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Exploring factors affecting First-Year Students' academic writing proficiency: Insights from one South African institution

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ABSTRACT

Academic writing is fundamental to students' success in higher education, yet many first-year university students struggle to meet the academic writing expectations of higher education institutions. In the South African context, these challenges are shaped by diverse linguistic, educational, and socio-cultural backgrounds. Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, this study investigated university lecturers' perceptions of the factors influencing first-year students' academic writing proficiency by exploring their expectations and experiences regarding students' writing development. A qualitative case study design was employed, with purposive sampling used to select ten lecturers who teach first-year students. Data were collected through open-ended face-to-face interviews and thematically analysed. The findings reveal that students experience significant challenges in grammar, argument construction, and source integration. Additionally, cultural and linguistic backgrounds were found to influence writing proficiency. Lecturers highlighted the importance of detailed, constructive feedback and the use of interactive teaching strategies that align with sociocultural principles of learning. The study contributes to research knowledge by providing insight into lecturers' perspectives on academic writing development in higher education. It recommends incorporating more interactive pedagogical approaches and improving feedback practices to support student learning. Therefore, this study contributes to scholarship by deepening the understanding of the factors that influence academic writing proficiency from the perspectives of first-year students within the context of South African higher education. The findings provide evidence to inform the design of contextually relevant academic writing interventions, curriculum development, and institutional support strategies to improve students' academic writing practices and overall academic success.

Keywords: Academic Writing Proficiency, Lecturers' Perceptions, First-year Students, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a fundamental skill required for success in higher education, particularly for first-year students newly introduced to its demanding conventions and expectations. It entails clarity of expression, coherence, logical structure, and adherence to disciplinary writing norms. Pasandeh defines academic writing proficiency as "the ability to effectively and proficiently communicate ideas,

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arguments, and research findings through written texts within an academic context".[1] This proficiency is shaped by a range of interrelated factors, including students' prior writing experiences, language proficiency, socio-cultural background, and the nature of the learning environment.[2] Within this framework, lecturers play a pivotal role in mediating students' academic development through instructional practices, feedback, and modelling.

Despite its centrality, many first-year students struggle to meet the academic writing standards expected at the university level, which can negatively affect their academic performance and overall success.[3] Research indicates that writing proficiency is not solely dependent on individual effort but is influenced by a complex interplay of contextual, pedagogical, and personal factors that vary across academic settings.[4] Lecturers' perceptions of these factors are therefore crucial, as they shape both the identification of challenges and the pedagogical responses adopted to address them.[5] However, a key issue and ongoing gap in the literature is that most studies foreground students' experiences, often overlooking how lecturers conceptualise and respond to the factors that influence academic writing proficiency.

This gap is particularly significant within the South African higher education context, where linguistic diversity, socio-cultural complexity, and varying levels of academic preparedness further complicate students' writing development. Moreover, there is limited in-depth exploration of how lecturers perceive the dynamic interaction between students' cognitive and personal factors (such as motivation and prior knowledge), pedagogical practices (including teaching approaches and feedback strategies), and environmental influences (such as institutional support systems and cultural contexts). Addressing this gap is essential to develop a more holistic understanding of academic writing instruction and to inform more effective, evidence-based pedagogical practices.

Against this background, the present study examines the perceptions of university lecturers of the factors influencing first-year students' academic writing proficiency at a South African institution of higher learning. The study aims to contribute to existing scholarship by foregrounding lecturers' perspectives and by providing insights that may inform improved teaching practices, assessment strategies, and student support mechanisms. Specifically, the study is guided by the following objectives:

- To explore lecturers' perceptions regarding factors that influence first-year students' academic writing proficiency in one South African academic institution.
- To examine how lecturers' instructional practices and feedback strategies in one academic department impact the academic writing development of first-year students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A substantial body of literature has examined the factors influencing students' academic writing proficiency, consistently demonstrating that writing development is shaped by the interaction of pedagogical, motivational, and contextual factors rather than linguistic competence alone. Studies by Cheng, Fatima, and McCutchen collectively emphasise the importance of lecturer support, constructive feedback, and explicit writing instruction in improving students' academic writing proficiency.[6] These

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[1] F. Pasandeh, *Academic Writing Proficiency and University Students'Performance* (Tehran: Tehran University Press,2004), 35.

