

Discovering Academic Literacy Skills in English of First Year ESL Students in Humanities at the University of Botswana

Ambrose B. Chimbaga

Dep. of Communication Studies, University of Botswana

P. B. 0022, Gaborone, Botswana

Tel: 2-677-184-0268

E-mail: chimbga@mopipi.ub.bw

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to find out the academic literacy skills in English of ESL first year humanities students from their own point of view. It is motivated by the fact that many lecturers at this university (and perhaps at many other universities elsewhere) often complain about the limited academic literacy skills of their students, especially those who use English as an additional or non-native language. Using both quantitative and qualitative research methods, the views and final examination essays of thirty conveniently sampled students were analyzed. The findings show that the majority of the students rated many of their academic literacy skills 'average'. In terms of their writing skills, the results indicate that the majority of the students have pragmatic competence which enables them to communicate their intended meaning reasonably well; but what they lack mainly is organizational competence, i.e. the ability to write ideas fluently and accurately. To help the students overcome some of their academic literacy limitations, it is suggested that teachers should first try to understand the students' practices, and to give written work that fosters a sense of ownership, self-reflection and personal engagement.

Keywords: ESL, EAP, Pragmatic competence, Organizational competence, Positive transfer, Academic literacy, Academic discourse

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, research interest in second or foreign language pedagogy has shifted its focus from teacher-directed instruction to students' learning activities. As a result, a raft of research studies has been conducted from the learner's perspective, such as personal factors and learners' beliefs about their own language abilities (Bernat & Gvozdenko, 2005; Chawhan & Oliver, 2000). In line with this tradition, this researcher investigates the academic literacy skills of speakers of English as a second language (ESL) at the University of Botswana, with the aim of trying to understand their abilities and what needs to be done to improve their skills.

The study is motivated by the fact that in our modern era of mass education in which institutions of higher learning now enroll students from heterogeneous backgrounds, many language and content subject lecturers at this university (and perhaps at many other institutions of higher learning) often complain about the limited academic literacy skills of their students. The majority of these students come from inadequately resourced schools and when they make their move to college or university, they often discover that they are not fully conversant with the expected discourses of their subject disciplines. Of particular concern is their inability to function effectively in the new academic environment because of their limited skills in English (Chimbganda, 2010; Twalo, 2008; Macfarlane, 2006; Mkhabela, 2004).

Realizing that many ESL students lack both linguistic and academic literacy skills that can help them tackle their learning more effectively, many colleges and universities in both the 'inner' countries (e.g. the UK and USA which use English as their native language) and 'outer' circle countries (mainly former British colonies which use English as a second language) now teach English for Academic Purposes (EAP), which is defined as "teaching English with the aim of facilitating learners' study or research" (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001: 8). Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002: 2) maintain that "EAP has emerged from out of the broader field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), a theoretically and pedagogically eclectic parent, but one committed to tailoring instruction to specific rather than general purposes".

The introduction of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), sometimes referred to as English for Academic Development (EAD), is based on the assumption that many students, especially ESL students, need to develop their proficiency in English not only for purposes of enhancing their specialization in discipline-specific areas but also for improving their general academic development. The need to offer more comprehensive and systematic English for academic development contrasts sharply with the previous 'do-nothing' approach, which required students to acquire the literacy practices and conventions of their discipline through an osmotic process and hoping that "... how content subjects are written about will surely rub off on our students" (Blanton, 1994:6).

Against this background, there has been a fair amount of research on college-level literacy

skills, second language acquisition (SLA), learning strategies, reading, college writing and so forth. However, little attention has been paid to how ESL students actually view their own ability to use a range of academic literacy skills in English in different academic settings. In particular, it is important to discover what students think about their writing abilities because not only does writing impose huge cognitive, linguistic and social demands to both native speakers and ESL learners, but it is also the most difficult to master particularly for ESL students with limited opportunities to experience authentic input (Brown, 2004; Nunan, 1999).

In an attempt to broaden our understanding of the academic literacy skills of first year ESL humanities students at the University of Botswana, the present study focuses on eliciting information from students about how they judge their proficiency in a number of skills, such as speaking, listening, reading and writing. In order to have a deeper understanding of the students' ability to write in an academic manner, their final end of semester essays were analyzed to determine the extent to which they had been acculturated into the discourse community of the academy they had entered. Their formal written essays were chosen because proficiency in writing is determined by the overall mastery of the language of education, which enables the writer to formulate the propositional content of the intended message and its organization (Torrance & Galbraith, 2006). For this study, humanities students were chosen mainly because they are the ones who are engaged in more writing activities than students in other faculties.

2. Theoretical Framework

The conceptual framework of this study is informed by a broad range of interconnected theories of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and academic literacy. Chomsky (1965) theorizes that humans have a genetic predisposition to acquire language competence; the innate ability which he refers to as 'universal grammar'. Drawing from Chomsky's (ibid) initial work, Cummins (1994) develops a related theory on the transferability of knowledge and skills learned from the first (L1) to the second language (L2). In this regard, Cummins (1994: 18) suggests that language learners have a common underlying proficiency in which "literacy-related aspects of a bilingual's proficiency in L1 and L2 are seen as common or interdependent across languages".

While Cummins' (vide supra) theory of a positive transfer of knowledge and skills in a bilingual or multilingual situation is instructive, especially knowing how to write the basic structure of an essay and how to formulate arguments in the first language which can be transferred to a second language, other researchers (e.g. Carson, 1992) have argued that the ability to transfer skills depends on the relative proximity of the languages in question. This point is echoed by Lefrancois (2001: 240): "les aspects positifs du transfert se font davantage sentir dans le processus que dans le produit de l'écriture" (*The positive aspects of the transfer seem to be more in the process than in the product of writing*). Previous studies (e.g. Oxford, 1990) have similarly noted that the degree of cognateness between the learner's native language and the additional language influences the rate of transferability. In this study,

unfortunately, the native languages of the students are unrelated to English, which means there are problems of transferability.

