

English Writing Challenges of First-Year Students: A Case Study of a University in the Eastern Cape

By Victoria Magaba*

Writing is a productive skill, which means that the emphasis is on the output. The fact that most students in South Africa learn English as a second language (L2) presents challenges concerning English writing proficiency, because writing is different from speaking since it utilises higher-order cognitive skills. The study analysed 184 students' scripts showing different forms of students' writing, such as, reports, creative writing assignments, language tests, business correspondence, research papers, answering open-ended questions on extracts and the like. A qualitative method was used to explore and describe challenges encountered by students in English writing by collecting students' scripts to identify problem areas where interventions needed to be applied. Purposive sampling was employed for the study as the focus was specifically on first-year University students registered for different modules, but all taking Communication (English), which is a compulsory module. Various theories such as the writing process, error analysis and proficiency theory were explored in order to understand the processes that underpin academic writing. The hypothesis is that mother-tongue linguistic features will pose challenges as they are embedded in the students' cognitive language skills, and they will therefore interfere in English writing since the students' mother tongue and English have different linguistic rules. Possible solutions for the many and varied challenges are the application of different processes that include different pedagogical methodologies. Error analysis played a crucial role in the study since it has a bearing on students who speak English as a second language because it investigates errors which are systematic and which result from language interference (this can manifest in intralingual and/or interlingual interference). In order to address these challenges, facilitators must employ pedagogical strategies that will encompass different teaching methods and different assessment methods that will link language exercises to other forms of writing such that there is a correlation between different aspects of language skills.

Keywords: *English writing challenges, language interference, error analysis, teaching methods, assessment methods, language skills*

Introduction

English writing at tertiary level is a very important skill because students' academic performance is graded mainly on their written work. However, studies conducted on first-year written work show that there are gaps in this literacy because the assumption is that students who enrol at university have the required level of writing proficiency to cope with the demands of academic discourse that

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will help them better understand concepts that form the focus of lessons. This assumption makes lecturers overlook the fact that most school leavers who enter South African universities are not adequately prepared for higher education studies. At high school, writing is viewed mainly as a tool for the practice and reinforcement of grammatical and lexical patterns, however at university; the emphasis is on academic writing, which is a skill that requires critical thinking and argumentation. Lecturers must take cognisance of such challenges and communicate with the writing centre so that appropriate measures can be put in place to support students in academic writing. In most cases, writing centres operate as separate entities covering a syllabus that does not contribute to the academic development of students who use this service. In essence, writing centres do students a disservice, as there is no synergy between writing centres and improvement of students' writing skills. The same issues became apparent at the university where the study was conducted as content covered by the writing centre and information imparted in lecture halls are not harmonised. The focus at the writing centre is mainly on grammar (and study skills), whereas academic writing requires skills that go way beyond the knowledge of grammar.

Of the four language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing, writing is the one that should most likely be used to determine whether students would progress to the next level/year. For this reason, it is crucial that students acquire writing proficiency, especially students who study English as a second language, because they are prone to encounter challenges in this discourse. Richard et al. (in Ellis and Barkhuizen 2005) have explored proficiency, defining it as the degree of understanding that one employs when engaging with language. Academic English writing proficiency denotes having the knowledge and skills within the form and function of the written language, which then enables students to engage themselves in whatever form is presented, thereby enabling them to fully demonstrate their content knowledge.

At the selected institution of the study population in the Eastern Cape, there is a writing centre where students are equipped with basic writing skills. However, writing centres generally focus on supporting students in the correct application of grammar, which is the case at this campus, but the writing centre does not delve into the writing process, which constitutes far more than the knowledge of grammar. A proficient writer is able to write appropriately and efficiently, therefore students need to apply the correct discourse in order to attain writing proficiency. Myles (2002) alluded to the importance of writing when stating that 'writing skills must be practised and learned through experience.' This emphasises the importance of the writing process, which encompasses various phases that students have to go through before they are able to self-edit their work.

