Assessing Students' Academic Writing Using Systemic Functional Linguistics at a University in South Africa

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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'. hese 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.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is an attempt to identify the key weaknesses in academic writing of students at tertiary level. A lot has been written on students' academic writing but not many studies have been conducted using Systemic Functional Linguistics to assess academic writing. For the purposes of this paper 20 students were given an essay to write. This paper shows that there are gaps in academic writing that needed to be attended to by teachers at high school level before students join tertiary level because competency in academic writing is a required for academic achievement at tertiary.

Banda (2004) says there is a growing concern about the falling standards of academic writing among students in South Africa's tertiary institutions. The problem is particularly marked among Black students whose home language is neither English nor Afrikaans, the languages used as media of instruction in such institutions (Banda 2004). One finds that these students have not yet reached adequate proficiency levels that would enable them to cope with written English as used in academic discourse. Studies have shown that this lack of English language proficiency by black students in South Africa affects their academic performance (Mc Laughlin 1987).

Learning at higher education entails having an ability to adapt to new ways of learning including academic writing. According to Lea and Street (1998), these new ways of acquiring academic writing skills can be challenging, particularly to undergraduate students. However, academic writing skills are necessary for higher education students since much academic knowledge is constructed and available as written texts (Bazerman 1988). Bazerman further points out that unless students can understand and interpret this new knowledge from written texts, they may be considered incompetent. This concern is echoed by Coffin et al. (2005) who state that one's ability to compose an extended text is the single best predictor of success in course work at higher education institutions. Therefore, supporting learners for their success at higher education presents a great challenge for the lecturers.

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL)

The paper uses SFL as an analytical tool to examine written texts. SFL helps us to analyse and explain how meanings are made in everyday linguistic interactions. In all our activities, language is involved. In life, we are constantly required to react and produce bits of language that make sense, which are referred to as texts (Eggins 2004).

Systemic functional linguistics is a very useful descriptive and interpretive framework for viewing language as a strategic meaning making resource. Halliday (1994) contributed to linguistics analysis in the development of functional grammar by showing how meaning, that is, ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions, are expressed in clause structures and also how language is used in social interactions, that is, texts.

According to Halliday (1994), ideational metafunction are those aspects of grammar which are involved in the representation of the world and its experiences. This ideational metafunction consists of two aspects the experiential and the logical. The resources of transitivity and of lexis are involved in representing experience. The logical metafunction is involved in the matter of building connectedness between the meanings of clauses (Christie 2002). Such connectedness is realized in those resources in the grammar which are involved in two different sets of relationships, those to do with the interdependency between clauses and those to do with the logico-semantic relationship between clauses brought about by expansion (Halliday 1994).

Interpersonal metafunction refers to those grammatical resources in which the relationship of interlocutors is realized (Christie 2002). On the other hand, the textual metafunction refers to those aspects of grammar that assist in organizing language as a message and, in this, the resources of theme, information and cohesion are involved (Halliday 1994).

When undertaking a grammatical analysis, the aim is to find the ways in which meanings of ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions are realized and tracked through the text. Text analysis would help to show this aspect of realization. The goal is to interpret the meaning in the overall organization of the text that the clauses constitute. This implies that the model of grammar is text or discourse driven (Christie 2002).

Eggins (2004) argues that all that systemic linguists are interested in is how people use language with each other to accomplish everyday social life. These linguists claim that the function of languages is to make meanings, which are influenced by the social and cultural context in which they are exchanged, and that the pro-

cess of using language is all about making meaning and to achieve purpose. Getting something done using language involves more than two moves, text and context. Thus text carries context with it. These linguists are interested in the relationship between language and context.

Language and context are interrelated. That is why we are able to deduce context from text and to predict language from context. It is not possible to tell how people are using language if you do not take into account the context of use. Once a text is taken out of context, its purpose becomes obscured with part of its meaning lost (Eggins 2004).

Eggins (2004) also argues that SFL linguists concern themselves with the analysis of text. Halliday and Hassan (1976, 1985) define text as any passage spoken or written that forms a unified whole. They say that text refers to any passage of coherent language. It is also a meaningful passage of language that hangs together. Text can be distinguished from non-text by texture. Texture is what holds the clauses of a text together to give them unity. Texture involves the interaction of coherence and cohesion. Coherence is the text's relationship to its extra-textual context and cohesion is the way the elements within that text bind it together as a unified whole. The result of the interaction of coherence and cohesion is a piece of language which is using linguistic resources in a meaningful way.