Furthermore, this study capitalizes on Vygotsky's (1978) theory of the zone of proximal development, which is the distance between the students' actual language development and their potential development. Vygotsky's (ibid) theory is further developed by Krashen (1982) who proposes that the linguistic development of ESL learners is dependent on the use of relevant and challenging materials that serve as comprehensive input ($i + 1$), which contain both familiar and unfamiliar information beyond what the students already know.

While the above theories are instructive, the theoretical framework of this study is particularly informed by Bachman's (1990) model of language competence, which suggests that language ability consists of both knowledge of competence and the ability to execute that competence in an appropriate and contextualized setting. In this study, the analysis of students' final examination essays is meant to understand the students' capacity to execute their 'pragmatic' (illocutionary and sociolinguistic) competence as well as their 'organizational' (textual and grammatical competence). Blanton (1994) notes that 'performance' as a corollary aspect of 'competence', is a key factor which shows the extent to which one has control over language, such as the power to use it strategically. In analyzing the students' essays, this researcher is interested in knowing the students' "ability to use language in the performance of specific language tasks... in which language is used purposefully" (Bachman & Palmer, 1996: 75)

In trying to unravel the students' language abilities as reflected by their written products, the researcher takes note of Brammer's (2002: 17) observation that ESL students (including some native writers) generally lack "linguistic cultural capital, the ability to recognize and to utilize the necessary written codes for academic success". In Brammer's (ibid) view, becoming part of a written discourse community is not an easy task for both the native and non-native writers, as there are considerable differences between formal written and spoken language. Therefore, it is important to make the students aware of the expectations of academic communication so that they can be assisted as "outsiders in acquiring linguistic cultural capital" (Brammer, 2002: 25).

In this study, the 'outsiders' are the neophyte ESL students who have not yet fully mastered the academic literacy skills expected at university level. The binary opposition between 'outsiders' (students) and 'insiders' (lecturers) often assumes a dialectical conflict in terms of 'power' and 'identity'. In the context of this university, students often see their lecturers as gate keepers who stand in their way of becoming 'empowered', a term which is used by Gee (1990) to refer to the facilitation of students to enter the 'new' academic culture. Street's (2003) 'ideological' concept of literacy is situated in the culture of the learners in which literacy is seen as a social practice which is not neutral at all. Street (ibid.) argues that literacy is socially constructed, especially the epistemological principles that underpin the knowledge and skills that the students are expected to acquire.

In order to appreciate the academic writing abilities of the students, this researcher uses a combination of ideas borrowed from systemic functional linguistic (SFL) approaches as exemplified by Lee (2010), Woodward-Kron (2009), Ravelli and Ellis (2005) and academic literacies and practices (ALP) as set out by Lillis and Scott (2008). A SFL approach to academic writing involves identifying and mapping out families of academic discourses, focusing on the structure of the text and linguistic choices in relation to the social context in which the students make meaning. The ALP approach, on the other hand, advocates that writing should go beyond looking at textual and linguistic patterns by focusing on the students' practices in their attempt to conform to the expectations of the institution in which they are studying.

Of late, research interest in language abilities has begun to investigate whether there are any differences between male and female students, especially in the way they orchestrate strategies (e.g. Chavez, 2001). Implicit in many of these studies is the notion that there are identifiable gender characteristics in writing, with females tending to write more complex texts than males and showing a greater awareness of how 'voice' works within a text. Millard (1997) refers to gender-based differences as 'differently literate' rather than 'deficiently literate', suggesting that there may be gender-based differences but not necessarily gender-based inadequacies. Growing evidence indicates, however, that it is not so much of gender differences but the type of topic that has a stronger influence on what each gender prefers to write about (Jackson, 2006; Francis, Read & Melling, 2003; Daly, 2002).

The perception about gender differences in writing is challenged by Francis, Read, and Melling (2003) who maintain that university lecturers are generally unable to identify the gender of an author, suggesting that gender characteristics are hardly discernible in any written work; an idea which is also confirmed by Massey, Elliot, and Johnson (2005). These two polarized positions suggest that there is no consistency or the data are statistically insignificant to be able to say, conclusively, that there are observable gender differences in writing. Cameron (2005) casts serious doubt about the notion of differences between male and female students' writing, suggesting that any such perceived differences should be regarded as a 'diversity' of multiple, contextually-shaped, and overlapping influences. Cameron (ibid.) concludes that the construct of a generic male or female student, subtle or rehearsed nuances that speak of fixed differences in writing is hard to sustain. Instead, institutions of higher learning should regard differences in writing among students as a manifestation of their plurality rather than their sexuality. Because of the inconclusive nature of research findings on gender differences in writing, and especially since the concept of 'gender' is more of a cultural than a biological construct, this study excludes this variable.

3. Research Questions

This study has two main goals: the first is to find out from a sampled microcosm of first year ESL humanities students how they rate their own academic literacy skills in English, and the second is to establish whether their claims are supported by their writing outcomes in a high stakes language task. To keep the research focused, the following questions were posited:

1. How do first year ESL humanities students view their own abilities to use academic literacy skills in English?
2. What do first year ESL humanities students see as their major strengths and weaknesses in a number of academic literacy skills in English?
3. What are the writing abilities of first year ESL humanities students as reflected by their essays?