Studies on writing challenges have been conducted both in South Africa and abroad. Heinemann and Horne (2003) conducted a study on the level of understanding of the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) where the aim was to specifically address challenges in teaching English in South Africa. Interestingly, many books have been published on second language English teaching, but according to Heinemann and Horne, 'they did not cover language issues in South Africa' (Heinemann and Horn 2003, x). Consequently, these

researchers co-authored a book aiming specifically at addressing issues encountered by first-year tertiary students in South Africa.

Academic writing is an area that has piqued researchers' interest in recent years in South Africa, and as a result, studies in writing have been conducted at various universities. However, no study has been conducted on writing at this historically black university in the Eastern Cape. This province is an important area of concern in this regard, as it is mainly rural and underprivileged where many schools are under resourced. For this reason, a study focusing on students' academic writing challenges will highlight if the challenges experienced in this rural province are the same as in other provinces, or if there are additional challenges.

Studies conducted on this topic include Kruger's (2011) study that measured the writing progress made by first-year students at North-West University (Vaal Triangle campus). Mkonto's (2015) investigation of first-year students' expectations of academic integration at the University of the Western Cape, and Chili's (2016) study which focused on students' writing success to measure the impact of the Academic Development Programme at Rhodes University, are some examples of studies conducted in this discipline. Studies conducted abroad have also investigated first-year students' writing. Crusan (2002) examined first-year writing placement assessment at Ohio University and found that students struggled with writing coherent discourse. Jordan (1997) studied English language problems of overseas students in higher education in the United Kingdom and concluded that writing challenges resulting in academic and career constraints for students, meaning that students who do not have this discourse will struggle in their studies and this might affect their future career endeavours. Abedi (2010) also examined students' writing performance in order to highlight the need to have a programme that would address first-year students' writing challenges. He acknowledged that research on first-year students' writing performance was lacking. However, although findings from studies have indicated challenges in writing proficiency, there are no measures to address the highlighted production challenges. Some writing challenges are general and they can be addressed through available writing models, other challenges are encountered in a particular group (for example, mother-tongue interference, poor teaching, lack of exposure to the language, etc.). This study will therefore address interventions that will curb students' writing challenges and also highlight what has influenced these and what can be done to alleviate problems in English academic writing. Failure to address these challenges mean that challenges will persist unabated and will hinder progress for current and future students as English is the language that is used as the language of learning and teaching in many institutions of higher learning.

Being fluent in English or in any other language enables interlocutors to use the language to persuade, to convert and to compel; this is because 'language is one of the rudimentary means of fostering relations among people' (Magaba 2019, p. 2). However, writing transcends these succinct traits of verbal communication since it requires a more complex communication skill, which is attained through practice, which is pivotal in academic writing. Technological advancements have opened new avenues for millions of people to engage with the written form

through emails, blogs, social media, texting and the like. When using technology, users apply their knowledge of literacy to encode and decode messages. However, these forums do not necessarily follow the standard English writing format; therefore, knowledge of these formats will not assist students in academic writing as its format differs markedly from the other writing genres. Students must be reminded that writing is distance-bound, therefore the written text must be methodical so that it conveys the writer's intended meaning where the correct inference will be drawn to avoid misinterpretation or communication breakdown. Written texts must satisfy three components, namely, the writer, the message and the receiver. This means that writing needs a careful plan and an explicit end product. In order for students to be proficient writers, they need to demonstrate good structure and fluency.

When they start their university studies, students are expected to have acquired a reasonable level of English proficiency to help them cope with academic writing discourse. This greatly places strain on first-year students because they are expected to be able to read tasks individually and display a high level of reading ability, which will enable them to write well-structured and fluent academic assignments. Lack of good academic writing skills can lead to a high failure rate, which in turn is likely to lead to a high dropout rate and loss of government subsidy by the university. Academic literacy programmes must address these concerns to help first-year students to cope with the transition from Grade 12 to tertiary education.

