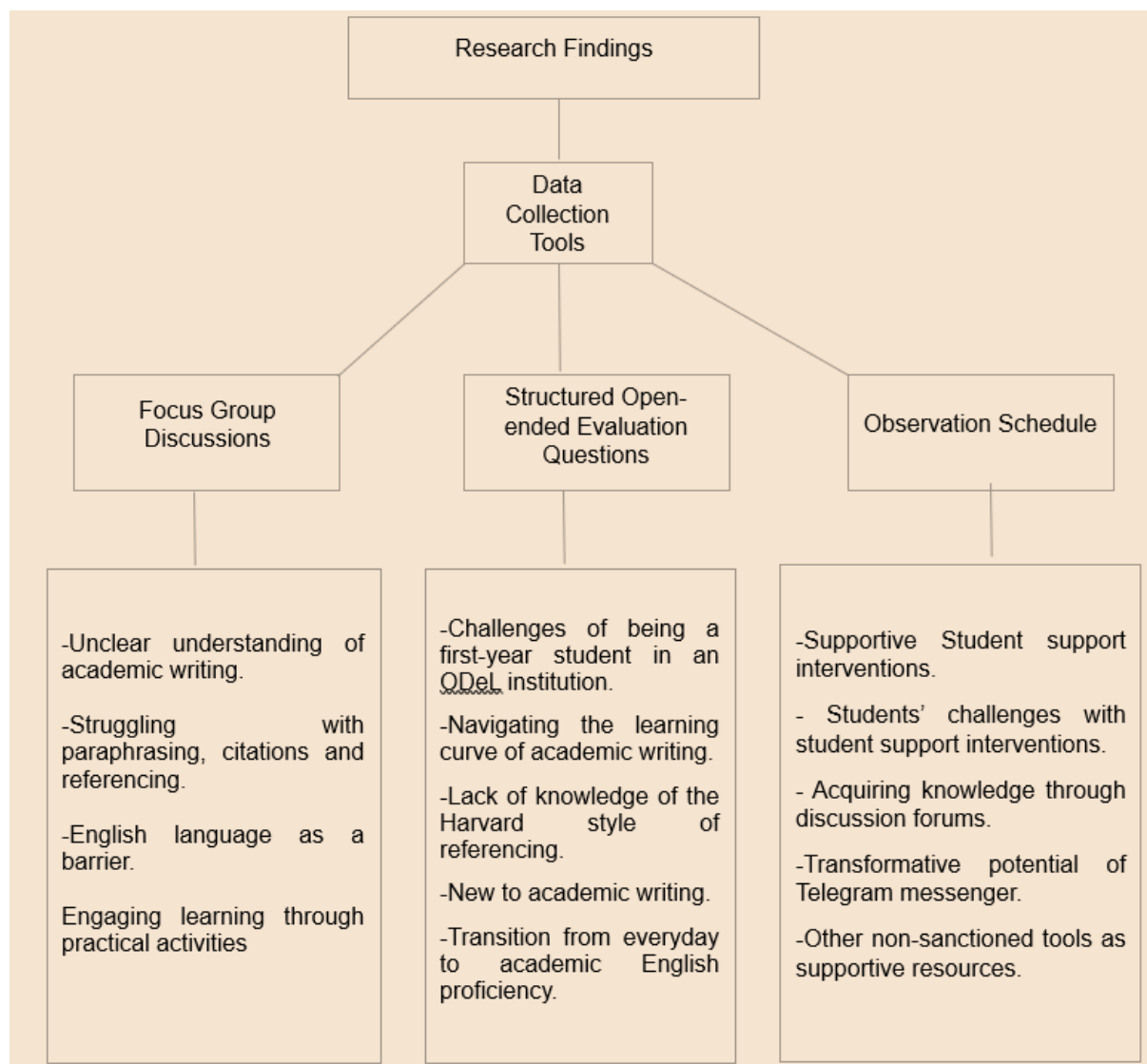


Figure 5.1: Summary of the research findings

5.2.1 Findings from Focus Group Discussions

Research Question 1: What academic writing challenges do first year EAL students encounter in the EAW101 module?

