


Lecturers' Perspectives on the Academic Writing Proficiency of First-year University ESL Students



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ABSTRACT

The academic writing standard of the majority of English Second Language (ESL) students has declined significantly on a global scale. Most tertiary education institutions are currently engaged in research to find new ways of helping ESL students improve their writing skills, as it has a major impact on their graduate output. This article evaluated lecturers' perspectives on the academic writing proficiency level of first-year university ESL students enrolled in a South African university. Data was collected through interviews with five lecturers responsible for teaching English Communication Skills, which is compulsory for all first-year students. The results indicate that students experienced numerous challenges when they first enrolled at university, but they gradually improved their performance by the end of the first semester. However, for a meaningful academic intervention to take place, leading to improved writing skills, there is a need for a more comprehensive Academic Support Programme to be implemented for ESL students. The study contributes to scholarship by amplifying perspectives of lecturers, identifying context-specific challenges in South African universities, and providing evidence-based insights into how support structures, such as writing centres, grammar instruction, and ICT can enhance ESL students' academic writing.

Keywords: English Second Language; Academic Writing; Perspectives; Process Approach; Writing Centre

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INTRODUCTION

Acquiring academic writing proficiency in English is widely recognised as one of the most important outcomes of higher learning, both nationally and internationally.¹ For students in multilingual contexts, particularly those for whom English is a second language (ESL), mastering academic writing requires far more than the ability to communicate; it necessitates the acquisition of complex skills in grammar, lexis, structure, and argumentation.² Academic writing is often regarded as the most demanding of the four language skills, since it requires the integration of knowledge gained through listening, speaking, and reading, while simultaneously conforming to conventions of clarity, coherence, citation, and critical thinking.

¹ Brenda Spencer, Miriam Lephala, and Cathy Pienaar, "Improving Academic Proficiency in Open Distance Learning through Contact Interventions," *Language Matters* 36, no. 2 (January 2005): 224–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10228190508566246>; Debra Myhill, Susan Jones, and Helen Lines, "Supporting Less Proficient Writers through Linguistically Aware Teaching," *Language and Education* 32, no. 4 (July 4, 2018): 333–49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2018.1438468>.

² Eli Hinkel, "Current Perspectives on Teaching the Four Skills," *Tesol Quarterly* 40, no. 1 (2006): 109–31.

Globally, research has shown that ESL students encounter difficulties in adjusting to the rigorous demands of academic writing at the university level.³ In South Africa, the challenge is particularly acute because the majority of students enter higher education institutions with limited exposure to formal English writing in their earlier schooling.⁴ This means that, alongside learning new disciplinary content, they must also acquire academic writing skills in a second language. For first-year students, this double burden often results in underperformance, high levels of anxiety, and, in some cases, attrition.⁵

Much of the existing scholarship has examined student outputs or self-reported experiences, while insufficient attention has been given to the professional insights of lecturers into the specific challenges faced and the pedagogical or institutional strategies that can best address them. Understanding lecturers' perspectives is critical, as they not only identify and assess students' weaknesses but also directly influence the design and implementation of interventions.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to investigate perspectives of lecturers on the academic writing proficiency of first-year ESL students at a South African university. By situating the inquiry within Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, the study emphasises the importance of interaction, scaffolding, and guided practice in supporting writing development.⁶ It seeks to uncover how lecturers perceive students' strengths and weaknesses, what interventions they believe are most effective, and how universities can structure support to ensure student success.

The rest of the paper unfolds as follows. First, a review of the literature highlights the advantages of academic writing proficiency and the role of instruction in ESL acquisition, with specific attention to challenges faced in South African universities. Second, the research methodology is presented, including data collection through interviews with lecturers of English Communication Skills (ECS). Third, the findings are discussed thematically, covering grammar instruction, plagiarism, the process approach, ICT integration, and the potential role of writing centres. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations and reflections on the broader implications for supporting ESL students in higher education.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Advantages of acquiring academic writing skills

Acquiring academic writing skills is essential for all ESL students enrolled in tertiary institutions, and they are expected to demonstrate explicit knowledge of syntactic, lexical, phonological, and morphological features of English, where it is the medium of instruction.⁷ Academic writing is a form of scientific writing where students synthesise information and critically evaluate the validity of information accessed from different sources, thus helping them to become critical thinkers. Green proposes that it is the responsibility of a particular university to teach disciplinary writing as a social practice to help students adapt to the standard expected.⁸