4. Methodology

4.1 Subjects

Thirty first year ESL humanities students were conveniently selected using the non-probability purposive sampling technique (Leedy, 1997). In using this technique, the researcher makes no pretence that each student in the sampled population is fully representative of the global population because it is generally acknowledged that each human being uses language in a unique manner. Altogether there were 18 female and 12 male students who participated in this study. The skewed gender imbalance in favour of females reflects the general composition of students in the faculty of humanities at this university. The students were in the second semester of their first year university studies during which time they had been taught -besides their core subjects in humanities such as English, Environmental Science, History, African languages, foreign languages such as French and Portuguese, Sociology, Psychology, Theology -Communication and Academic Literacy Skills.

The majority of the students (20) spoke Setswana, a Bantu language, as their native or home language. The language is spoken from the western part of South Africa to Botswana and some parts of eastern Namibia and western Zimbabwe. The rest of the students spoke Kalanga, a language which is genealogically related to Shona spoken in Zimbabwe, or other African languages. On average the students were 18 – 21 years old and had been learning in English for 10 – 12 years. They had a mean C grade (50 – 59%) in their high school English language public examinations such as the Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE) and the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), which are modelled on the Cambridge Overseas School Certificate (COSC).

4.2 Instruments

For the data reported in this study, a Likert-format questionnaire and a textual analysis of final examination essays were used to elicit information on the students' academic literacy skills in English. The students' essays were analyzed in order to corroborate their claims about their writing abilities. The researcher personally administered the questionnaire (see Appendix 1) during the second semester. Prior to the administration of the questionnaire, it had been pre-tested in a pilot study of six randomly selected humanities students who were later excluded from this study to avoid 'contaminating' the results. Before administering the questionnaire, the researcher emphasized the confidentiality of the information and how it would give the EAP teaching staff some idea about the students' academic literacy levels and

how they could be helped to improve their academic skills.

Three different types of essays, which were set for the final Communication and Academic Literacy Skills examination, were used to assess the students' writing abilities, and this was done because empirical evidence suggests that the choice of a topic influences the disposition to write effectively (Daly, 2002; Myhill, 2001). The essays used were: (1) "Analyze the causes and effects of domestic violence in your country, and suggest what should be done to deal with the problem", (2) "Young people have more problems than adults. Do you agree with this claim?" and (3) "If you were the president of your country, what changes would you introduce and why?" These topics were chosen by a team of lecturers who teach English for Academic Purposes (EAP) to humanities students. Although these essays are of a different type (analytical, argumentative and expository), the students were required to break down their chosen topic in order to examine its components, to spell out their thesis statement which expresses the controlling idea of the essay, to develop each of the ideas, offer counter ideas, and then bring the essay to an effective conclusion. Above all, the students were expected to write in an academic style which involves the use of precise, plain and objective language; and to be sensitive to 'hedging', where there are divergent opinions.

4.3 Procedure of Assessing the Essays

The procedure of assessing the students' essays followed the systemic functional linguistic (SFL) approach (vide supra), especially Bakhtin's (1981, 1986) approach, which treats texts as discourse situated in a particular context. The approach involves a careful analysis of the written discourse, focusing on various aspects. The selection of assessment criteria followed Bachman's (1990) model of language competence which focuses on (a) the students' pragmatic competence, involving *illocutionary* (ideational, manipulative and imaginative), *sociolinguistic* competence (sensitivity to variety, register and naturalness) and (b) the students' organizational competence involving *textual* (rhetorical organization and cohesion) and *grammatical* competence (concord, morphology, syntax and vocabulary). In order to assess the essays systematically, a step-by-step analysis was done following the grounded approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990), which focuses on the atomic elements of the research phenomena. To ensure that the researcher's rating was reliable the essays were independently marked by two other lecturers who teach the same course using the same marking guide.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Quantitative Results

Figure 1 below shows that out of the 30 students who were involved in this study, 18 started learning English when they were 6 -10 years old, 9 started when they were 1-5 years and 3 began learning English when they were 11-15 years old. This biographic information suggests that the majority of the students (slightly over two thirds) started learning English at the latter stage of the puberty stage, which means that there may be constraints in the language development of the students.

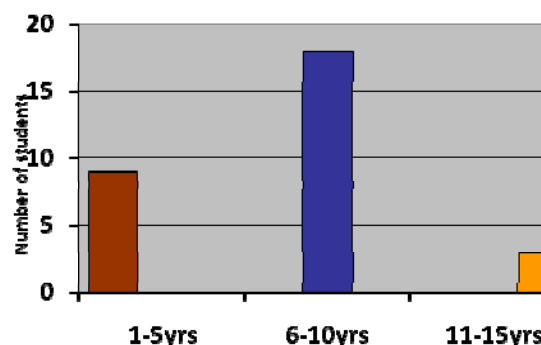


Figure 1. Age when students first started learning English

The idea about the students' limited abilities in academic literacy skills in English comes out clearly in figures 2, 3 and 4 below. Figure 2 shows that only four students use both Setswana and English for communicating with members of their communities, while twenty six use their first or mother tongue. Figure 3, which shows the frequency with which the students speak in English on the University campus, shows that slightly over fifty percent of the students (16) 'sometimes' use English, thirty three percent (10) 'often' use English, ten percent (3) use English 'most of the time' and only three per cent (1) student uses English 'all the time'. Figure 4 shows the frequency of using English with friends. Out of the 30 students, 18 indicated that they 'sometimes' use English with their friends, 8 'often', two use it 'most of the time' and two use it 'all the time'. What this information shows us is that the vast majority of the students in the faculty of humanities at this university hardly use English for their social needs, which limits their ability to use the language in real communicative situations.