According to Halliday and Hassan (1976), a text is regarded as a semantic unit of meaning which has clauses that are contextual properties that hang together. A text must also have cohesion, which refers to the way we relate or tie together bits of discourse. Furthermore, Halliday and Hassan (1976) state that cohesion is like glue, since it sticks the elements and meaning together. It also expresses the continuity that exists between one part of the text and another. Cohesion occurs where the interpretation of some elements in the discourse are dependent on that of another. In cohesion, there is a semantic tie between an item at one point in a text and an item at another point within the same text. This makes one item depend upon the other for its interpretation. The absence of semantic ties between elements prevents the text from hanging together internally as a piece of lan-

guage (Eggins 2004). For a text to have intelligibility it must have coherence and cohesion.

Texts can share a common field while linguistic analysis differentiates the way the text approaches and constructs that field. Field refers to what is happening, the nature of social interaction and the correct language used in that interaction. Field focuses on the activity. Some text can be written for experts and others for beginners. The situation can either be technical or everyday in the construction of an activity focus. The technical situation could be characterized by a degree of assumed knowledge among the interactants in everyday situations. Knowledge that constitutes a field can be presented in taxomies. When we classify taxomies we find differences between depth and complexity of a text. Language in an everyday field is more familiar, grammatical structures are standard and syntax is standard. On the other hand, technical language is words only insiders understand (Eggins 2004).

In mode a text can be formal, have authoritarian tenor, construct itself as a reflexive text and written by an impersonal writer to be read by an unknown distant reader. Sometimes the language of a text can indicate a relationship of friendship between interactants in face to face contacts. While writers must present the text as context independent, sometimes they minimize formality by incorporating features of a spoken interactive mode.

Mode is the role that language plays in interaction. In written language, there is no visual contact with the intended audience, thus language is used to reflect on some topic. Written situations in our culture call for rehearsal which includes drafts, edits, rewrites and writing of the final draft. A written text needs to be context independent. A written text has the beginning, middle and end. Students who are competent in academic writing follow the pattern of thesis, evidence and summary (Eggins 2004).

Tenor refers to who is taking part, that is, the nature of the participants including their roles and relationships and the types of speech roles they are making. The variables of tenor are power, solidarity and interpersonal relations. Tenor refers to the social role that one plays and has an effect on the language in terms of formality, politeness, and reciprocity. This involves vocabulary choice. In informal situations we tend to use slang and abbreviated form of words. In formal language we use the complete lexical items that are polite. In informal language the clause structure is imperative whereas in formal language it is interrogative (Eggins 2004).

Each text must have a theme. A theme, according to Halliday and Matthiessen (2009) is the starting point of the message, that is, what the message is going to be about. Theme contains well-known information which has already been mentioned before in the text. It also comes first in the clause. Theme also functions as the subject of the clause (Eggins 2004; Martin and Rose 2003). In a clause there is a rheme which is part of the clause in which the theme is developed. Theme contains the familiar and rheme contains the unfamiliar. New information is contained in the rheme. In a sentence, once the theme is identified, it becomes easy to identify the rheme since it is everything else in a sentence which does not form part of the theme (Martin and Rose 2008).

Thematic choices realize meanings about the communication event, that is, how the text hangs together and how it relates to its context. Theme offers choices of what meaning to prioritise in a text, what to package as familiar and as new. Textual choices alone cannot create text without content and it would also be impossible to interact with it. Text needs to be structured first so as to initiate interaction. This means that there is a need to construct mood structures by making interpersonal and experiential choices, which refers to how the text relates to the context. Once the thematic structure of the text is scrambled it becomes difficult to follow. Textual choices are essential to the text's making sense. Thematic selection results in a text which hangs together (Eggins 2004). There is no doubt that what distinguishes competent and incompetent writers is mainly determined by how they deal with and develop a theme.

Competent writers are consciously or unconsciously aware of the different kinds of themes and how they relate to textual meaning. This enables them to manipulate textual structures to achieve particular thematic effects and developments.

Aim and Objectives

The general aim of this research was to identify the kinds of strategies that are critical in coherent English second language academic

writing for black students in South Africa's multilingual contexts.

The objective is to examine strategies that are used by the two groups of competent and not-so-competent black students in English Second Language (ESL) at a university of Technology in South Africa, in coping with academic writing.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative design involving analysis of students written academic essays. Strauss and Corbin (1990) argue that qualitative research is concerned with understanding the context in which behaviour occurs.