Students with an adequate command of English can present ideas clearly when writing essays, which ultimately helps them to score better. Beare and Bourdages maintain that students with a good command of English hardly use their native language to generate ideas when writing texts in English in institutions where English is the medium of instruction.⁹ On the other hand, those with low command usually rely on their native language to generate ideas and then translate these ideas into English, which

³ Theresa Lillis and Mary Jane Curry, "Professional Academic Writing by Multilingual Scholars: Interactions with Literacy Brokers in the Production of English-Medium Texts," *Written Communication* 23, no. 1 (2006): 3–35; Joseph J. Lee, Chris Hitchcock, and J. Elliott Casal, "Citation Practices of L2 University Students in First-Year Writing: Form, Function, and Stance," *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 33 (May 2018): 1–11, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2018.01.001>.

⁴ Ernest A Pineteh, "The Academic Writing Challenges of Undergraduate Students: A South African Case Study.," *International Journal of Higher Education* 3, no. 1 (2014): 12–22.

⁵ Colleen du Plessis, "Inferences from the Test of Academic Literacy for Postgraduate Students (TALPS)," *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 34, no. 1 (March 31, 2016): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2015.1108206>. L J Ngoepe, "Ethnographically Oriented Assessment of an Emergent Multidisciplinary Science ESP Group Project Module," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 31, no. 2 (2017): 172–91.

⁶ Lev S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, vol. 86 (Harvard university press, 1978).

⁷ Rod Ellis, "The Definition and Measurement of L2 Explicit Knowledge," *Language Learning* 54, no. 2 (June 10, 2004): 227–75, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9922.2004.00255.x>.

⁸ Stanislav Shmelev, "Multidimensional Sustainability Assessment for Megacities," in *Green Economy Reader: Lectures in Ecological Economics and Sustainability* (Springer, 2016), 205–36.

⁹ Sophie Beare and Johanne S Bourdages, "Skilled Writers' Generating Strategies in L1 and L2: An Exploratory Study," in *Writing and Cognition*, ed. M. Torrance, L. van Waes, and D. Galbraith (Brill, 2007), 151–61.

impacts the quality of their essays.¹⁰ Therefore, ESL students should be taught the dynamics of academic writing in a formal setting for a specific period, which can be determined by the institution depending on the students' level of proficiency. Such a practice would help these students adjust to the demands of the institution and assess whether they are capable of engaging in different forms of writing. Moreover, engaging in different forms of writing helps students to understand the surface and deeper meaning of written language, which ultimately improves their academic writing level.

The role of instruction in second language acquisition is important in helping students identify their weaknesses and make efforts to improve the current state of their academic writing.¹¹ The debate on the role of output and input in second language acquisition needs further deliberation to prove that students are not coping on their own, and they need facilitators or lecturers to help them improve their language levels. In a study conducted in Germany, Raisig and Vode maintain that students have challenges in understanding and implementing intertextual practices when writing essays.¹² They identified five key difficulties and then proposed seven remedial exercises that can be implemented to help minimise the challenges students are facing. Language aptitude is regarded as the "most important individual difference variable in second language acquisition", and thorough attention should be paid to how to resolve different aspects that hinder ESL students from acquiring proficiency.¹³

As English is a global language, it is imperative for ESL students to receive tuition on how to improve their academic writing skills to enable them to use the skills acquired after graduation. David, Thang and Azman designed an online writing support programme planned for students with low proficiency in English.¹⁴ The programme has proven to be very successful in Malaysia, and other institutions are in the process of implementing it. The programme provides newly admitted students with guiding principles for improving their academic writing and having adequate control over all of their writing. Thorough practice in academic writing helps students to evaluate different points of view by researchers on a particular topic and be able to write a coherent text based on their evaluation. They are also expected to recognise errors in written texts and to use the language with great sensitivity. Mitchell and Evison advise that learning academic writing should be a continuous process for all students registered at a particular institution, rather than selecting at-risk students to attend special classes.¹⁵ Ideally, institutions have a role to ensure that all students understand academic writing standards, which they are expected to use once they start writing different texts.