From the analysis of the FGDs, first year EAL students experience writing difficulties in the EAW101 module. A major weakness is their inadequate, or rather vague comprehension of what academic writing entails. While the students have different meanings of the term that shows they are aware of it, the level of understanding remains at its most rudimentary (1Dana, 2Bana, 2Cana, & 3Eana, 2023). This foundational gap can cause the aforementioned problems, and result in a student failing to effectively cope with university expectations of academic writing skills. Their university preparedness compared to high school standards is another factor that raises the dropout level (Mbirimi, 2012). The other major concern was the challenge experienced in paraphrasing, citations and referencing. Several students said that they face challenges on how to apply citation styles particularly Harvard style of referencing and most of them said that their high school education did not prepare them well for such exercises (1Ana, 2Eana & 3Bana, 2023). This challenge is carried over from high school to a university learning system in which this transition is demanding, and pedagogy quite divergent (Teng et al., 2022). Once again, the proposed emphasis on the practical application of theory was stated as the FGDs because the students would like to see exemplars and detailed explanations provided by lecturers. This approach would assist with the two theoretical frameworks discussed such as Col and TD, thus leading to the increase of confidence and competence in academic writing.

5.2.2 Findings from Structured Open-ended Evaluation Questions

Research question 2: How do the EAW101 students experience the academic writing challenges in the module?

The findings from the structured open-ended evaluation questions indicate that the first year EAL students in the EAW101 module have major challenges in writing academic assignments different from the ones they encountered in their face-to-face classes. Altogether, one has to admit that students' problems result from their previous backgrounds which have little if any academic writing patterns and the psychological factor which is a result of transition to new educational contexts. Depersonalisation has become a major issue in the shift to ODeL, which wilts the confidence of students

as well as their approach towards study materials. The problems arise where communication between lecturers and students is hindered causing TD to widen.

Furthermore, the analysis revealed that students experience challenges when it comes to writing in general and referencing using the Harvard style. This inexperience worsens the student position to handle academic writing, further aggravating the cognitive and social presence pressures in the learning community. It is needful to use the tools of social presence and interacting tasks in the format of the class to avoid students' feelings of loneliness and to privilege feelings of belongingness (Archambault, Leary & Rice, 2022). High teaching presence and visibility through clear communication and offering of differentiated resources to the students is transformative in guiding students through the different processes of writing and documentation (Garrison, 2016). These findings call for multipronged initiatives to address writing difficulties of the first year students as well as support them through the ODeL learning model of delivery.

5.2.3 Findings from a Structured Observation Schedule

Research question 3: How do study materials and student support initiatives assist students with their academic writing?

The findings from the observation schedule indicate that the EAW101 student support initiatives, such as podcasts, vodcasts, Telegram groups, discussion forums, and online lessons, play a significant role in enhancing students' academic writing skills. These resources cover essential aspects of academic writing which includes paragraph structuring, proofreading, and citation techniques. The interactive Telegram group, with over 3000 participants, promotes a supportive community where students receive timely responses from peers and lecturers. Discussion forums on the Moodle LMS further facilitate student engagement, promoting cognitive and social presence essential for a positive online learning environment. The lecturers' proactive involvement in these platforms is crucial, as it ensures prompt feedback and guidance, reduces TD, and enhances a conducive learning atmosphere.

However, challenges such as poor network coverage and other access-related issues hinder the effectiveness of these initiatives, particularly for students from underprivileged rural backgrounds. These difficulties contribute to a sense of isolation

and disrupt the learning process, and thus highlight the need for improved digital infrastructure and support systems. Despite these challenges, student feedback suggests that the initiatives positively impact their academic writing abilities, as evidenced by improved performance and active participation. Nevertheless, some students expressed dissatisfaction with the depth of guidance provided, pointing to a need for more comprehensive support. The EAW101 module pass rates over five years revealed fluctuations that suggest that the effectiveness of support initiatives may vary based on cohort size and instructional methods.