Research Instrument

For the purposes of this paper an essay was given to two groups of 80 students who had joined the University of Technology for the first time. These groups were Adult Basic Education and Public Relations Management students. The essay topic was 'Challenges Facing Education in South Africa'. The essay was written as part of the normal class assignment in the Communication Skills class. Out of all the essays, 20 that met the purposive criteria were analysed. Out of the 20 essays the researcher classified 10 as being from competent students and 10 from the not-so-competent students in academic writing. The essays were selected purposefully since they had theme problems the researcher was looking for.

Data Collection Procedure

The researcher used 'impression' marking to judge the competency of learners in academic writing of those 20 students. The final categorization, according to the competent and not-so-competent, was done after reading the essays relying on impressionistic procedures sometimes applied in marking an essay. Following Bachman and Palmer (1996), while the procedure relies on the general flow of the text, certain usages were identified to either show whether the students planned their essays well and also the strategies that they used in writing the essay. The researcher underlined all the errors that af-

fected coherence and cohesion. Bachman and Palmer (1996) further recommend that broad specifications be used to define the criteria by which the quality of the essays is evaluated. In this case, the following broad specifications were used:
  i)   Contextualization of the topic,
  ii) Coherence
  iii) Cohesion.
  iv) Thematic development

The two groups of students wrote the assignment of two pages in length. One of the aims of the essay was to enable students to use language creatively as they normally would in such an exercise. The essay provided the students with an opportunity to explore their level of communicative ability, that is, their ability to construct functional sentences as well as expose their underlying systematic errors. Bachman and Palmer (1996), say that an essay writing task can encompass a wide variety of prompts that can differ in terms of audience, purpose and organization patterns. In order to reduce the degree of variability in students' performance, a common essay topic was chosen.

Data Analysis

The twenty (20) essays analysed were allocated numbers one to twenty (1-20). In marking the essays the scoring was guided by how well the students were able to express their ideas correctly and link the sentences to form a piece of coherent text which communicates their ideas and thoughts accurately, fluently and imaginatively. This procedure conformed to Bachman and Palmer's (1996) recommendations that require students to produce extended responses that may be scored using scales of language ability.

The essay scores assisted in making decisions about an individual's language ability. The methods used to arrive at these scores were a crucial part of the measurement process. Scoring is an essential step to arrive at a conclusion. In some cases, scoring may influence specific tasks included in the assignment. The first step was to determine whether their essays were coherent or not.

In an essay designed to measure coherence and cohesion knowledge, meaningfulness should be used as the criterion. To avoid looking at only one aspect of language ability, multi-

ple criteria for correctness would be necessary in scoring the responses. This would include aspects such as grammatical accuracy. It also included meaning appropriateness and coherence, which included contextualization, paragraph unity, colloquialism, themes, reference chains, lexical cohesion, cohesive characterization, and register analysis (Bachman and Palmer 1996).

The essays used were meant to assess strategies that are used by Black ESL students to cope with academic writing.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings showed that the not-so-competent students had problems with the development of theme as compared to competent students

Competent students showed a degree of thematic planning to make their texts coherent. They used topical themes which function as the subject of the clause to give orientation to what is to come, that is, the frame of reference and also to predict how the text will unfold (Eggins 2004). On the other hand the not-so-competent students did not use topical themes since they are not competent in academic writing. That made their texts incoherent.

Competent students used topical themes effectively foregrounding from one phase of the essay to the next (Halliday 1994). They also used marked themes to signal a new phase and to move the reader from incident to incident. That appeared to be a realization of a careful written mode, which required planning the rhetorical development of the text to allow foregrounding of circumstantial information. Essay no. 13 gives us a good illustration of how competent students were also able to move the reader from incident to interpretation. Consider the following example:

I think money is the biggest challenge facing South African education.

Children don't go to school because fees have to be paid. Parents have to buy expensive uniform, shoes and books (13).

Not-so-competent students hardly used marked themes in their essays. That clearly showed that there was no careful planning of the rhetorical development of the text. Let us consider essay no. 10 for example:

Many years ago in the rural areas schools there is no there but now there are schools. And Adult basic school. If you not study and now you are employee is the chance of you now. Because Mining Works there's Adult school there (10).

It is also noteworthy that both groups did not use dependent clauses which show that the main clause depends on the clause that follows, for coherence, which according to Halliday and Hassan (1976, 1985) keeps the text hanging together. That affected coherence in the text of the not-so-competent students since they did not use other thematic structures. On the other hand, dependent clauses for the competent students did not have a negative impact on their texts, for they used other thematic structures to create coherence.The same cannot be said about the not-so-competent group. For example, let us consider the following extract from essay no. 8 from a leaner who is not competent:

If you see in South Africa education is very poor a special in rural Areas. When you go to college and finished you go back to your home cause have no jobs for teaching that means have not their is no different between education people and uneducated (8).