Academic Writing in South African universities

ESL students in South Africa struggle to cope at university, particularly in their first year, as they have to acquire academic writing skills while at the same time learning the course content presented in English. Pineteh argues that South African universities are currently dealing with students' attitudes and skills that are not suitable for higher education, which was not the case more than twenty years ago.¹⁶ This is supported by a process framework developed in a South African university to integrate academic writing into an undergraduate degree. Schulze and Lemmer aver that even most postgraduate students at master's and doctoral levels struggle with the rigour of dissertation writing, as English is not their first language.¹⁷

According to Ngoepe, students need relatively more support from their learning environment to help them complete their studies.¹⁸ Thus, universities need to ensure that undergraduate students receive

¹⁰ Daphne van Weijen et al., "L1 Use during L2 Writing: An Empirical Study of a Complex Phenomenon," *Journal of Second Language Writing* 18, no. 4 (December 2009): 235–50, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2009.06.003>.

¹¹ Nina Spada, "Beyond Form-Focused Instruction: Reflections on Past, Present and Future Research," *Language Teaching* 44, no. 2 (April 13, 2011): 225–36, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444810000224>.

¹² Dzifa Vode and Shawn Raisig, "A Workshop to Help Students Integrate Sources into Their Writing," *Journal of Academic Writing* 6, no. 1 (2016): 222–51.

¹³ Shaofeng Li, "The Associations Between Language Aptitude and Second Language Grammar Acquisition: A Meta-Analytic Review of Five Decades of Research," *Applied Linguistics* 36, no. 3 (July 2015): 385–408, <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amu054>, 385.

¹⁴ Anne Rowena David, Siew Ming Thang, and Hazita Azman, "Accommodating Low Proficiency Esl Students' language Learning Needs Through An Online Writing Support System," *E-BANGI* 10, no. 1 (2015): 118.

¹⁵ Sally Mitchell, Alan Evison, and L Ganobcsik-Williams, "Exploiting the Potential of Writing for Educational Change at Queen Mary, University of London," *Teaching Academic Writing in UK Higher Education*, 2006, 68–84.

¹⁶ Pineteh, "The Academic Writing Challenges of Undergraduate Students: A South African Case Study."

¹⁷ Salome Schulze and Eleanor Lemmer, "Supporting the Development of Postgraduate Academic Writing Skills in South African Universities," *Per Linguam*, June 2017, <https://doi.org/10.5785/33-1-702>.

¹⁸ Ngoepe, "Ethnographically Oriented Assessment of an Emergent Multidisciplinary Science ESP Group Project Module."221.

adequate training in academic literacy and language proficiency, which can help them complete their studies.¹⁹ Lombard found that although “majority of students regard English as an international language,” they think that indigenous languages need to be developed and used as media of instruction at the tertiary level.²⁰ Student writing is linked and shaped by the epistemological and values of communities where they live and learn; hence, it is marked by specificity. Du Preez and Foley proposed a developmental framework aimed at improving the academic writing skills of undergraduate students in South Africa, and this has yielded good results since its inception.²¹ Literature from different countries proved that academic writing by ESL students is still a challenge that needs attention, particularly in African countries where English is the medium of instruction but the first language of less than ten percent of the population of the country.²²

It is a fact that writing intervention can be a useful strategy to help first-year students improve their academic writing levels.²³ On realising the challenges that students encounter, the University of Kwa-Zulu/ Natal introduced Isi-Zulu to be used with English as a medium of teaching and learning.²⁴ Using Isi-Zulu, the first language of the majority of students at the University of Kwa-Zulu/Natal, helps to bolster their understanding of academic writing in English, which is a second language.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative method was used to collect data from five participants responsible for teaching English Communication Skills, an academic literacy course. The rationale for using all five lecturers was that the population was numerically limited and had specific characteristics that the researchers were interested in. Moreover, using all five lecturers elicited the required data, which helped to uncover their perspectives on the academic writing levels of English second-language students.

Research data was collected through semi-structured interviews at the university premises at an agreed-upon time between the researchers and the participants. Berg defines an interview as “a conversation with a purpose.”²⁵ The purpose of conducting interviews was to encourage the participants to share their experiences on the challenges exhibited by students in their written texts. The five participants were interviewed using open-ended questions. The focus of data collection was on their commitment, interests and experiences. The questions were prepared to encourage the participants to share their experiences by explaining in detail what could be done to improve the academic writing levels of their students. The open-ended questions allowed the researchers to probe further in cases where the respondent had not fully responded to the question asked. Each interview session was scheduled for one hour, and an audio recorder was used to capture the information. The demographic details of the participants were as follows:

Participant	Gender	Age	Number of years teaching ECS	Highest Qualification
A	Female	51	22	PhD in English
B	Female	54	16	DEd in ELT
C	Male	46	20	MA in English
D	Female	44	15	PhD in English
E	Male	52	23	MEd in ELT

All five participants willingly participated as they regarded the research as a developmental process that could help them improve their teaching performance. They consented to participate in the study after all ethical procedures were followed and information was thoroughly explained. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms were assigned, using letters A – E to represent the participants’ data.