Background and Context to the Study

According to Graham and Harris (2013) the fact that English is a second language for most learners can negatively influence their academic achievements, particularly in higher education. If students lack competence in the LOLT, they will feel restricted, which will ultimately make them feel inadequate. Maxwell and Meiser (2001) concur with this when positing that students who encounter challenges at tertiary institutions as a result of poor language skill, will not succeed, thus adding to the high level of drop-outs. English proficiency therefore becomes imperative because students need to be able to read and write proficiently in order to attain success in their studies. Banjo and Bisang (1985) emphasise the importance of mastering the LOLT when they infer that students will only be fully able to understand the subject content if they understand the LOLT. Language competence is important, as it is a prescript for language proficiency, hence it is important that students' writing must be analysed at first-year level to ensure that they acquire the requisite proficiency in the writing skill. Lack of this prerequisite will culminate in poor productive skill, which will negatively affect students' success in their academic work, as they will struggle with the subject content in different learning areas and they will ultimately fail to reach their academic and career potential.

Lack of exposure to English earlier on in life and outside of school hinders progress and ultimately has a negative impact on language proficiency later on in

the learners' school life. It is imperative for English learners to be introduced to the language as early as possible so that by the time they leave school at the end of grade 12; they can speak, read and write English well and are ready for tertiary education. Magaba (2019) concurs, stating that it is paramount to pave the way for everyone to access opportunities through a fair and just educational system. This means that earlier exposure to the language will assist in addressing overt and covert challenges in the LOLT.

Writing is cognitively demanding, therefore it is incorrect to assume that being able to speak English fluently automatically makes one a good writer. Based on this, even mother-tongue speakers of English need guidance in academic writing (Wingate 2015). This is apparent in the writing process, that includes planning, which manifests in an opening framework in the form of key words relating to the topic (taxonomy). Drafting (writing down information relating to the content) and revising (checking the sequence of events or arguments, substituting words that will make the topic more interesting or stronger) are important steps to ensure good organisation and structure. The final step in the writing process is editing (meaning, checking grammar, spelling and whether the meaning intended is written in a methodical and explicit manner to avoid ambiguity) for appropriate diction and clarity.

Good academic writing focuses not just on grammar, but also on the content and style of writing. Previous studies on academic writing have focused on the root causes of students' lack of writing proficiency, but have not suggested strategies that can be employed to deal with these challenges. Hinkel (2006) posits that proficiency in writing requires explicit pedagogy in grammar and lexis. Grammar is a term used by linguists to refer to both the structure of words and their arrangements in sentences (Stock and Widdonson 1974). Other than the basic requirement for grammar to follow a particular sequence, for example, subject-verb concord, the text must have meaning (Bell, 1981). Knowledge of grammar plays an important role in any language, particularly in the construction of written work where the writer must follow the underlying rules governing language use (Bachman and Palmer 2010, Debata 2013, Mbau and Muhsin 2014). Research has shown that teaching grammar and lexis overtly does not enable students to write coherently (Odlin 1989). In order for students to achieve writing proficiency, they need to be taken through the writing process from the moment they start preparing themselves to do a writing task until they eventually produce the final product.

Wingate (2015) contradicts earlier studies and argues that academic literacy is more than what it is generally perceived to be. Many studies have indicated that it is mostly students who are second language learners who struggle with academic writing discourse. However, Wingate is of the view that challenges in writing happen across the board and they are not just challenges experienced by students from underprivileged backgrounds or second language learners. She is of the view that problems in literacy transcends race, and that is why these challenges are encountered globally. Wingate (2015), like Corder (1967), Cummings (1984), and Hakuta and Lee (2009) deviate from the perceived norm as cited by Kruger (2006; 2009) and Rees (2008) that being fluent in a language automatically makes one a good writer.

Aim of the Study, Research Questions and Research Objectives

The aim is to highlight areas of concern in academic writing for first-year university students.

1. What problems do first-year university students encounter in academic writing?
 2. What are the causes of academic writing challenges?
 3. Which writing trends do first-year university students commonly use?
 4. How does academic writing affect students' performance?
 5. Which measures can be applied to address challenges in academic writing?
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1. To find out what problems do first-year university students commonly encounter in academic writing.
 2. To determine the root causes of challenges in academic writing.
 3. To explore writing trends of first-year students.
 4. To analyse the impact of academic writing on students' performance.
 5. To provide recommendations that will help resolve some of the issues causing challenges in academic writing.