In this paragraph there is no topical theme. What is supposed to be a topical theme 'If you see South Africa' is incomplete because the dependent clause is missing. The student used 'if' which should be followed by 'then' in order to introduce contrast. In the second sentence the student used two possible themes but both are qualified by unrelated information.

Competent students used conjunctive cohesion of elaboration, extending and enhancing to add to the texture of the text in order to create semantic unity and cohesion. This is in line with Halliday and Hassan (1976) who say that cohesion is like glue since it sticks the elements of a text and meaning together. Elaboration is a relationship of restatement by which one sentence is the representation of a previous one. On the other hand, extending is a relationship of either addition or variation and enhancement refers to ways by which one sentence can develop on the meaning of another in terms of time, composition, cause condition and concession (Eggins 2004). This is a clear demonstration that the competent students were aware of how elements in a sentence relate to each other, as well as the world outside. In this regard, they were better

able to connect aspects of the context of situation to intended textual meaning as illustrated in the following extract from the essays of competent students;

The first challenge that mostly affects education in this country is lack of properly trained teachers. These days no one wants to be a teacher because of certain reasons and this results to few teachers. We all know that teachers play the most important role in education so they need to be taken care and natured in order to improve the standard of education in this country.

Secondly, in schools we can have teachers but if they are not properly trained—

On the other hand, most of the not-so-competent students did not use conjunctions in their texts, and if they did, they sometimes used them incorrectly and that resulted in texts that lack cohesion. For example, they often used causal conjunctions where there was no cause, or where the relationship was not causal. The following example from essay no. 10 shows this problem:

Education is to give more and information in our peoples because if the Department of Education is not created in South Africa many people were died because space of jobs development education Department and now developing Adult schools in South Africa.

Both competent and not-so-competent groups do not use explicit and implicit conjunctions. That did not affect cohesion negatively.

Competent students used reference chains effectively to show the reader the major participants in the text (Martin and Rose 2003). They were also able to link reference markers to produce highly cohesive texts. They used more homophoric and esphoric references which occur when the referent occurs in the phrase immediately following the presuming referent item, that is, within the same noun phrase. Homophoric reference involves information found in cultural knowledge that the reader and the writer share. That showed that the competent students were more familiar with the culture of writing texts (that is, knowledge of genre and register) than the not –so-competent students.

On the other hand, the not-so-competent students' texts were not linked with reference markers. Their texts did not have a significant number of major participants compared to the competent students as can be seen in the following example;

In South Africa there is a lack of schools. Many children are having there interested of learning. Some of the student they got no money to go to school.

Their texts showed categories of non retrieval from cultural context to make meaning, this is not in line with Eggins (2004) who says that the functions of language is to make meanings which are influenced by the social and cultural context. This could be because of poor education background, lack of reading culture or lack of access to reading materials at home because of poverty. There were indications of certain characteristics of a spoken mode in their texts. Unlike the competent students, this shows a lack of generic and registerial knowledge on the part of the not-so-competent students. This problem of reference ties results in texts that lack cohesion.

Competent students on the other hand, showed competence in academic writing by using some of the strategies of foregrounding and co-articulation which are, for example, 'first', 'then', 'when', 'later', 'as before' and 'finally', to connect specific evidence (Martin and Rose 2003) as in the example below;

Firstly, challenge that mostly affects education in this country is the lack of properly trained teachers. Secondly, its schools that are not built properly. (11)

It is also noteworthy that the competent students produced more head items and participant chains than the not-so-competent students. They also had richer and more differentiated head item chains. This seems to further support the argument that the competent students have superior vocabulary and morpho-syntactic knowledge of ESL.

The expense of education also puts a strain on South African Education. Advanced schools are expensive and not everyone can afford them. It is mostly private schools that offer almost every equipment needed for better education

It can be said that, both groups did not use many cataphoric reference which occurs when the referent has not yet appeared but will be provided subsequently (Eggins 2004). The implication, particularly for the competent group is that, although their skills might be characterized as competent in terms of writing, they had not yet reached the levels of what could be characterized as accomplished writers.