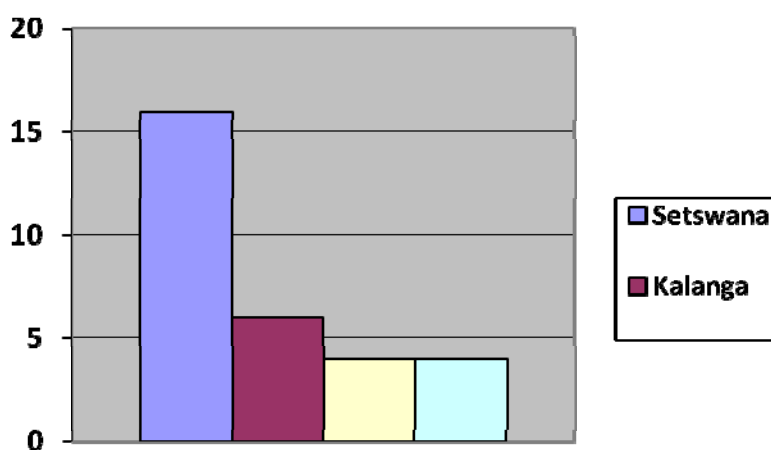


Figure 2. Language used in students' community

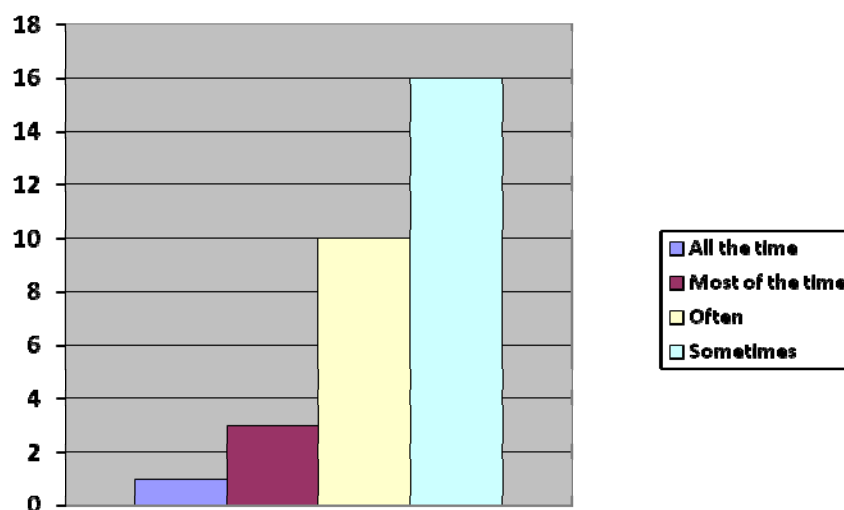


Figure 3. Frequency of using English on campus

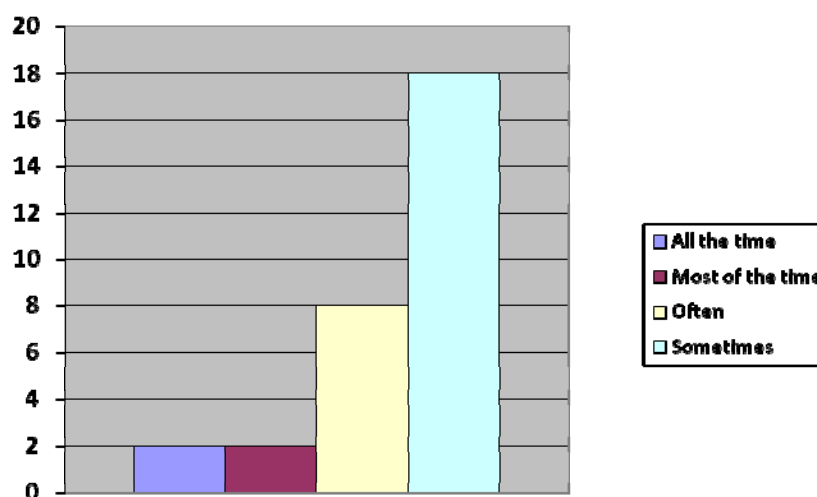


Figure 4. Frequency of using English with friends

When it comes to why the students learn English, which gives an indication of their motivation, utilitarian rather than integrative purposes are predominant. For instance, figure 5 below shows that forty per cent (12 students) indicated that they learned English in order to develop their future careers, thirty per cent (9) learned it because it was a requirement for graduating and about seventeen per cent (5) needed it for communicating with foreigners. Only thirteen percent (4) learned English because they had an intrinsic interest in it. Although studies on what motivates a person are inconclusive, studies in educational psychology tend to suggest that intrinsic, rather than extrinsic factors, get the best out of learners.