Research Design and Methodology

Research design may be exploratory, experimental, descriptive, etc. and each design underpins research methodology through a myriad of forms. The research design applied in this study is exploratory and descriptive as the researcher wants to uncover the underlying reasons that contribute to challenges in academic writing and analyse students' written work under different forms, namely, reports, business correspondence, language tests, etc. The exploratory design focuses on the trends in relation to the writing style and use of vocabulary, while the descriptive design manifests in analysing students' written materials and giving an account of any area that poses a challenge in academic writing.

The study used the qualitative method as the bedrock for exploring students' traits that impede them from attaining writing proficiency. The qualitative method has been chosen because it focuses on inductive reasoning, which analyses patterns and observations of the sampled population to enable the researcher to reach conclusions, which can be applied to broader generalisations. The information was obtained from students during unstructured interviews, focus group discussions and the submission of scripts, as these provided insights into the problem and uncovered underlying trends in academic writing. The writing output of 184 students in four different departments was collected and analysed for similarities and differences. Writing challenges are cross-curricula; hence, purposive sampling of first-year students was employed to gauge the level of writing challenges in different departments. The researcher was also involved in the study as an observer, took notes, and recorded events, which assisted in analysing the data (Creswell 2009). Students' scripts were collected and analysed over a semester so that a

varied sample could be collected to address the contentious issue that knowledge of grammar is the answer to writing challenges. An array of students' scripts collected included: answers to open-ended texts, unprepared creative writing tasks, writing and responding to business correspondence, summarising extracts and notes, writing reports, and the like. All written scripts made available were analysed by the researcher. The students were given feedback on the tasks completed after the lecturer graded their scripts and the students had to do corrections. The researcher explored the correlation between the graded task and the corrections not only to check whether there was any progression/understanding of not just the content, but also to ascertain whether the writing discourse was applied when correcting mistakes and errors. The overall writing style was also noted. Follow-up tasks were used to determine whether the suggested correction forms would be applied in other tasks to show broader understanding of concepts such as content and academic writing. Glasgow and Farrell (2007), who emphasised the importance of viewing students' writing as a process that needs to be nurtured through different stages, have alluded to this. A number of studies have explored the importance of the writing process to highlight the pivotal role that students need to embark on in order to be proficient writers. In essence, checking students' corrections of previously analysed texts is crucial because it will indicate whether there are embedded trends in the students' writing style.

The researcher incorporated an ethnographic design informed by the qualitative method where the researcher observed participants in their natural setting (the interaction was conducted in the university lecture halls and tutorial sessions). Data was then compiled from the point of view of the participants during unstructured interviews and during focus group discussions where active interaction took place between students. The researcher played the role of observer to avoid influencing opinions or stifling the atmosphere. Primary data was mainly collected on a continuous basis over the semester whenever there were written tasks. These were collected from different settings and then analysed.

Data Collection

Methods of data collection:

- Collecting students' scripts (this was done in every writing session regardless of the format of the writing, which could be a character sketch, a business plan, answers to open-ended questions, essays, etc.). This serves to analyse academic language use.
- Observations (to check the level of support given and/or engagement with the task in both individual and paired/group written tasks).
- Unstructured interviews (to address issues as and when they arise using open-ended questions to gain clarity).
- Focus group discussions (to obtain a general perspective from a number of students).

The researcher continually collected data from students' written work and conducted unstructured interviews to get the students' opinions on the written work covered in each lesson. The collection of data happened at the end of each writing lesson. First-year lecturers were also interviewed to obtain their views on what they thought were the writing challenges experienced by first-year students. Using different data collection methods allowed the researcher to implement triangulation to ensure research validity. As the students were involved in the writing process, they made corrections at each phase of the process. Scripts where students wrote corrections were also collected to gauge whether changes were implemented in accordance with academic writing. Data collected was used in the design of the suggested writing model.