[2] T. P. Ling, "Academic Writing Difficulties of Malaysian ESL Learners," *Journal of Applied Linguistics and Language Research* 3, no. 2 (2016): 1–12; S.Vasu, T. P Ling, and V Nimehchisalem, "Malaysian ESL Students' Academic Writing Problems," *Advances in Language and Literary Studies* 7, no. 5 (2016): 72–80.

[3] Phethani P Mudau, Madoda Cekiso, and Itani P Mandende, "First-Year Students' Perceptions of Factors Affecting Academic Writing," *Reading & Writing-Journal of the Literacy Association of South Africa* 16, no. 1 (2025): 567.

[4] Jiwon Han and Phil Hiver, "Genre-Based L2 Writing Instruction and Writing-Specific Psychological Factors: The Dynamics of Change," *Journal of Second Language Writing* 40 (2018): 44–59; N Hynninen, "Language Regulation in English as a Lingua Franca Academic Writing," *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 31 (2018): 98–110.

[5] Peter Dahler-Larsen, *The Evaluation Society* (Stanford University Press, 2011); John Hattie and Helen Timperley, "The Power of Feedback," *Review of Educational Research* 77, no. 1 (2007): 81–112; A. S. Modhish, "Use of Direct and Indirect Feedback in Improving EFL Students' Writing," *English Language Teaching* 5, no. 3 (2012): 78–89; Mudau, Cekiso, and Mandende, "First-Year Students' Perceptions of Factors Affecting Academic Writing."

[6] Y-S Cheng, "A Measure of Second Language Writing Anxiety: Scale Development and Preliminary Validation," *Journal of Second Language Writing* 13, no. 4 (2004): 313–35; S Fatima, "Students' Needs for Academic Writing at the English Department," *English Language Teaching Educational Journal* 1, no. 3 (2018): 161–75; Deborah McCutchen, "Cognitive Factors in the Development of Children's Writing," *Handbook of Writing Research* 8 (2006): 115–30.

studies argue that supportive learning environments, early intervention, and structured guidance in planning, organisation, and paragraph development enable students to acquire the knowledge and skills required for effective academic writing. Similarly, Graham, Daoud and Al-Hazmi highlight the value of authentic writing tasks, self-assessment, and critical thinking, suggesting that meaningful classroom engagement encourages students to become active participants in the writing process.[7] Taken together, these studies indicate that academic writing proficiency is a developmental process that is strengthened through sustained instructional support, learner engagement, and opportunities for guided practice.

The literature further demonstrates that linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural factors influence the academic writing proficiency of students. Studies conducted in Saudi Arabia, China, and other multilingual contexts consistently report that students experience challenges related to grammar, argument development, rhetorical conventions, source integration, and adapting to the expectations of academic discourse.[8] Although these studies were undertaken in different educational settings, they collectively show that academic writing difficulties extend beyond language proficiency to include unfamiliarity with disciplinary conventions and academic genres. This synthesis suggests that improving academic writing requires a holistic approach that integrates language development with explicit instruction in academic discourse, argumentation, and genre conventions.

Institutional and curriculum-related factors also emerge as significant determinants of academic writing proficiency. Almarwani argues that writing development is strengthened when institutions provide enabling learning environments, redesign curricula to incorporate dedicated writing instruction, and integrate academic writing support within programmes.[9] While Almarwani acknowledges the value of digital technologies such as Google Classroom in facilitating writing instruction, the study emphasises that technological tools are most effective when complemented by constructive lecturer feedback and scaffolded learning.[10] Likewise, he advocates extending communication skills instruction and embedding explicit writing support throughout students' academic programmes. Collectively, these studies demonstrate that institutional commitment, curriculum design, and pedagogical support are essential for fostering students' academic writing proficiency.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that academic writing proficiency is shaped by pedagogical, contextual, and cognitive factors. The literature consistently identifies lecturer support, constructive feedback, explicit instruction, authentic learning tasks, and institutional structures as central to students' writing development. At the same time, the reviewed studies reveal that students' linguistic backgrounds, cultural influences, and individual cognitive engagement also significantly affect writing proficiency. Although the literature offers rich insights into the challenges of academic writing development, most studies focus predominantly on students' experiences and strategies. There remains limited attention to lecturers' perceptions of the factors influencing first-year students' academic writing proficiency.