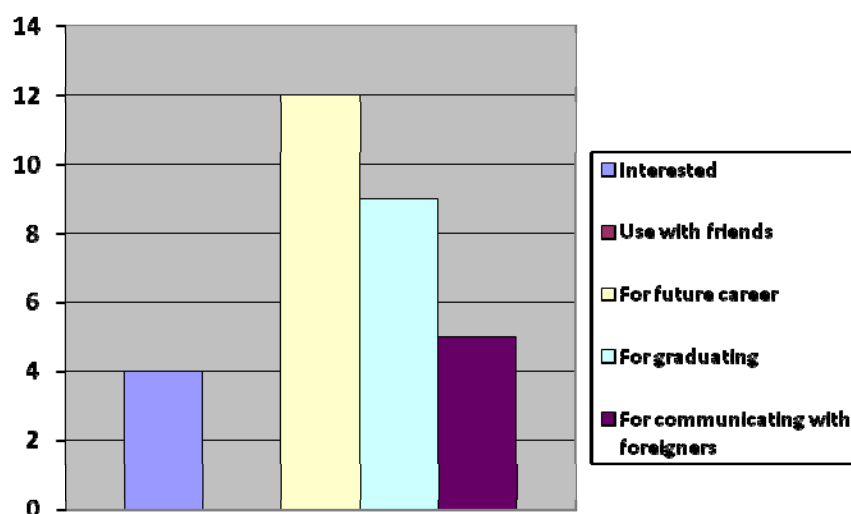


Figure 5. Reasons for learning English

In response to the question about the two aspects of learning English the students enjoy most (see figure 6 below), thirty three percent (10) indicated that they enjoyed reading and writing, twenty seven per cent (8) indicated that they enjoyed reading and listening, seventeen per cent (5) enjoyed writing and talking. The rest indicated that they enjoyed reading and talking, and talking and listening. Although these responses do not specifically shed light on the students' ability in these academic literacy skills, reading and talking appear to be the two aspects the students were mostly interested in, while listening and writing were the least enjoyed. The students' lack of interest in writing is not surprising because research by Malia (2006) on ESL college writing suggests it is the most difficult to master.

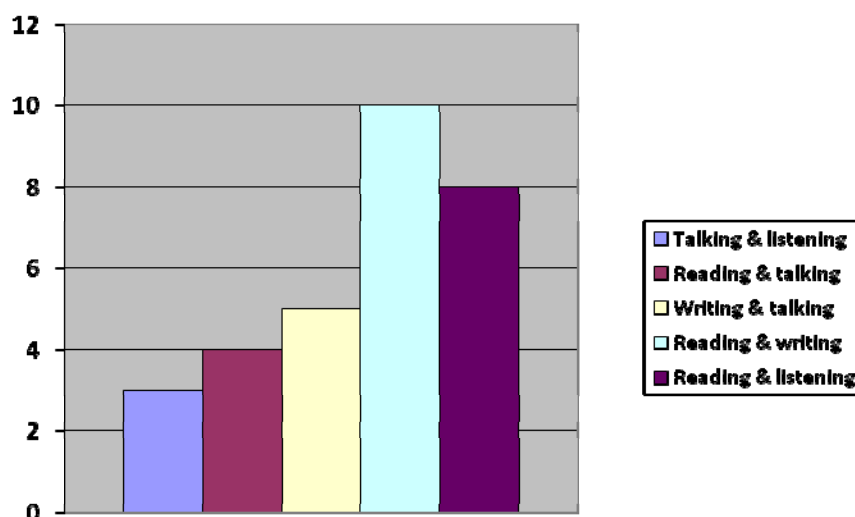


Figure 6. Two aspects enjoyed in learning English

The students' profile on their English language high school grades, self-rating on their ability to use English and the aspects they think they need to improve on (see figures 7, 8 and 9

below) shed light on their language abilities. For this study, knowing the students' background for purposes of developing their potential was necessary because "knowing about the educational background of students can provide ESL teachers with insights into the ways in which ESL writers may approach the often formidable task of learning to write in English" (Lefrancois, 2001:56). Figure 7 shows that sixty per cent (18 students) had C and D grades at high school which are barely sufficient for admission into university. The students' personal rating of their own ability to use English (see figure 8) also shows that fifty seven per cent (17 students) perceived themselves to be average or below average, while forty three percent (13) thought they were good or very good. Concerning the aspects which the ESL students needed to improve on, figure 9 below shows that writing, reading and speaking are the main skills they thought they needed to improve on.