Data Analysis

Data analysis of students' writing became an on-going process as the study covered a number of lessons over a semester. After each writing session, students' work was collected for analysis. The research methodology applied in this study incorporated an ethnographic method, which means that data collection and data analysis were concurrent.

Table 1. *Data Collection and Analysis of Written Work*

Activities	Method of collection	Method of data analysis
Writing proficiency	Students' scripts.	Is there a general flow (coherency) and appropriate link of arguments?
Error analysis	Individual students exposed to a standardised text.	Checking for mother-tongue interference/interlanguage.
Socio-cognitive theory of writing	Written scripts such as an essay, a text or answers to open-ended questions.	Checking students' scripts to see if there is negotiated interaction with interlocutors (Is the intended meaning clear?)

Findings

First-year students' challenges in academic writing are many and varied, for example, poor language skills, lack of coherency and consistency in arguing/supporting a point, poor organisation and many others. The main problem is that challenges in academic writing lead to poor academic performance. Academic performance refers to a measure that is used to determine if a student has attained the set goal in a particular task, for example, in a test, an assignment, an exam, etc.

To demonstrate how widespread writing challenges are, a group of first-year students discussed their experiences of academic writing across the curricula. The discussion touched on some of the areas that were raised in a different group the previous year. That group of students were asked to write their expectations of university before they enrolled and experiences at university towards the end of their first year. The students were made aware that the papers collected would not

be graded and they were asked to be as frank as possible as their contributions might highlight areas of teaching and learning that needed to be reviewed and possibly amended. These are some of the general comments and concerns from some of the focus group members for this study (a number of students shared their comments in their mother tongue (mostly Xhosa) and the researcher translated them into English. The information is based on students' views relating to English, which is their medium of instruction, and how it affects their academic performance, particularly in written tasks.

- My English is generally poor, but writing poses a greater challenge than speaking as there are rules to adhere to for formal writing.
- I have no problems with writing prepared pieces; the problem arises when I have to write information on a new topic.
- What I see as contributing to some of our problems is that we were mostly taught in our home language, so being at university and expected to write good English is a problem.
- I don't have problems with speaking English, but I find writing quite challenging, especially at university. My mother suggested that I should read more to improve as she thought that my poor performance was that I was not applying myself fully. My lecturer advised me to take notes in class, go through them later, and then summarise them so that I can get used to the writing discourse.
- There are certain ways that I have always applied in my writing, and because they were hardly ever corrected, it is hard for me to change how I write and this style of writing isn't helping me with serious pieces of writing like business correspondence.
- If we were given the rubric for our written tasks like reports and research, that will help us do better because we will use it to streamline our work, so without such information, we often end up performing poorly.
- I think my academic performance would improve if I were taught in my home language because English is posing problems for me, especially when it comes to writing. If we had a choice, some of us would write in our mother tongue because it will be easier to demonstrate our knowledge of content in the different modules.
- Writing in a language that you're not even fluent in speaking is bound to be challenging. My written work is often written in simple sentences, regardless of the task/s because I struggle to formulate sentences using complex and compound sentences. If I attempt to incorporate longer and better-structured sentences, I end up making too many mistakes and errors because I am not sure of the correct format.
- My writing has improved since I started university because the writing style that I have learned in my English Communication class has made me more conscious of how I should write.
- I don't think my challenges at university are just language-based. I am generally not an academically strong student, so I can't blame English as the source of my poor performance.