Despite these important contributions, the existing literature has predominantly examined academic writing from students' perspectives, focusing on their challenges, writing strategies, and learning experiences. Comparatively little attention has been paid to lecturers' perceptions of the factors influencing first-year students' academic writing proficiency, particularly within the South African higher education context. This represents an important gap because lecturers play a central role in designing writing instruction, providing feedback, scaffolding students' learning, and implementing institutional writing support. By exploring lecturers' perceptions, the present study contributes new knowledge by providing context-specific evidence on the pedagogical, institutional, and student-related factors that influence first-year students' academic writing development. In doing so, the study extends

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[7] Steve Graham et al., "Teaching Elementary School Students to Be Effective Writers: A Practice Guide. NCEE 2012-4058.," *What Works Clearinghouse*, 2012; S. A Daoud and S. H Al-Hazmi, "Academic Writing Problems: A Study of Arab Postgraduate Students," *The ESP World* 1, no. 1 (2002): 1–10.

[8] M. A. Al-Khiry, "Developing EFL Academic Writing Skills through the Use of Instructional Strategies," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3, no. 6 (2013): 134–42; X Bian and X Wang, "Chinese EFL Learners' Rhetorical Problems in Writing," *English Language Teaching* 9, no. 7 (2016): 86–94; John Bitchener and Helen Basturkmen, "Perceptions of the Difficulties of Postgraduate L2 Thesis Students Writing the Discussion Section," *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 5, no. 1 (2006): 4–18.

[9] Manal AlMarwani, "Academic Writing: Challenges and Potential Solutions," *Arab World English Journal*, 2020; .

[10] AlMarwani, "Academic Writing: Challenges and Potential Solutions."

existing scholarship by foregrounding lecturers' experiences and offering practical insights to inform curriculum development, academic literacy interventions, and institutional support strategies within South African universities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the development of first-year students' academic writing proficiency, emphasising that cognitive growth occurs through social interaction within specific cultural and historical contexts.[11] Academic writing, therefore, is not developed in isolation but through engagement with lecturers, peers, and the broader academic environment. According to Vygotsky, learning occurs through mediation by more knowledgeable others within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners develop new knowledge and skills with appropriate guidance and support before achieving independent performance. In the context of academic writing, lecturers scaffold students' learning through explicit instruction, constructive feedback, collaborative learning activities, and guided writing practice, allowing them to internalise academic writing conventions over time.

This theoretical perspective is particularly appropriate for the present study because it explains how first-year students develop academic writing proficiency through socially mediated learning experiences rather than solely through individual effort. The interactions between lecturers and students, together with peer collaboration and classroom engagement, provide opportunities for students to negotiate meaning, refine their writing practices, and progressively develop their competence in academic writing.

Therefore, this study is grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, demonstrating how social interaction, scaffolding, and mediation shape the development of academic writing within higher education. It highlights the critical role of lecturers as mediators who scaffold students' learning through instructional strategies and feedback, thereby shaping their writing competence. By foregrounding lecturers' perceptions, the study offers practical insight into how social and pedagogical dynamics within the classroom contribute to the acquisition of academic writing skills.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative research method. As Bhandari notes, qualitative research involves collecting and analysing non-numerical data, such as text, audio, or video, to gain insights into ideas, perspectives, or experiences.[12] This approach is particularly useful for exploring new research concepts or developing a deeper understanding of specific issues. A case study design was used, in alignment with the qualitative research approach. According to Creswell, a case study is a research design that seeks to provide an in-depth, multifaceted understanding of a complex issue within its real-life context.[13] This design allows researchers to examine data comprehensively within a specific setting. Given its ability to offer detailed insights into lecturers' perceptions of the factors influencing academic writing proficiency of first-year students, the design of the case study was deemed appropriate for this investigation.

Data for this study were collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions. As Dossetto explains, open-ended questions require participants to provide more detailed responses, moving beyond simple yes-or-no answers.[14] This approach yields richer, more nuanced data by encouraging participants to articulate their views in their own words rather than responding to predetermined options. Dossetto further asserts that open-ended questions enable researchers to gain deeper insights into participants' perspectives, offering a more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.[15] In this study, open-ended questions allowed participants to

[11] Lev S Vygotsky, "The Development of Academic Concepts in School Aged Children," *The Vygotsky Reader*, 1994, 355–70.
[12] Pritha Bhandari, "What Is Qualitative Research?| Methods & Examples," 2020.
[13] John W. Creswell, *Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Sage, 2014).
[14] B. Dossetto, *Open-Ended Questions: Definition, Advantages and Examples* (Atlassian Team Playbook, 2023).
[15] Dossetto, *Open-Ended Questions: Definition, Advantages and Examples*.

elaborate on specifics, provide extended answers, express their ideas, and share their opinions on factors that affect first-year students' academic writing proficiency.