5.3 Limitations

This research targeted first year EAL students registered in the EAW101 writing module at an ODeL institution. Among all other modules in the English Studies department, EAW101 has more than 16 000 students and this huge number made it impossible to use all students as participants. To address this limitation, I only chose participants who met the specific criteria: first year, EAL, registered for EAW101 module, and spoke an African language. Another limitation to this research was that sometimes participants were not available for the study, and I then had to approach them at some other time convenient for them to respond to the research questions. The above limitation was, however, addressed by ensuring that the dates on which interviews were conducted were close so that I did not forget what other participants had said and data would not be affected in any way. Lastly, another limitation was scheduling the FGDs with participants who consented to be part of this study. Some did not respond to their emails and others responded after a few days. I overcame this limitation by contacting the students to ask for a suitable date for those focus discussions. Once I received all the suggested dates and times, I found a neutral date to have all the participants available.

5.4 Implications and Recommendations

This study was carried out with the purpose of identifying the specific challenges in academic writing skills of first year EAL students in the context of the EAW101 module. The findings of this study show that academic writing is a challenge for first year EAL students in ODeL in particular. The students have various problems which require concerted effort from the lecturers to support these students to improve their academic

writing skills. These efforts include using various support initiatives. This study therefore has implications for students, lecturers, the Department of English Studies, policy-makers and ODeL practitioners and managers. The outcomes of this research on first year EAL students with difficulties in academic writing within the EAW101 module are multifaceted. This study explored challenges students face in the development of their academic writing skills hence the call for guided remedial action. This study revealed issues that EAL students encounter in their academic writing namely, issues with transition to distance learning, issues with writing conventions, and issues with citations and references particularly in using the Harvard style of referencing. For the identification of these difficulties, academic stakeholders can perform specific measures focusing on the advancement of the first year EAL students. Therefore, the implications of this study can be of immense importance to lecturers who are in charge of teaching academic writing. The exploration of various difficulties experienced by first year EAL students in learning academic writing suggests that the existing practices must be improved. Lecturers should consider adopting teaching methods that accommodate specific needs of EAL students. Finally, the findings of this study have implications for policy makers in the field of education. To tackle the identified difficulties and facilitate improvement of the academic writing skills of EAL students, policymakers should redefine educational policies that consider the linguistic diversity of the students. Currently, the lack of clear presentations which would allay difficulties encountered by EAL students in writing require educational policies to include guidelines that apply support frameworks within schools and universities.

Lecturers also have responsibilities to craft supportive measures and ensure that such measures enhance learning. Student support initiatives such as podcasts, vodcasts, discussion forums, and Telegram assist with teaching academic writing. These platforms should be created by the lecturers, and moderate these platforms to make them understandable, interesting, and relevant to the students' questions. In addition, policymakers are advised to use their assets to fund and maintain initiatives in language support programmes to develop academic writing skills amongst first-year students. These programmes can involve one-to-one support for EAL students or extra-curricular and extra-online resources aimed at improving skills in academic writing. Future research should explore other technology tools such as Artificial

Intelligence writing assistants in supporting academic writing skills of EAL students. The use of podcasts and social media for a sense of community and reducing feelings of isolation in online learning is essential to close the learning gaps for ODeL students. Also, a personal learning plan and overcoming technical difficulties could guarantee equal access to the resources and improve student performance in academic writing for low income, rural students.

The findings of this study are useful for lecturers and tutors in the ODeL environment as they focus on the area where students need assistance in when writing. The findings of this study can help EAL practitioners and other related stakeholders on how they should go about teaching academic writing. To apply Col in one's research entails acknowledging the social nature of knowledge construction. Lecturers can use this knowledge to consolidate structures for thinking progressively about cognitive, social, and teaching presence. Sharing culture and encouraging people to participate in group work, discussions with other students make online learning more socially acceptable. This study's TD theory findings highlight the distinct difficulties involved in transitioning from high school to university, a situation that calls for improved support mechanisms. Lecturers and institutions can influence the knowledge through the development of strategies that seek to provide support and relevant resources assisting the first year EAL students to meet the expected demands of writing at university level. To the Department of Education and the other policymakers in the education sector, this study recommends systematic teaching of writing from high school, right up to the university level.