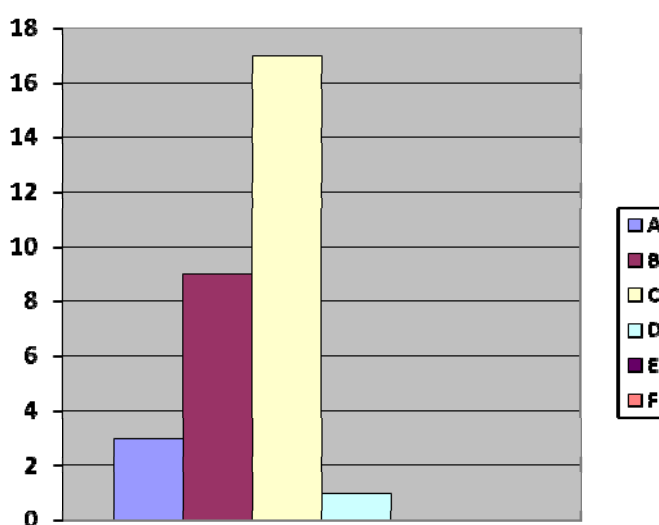


Figure 7. English grades obtained at high school

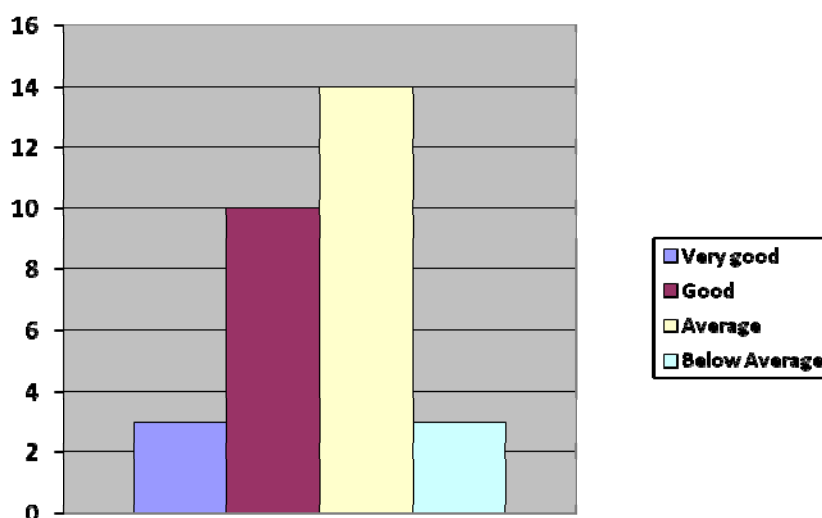


Figure 8. Students' self-rating on ability to use English

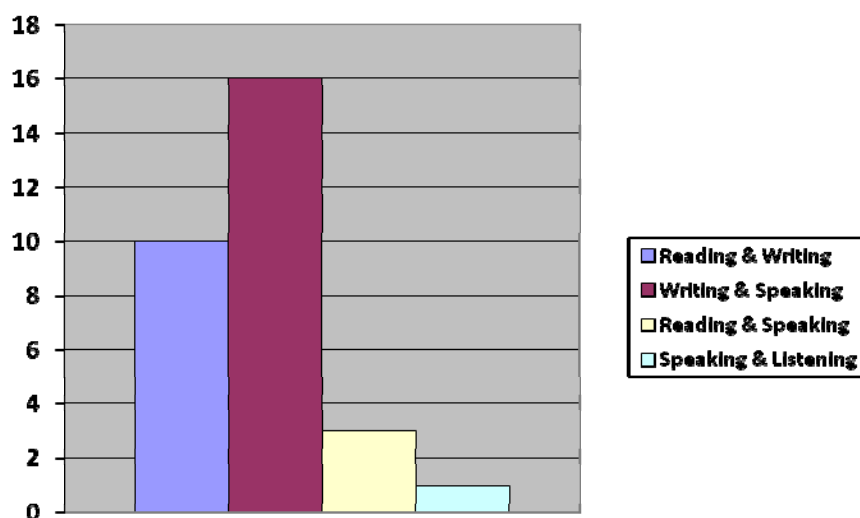


Figure 9. Two aspects of English requiring improvement at university

Table 1. Students' self-rating of abilities in different language skills (N=30)

Item	Below Average	Average	Good	Very Good
Speaking		18 (60%)	12 (40%)	
Writing	6 (20%)	20 (66.6%)	4 (13.3%)	
Reading	2 (6.6%)	15 (30%)	10 (33.3%)	3 (10%)
Listening			20 (66.6%)	10(33.3%)
Vocabulary	5 (16.6%)	22 (73.3%)	3 (10%)	
Grammar	4 (13.3%)	20 (66.6%)	6 (20%)	
Organization of ideas	2 (6.6%)	24 (80%)	3 (10%)	1 (3.3%)
Style of writing	3 (10%)	14 (46.6%)	1 (3.3%)	
Cohesion of ideas	4 (13.3%)	16 (53.3%)	3 (10%)	
Appropriate language use	6 (20%)	22 (73.3%)	2 (6.6%)	
Cultural use		19 (63.3%)	2 (6.6%)	
Idiomatic use of Eng.	6 (20%)	20 (66%)		
Natural use of English	2 (6.6%)	15 (50%)	8 (26.6%)	
Type of English used	3 (10%)	15 (50%)	6 (20%)	
Creative use of English	8 (26.6%)	20 (66.6%)	1 (3.3%)	
Ability to interpret texts	7 (23.3%)	18 (60%)	2 (6.6%)	
Paraphrasing	8 (26.6%)	16 (53.3%)	2 (6.6%)	
Summarizing	6 (20%)	18 (60%)	6 (20%)	
Ability to agree or disagree with texts	12 (40%)	16 (53%)	2 (6.6%)	
Ability to use prior knowledge to deal with new information	7 (23.3%)	14 (46.6%)	1 (3.3%)	

In order to have a full picture of the academic literacy skills in English of the first year ESL humanities students, they were further asked to rate themselves on a number of academic literacy skills based on four descriptors: very good, good, average and below average (see table 1). Without going into details about the students' responses on each item, the pattern that emerged is that the students rated themselves 'average' on most of the skills. What is significant is that they perceived themselves as either very good or good at listening and reading, and average at writing and speaking. The skills they rated themselves as either below average or just average are 'their ability to agree or disagree with texts', 'ability to use prior knowledge in order to deal with new information', 'paraphrasing', 'creative use of English', 'grammar', 'summarizing', 'vocabulary', 'idiomatic' and 'appropriate' language use for a given context. They also rated themselves as either below average or average when it comes to their ability to organize ideas, the use of an appropriate writing style and using ideas cohesively. In a nutshell, what is clear from the students' self-evaluation is that they did not regard themselves as sufficiently proficient in many of the skills, which suggests that there may be need for 'scaffolding' (Kifol, 1997) in order to improve the overall academic literacy skills of the first year ESL humanities students.

5.2 Qualitative Results

As mentioned under the section on research methodology, the procedure used for assessing the students' essays as a way of establishing their academic writing literacy skills followed Bachman's (1990) model of language competence, which focuses on illocutionary, sociolinguistic, textual and grammatical competence. In this study, the researcher was preoccupied with the students' pragmatic and organizational ability such as how they address the issue at hand, how they develop and support the main ideas, the cogency of their argument, the coherence of their ideas, the power to control the language and the ability to use correct grammar in order to achieve the intended meaning.

The analysis of the students' essays shows that all the thirty students displayed a reasonable degree of pragmatic competence, in which they were able to put across their ideas; but lacked organizational competence, that is to say, their essays were riddled with too many gross errors and incoherencies that sometimes obfuscated their intended meaning. To illustrate this point, let us look at the following typical excerpt taken (unchanged) from Thato's essay (nom deplume and so are all names of students mentioned in this study) on the topic: "Young people have more problems than adults. Do you agree?"