The interview protocol was developed from the study objectives and relevant literature on academic writing proficiency in higher education. Before the main data collection, the interview schedule was reviewed by two experts in language education to establish content validity and tested with one lecturer who met the inclusion criteria but was not included in the final sample. Minor revisions were made to improve the clarity and sequencing of the questions.

Between August and September 2024, the researchers designed a set of open-ended questions aligned with the study's aims, and data were subsequently collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and, with participants' consent, was audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim to facilitate accurate analysis.

Research Participants

A purposive sampling method was employed to select ten (10) participants for this study, specifically targeting lecturers who teach first-year students in the Department of Applied Languages. Participants were chosen based on their involvement in teaching first-year students, ensuring relevance to the study's focus on academic writing proficiency. Potential participants were initially identified through the departmental staff list. They were contacted by email and received an information sheet explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the inclusion criteria. Lecturers who expressed willingness to participate were invited to schedule interviews at a mutually convenient time.

The sample consisted of lecturers aged 25–55 years, with a gender distribution of six males and four females. This selection criterion was designed to capture a diverse range of perspectives on the factors that influence the development of academic writing by first-year students.

Data Analysis

To ensure a thorough understanding of the data, the researchers read the responses multiple times. This iterative process facilitated the identification of key themes and patterns within the data. From these readings, broad categories were developed to systematically group responses into relevant thematic clusters.

The data were analysed using Dossetto's six-phase thematic analysis.[16] The researchers first familiarised themselves with the interview transcripts through repeated reading, after which they generated initial codes. Similar codes were grouped into categories, which were subsequently refined into overarching themes reflecting lecturers' perceptions of the factors influencing first-year students' academic writing proficiency. The themes were reviewed against the original transcripts to ensure that they accurately represented participants' accounts before being defined and named. Each response was subsequently assigned a numerical code, with each code representing a distinct segment or cluster of related responses. This coding process allowed for the organisation and categorisation of the data, ensuring that similar ideas and viewpoints were grouped for subsequent analysis.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the reliability of the findings, the study adhered to Creswell's criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.[17] Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the data, member checking, in which participants were allowed to verify the accuracy of their interview transcripts, and peer debriefing with experienced qualitative researchers. Transferability was supported by providing rich descriptions of the research context and participants. Reliability was ensured by maintaining an audit trail documenting the research process, methodological decisions, and data analysis procedures. Confirmability was strengthened by keeping reflective field notes and by grounding the findings in participants' narratives rather than in the researcher's bias.

[16] Dossetto, *Open-Ended Questions: Definition, Advantages and Examples*.
[17] Creswell, *Qualitative, Quantitative and Mixed Methods Approaches*.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the relevant institutional Research Ethics Committee before the commencement of the study (REC Ref #: REC2024/01/005 (HUM)). Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Department of Applied Languages. All participants gave their informed consent before participating in the interviews and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information from the interview transcripts. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored securely and were accessible only to the researchers.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This study aimed to explore university lecturers' perceptions of the factors affecting first-year students' academic writing proficiency at a South African institution, with a view to identifying key influences and proposing ways to enhance students' writing abilities. The findings, analysed in relation to the research objectives and existing literature, revealed four prominent themes which are discussed in detail in the sections that follow.

Table 1: Demographic Profile of Participants

Characteristic	Description
Institution	Tshwane University of Technology
Faculty	Faculty of Humanities
Department	Department of Applied Languages
Number of participants	10 lecturers
Teaching responsibility	Lecturers teaching first-year students
Gender	6 Male; 4 Female
Age range	25–55 years
Data collection method	Face-to-face semi-structured interviews

Theme 1: Perceived Academic Challenges in Writing

The findings reveal that lecturers perceive several fundamental challenges that hinder the development of academic writing proficiency by first-year students. These challenges primarily relate to weaknesses in grammatical competence, difficulties in constructing coherent arguments, limitations in integrating sources effectively, and the influence of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds on students' writing practices. Although the lecturers acknowledged that first-year students often possess ideas worth communicating, they emphasised that limited mastery of academic writing conventions often undermines these ideas.