5.5 Concluding Remarks

This study sought to answer the research questions on academic writing challenges facing EAL first-year students in the EAW101 module, establish reasons for challenges students face, and determine the contribution of materials and study initiatives in supporting student's learning of academic writing in English. Using a qualitative case study design and Col as well as TD as theoretical frameworks, the study showed that many first year EAL students face significant challenges in academic writing, largely due to a lack of holistic understanding and insufficient preparation in academic English. This is worsened by the distinction between EHL and EFAL, which perpetuates disparities in English exposure and proficiency (Harmse &

Evans, 2017). TD theory as well as Col application are useful in overcoming these barriers to create a conducive learning environment for students and, more to that, help minimise the psychological and communicative divide between the students and lecturers. This can be done through specific instructions and effective use of interactive methods of teaching and learning. When the model texts or exemplars are provided to the students, extra care should be taken not to overemphasise them as they would simply replace critical thinking by the students with memorisation of various texts. Therefore, it is necessary for lecturers to use these tools in tandem with the ones where students actively participate in the development of academic literacies and practices. The technical challenges faced by students (especially those from low income or rural areas) also expand the transactional distance. Such difficulties, combined with insufficient teaching instruction on citation and grammar, contribute to disparities in pass rates. This points to the need for more individualised and effective support initiatives not only in the cognitive and social nature of learning and its processes, but also lessening the transactional distance in the learning process (Raaper & Brown, 2020).

Future research could explore more effective teaching strategies that integrate both model texts and opportunities for students to apply academic writing conventions independently. In addition, more research should be undertaken on the ways in which digital tools and social learning communities can minimise transactional distance and increase a community of inquiry within ODeL settings. Scholars could review how asynchronous and synchronous initiatives such as Telegram groups and podcasts affect students' participation and understandings especially in developing communities (Archambault, Leary & Rice, 2022).

In conclusion, the various academic writing difficulties that students in their first year of university learning experience, especially those in EAL, require the formulation of efficient and effective writing support programmes in universities that would comprise of workshops (writing centers) and effective feedback on how best to paraphrase, cite and reference.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDELINES

SESSION 1: INTRODUCTORY SESSION

1. Tell me briefly about yourselves?
2. Why did you choose this module?
3. In high school you were taught writing. How did you find writing in high school?
4. In your view, do you think high school prepared you enough for writing at university level? Elaborate your answer.
5. What would you like your teachers to have done to prepare you for writing at university?
6. How are you experiencing the module this far?

SESSION 2: QUESTIONS

1. Can you briefly explain your understanding of academic writing?
2. Share with me the academic writing challenges you encountered in the EAW101 module.
3. What makes academic writing challenging to you?
4. Why do think you experienced the challenges you have mentioned?
5. If you were to ask your lecturers to help you address the challenges you have mentioned, how would you want them to do that? Explain.
6. Are your challenges linked to the teaching of academic writing?

Appendix B: STRUCTURED OPEN-ENDED EVALUATION QUESTIONS

OPEN-ENDED EVALUATION QUESTIONS

1. How many languages do you speak? Name them.
2. Have you ever encountered any writing challenges prior to the commencement of this module? If so, do you think these challenges have contributed to your performance in the ENG1503 module?
3. What challenges do you encounter in the EAW101 module? Elaborate.
4. Why do you think you have encountered the challenges you have mentioned in question 3 above?
5. What can you do to improve your academic writing skills?
6. Discuss your experience with any of the student support initiatives in the module (Telegram, WhatsApp, Moodle, podcasting, vodcasting, lessons, livestreaming, and workshops).
7. Discuss your challenges with any of the student support initiatives in the module (Telegram, WhatsApp, Moodle, podcasting, vodcasting, lessons, livestreaming, and workshops), what was/were the reason/s for this?
8. How did your lecturers help you enhance your writing skills in the module?
9. What can lecturers do to improve students' academic writing skills?