¹⁹ du Plessis, “Inferences from the Test of Academic Literacy for Postgraduate Students (TALPS).”

²⁰ Ellen Lombard, “Students’ Attitudes and Preferences toward Language of Learning and Teaching at the University of South Africa,” *Language Matters* 48, no. 3 (September 2, 2017): 25–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2017.1398271>.

²¹ I Du Preez and A Fossey, “Developing Academic Writing Skills as Part of Graduate Attributes in Undergraduate Curricula,” *South African Journal of Higher Education* 26, no. 2 (2012): 346–57.

²² Sheena Shah et al., “Writing for Speaking: The Nluu Orthography,” *Creating Orthographies for Endangered Languages*, 2017, 109–25.

²³ Spencer, Lephala, and Pienaar, “Improving Academic Proficiency in Open Distance Learning through Contact Interventions.”

²⁴ Stephanie Rudwick and Andrea Parmegiani, “Divided Loyalties: Zulu Vis-à-Vis English at the University of KwaZulu-Natal,” *Language Matters* 44, no. 3 (November 2013): 89–107, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2013.840012>.

²⁵ B. L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 4th ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2001), 66

After data collection, the researchers transcribed the recorded data and deeply immersed themselves in reading and sorting it into meaningful units. Afterwards, the data was coded into meaningful themes and then reviewed thoroughly in alignment with the research topic. Data not related to the lecturers' perspectives on the academic writing levels of ESL students were discarded, while the relevant data were sifted to be used during analysis. Five themes emerged during the refining process; hence, thematic analysis was used to discuss the findings of the study. Thematic analysis is a highly flexible method that can be used to analyse data rigorously to get trustworthy results.²⁶

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Data were carefully analysed under the five themes that emerged after rigorous sifting and sorting. The focus of all themes is on lecturers' perspectives on providing initiatives aimed at improving the academic writing level of first-year students. These initiatives can be supplemented by practical tasks that can help students adjust to the university style of writing, which is different from that used at the high school level. Writing is an important skill that students utilise to present their ideas and arguments, which should be graded by their lecturers.

Teaching Grammar Structures

The Communicative Approach to Language Teaching has brought several misconceptions, including the fact that students should acquire grammar structures naturally during conversation. Jones, Myhill and Bailey maintain that effective teaching of grammar must be contextualised to help students improve their writing levels.²⁷ The participants, however, pointed out that the writing level of some students is very low and that they must be taught how to use grammar rules effectively while promoting communicative competency. Participant A pointed out that “the majority of our students come from deep rural monolingual communities where the use of mother tongue dominates.” These students use English mainly when communicating in class and use their home language in social conversations. The results corroborate Potgieter and Conradie's findings that teachers believe that explicit teaching of grammar rules helps students improve their language skills.²⁸

Participants also recommended that grammar lessons should be offered once a week as a remedial session where students can engage with the lecturer during discussions. Grammar lessons need to be efficient to motivate students to see the benefits of attending when compared to other courses, which also demand much of their time. Participant E argued that:

I understand that we are in the era of communicative approach to language teaching, and there is an assumption that grammar teaching is not necessary at the university level. I would like to indicate that our students were taught by English teachers who are still rooted in the principles of Bantu education. These teachers still promote drilling of language rules and vocabulary memorisation, yet we expect students to have acquired an adequate level of writing when they are admitted to university.

English language teachers have an important role to play in preparing high school students to cope at the tertiary level. The above statement gives some of the reasons contributing to students' underperformance at the university level. Based on the above excerpt, lecturers must extract what is useful from different teaching methods and implement it in their classes to help students improve their performance. Myhill *et al.* propose that linguistically aware teachers help students understand a second language better.²⁹ The challenge is that some teachers still resist adjusting to the current proposals on grammar teaching, which researchers have suggested, as they still believe students can acquire grammar structures naturally. Hinkel avers that teaching grammar is essential in helping students improve their

²⁶ Lorelli S Nowell et al., “Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 16, no. 1 (2017): 1609406917733847.