Four participants (L02, L03, L04, and L09) particularly highlighted these concerns, noting that students' difficulties extend beyond surface-level errors and often involve deeper issues related to organisation, argumentation, and adaptation to academic discourse. These lecturers emphasised that addressing such challenges requires not only improving students' technical writing skills but also providing guidance on structuring arguments and engaging with scholarly sources effectively.

L04 stated that:

> "*Many of my students struggle with basic grammar, sentence structure, and proper citation. They often don't understand the importance of clear and concise writing in an academic context*."

In support of this view, L02 explained that grammatical challenges are only one aspect of the broader difficulties students experience when writing academically. The lecturer stressed that many first-year students struggle to develop coherent arguments, which negatively affects the readability of their work.

L02 noted that:

> "*It's not just about grammar. First-year students also face difficulties in constructing coherent arguments. Their writing often lacks flow, making it hard for readers to follow*."

In addition to these structural challenges, lecturers also highlighted students' difficulties in integrating academic sources into their writing. Three participants (L03, L04, and L02) observed that students often lack the skills required to incorporate sources meaningfully into their arguments. Instead, they either rely heavily on direct quotations or fail to connect the cited material to their own ideas.
In this regard, L03 indicated that:

> "*One challenge is that students often don't know how to incorporate sources effectively into their writing. They either overuse quotes or fail to integrate sources into their arguments properly*."

Furthermore, lecturers acknowledged that students' academic writing challenges are often shaped by broader contextual factors, particularly their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These factors may influence how students interpret and apply the conventions of academic discourse within the university setting.
In this respect, L09 stated that:

> "*Cultural differences and language backgrounds significantly impact their ability to write effectively. Some students struggle to adapt to the expectations of academic writing because of their diverse language experiences*."

Taken together, these findings suggest that the challenges first-year students face in academic writing are multifaceted and interconnected. Lecturers' responses indicate that students require support not only in developing grammatical accuracy but also in strengthening their ability to construct coherent arguments, integrate sources appropriately, and navigate the conventions of academic writing within a diverse higher education environment.

Theme 2: Impact of Lecturer Feedback on Writing Development

The findings indicate that lecturer feedback plays a significant role in supporting students' academic writing development. However, lecturers acknowledged that feedback effectiveness often varies depending on how students interpret and engage with the comments. Although lecturers strive to provide detailed feedback on both the structural and conceptual aspects of writing, they observe that students do not always act on these suggestions immediately and may require repeated reminders before implementing improvements in subsequent assignments.

Research participants coded (L01, L02, L03, and L04) emphasised different dimensions of the feedback process, highlighting both its benefits and its limitations in promoting writing development. These lecturers noted that although feedback is intended to guide and support students, some students do not fully engage with it, particularly when the same issues need to be addressed multiple times.
L01 stated that:

> "*I provide detailed feedback on structure and content, but I've noticed that students often don't take my suggestions seriously unless they are pointed out multiple times*."

In addition to students overlooking feedback, lecturers also emphasised the importance of balancing constructive criticism with positive reinforcement. Participants said that acknowledging students' strengths is essential to maintain motivation and encourage continued improvement. However, lecturers observed that students often focus primarily on the critical aspects of feedback, sometimes overlooking the positive comments intended to highlight their progress.
In support of this view, L02 explained that:

> "*I always offer both positive and constructive feedback. It's important for students to know what they are doing right as well as where they need to improve, but I sometimes feel that they focus only on the negative*."

Beyond written feedback, some lecturers highlighted the value of interactive engagement with students during the feedback process. They suggested that personalised interactions could enhance students' understanding of the comments provided and encourage greater engagement with revision and improvement.

In this regard, L03 indicated that:

> "*I try to engage students in a dialogue about their work. However, I feel the feedback process could be more effective if we had more one-on-one interactions instead of just written comments*."

Similarly, lecturers recognised that feedback must be delivered in a manner that encourages learning rather than discouraging students. Some participants noted that students may feel overwhelmed by extensive critical feedback, which can affect their confidence and willingness to revise their work. L04 emphasised this concern, stating that:

> "*Feedback should encourage growth, but many students seem overwhelmed by critical comments. I've been working on offering feedback that is both motivating and instructive to boost their confidence*."

Together, these findings suggest that lecturer feedback is a crucial component of the development of academic writing by students. While lecturers provide detailed comments to improve structure, content, and clarity, students may require repeated guidance before engaging in meaningfully engage with these suggestions. Moreover, the findings highlight the importance of balancing constructive criticism with positive reinforcement to maintain student motivation. Lecturers also emphasised that more personalised interactions, such as one-on-one discussions, could strengthen the feedback process, as written comments alone may not always foster the level of engagement necessary for substantial improvement in students' writing.