Appendix C: OBSERVATION SCHEDULE

Observation Schedule	
Date: 2023	
1. What student support initiatives are available to the EAW101 students?	
2. Which student support initiatives do EAW101 students respond to the most and why?	
3. What challenges do these student support initiatives address in the module?	
4. Do students experience challenges with any of the student support initiatives in the module?	
5. Do the initiatives assist students in their academic writing?	

Appendix D: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

30 June 2023

Title: **EXPLORING ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES OF FIRST YEAR ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE STUDENTS AT AN ODeL INSTITUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA**

Dear Prospective Participant

My name is Tumelo Jaquiline Ntsopi, and I am doing research with Dr K Sevnarayan and Dr D Mkhize. They are Senior Lecturers in the Department of English Studies at the University of South Africa. We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled '**Exploring academic writing challenges of first year English, as an Additional Language, students at an ODeL institution in South Africa**

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

This study is expected to explore academic writing challenges of first year students registered in an academic writing module EAW101 at an ODeL institution in South Africa.

WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

You are chosen to participate in this study because you are registered in an academic writing module. The sampled participants in this study are 25 students who use English as an Additional Language. All participants' privacy and confidentiality will be respected, respected and participants may withdraw from participating in this study at any given time without any explanation.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

The study involves focus group discussions, structured open-ended evaluation questions and an observation schedule. A list of questions that would be asked will be attached to this document. Due to Covid-19 regulations, during the interview, you will be in a group with 4 other participants, and it will take place on Microsoft Teams to protect the participants and the researcher against the virus. With each group, the duration of the interview will be 45 minutes, depending on the responses of each participant within each group. The researcher is planning

to collect the data over a period of five weeks; it will depend on the availability of the participants.

CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?

Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participate. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any given time without giving any explanation.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

Your participation in this study would enable lecturers in the EAW101 module to understand students' perspectives on the challenges of academic writing. With that said, your contribution in this study may prompt lecturers in the module to consider re-evaluating their methods of teaching in the hopes that they can improve EAL students' academic writing skills. This proposed study may help the lecturers towards enhancing academic writing in an ODeL context and how to improve academic writing skills of first year students through the use of student support initiatives.

ARE THERE ANY NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR ME IF I PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH PROJECT?

There will be no negative consequences for participating in this study as no one will know that you took part in the study. Your name and any other personal details will not be mentioned anywhere in the study.

WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER AND MY IDENTITY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

Confidentiality and anonymity in this study will be preserved. Responses and results from individual participants will remain private and will only be used for research purposes. The agreement between the researcher and the participant is that, no information about the participants will be revealed. Their privacy will be preserved.

HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?

The information will remain with the researcher all the time. No one will be able to access the information because it will be encrypted with a password. Since the interviews will be recorded in the form of an audio, the recordings will also be encrypted with a password. To ensure that

the information is secure, the researcher will use a password protected laptop and save the information on a hard drive in case the laptop is stolen or lost.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY?

You will not receive any payment or reward for your contribution and participation in this study.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Review Committee of the Department of English Studies, Unisa. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher if you so wish.

HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Tumelo Jaquiline Ntsopi on email address ntsoptj@unisa.ac.za. The findings are accessible for 5 years after the research has been concluded.

Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact my supervisor Dr K Sevnarayan on esevark@unisa.ac.za and Dr D Mkhize on mkhizdn@unisa.ac.za. Alternatively, contact the research ethics chairperson of the Department of English Studies, Dr Alexander on (012) 429 3904, busarjo@unisa.ac.za

Thank you for taking time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Thank you.

TJ Ntsopi

Ms Tumelo Jaquiline Ntsopi

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, _____ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits, and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

I have read (or had it explained to me) and understood the study as explained in the information sheet.

I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the study.

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable).

I am aware that the findings of this study will be processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings, but that my participation will be kept confidential unless otherwise specified.

I agree to the recording of the <insert specific data collection method>.

I have received a signed copy of the informed consent agreement.

Participant Name & Surname..... (please print)

Participant Signature.....Date.....