- For me, speaking English is not a problem, so it would help if some modules would be assessed through oral presentations like those that we do in some of our Communication tasks.
- Our performance might improve if the marked scripts from all our lecturers had specific guidelines on how we should correct our work and not just a cross or a question mark for incorrect answers. This will improve our writing and we will get better marks.
- According to me, most of us would greatly improve our English writing if all our lecturers encouraged us to write in this formal style of writing, but since most of them don't enforce this, then we concentrate on applying correct writing skills only in our English Communication tasks.
- Group work or paired written tasks would help us improve so that when we do individual academic written tasks later, we would at least have had practice.
- We are used to the kind of English writing that we use in social media where the form of writing is different. This creates problems for us because we must now unlearn some of our writing styles since they do not conform to academic writing style.
- Remedial support would help students who struggle with writing good English, but this should be part of the lessons throughout the curriculum. There is no academic writing support that we are aware of outside of what is covered in the Communication class.
- Continuous short assessments in formal English writing will help most students to improve their writing skills.
- Students would benefit if individual writing was stressed and encouraged in high school because in high school, we mostly worked on previous question papers as a class to prepare us for exams. We were not fully prepared for academic writing and that is why some of us are struggling in our studies now.
- The students who struggle with English academic writing must be offered extra support since without this support, they are unlikely to do well or even pass. This will have a negative impact on them because most students here are on NSFAS (National Student Financial Aid Scheme), and if a student fails, they will lose part of their funding or the affected students might not even get funding at all.
- English is our second language, therefore, expressing subject knowledge in writing persuasive, exploratory, narrative and creative pieces of writing is challenging for most of us.
- Students would generally do better if lecturers would be considerate when setting students' assessments. Assessments should be conducted using different formats, because they are currently based mostly on testing knowledge through writing. For examinations, it is just writing, this is unfair because not all students are good at expressing their knowledge in writing.
- Continuous assessments must have a higher percentage than examinations (60/40 or even 70/30) because examinations are stressful, so students are

unlikely to demonstrate good writing skills under enormous pressure where they are expected to not only demonstrate their subject knowledge, but also must do so in the allocated period.

Writing trends of first-year students rely heavily on plagiarism (academic theft where someone copies information without acknowledging the source and claiming that information or idea as their own) and group writing (working on individual tasks as a group and submitting the same or similar answers). Plagiarism is common in research-based questions and/or where students are expected to analyse concepts. In other cases, they apply plagiarism by paraphrasing information and then failing to acknowledge the source. In research-based questions, students also use google search to get related information. When analysing concepts, many students consult published online sources and copy information as it stands. Group writing leads to poor understanding of concepts as there is no thorough engagement with tasks.

Many students rely on rote learning where they regurgitate information in the same way that it was imparted. Rote learning affects performance because it relies on students recalling information word for word where it is generally repetition without understanding; therefore, if students cannot recall certain information, they are highly likely to perform poorly as there is no meaningful learning.

In order to address these challenges, some measures can be incorporated in lessons to help students better understand concepts. One way of doing this is for comprehension of tasks to be reinforced by applying teaching practices that are multimodal (where meaning is communicated through different forms to help with understanding).

Exposure to different formats of formal writing through recommended links, websites, publications, etc. will reinforce measures that underpin good writing skills, which will ultimately result in improved academic performance.

Furthermore, unstructured interviews conducted with first-year university students support the view that there are writing challenges that students are encountering, and students are hoping for a solution to these challenges to boost their academic performance. Based on writing skills analysed in students' scripts, some suggested recommendations that can help solve some of these challenges are listed below.

Analysis of students' writing highlighted challenges in the following areas:

- The students' focus was primarily on content, hence writing proficiency remains a challenge.
- Poor application of punctuation, which leads to run-on sentences, and/or changing the intended meaning altogether.
- Rote learning; students tend to regurgitate memorised subject content information, but cannot engage with the text/information in a critical manner.
- Literal translation from the mother tongue to the language of learning and teaching.

- Poor language use at different levels (morphology – at the word level and incorrect use at the syntactical level – sentence level).
- Use of informal language in formal writing tasks; this is because students struggle to differentiate between the two.
- Poor spelling, which might cause confusion (especially concerning homonyms, which are words that have the same pronunciation, but have different meanings, e.g., flower/flour, fore/four, seen/scene, etc.).
- Poor transition from one section to the next. This leads to a lack of clarity in controlling ideas/arguments.
- Poor vocabulary, which prevents students from conveying the intended meaning; this results in challenges when they are required to use more appropriate diction.
- Poor usage of different sentence structures to demonstrate good academic writing (simple sentences, complex sentences, compound sentences, etc.)
- Unsatisfactory engagement with the topic using own words to demonstrate comprehension. This was especially common when answering questions based on an extract, as some students ‘copied’ answers directly from the text word for word.
- Substandard organisation – this leads to incoherency as there is no consistency.