Theme 3: Instructional Practices and Their Role in Academic Writing

The findings reveal that lecturers employ a range of instructional practices to strengthen students' academic writing skills. Participants indicated that effective teaching strategies often involve a combination of peer review activities, interactive workshops, structured planning, and explicit step-by-step guidance. These approaches are intended to support students in understanding academic writing as a gradual developmental process rather than a single completed product. Through these strategies, lecturers attempt to create learning environments that encourage participation, reflection, and the gradual improvement of writing skills.

Four participants (L01, L02, L04, and L06) emphasised the importance of integrating varied teaching methods when teaching academic writing. These lecturers highlighted that combining collaborative learning activities with structured guidance helps students become more aware of writing conventions while simultaneously developing confidence in their writing abilities.

An instructional approach frequently highlighted by lecturers is peer review, which encourages students to critically evaluate their own writing and that of their peers. According to participants, this strategy allows students to identify common errors and strengths while recognising that writing is a process that involves drafting, reviewing, and revising.

In this regard, L02 explained that:

> "*I use peer review exercises in my class, which help students see writing as a process. By reviewing each other's work, they gain insight into the common mistakes and strengths*."

In addition to peer review activities, lecturers also emphasised the value of interactive workshops that provide students with opportunities for hands-on engagement with writing tasks. These workshops often involve group discussions, collaborative writing exercises, and guided practice, all of which help build students' confidence and participation in the writing process.

Supporting this view, L04 stated that:

> "*Incorporating interactive workshops on academic writing really helps. Through group discussions and writing exercises, students get hands-on practice, which makes them more confident in their skills*."

Another important instructional strategy highlighted by participants involves encouraging students to engage in structured planning and outlining before beginning their writing. Lecturers noted that planning helps students organise their ideas logically and produce more coherent essays. However, they also acknowledged that some students tend to overlook this preparatory stage, often rushing through the drafting process without adequately organising their thoughts.
L06 explained this challenge as follows:

> "*I emphasise planning and outlining before writing. This process helps students organise their thoughts, leading to more coherent essays. But some still try to rush through their drafts without this foundational step*."

Furthermore, lecturers highlighted the importance of providing explicit instruction in academic writing conventions, including referencing, argument development, and paragraph organisation. By breaking down these conventions into manageable components, lecturers aim to help students gradually develop a strong foundation in academic writing.
In this regard, L01 noted that:

> "*I find that a step-by-step breakdown of academic writing conventions like referencing, argument construction, and paragraphing helps students build solid writing foundations over time*."

Taken together, these findings suggest that a combination of collaborative learning activities and structured instructional guidance plays a vital role in the teaching of academic writing. Peer review exercises allow students to recognise common errors and strengths while reinforcing the understanding of writing as a process. Similarly, interactive workshops offer practical opportunities for engagement, enhancing students' confidence in their writing abilities. Although lecturers emphasise the importance of planning and outlining as essential steps in organising ideas, some students still overlook these practices. Additionally, a clear, systematic explanation of academic writing conventions helps build a strong foundation for students' writing skills over time.

Theme 4: Student Attitudes Towards Academic Writing

The findings indicate that students' attitudes towards academic writing play a significant role in shaping their engagement in university writing tasks. Lecturers observed that many first-year students approach academic writing with reluctance, often perceiving it as a compulsory academic task rather than an opportunity to express ideas or develop critical thinking skills. According to participants, these attitudes may negatively influence students' motivation and willingness to engage meaningfully with writing activities.

Participants coded (L01, L02, L03, and L04) reflected on how students' perceptions of academic writing influence their learning experiences. Lecturers noted that many students enter university with preconceived notions about writing, often shaped by their previous educational experiences. These perceptions may lead to disengagement or limited effort when completing writing tasks.
L01 highlighted this concern, stating that:

> "*Many students seem indifferent to academic writing, viewing it as a chore rather than an opportunity to express ideas. Changing this mindset is a major hurdle*."

While some students display indifference towards writing, lecturers also observed that others show an interest in improving their writing but struggle with motivation due to negative experiences in earlier schooling. These previous experiences may shape students' perceptions of writing as a difficult or discouraging activity.
In support of this observation, L02 explained that:

> "*Some students do care, but they struggle with motivation due to poor experiences in high school. I try to spark their interest by showing them how good writing can open doors in their academic careers*."