Researcher's Name & Surname: Tumelo Jaquiline Ntsopi

Researcher's signature: *TJ Ntsopi*

Date: 30 June 2023

Appendix E: PERMISSION LETTER

Request for permission to conduct research at the University of South Africa (UNISA)

“EXPLORING ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES OF FIRST YEAR ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE STUDENTS AT AN ODEL INSTITUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA”

30 June 2023

Dr TP Shandu-Phetla
Department of English Studies WMM building, 6th Floor
012 429 6140 and Shandtp@unisa.ac.za

Dear Dr TP Shandu-Phetla,

I, **Tumelo Jaquiline Ntsopi** am doing research with **Dr K Sevnarayan** and **Dr D Mkhize** who are both senior lecturers in the Department of **English Studies** towards a **MA: English** at the University of South Africa. We are inviting you to participate in a study entitled **‘EXPLORING ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES OF FIRST YEAR ENGLISH AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE STUDENTS AT AN ODEL INSTITUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA’**.

The aim of the study is to explore academic writing challenges of first year English, as an Additional Language, students in an academic writing module at an ODeL institution.

The study will entail administering focus group discussions, structured open-ended evaluation questions and an observation schedule. Data collection and analysis will take place as follows: With 25 participants selected for this study, the researcher will group the participants into 5 groups with 5 participants each to obtain qualitative and manageable data. With each group, the duration of each focus group will be 45 minutes depending on the responses of each participant within each group. The researcher is planning to collect the data over a period of five weeks, which will depend on the availability of the participants. The structured open-ended evaluation questions will be posted on the Moodle learning system, under ‘forums’. With the observation schedule, the researcher will review the student support initiatives to find if they assist students with their academic writing.

The benefit of this study is that it will help to expose the challenges in academic writing encountered by first year EAL students in an academic writing module. Additionally, it could help lecturers within the module, to review their pedagogical methods.

For any information such as the study's findings, contact the researcher on ntsoptj@unisa.ac.za. You may also contact the researcher's supervisors, Dr Sevnarayan on esevark@unisa.ac.za 012 429 3821 and Dr D Mkhize on mkhizdn@unisa.ac.za 012 429 3111.

Yours sincerely

Tumelo Jaquiline Ntsopi

English Studies Junior Lecturer, University of South Africa

2nd year MA student at the University of South Africa

APPENDIX F: ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE



COLLEGE OF HUMAN SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEW COMMITTEE

29 August 2022

Dear Ms Tumelo Jaquiline Ntsopi

Decision:
**Ethics Approval from 29 August 2022
to 29 August 2023**

NHREC Registration # :
Rec-240816-052
CREC Reference # :
90432630_CREC_CHS_2022

Researcher(s) Name: Ms. TJ Ntsopi
Contact details: ntsoptj@unisa.ac.za
Supervisor(s) Name: Dr. K Sevnarayan
Contact details: esevark@unisa.ac.za
Supervisor(s) Name: Dr. D.N. Mkhize
Contact details: mkhizdn@unisa.ac.za

**Title: EXPLORING ACADEMIC WRITING CHALLENGES OF FIRST YEAR ENGLISH
AS AN ADDITIONAL LANGUAGE STUDENTS AT AN ODEL INSTITUTION IN SOUTH
AFRICA**

Degree Purpose: MA English

Thank you for the application for research ethics clearance by the Unisa College of Human Science Ethics Committee. Ethics approval is granted for one year.

The low risk application was reviewed by College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee, in compliance with the Unisa Policy on Research Ethics and the Standard Operating Procedure on Research Ethics Risk Assessment.

The proposed research may now commence with the provisions that:

1. The researcher(s) will ensure that the research project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the UNISA Policy on Research Ethics.
2. Any adverse circumstance arising in the undertaking of the research project that is relevant to the ethicality of the study should be communicated in writing to the College Ethics Review Committee.
3. The researcher(s) will conduct the study according to the methods and procedures set out in the approved application.