Other areas that contribute to these challenges are practical things that are needed to give students the option of having the mother tongue as a medium of instruction since a number of students indicated that such an option would help them perform better. These challenges are the shortage of trained teachers who can teach in African languages up to higher levels, lack of learning resources in African languages and funding to support this process in different languages as South Africa is a multilingual country. To counteract these three challenges, some people feel that these challenges can be overcome with government support. In support of this, Prof Schoole (in Govender 2022) stated that if the promotion of African languages can be made a national priority the same way that Afrikaans (a dialect of Dutch spoken in South Africa) was supported, then having African languages as medium of instruction is a feasible prospect. A point raised in favour of the African language as a medium of instruction is that this will elevate the position of African languages, which are currently on the periphery. Siluma (2022) concurs when highlighting that black languages have been historically discriminated against and marginalised, but it is time that these languages get national support to allow them to make inroads in education. Such a venture might enhance the academic performance of many students whose mother tongue is not English.

Conversely, “if learners and parents still cling to the notion that English is the only language that will provide opportunities and a future for learning in South Africa, they will not opt for mother-tongue education” (Prof Kaiser, in Govender 2022). This view is supported because English is an international language that is mostly used in commerce, on the internet and other fields used by an overwhelming majority of people.

Areas highlighting that there is Potential for Improvement

- Students' satisfactory performance when answering questions that required short answers.
- Satisfactory performance when writing information that the students have written before, although engaging with any section that was unfamiliar proved a bit challenging, even within the same text.
- Students performed well when correcting mistakes and errors shortly after being taken through the process for the written task/s.
- There was improved performance when writing was reassessed, because not only did the content improve, but the phrasing of statements improved as well.
- Improvement was noticed when students were given more time to draft their pieces of work and then submitting them for guidelines before writing a final draft.

Conclusion

The South African government is studying the feasibility of mother-tongue instruction in some schools which are showing an interest in this endeavour; hence, the government has established a task team to gauge how the process can be implemented. The primary focus of this task team is to encourage the teaching of different subjects in the mother tongue from grade 4 (Govender 2022). This initiative is supported not only for promoting marginalised languages, but also to improve students' performance as expert opinions state that "learning and conceptualisation improve significantly when children are taught in a language they are most familiar with" (Prof Jita, in Govender 2022). Some schools have taken part in this pilot project and general results shared indicate that mother-tongue instruction indeed helps students perform better in their studies. From the results shared, the Eastern Cape Province (the province where this study was conducted) was one of the areas where students were taught in their mother tongue (Xhosa). There was a marked improvement in performance from 40% and 50%, to more than 60% (Govender 2022). There are suggestions that all schools must make it compulsory to teach at least one African language to help promote indigenous languages across the spectrum as part of language in education policy (Siluma 2022).

According to Prof Madiba (in Govender 2022), a contributing factor to poor academic performance at tertiary level is attributed to English being the medium of instruction from grade 4 to tertiary education when not enough time has been granted to learners to grasp English. To highlight this problem, Madiba states that, "Three years is not enough for learners to switch to learning everything in English as the majority of learners come from an environment where English is not even spoken, so they cannot develop cognitive language proficiency skills in English."