Another significant issue identified by lecturers is related to the lack of confidence among students in their writing ability. Participants noted that many students fear making mistakes, which can discourage them from experimenting with ideas or engaging critically with academic content. This fear often limits students' willingness to actively participate in writing tasks.
In this regard, L03 indicated that:

> "*There's a lack of confidence. Some students are terrified of making mistakes, which prevents them from even trying to write creatively or critically. I work hard to create a safe space for trial and error*."

Lecturers also emphasised that the transition from high school to university-level writing presents a considerable challenge for many first-year students. The shift to more complex writing expectations can create uncertainty about students' abilities, leading to reduced engagement with writing tasks.
L04 highlighted this transition, stating that:

> "*The shift from high school to university-level writing is huge. Many first-year students are unsure about their writing abilities, and this uncertainty often leads to disengagement*."

Taken together, these findings suggest that students' attitudes towards academic writing are influenced by a combination of prior educational experiences, confidence levels, and the challenges associated with transitioning to university-level academic discourse. Many students perceive writing as a demanding task rather than a platform for intellectual expression, which may hinder their motivation and engagement. Consequently, lecturers emphasised the importance of fostering supportive learning environments where students feel encouraged to experiment, make mistakes, and gradually build confidence in their academic writing abilities.

Theme 5: Institutional and Curriculum Support for Academic Writing

The findings indicate that institutional and curriculum support plays an important role in strengthening students' academic writing abilities. Lecturers acknowledged that many universities provide various forms of writing support, including writing centres and academic workshops. However, participants also emphasised that these initiatives are not always fully utilised by students and may not consistently address the specific writing challenges faced within different academic disciplines. As a result, lecturers suggested that greater integration of writing support within the formal curriculum could enhance its effectiveness and accessibility.

Four participants (L04, L06, L09, and L10) reflected on the current institutional support structures and highlighted areas where improvements could be made. These lecturers noted that, although writing support services are available, students often do not engage with them, which limits their potential impact on writing development.
L04 emphasised the importance of making writing support more accessible to students by embedding it within the curriculum, stating that:

> "*Our university offers writing support centres, but not all students take advantage of them. We could improve by incorporating writing sessions into the curriculum to make them more accessible*."

In addition to accessibility concerns, lecturers also pointed out that existing writing workshops sometimes lack a focus on the specific academic writing challenges students encounter within particular disciplines. Participants suggested that more subject-specific writing instruction could better address the diverse writing expectations in different academic fields.
Supporting this view, L09 explained that:

> "*The curriculum does offer some writing workshops, but they don't always focus on the specific challenges students face in academic writing. More subject-specific writing instruction could be beneficial*."

Furthermore, lecturers highlighted the need for a more systematic and coordinated approach to teaching writing across university programmes. Although some departments strive to incorporate writing development into their courses, participants indicated that a broader institutional strategy could ensure that writing instruction is consistently integrated across disciplines.
In this regard, L06 noted that:

> "*While our department does its best to integrate writing throughout the course, I feel that there should be a more systematic approach to teaching writing skills across all disciplines*."

Participants also emphasised the importance of identifying students' writing challenges early in their academic journey. They suggested that implementing early diagnostic assessments and targeted writing interventions could help lecturers identify specific areas where students require support, allowing institutions to address these challenges before they negatively affect academic progress.
L10 highlighted this point by stating that:

> "*There are some gaps in institutional support. I think offering early diagnostic assessments and targeted writing interventions would go a long way in addressing students' specific needs before they fall behind*."

Taken together, these findings suggest that while there is institutional and curriculum support for academic writing, there remain opportunities to strengthen these initiatives. Lecturers indicated that integrating writing support directly into the curriculum could improve accessibility and student participation. Additionally, the development of subject-specific writing instruction and a more coordinated institutional approach may further enhance the effectiveness of writing support across disciplines. Finally, implementing early diagnostic assessments and targeted interventions could enable universities to proactively address students' writing challenges, thereby supporting their academic success from the beginning of their studies.