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4. Any changes that can affect the study-related risks for the research participants, particularly in terms of assurances made with regards to the protection of participants' privacy and the confidentiality of the data, should be reported to the Committee in writing, accompanied by a progress report.
5. The researcher will ensure that the research project adheres to any applicable national legislation, professional codes of conduct, institutional guidelines and scientific standards relevant to the specific field of study. Adherence to the following South African legislation is important, if applicable: Protection of Personal Information Act, no 4 of 2013; Children's act no 38 of 2005 and the National Health Act, no 61 of 2003.
6. Only de-identified research data may be used for secondary research purposes in future on condition that the research objectives are similar to those of the original research. Secondary use of identifiable human research data require additional ethics clearance.
7. No fieldwork activities may continue after the expiry date (**29 August 2023**). Submission of a completed research ethics progress report will constitute an application for renewal of Ethics Research Committee approval.

Note:

The reference number 90432630 _CREC_CHS_2022 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants, as well as with the Committee.

Yours sincerely,

Signature: 

Prof. KB Khan
CHS Research Ethics Committee Chairperson
Email: khankb@unisa.ac.za
Tel: (012) 429 8210

Signature: PP 

Prof. ZZ Nkosi
Acting-Executive Dean: CHS
E-mail: nkosizz@unisa.ac.za
Tel: 012 429 6758



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APPENDIX G: RPSC CERTIFICATE



**RESEARCH PERMISSION SUB-COMMITTEE (RPSC) OF THE SENATE
RESEARCH, INNOVATION, POSTGRADUATE DEGREES AND
COMMERCIALISATION COMMITTEE (SRIPCC)**

30 January 2023

Decision: Permission approval 30
January 2023 to 29 August 2023

Ref #: 2023_RPC_006
Ms Tumelo Jaquiline Ntsopi
Student #:
Employee #: 62438425

Principal Investigator:

Ms Tumelo Jaquiline Ntsopi
Department of English Studies,
College of Human Sciences
ntsoptj@unisa.ac.za; 0123524117

Supervisor: Dr Kershnee Sevnaravan; Sevnarayan, esevark@unisa.ac.za; 0124293111

Co-supervisor: Dr Dumisani Mkhize; mkhizdn@unisa.ac.za; 0124293821

**Exploring academic writing challenges of first year English as an additional
language students at an Odel institution in South Africa**

Your application regarding permission to involve Unisa staff, students and data in respect of the above study has been received and was considered by the Research Permission Subcommittee (RPSC) of the UNISA Senate, Research, Innovation, Postgraduate Degrees and Commercialisation Committee (SRIPCC) on 25 January 2023.

It is my pleasure to inform you that permission has been granted for the study. You may include Unisa first-year students that are registered for a writing module (EAW101) to participate in a voluntary questionnaire and focus groups (n=15).



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Adherence to the National Statement on Ethical Research and Publication practices, principle 7 referring to Social awareness, must be promoted: " Researchers and institutions must be sensitive to the potential impact of their research on society, marginal groups or individuals, and must consider these when weighing the benefits of the research against any harmful effects, with a view to minimising or avoiding the latter where possible."

The personal information made available to the researcher(s)/gatekeeper(s) will only be used for the advancement of this research project as indicated and for the purpose as described in this permission letter. The researcher(s)/gatekeeper(s) must take all appropriate precautionary measures to protect the personal information given to him/her/them in good faith and it must not be passed on to third parties. The dissemination of research instruments through the use of electronic mail should strictly be through blind copying, so as to protect the participants' right of privacy. The researcher hereby indemnifies UNISA from any claim or action arising from or due to the researcher's breach of his/her information protection obligations.

You are requested to submit a report of the study to the Research Permission Subcommittee (RPSC@unisa.ac.za) within 3 months of completion of the study.

Note: The reference number 2023_RPC_006 should be clearly indicated on all forms of communication with the intended research participants and the Research Permission Subcommittee.

Kind regards,



Dr Retha Visagie – Deputy Chairperson

Email: visagrg@unisa.ac.za, Tel: (012) 429-2478

Prof Lessing Labuschagne – Chairperson

Email: llabus@unisa.ac.za, Tel: (012) 429-6368

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