

**Assessing Students' Academic Writing Using Systemic Functional Linguistics at a University in South Africa****Baba Tshotsho***University of Fort Hare King Williams Town Road, Private Bag X 1314 Alice  
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Telephone: 27406022402, Mobile: 0822021783;E-mail: BTshotsho@ufh.ac.za***KEYWORDS** Systemic Functional Linguistics. Second Language. Competent and Not-So-Competent Students. Coherence and Cohesion. Thematic Development. Hypetheme. Hypernew. Esphoric

**ABSTRACT** The main focus in this paper is to assess academic writing of first year students at tertiary level which essentially determines students' success in their studies. For the purposes of this paper 20 students from a university of Technology in South Africa were given an essay to write on 'Challenges Facing Education in South Africa'. These students were divided into 2 groups: those who were competent and those who were not so competent in academic writing. Their essays were analysed using systemic functional linguistics (SFL) as an analytical tool, looking at how they develop themes when writing texts in the second language. The focus is on identifying the strategies that are critical in academic writing of Black students in a South African multilingual context. The findings showed that the not so competent students in academic writing could not write coherent texts. They failed to contextualize the topic; their paragraphs and sentences were not linked. One of the reasons for this is because they were from poor backgrounds where they did not have reading materials and also their schools were poorly resourced. This paper also serves as a starting point for remedial action that can be taken at school level.