Table 2: Summary of Themes Emerging from the Thematic Analysis

Theme	Key Findings
Theme 1: Perceived Academic Challenges in Writing	Students experience difficulties with grammar, sentence structure, coherent argumentation, source integration, referencing, and adapting to academic writing conventions because of diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds.
Theme 2: Impact of Lecturer Feedback on Writing Development	Constructive and timely feedback supports writing development; however, students often require repeated guidance and personalised engagement to fully benefit from it.
Theme 3: Instructional Practices and Their Role in Academic Writing	Lecturers promote writing proficiency through peer review, interactive workshops, structured planning, and explicit instruction in academic writing conventions.
Theme 4: Student Attitudes Towards Academic Writing	Students' motivation, confidence, prior educational experiences, and transition to university influence their engagement with academic writing.
Theme 5: Institutional and Curriculum Support for Academic Writing	Writing centres, curriculum integration, discipline-specific writing support, and early diagnostic interventions are considered essential to improve students' academic writing proficiency.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide important insights into the factors influencing first-year students' academic writing proficiency from the perspective of lecturers. Although the findings corroborate previous studies that identify grammar, sentence structure, argument development, and referencing as

persistent challenges,[18] this study demonstrates that these difficulties are not merely linguistic in nature but are shaped by the interaction of students' educational backgrounds, motivation, confidence, and institutional support. Within the South African higher education context, where students enter university with diverse linguistic and educational experiences, academic writing should be understood as a developmental and socially situated practice rather than a remedial skill. This finding extends existing scholarship by showing that writing proficiency is influenced by a complex interplay of personal, pedagogical, and contextual factors, highlighting the need for contextually responsive academic literacy interventions**.** The influence of students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, as identified by the participants, resonates with Al-Khiry and Daoud and Al-Hazmi, and reveals that even students with previous exposure to academic writing may struggle due to affective factors such as low confidence and motivation.[19] This challenges deficit-oriented perspectives that attribute poor writing primarily to language proficiency and instead supports a more holistic understanding of academic writing development.

Lecturer feedback, peer review, and hands-on writing workshops emerged as essential strategies for improving students' academic writing proficiency. Rather than functioning as isolated teaching practices, these strategies demonstrate that academic writing develops through continuous interaction, guidance, and collaboration, thereby providing empirical support for Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. Lecturers acted as mediators who scaffolded students' learning by creating opportunities for dialogue, collaboration, and gradual development of academic writing competence. Furthermore, participants emphasised the importance of institutional support through writing centres and discipline-specific writing initiatives, suggesting that academic writing should be integrated across the curriculum rather than confined to standalone support programmes. Therefore, the study contributes to theory by extending the application of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory to the development of academic writing within the South African higher education in South Africa and contributes to practice by providing evidence that can inform curriculum development, academic literacy programmes, lecturer feedback practices and institutional policies aimed at improving first-year students' academic writing proficiency and overall academic success.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In terms of recommendations, it is crucial for institutions to implement professional development programmes for lecturers, focusing on enhancing their understanding of effective feedback strategies and interactive teaching methods that align with students' diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Given the challenges identified in grammar, argument construction, and source integration, lecturers could benefit from training that scaffolds these areas through targeted activities and peer collaboration. Furthermore, universities should consider establishing support systems such as writing centres or workshops, where students can receive additional help with academic writing, particularly in the early stages of their studies. Encouraging a more integrated approach to feedback, where students engage in reflective practices and dialogue with lecturers, may foster a deeper understanding of writing expectations and improve overall academic writing proficiency.

CONCLUSION

This study successfully explored lecturers' perceptions of the factors influencing first-year students' academic writing proficiency and examined the impact of lecturers' instructional practices and feedback strategies on students' writing development. The findings highlighted key challenges, including difficulties with grammar, argument construction, and source integration, as well as the role of cultural and linguistic backgrounds in shaping writing proficiency. Lecturers emphasised the importance of providing detailed, constructive feedback and of using interactive teaching strategies, both aligned with the principles of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. Although the study contributes valuable insights into

[18] Bian and Wang, "Chinese EFL Learners' Rhetorical Problems in Writing"; Bitchener and Basturkmen, "Perceptions of the Difficulties of Postgraduate L2 Thesis Students Writing the Discussion Section."

[19] Al-Khiry, "Developing EFL Academic Writing Skills through the Use of Instructional Strategies"; Daoud and Al-Hazmi, "Academic Writing Problems: A Study of Arab Postgraduate Students."

the factors affecting first-year students' academic writing and the role of social interactions in writing development, a limitation is that it is based solely on lecturers' perspectives, which may not fully capture the students' experiences. Future research could benefit from exploring students' views on these challenges and their perceptions of feedback and instructional practices to provide a more comprehensive understanding.

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