²⁷ Susan Jones, Debra Myhill, and Trevor Bailey, “Grammar for Writing? An Investigation of the Effects of Contextualised Grammar Teaching on Students' Writing,” *Reading and Writing* 26, no. 8 (2013): 1241–63.

²⁸ Anneke P Potgieter and Simone Conradie, “Explicit Grammar Teaching in EAL Classrooms: Suggestions from IsiXhosa Speakers' L2 Data,” *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 31, no. 1 (March 2013): 111–27, <https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2013.793956>.

²⁹ Myhill, Jones, and Lines, “Supporting Less Proficient Writers through Linguistically Aware Teaching.”

writing ability when the focus is on contextualised uses of grammatical structures that promote the grammatical application of knowledge in different situations.³⁰ Contextualised uses of grammar structures improve students' metalinguistic awareness and promote critical thinking. Participant B raised her concern about grammatical fluency:

Our students lack the appropriate grammar knowledge to present ideas in their essays clearly. However, after several weeks of grammar instructions, they gradually improve their writing style and include academic vocabulary in their writing.

To avoid redundancy in grammar teaching, the university must provide a clear course outline on aspects that are regarded as challenging and the assessment methods to be used.

Also, lecturers need to actively engage students during sessions and provide opportunities for students to improve their writing standard.³¹ First-year students lack understanding of the meaningful structures and patterns when writing essays in English, as it is not their primary language. They usually submit essays that lack coherence and cohesion as they struggle to construct grammatically correct sentences.³² Teaching some aspects of grammar, therefore, enhances students' ability to understand the knowledge that lecturers impart in class, as well as writing essays that display a shift from high school to university standards. In addition to the benefits of teaching grammar, lecturers must create a fertile ground for students to interact meaningfully using English, which is the medium of teaching and learning.

Using the process approach to help students refine their writing

Participants agreed that students need to regard writing as a process that gives them ample opportunity to engage with the text. Some students tend to write essays hurriedly for submission instead of following the various steps in the process of writing a text. Although researchers have different names for various steps used in the process approach, the most common are as follows: prewriting, drafting, revision, editing and publishing. The five steps are not fixed but happen in a recursive process, where students can move forward and backwards, engaging with different points and making corrections until they are satisfied with what they have created.³³

Participant B complained about the feasibility of implementing the process approach, citing understaffing and time constraints for follow-up. She argued that the university has a major role in appointing more staff members to minimise the gap between the student/lecturer ratio, which is abnormally high. The process approach to writing is a useful method that requires commitment from both the students and the lecturers. Participant C had this to say:

I do try to give written corrective feedback to students in an effort to help them improve their writing ability. The main challenge is that very few of them are eager to correct their own work and to engage other students to help them with peer editing.

Providing feedback is essential in helping students; however, it is usually a one-way process wherein lecturers impose their views, as there is insufficient time for the lecturer to engage students on an individual basis.³⁴ More importantly, lecturers must devise new strategies that can be used to take some steps in the process approach that do not adequately help students improve their writing standards.

This can help students who regard the process approach as a waste of time, as they only focus on the grade that they achieve, rather than regarding it as a developmental process to improve their writing. Participants also pointed out that although students work under great time constraints, they must

³⁰ Eli Hinkel, *Second Language Writers' Text: Linguistic and Rhetorical Features* (Routledge, 2002).

³¹ Seunghun J Lee, "Cumulative Effects in Xitsonga: High-Tone Spreading and Depressor Consonants," *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 33, no. 3 (2015): 273–90.

³² Madoda Cekiso, Baba Tshotsho, and Michael Somniso, "Exploring First-Year University Students' Challenges with Coherence Writing Strategies in Essay Writing in a South African University," *International Journal of Educational Sciences* 12, no. 3 (March 25, 2016): 241–46, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09751122.2016.11890431>.

³³ Linda Flower and John R Hayes, "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," *College Composition & Communication* 32, no. 4 (1981): 365–87.

³⁴ S. Deyi, "Feedback or Feed-Forward? Implications of Language Used in Giving Feedback on Students' Writing," in *Changing Spaces: Writing Centres and Access to Higher Education*, ed. A. Archer and R. Richards (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2011).

understand that acquiring adequate writing skills is a life skill that they will use in their different workplaces; hence, there is a great need to improve them.