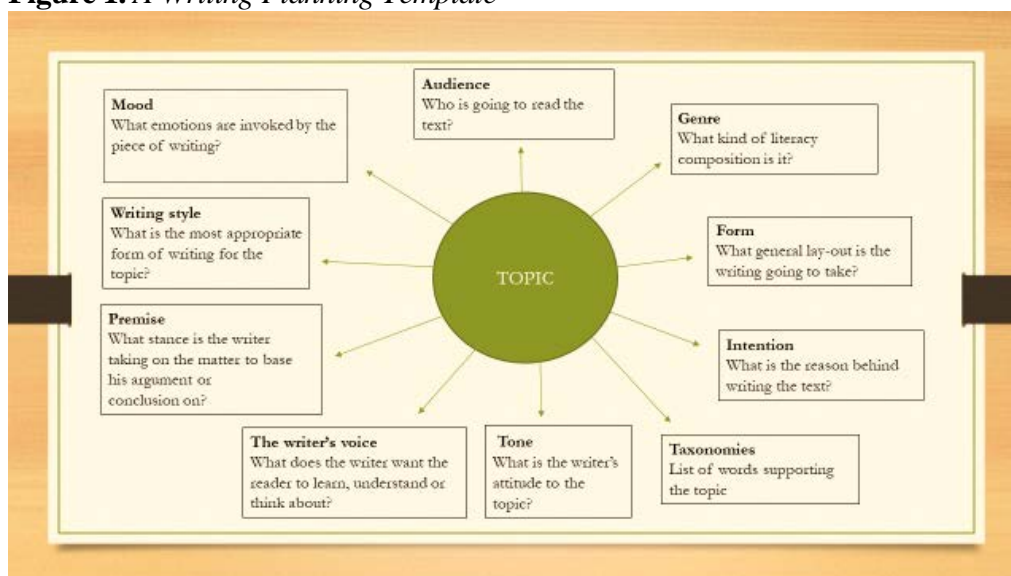
Other than the medium of instruction contributing to challenges in coping with tasks, teaching practice can also play a role in poor academic performance,

regardless of the language of teaching and learning and regardless of where in the world this happens. Di Zhang and Yu (2022) conducted a study in mainland China which was prompted by the students' challenges in engaging proficiently with creative writing and analysing texts for meaning. The analysis of data collected indicated that multimodal modes (where meaning is communicated through combinations of two or more forms like posters, newspapers, reports, etc.) helped students to express their creative ideas fully. What teachers must learn from this is that their teaching practice must incorporate tasks that are multimodal to enable students to have a broad scope of engagement, which is likely to improve performance.

Most first-year students struggle with their academic work mainly because of the language issue, but particularly because of poor writing skills. Although the majority of students are articulate in English, this does not necessarily imply that they can cope with the writing discourse. If emphasis on the knowledge of grammar was coupled with a format that assisted students to become proficient writers, this would lead to significant progress in students' writing skills, hence, a planning template as demonstrated in Figure 1 is supplied to act as a guide. This serves to highlight the different areas of focus in a piece of writing to help maintain good organisation and consistency in the writing process. In addition, the content and style of writing resulting from a discourse that encompasses rigorous engagement with the writing task through phases should include among other things:

1. A planning template (focusing on: the audience, the intention, taxonomies, the tone, genre, writing style, the mood, etc.).
2. Drafting (the background to the topic, ideas on explaining the message the student is writing to promote, supplying reasons for applying the tone and the mood, displaying how the different subsections are co-related).
3. Revising (clarifying any ambiguity, checking for relevance and correcting diction)
4. Editing (correcting grammar and spelling, checking for the consistency and coherency of the writer's point/s on the issue, etc.).

Based on the findings of the study, a good starting point for tackling students' writing challenges is a writing model, which can be used to assist students in their writing practice to avoid any chance of students going off track. The writing task would determine whether the focus should be on the writing style, the writer's voice, taxonomies and the like.

Figure 1. A Writing Planning Template

In summarising the study, the writing centre should cover areas that students struggle with, as indicated by lecturers, and the two parties must review this at the end of every semester in order to determine whether the process is yielding positive results for students or not. If there are any unforeseen challenges surfacing before the scheduled meeting, either of the two parties must intercede to prevent students from falling through the cracks, as this is pivotal for students' success.

Some areas of concern are that students might not be forthcoming with information pertaining to all the areas of concern during unstructured interviews. Some lecturers tend to view an exercise where students' challenges are highlighted as an area of weakness in the way they conduct lessons, so they might not be open to the process where they speak openly and honestly about any challenges that they encounter with their classes or with the delivery of lessons.

Ethical Issues

No students were singled out as having problems in writing, hence all the students' writing covering different formats was analysed to gauge the students' levels. No students were named or identified in anyway as the purpose of the study was solely to highlight problem areas and suggest solutions to help students cope with critical writing analysis in higher education.

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