The majority of young people have more problems than adults from my own thinking. This problems may be coursed by a factor of issue like shortage of jobs in the country, lack of parental guidance and alcohol abuse.

Firstly, I would look at the issue that most of the university graduate student are mingling out there with certificate but no jobs are available for them compared to adult who have more expertise.

The above extract from Thato's essay illustrates the researcher's discovery that many students

were able to marshal their ideas; but textual and grammatical errors weakened their intended meaning. In this extract it can be seen that the student is able to address the issue of whether young people have more problems than adults; but the problem seems to be the student's inability to write the ideas fluently and accurately. The thesis and outline of the essay are spelled out but the ineffectual control of language as in 'from my own thinking', 'this problems', 'may be coursed', 'a factor of issue', 'mingling out there with certificate' and many other errors dilutes the argumentative force of the essay. The same observation is also made about Tshepo's following essay on the topic "Analyze the causes and effects of domestic violence in your country":

Domestic violence is the physical, economic and emotional abuse of one person with a household. There are three main courses and effects of domestic violence in my country. This essay serves to discuss the courses and effects of domestic violence in Botswana.

Firstly, one of main courses of domestic violence in Botswana are unfaithful marriages. Unfaithful marriage usually led to a lot of hatred in a household (heated arguments). For example, when one partner cheated in a relationship or marriage there is likelihood of a physical fight erupting.

Tshepo's essay confirms the general observation that the students have a reasonable ability to express their ideas in a fairly intelligible manner but seem to lack organizational competence, such as the ability to control surface-level errors, i.e. grammatical concord, rhetorical organization, cohesion, tense and the use of appropriate words. These common weaknesses are also noticeable in Boipuso's following (unedited) excerpt which answers the question: "If you were the president of your country, what changes would you introduce and why?"

If i was the president of my country i would introduce a lot of changes from primary to tertiary to justify that my country delivers and succeed for the best.

First of all i would start with introducing tall gates which is also known as pay gates, this would be done to upgrade our roads as the money would be used to make new road, fix the road to avoid pot holes and a whole lot. The other thing I would do will be to tighten the security of my country introducing security courses at university for school leavers who did not perform their best.

The commendable thing about Boipuso's essay, like many other students in this research group, is that s/he is able to deal with global issues such as focusing on the demands of the question and trying to develop the ideas; but makes persistent errors which involve the generation of many other errors involving tense, noun/verb agreement, choice of words and lack of clarity. The students' ability to state the thesis and to put the ideas in clusters of paragraphs appears to support the notion that literacy-related aspects are interdependent across languages and disciplines (Cummins, 1994).

In assessing the students' essays in this study, the issue that kept on arising is Street's (2003) ideological versus autonomous model of literacy. Those of us in institutions of higher

learning who set the rules of academic excellence have been socialised to believe that certain academic literacy conventions are superior to others, which is often based on the ideological beliefs which we hold. Proceeding from this premise, let us consider the following extract from Kgarabo's (nom deplume) essay, which was judged to be one of the best three essays. The student is answering the popular question: "Young people have more problems than adults. Do you agree?"

I fully agree that young people have more problems than adults. Quite often it is argued that adults have more responsibilities than young people, and hence have more problems. On the contrary, I am convinced that young people have more problems than adults.

It may be true that adults have a lot to do, such as looking after their children, parents, and the extended family; but what about young people who are still growing up? There are a lot of challenges they face such as having to make critical decisions about their future, their careers, choice of friends and the colleges or universities they should attend.

Unlike the other extracts cited earlier on, Kgarabo states her/his thesis quite forcefully: "I fully agree that young people have more problems than adults". The student then goes on to develop the position that s/he has taken and juxtaposes the two divergent positions. The student expresses her/his ideas with some finesse, and above all shows an awareness of 'voice' and 'identity' ("I") as well as the use of 'hedging' where there may be differences of opinion, such as "quite often it is argued that..." and "it may be true that...." Also, the ideas are well organized, fluent and accurate. On the whole, this student appears to have mastered the academic writing conventions that conform to the expectations of the institution s/he has entered, which is why her/his essay was rated one of the best among the thirty students.

6. Limitations

Before discussing the implications of the study, it is necessary to point out the limitations. Firstly, the study involved thirty first year ESL humanities students who were selected using the convenience sampling technique. This non-probability sampling procedure does not guarantee representativeness of the wider population, especially because each person uses language in a unique manner. Secondly, some of the findings based on the quantitative data yielded from students' self-evaluation of their literacy skills may not fully reflect their abilities because there is a human tendency of either underestimating one's abilities or not wishing to 'expose' one's inadequacies. Thirdly, the analysis of essays using an assessment instrument in order to determine the writing skills of a student always remains open to alternative interpretations, especially bearing in mind that those who are in a position of power to judge the worth of someone's work operate from different ideological positions.

7. Implications

In spite of the limitations, this study has a number of implications. Firstly, the students' bio-data and self-assessment of their academic literacy skills in English indicate that many of

them do not have a solid background which would enable them to maximize their learning. The students' overall evaluation of their academic literacy skills, which clusters around 'average', points to the fact that by the time they complete the first year of their university studies, they will not have mastered fully the essential academic literacy canons that help them navigate their learning effectively. The students' inadequate mastery of many academic literacy skills in English implies that instead of focusing on the narrow approach to EAP, which is "teaching English with the aim of facilitating learners' study or research" (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001:8), it might be necessary to adopt an eclectic approach which aims at improving both the ESL students' academic literacy skills and their general English competence.