Helping Students Avoid Plagiarism

Students with low proficiency in English resort to plagiarism when writing different texts for summative evaluation. The moment students register at university, they are expected to engage in research from the first year, where they consult a variety of sources on different topics and write well-structured essays. This is an excruciating exercise for ESL students in their first year at tertiary institutions and also for the lecturers responsible for teaching large classes.³⁵ Participants therefore unanimously indicated that very few students have the skills and adequate knowledge on how to collate information from different sources, which compels them to engage in plagiarism. Participant D indicated that:

Reading and marking more than 100 essays is a daunting task, as the majority of the students use the copy-and-paste system with the hope that it will not be detected. It is easy to detect it as some of them fail to link paragraphs from different texts, and they assume that we do not have enough to read all the essays.

Writing a coherent essay is a challenging exercise for ESL students due to their limited analytic skills to scrutinise and synthesise information from different sources. Participant C further pointed out that “first-year students do not know how to summarise and then use the information to create their own texts.” Henning, Gravett and van Rensburg support this view by arguing that students resort to plagiarism because they are unable to write creatively on their own.³⁶ In some cases, students are too lazy to do their work on time, and they engage in plagiarism to submit the essay before the due date. Participants also indicated that students should be informed about the use of TURNITIN software from the first year, so that they may get acquainted with it before completing their first degree. A student can be penalised or requested to rewrite an essay if the software detects that major parts of the essay were copied directly from other sources. Thus, Abasi and Graves argue that students need to be enlightened about the genre of academic writing and that a particular institution prefers to avoid a situation where students are penalised.³⁷

Encouraging the use of ICT when writing

Participants gave critical perspectives on the use of ICT in helping students hone their writing skills. Of the five participants, two blame the rise of technological devices for harming students in the quest to improve their writing skills. They indicated that students use informal language when they chat with friends and relatives on social media, even when they write formal texts to be submitted for either formative or summative evaluation. However, the other three argue that students should be encouraged to write different forms of tasks on their laptops and tablets and then save them in files to be used during discussion or when preparing tasks for summative evaluation. Participant D indicated that “*we are living in a digital age, and therefore students need to be encouraged to use different gadgets to improve their academic writing levels.*” This view differs from the belief that the widespread use of ICT has significantly contributed to the decline in writing skills of students. The majority of students now find pen-and-paper writing old-fashioned, yet universities rely on this system for summative evaluation. Yaman, Müfit and Deren argue that smartphones can be “effectively used for language learning purposes” if students are given instructions and then encouraged to use them for learning.³⁸

Participants further argue that since the university has introduced the “Blackboard” system, all students must use the software effectively to stimulate their desire to avoid pen and paper writing.

³⁵ Pryah Mahabeer and Tashmika Pirtheepal, “Assessment, Plagiarism and Its Effect on Academic Integrity: Experiences of Academics at a University in South Africa,” *South African Journal of Science* 115, no. 11–12 (2019): 1–8.

³⁶ E. Henning, S. Gravett, and W. van Rensburg, *Finding Your Way in Academic Writing*, 2nd ed. (Pretoria: Van Schaik Publishers, 2005).

³⁷ Ali R. Abasi and Barbara Graves, “Academic Literacy and Plagiarism: Conversations with International Graduate Students and Disciplinary Professors,” *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* 7, no. 4 (October 2008): 221–33, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2008.10.010>.

³⁸ İsmail Yaman, Müfit Şenel, and Deren Başak Akman Yeşilel, “Exploring the Extent to Which ELT Students Utilise Smartphones for Language Learning Purposes,” *South African Journal of Education* 35, no. 4 (November 30, 2015): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v35n4a1198>, p. 1.

Tummons, Fournier, Kits and MacLeod maintain that teaching without a blackboard and chalk provides “newer and improved affordances for learning and teaching.”³⁹ The participants highlighted the numerous benefits of using ICT for students to improve their writing skills; however, the current digital divide in South Africa makes it challenging for all students to use the available programmes. The majority of students are from rural areas where there is no access to the internet, and some come from areas with limited access to the internet, which poses a serious challenge to connectivity.