The second implication is that from the students' essays, it was clear that almost all of them had pragmatic competence which enabled them to construct meaningful ideas within their social milieu; but what they seemed to lack mostly was organizational competence, that is, the ability to write ideas fluently and accurately. Many years of teaching EAP have shown that the teaching of 'grammar' is generally ignored under the guise of wanting to focus on 'global' skills such as the organisation of ideas. Perhaps it is high time that we take heed of Ellis's (1994) wise counsel that we should make a 'formal intervention' in combination with teaching 'language in context'.

A wider implication of this study is that although many university teachers seem to believe that it is difficult to liaise with different subject disciplines for purposes of improving the writing abilities of students, there is a huge potential of combining content area teaching with writing instruction. Also, judging from the types of errors the students made in their essays, some of which were 'slips' rather than errors, it is clear that there is need to make teachers more aware of the long-term benefits of training students to become independent editors of their written work. Teachers could empower their students by using error frequency charts or error logs, peer and self-evaluation reports so that they can monitor the students' written work. Ferris & Heit (2000) hit the nail on the head when they say that it is important for error feedback to be used together with grammar instruction so that students can learn to edit their own writing independently, and to take greater responsibility for their own improvement.

8. Conclusion

The findings of this study, notwithstanding its limitations, show that the majority of the sampled ESL students in humanities have a modest English language education background which hampers their speedy immersion into the different families of academic discourse. The students' self-assessment of their abilities in different academic literacy skills suggests they are 'average', which means there is need to help them develop their nascent skills by giving them different learning tasks that foster the reconstruction of ideas, personal engagement and self-reflection.

In terms of their writing ability, which plays a crucial role in academic success, the results show that the majority of the humanities students have a reasonable pragmatic competence

which enables them to convey their ideas in a fairly complex manner. What they seem to lack is organizational competence, which is the ability to interconnect their ideas and to impose power and authority on their communicative acts. To deal with this problem, it is important to understand the students' cultural backgrounds, especially their knowledge systems, and to formulate interactive writing activities that stretch their experiences. In a nutshell, the humble contribution of this study is that it reaffirms the pedagogical arguments raised by previous researchers that an understanding of learner beliefs and practices can enhance the language learning process. Chawhan and Oliver (2000) remind us that classroom activities in which learners evaluate their own beliefs lead to an increased awareness of their literacy skills. This, in turn, raises profoundly the ESL teachers' consciousness of the students' academic literacy practices and makes ESL learning more vibrant and exciting.

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Appendix

Appendix 1. Questionnaire

I am conducting a study on your academic literacy skills in English. The study is important in that it is likely to give us some idea about your abilities, and how we can help you and those coming after you to improve your academic literacy skills for academic purposes.

Kindly answer all the questions.

Section A: Personal Information

1. Surname: _____ First name(s): _____

2. Age: _____

3. Sex: Female _____ Male _____

4. Which language did you speak first as a child? _____

5. Which language do you use at home? _____

6. How old were you when you first started learning English? _____

7. Which language(s) do you use in your community? _____

8. For how many years have you been learning English at school? _____

9. How frequently do you speak in English on university campus? (Tick **one** applicable)

All the time _____ Most of the time _____ Often _____ Sometimes _____

10. How frequently do you speak in English with your friends?

All the time _____ Most of the time _____ Often _____ Sometimes _____

11. Why are you learning English? (Tick **one** most appropriate)

- Interested in the language _____
- For use with friends _____
- I need it for my future career _____
- Required in order to graduate _____
- For communicating with people from other parts of the world _____
- Other (Please specify) _____

12. Do you enjoy learning English? (Tick most appropriate) Yes _____ No _____

13. Name **two** aspects of learning English that you enjoy.

(a) _____ (b) _____

14. Name **two** aspects about learning English that you don't enjoy.

(a) _____ (b) _____

15. What **grade** did you get in **English** in your last high school examination, such as BGCSE/IGCSE/GCSE/S.A.MATRIC/HIGCSE/ 'A' Level? _____

16. How do you rate your ability to use English (Tick **one** most appropriate)

Very Good _____ Good _____ Average _____ Below Average _____

17. What two aspects of English do you need to improve at University?

(a) _____ (b) _____

Section B: Your English Language Competence

Read the following items, and then **circle** your response in terms of how you rate your own ability in each of the items.

My ability in each of the following English skills can best be described as:

<u>Item</u>	Below Average	Average	Good	Very Good
18. Speaking	1	2	3	4
19. Writing	1	2	3	4
20. Reading	1	2	3	4
21. Listening	1	2	3	4
22. Vocabulary	1	2	3	4
23. Grammatical arrangement of words	1	2	3	4
24. Organization of ideas	1	2	3	4
25. Style of writing	1	2	3	4
26. Cohesion of ideas at a paragraph level	1	2	3	4
27. Choice of appropriate language for a particular situation	1	2	3	4
28. Sensitivity to cultural use	1	2	3	4
29. Use of idiomatic expression	1	2	3	4
30. Using English naturally	1	2	3	4
31. Sensitivity to the type of English you use	1	2	3	4
32. Creativity in using English	1	2	3	4
33. Interpretation of words & texts	1	2	3	4
34. Paraphrasing or using your own words	1	2	3	4
35. Synthesizing/summarizing information	1	2	3	4
36. Agreeing or disagreeing with texts	1	2	3	4
37. Using prior knowledge to deal with new information	1	2	3	4

Section C: Further Information

38. Briefly explain below what **your major strengths** are in using English.

39. Briefly explain below what **your major weaknesses** are in using English.

40. Suggest **three ways** in which you can be helped to improve your use of English so that you can learn better at university.

(a) _____

(b) _____

(c) _____

Thank you so much for sparing your time to answer the questions.