Participant A reflected on her previous experience in supporting the use of ICT in teaching and learning. She pointed out that “*in my previous employment before I came here, we used Web 2.0 technologies designed for different courses, including language teaching.*” It is a useful software which promotes interactivity and collaboration between students and lecturers from different universities. Advantageously, it motivated students to learn using ICT devices and encouraged them to write weekly reports, which ultimately helped them improve their academic writing ability. Additionally, students can use their handheld gadgets to share ideas daily or weekly, and they can even make critical analyses of the short text at their leisure. David *et al.* posit that online language learning plays an important role in scaffolding university students with low proficiency in ESL to cope with the dynamics of academic writing.⁴⁰

Establishment of a Writing Centre at the University

Globally, most universities have established or are in the process of establishing writing centres to assist students who are struggling to write well-structured academic texts. Students with low academic writing proficiency levels benefit substantially when they interact with experienced lecturers and language experts on a one-to-one basis at the writing centre. Participant E confirmed the advantages of a writing centre by indicating that “*I have worked at the writing centre for one year before I was employed here, and the results of students who come to consult have improved greatly.*” This aligns with Vygotsky’s concept that language learning is socially situated and culturally constructed, as students need knowledgeable peers to scaffold them from a lower level to an advanced level.⁴¹ This aligns with Rambiritch and Carstens’ argument that positive politeness in the form of praise elicits remarkable results in the writing centre and encourages students to return.⁴² Writing centres were introduced in some South African institutions since the dawn of democracy, but their impact is insignificant as they focus on error correction. Thus, participants need to understand that the introduction of a writing centre should focus on changing students’ way of reading, thinking, writing and interpreting a text.

The writing centre is expected to boost students’ confidence in tackling new topics, which helps them write regularly rather than wait for the lecturer to give them essay topics. The participants therefore proposed that the university should consider establishing a writing centre and employing well-capacitated staff who can help the students who are at risk of failing to finish their studies during the prescribed period or dropping out because of frustration. The assertion below made by Participant A foregrounds the usefulness of a writing centre:

I believe a writing centre can help students with low proficiency in English improve their performance. I worked for two years at a writing centre in the UK while doing my PhD, and I have witnessed how students, especially from Asia and Africa, quickly improve their academic writing levels.

The findings from the participants support that a writing centre can have prospects for students who are struggling to write. The university management must ensure that capable graduate students are recruited and trained to work at the writing centre because “the acquisition of academic writing

³⁹ Jonathan Tummons et al., “Teaching without a Blackboard and Chalk: Conflicting Attitudes towards Using ICTs in Higher Education Teaching and Learning,” *Higher Education Research & Development* 35, no. 4 (July 3, 2016): 829–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2015.1137882>, 837.

⁴⁰ Anne Rowena David, Siew Ming Thang, and Hazita Azman, “Accommodating Low Proficiency Esl Students’ language Learning Needs Through An Online Writing Support System,” *E-BANGI* 10, no. 1 (2015): 118.

⁴¹ Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*.

⁴² Avasha Rambiritch and Adelia Carstens, “Positive Politeness in Writing-Centre Consultations with an Emphasis on Praise,” *Language Matters* 52, no. 2 (May 4, 2021): 72–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2021.1942169>.

competency is a lengthy process".⁴³ Participant C supports this by indicating that "a writing centre is likely to reduce our workload as graduate students will help students with low proficiency in English improve." Furthermore, a writing centre has the positive role of scaffolding students to become independent after several contacts with their tutors and also influencing struggling students to enrol at the centre. It helps students receive verbal and written feedback as well as access to effective consultation processes that make them own their writing.⁴⁴

The writing centre assists university students in comprehending the expected writing style at the university and enhancing their language skills. This is supported by Severino, Egan and Prim, who highlighted that the writing centre helped to improve the linguistic and rhetorical features of English second language students.⁴⁵ Surprisingly, only institutions that are well-rated and that admit a high number of students who speak English as a first language have writing centres, and those that admit the majority of ESL students do not prioritise establishing writing centres. Archer states that a writing centre helped students at the University of Cape Town to adjust to the academic environment and increase confidence when tackling different tasks.⁴⁶ Mentors also help students realise that writing is not an anxious and solitary activity but an activity that can be greatly improved through consultation and peer editing. The participants' proposal that a writing centre is essential, therefore, requires consideration for the benefit of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Lastly, a writing centre is easy to manage as it requires a few qualified staff and tutors who have adequate academic writing skills.

The study highlighted the perspectives of university lecturers on the challenges that first-year university students face when writing essays. The participants indicated that first-year students admitted to university have different academic writing levels, and some struggle to effectively collate information from different sources and compose a coherent essay. This is in line with McNamara *et al.*'s assertion that students rarely use subordinating conjunctions or signpost words, which greatly improve text quality and guide the reader through the text.⁴⁷ Insufficient use of signpost words is one feature that indicates that a student has not fully acquired academic writing skills and thus needs more training in that specific area. Data collected from participants further confirms that students experience numerous challenges when they are expected to write long essays wherein they are supposed to collate information from different sources.

Another challenge is that most of these ESL students have low academic writing proficiency in English, which is the medium of instruction. They struggle to use phrasal and clausal grammatical features that enhance the quality of any written text and make it appealing to the reader in their essays. The discussion above affirms that students need more training on grammatical structures and the appropriate use of complex academic vocabulary, which can help them improve their academic writing proficiency. Hinkel argues that teaching specific grammatical features is essential in helping English second-language students improve the quality and sophistication of their written texts.⁴⁸ Lack of adequate knowledge in second language grammar has a serious impact on students' written production, which has a negative impact on their studies. Thus, infusing socio-cultural issues in teaching grammatical structures is perceived as important in helping students improve their writing abilities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussion, universities outside English-speaking countries need to examine their course outlines on either Academic literacy or English Communication Skills to cater for ESL students. Lecturers responsible for ECS need to be sensitive when dealing with students by trying to always give them equal attention. Where applicable, student-lecturer conferencing is an essential strategy that can help a student

⁴³ Karis Moxley and Arlene Archer, "Writing Centres as Dialogic Spaces: Negotiating Conflicting Discourses around Citation and Plagiarism," *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics Plus* 56, no. 0 (November 2019), <https://doi.org/10.5842/57-0-808>, 32.

⁴⁴ M. Skead and T. Twalo, "The Fort Hare Writing Centre," in *Changing Spaces: Writing Centres and Access to Higher Education*, ed. A. Acher and R. Richards (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2011), 115–30.

⁴⁵ Carol Severino, Deirdre Egan, and Shih-Ni Prim, "International Undergraduates' Perceptions of Their Second Language Writing Development and Their Implications for Writing Center Tutors," *The Writing Center Journal* 38, no. 1/2 (2020): 165–202.

⁴⁶ A. Archer, "Investigating the Effects of Writing Centre Interventions on Students' Writing," in *Changing Spaces: Writing Centres and Access to Higher Education*, ed. A. Archer and R. Richards (Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 2011), 131–44.

⁴⁷ Danielle S. McNamara et al., "Coh-Metrix: Capturing Linguistic Features of Cohesion," *Discourse Processes* 47, no. 4 (May 5, 2010): 292–330, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01638530902959943>.

⁴⁸ Eli Hinkel, "Research Findings on Teaching Grammar for Academic Writing," *English Teaching* 68, no. 4 (2013): 3–21.

with low proficiency in English improve performance. Student-teacher conferencing helps students gain confidence to write essays and other texts easily with the aim of improving their writing ability for summative evaluation. The suggestions given by the participants are important in helping the university management detect the challenges that students encounter and the strategies that can be implemented to solve the current challenges. It is, therefore, recommended that the university fully capacitate lecturers on the effective use of online learning and teaching resources and also ensure that there is a network at all nodal points on campus. Also, a fully functional writing centre should be established on campus, and students need to understand that they have to consult their tutors regularly to improve their writing standards.

CONCLUSION

This study explored perspectives of lecturers on the academic writing proficiency of first-year ESL students at a South African university. The findings revealed that many students struggle with grammar, coherence, vocabulary, and the integration of sources when writing academic texts, which negatively affects their overall performance. Lecturers consistently pointed to the importance of targeted interventions, such as explicit grammar teaching, structured use of the process approach, corrective feedback, and plagiarism awareness to address these challenges.

Beyond classroom strategies, the study highlighted the crucial role of institutional support. Lecturers emphasised that sustained improvement requires the integration of ICT tools for writing, the establishment of a well-resourced writing centre, and adequate training for both students and lecturers. These broader initiatives would not only build students' confidence and independence in writing but also ease lecturers' workload while improving retention and graduation rates.

Ultimately, the study contributes to ongoing debates on ESL writing by demonstrating that academic writing development is a shared responsibility between students, lecturers, and universities. It concludes that meaningful progress can only be achieved when pedagogical strategies are complemented by structural reforms that prioritise writing support as a central element of academic success in multilingual higher education contexts.

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