In register analysis information obtained from the detailed analysis of a text can be interpreted as realization of contextual dimensions enabling

a summarized register description. The contrastive register description of the text is based on the combined lexico-grammatical and cohesion evidence. Eggins (2004) argues that evidence allows us to specify similarities and differences between the texts at a contextual level.

The information obtained from the detailed analysis of register showed that there were similarities in field between most of the texts of competent students since most of them were able to contextualize the topic, unlike the not-so-competent students, most of whom could not contextualize the topic. This is illustrated in the example that follows;

There are many challenges facing Education in South Africa challenges like to know you rights in South Africa.

The first challenge that can I talk about is to be well educated because many years ago South Africa was colonized by Britain. But is not South Africa only was colonized all countrys of the African contenet were being colonized.

In South Africa there was the cegregation which was made by Britain oppressing South African dwellers or citizen. But because of education South Africa realized that Britain is dominating the rights of the South African citizen. The example of domination that I am talk saying the place of the womens is in kitchen.

In mode and tenor, competent students used high formal, authoritarian tenor. They constructed their texts as reflective written texts by impersonal writers to be read by unknown distant readers. On the other hand, extreme not-so-competent students used highly informal language, non-standard grammar, incomplete clauses, incorrect spelling, and highly interpersonal language. Their language incorporated features of a spoken interactive mode (Eggins 2004). Out of field, mode and tenor, mode has proved to be the most problematic.

Textual choices alone cannot create a text; the text would have no content, nor would it be possible to interact with it. Thus, knowledge of context of culture and situation (field, generic and registerial competence) are critical in this regard. Meaning cannot be prioritized until those meanings have themselves been chosen in context. Thus, we saw the competent students constructing transitivity structures by making experiential choices, segmenting and linking those experiential choices through logical relations.

On the one hand, the not-so-competent students did not use transitivity structures to link experiential choices. The following example is taken from the essays of the not so competent learners;

The country has improve to merged the blacks and whites in their schools which was no allowed in the 20th century. In many years ago the blacks were not allowed to attend the sports like cricket rugby etc but now you'll find that the sport is for everyone according education. Look now we have black lectures which was few of the by that time and even as we are in tertiary so it shows that tertiary level is not for whites only as they did before.

The findings showed that competent students did not have problems with themes, conjunctive cohesion reference chains, lexical cohesion, and cohesive characterization and register analysis since they do a lot of reading as they mentioned in the interviews that were also conducted

On the other hand, not-so-competent students had serious problems with all the aspects mentioned above. In their essays themes could not be clearly identified. They also did not use cohesive conjunctions and if they did, used them incorrectly. Furthermore, textual cohesion markers which help to indicate relationships in their texts, had been incorrectly used. These problems could, arguably, be associated with the fact that black students from rural schools do not read due to lack of reading materials at home.

CONCLUSION

The gaps on academic writing for students at tertiary level as highlighted in this paper reaffirms the view that there is a need for teachers to guide students on the strategies that they can use to improve their academic writing in order for them to be successful at tertiary level. It can also be argued that improving students' academic writing is a slow process that requires commitment on the part of the students, teachers, lecturers, government and parents. Of course this is not impossible, with dedication, hard work and commitment it can be done.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Tertiary institutions assume that students are familiar with aspects of academic writing such

as theme construction and development. It is clear in this paper that a significant number of black students have difficulty with essay writing. Teachers therefore need to help black students to identify different types of themes.

One way of doing this is for teachers to start with a simple narrative text, where students can be guided to identify the themes. Thereafter, they can be introduced to specialised writing using some of the themes identified earlier on in the lesson.

Teachers need to help students on how to decide on the hypertheme, which is the topic sentence of each paragraph. The hypertheme gives orientation to what is to come, that is, the frame of reference, and predicts how the text will unfold. The hypernew should support the hypertheme. This is any new information accumulated from the hypertheme and also supporting it.

Also teachers need to help students on how to decide on the hypernew which supports the hypertheme with specific and relevant evidence. Supporting evidence is needed for the purposes of coherence. The evidence that supports the point in a paragraph consists of overt markers such as 'first of all', 'secondly' and 'finally'. The evidence is also made up of reference chains showing the major participants in the text. These include homophoric, esphoric, exhophoric, endophoric and cataphoric references. These are used to link clauses and ideas, and to create a text that has coherence and cohesion.

Furthermore, teachers need to help the students on how to connect specific evidence for coherence in their texts. The reader of the text must move smoothly from one bit of supporting information to the next. Students need to be taught how to use transition words such as, 'also', 'on the other hand', 'firstly' and 'then', which are strategies of foregrounding and co-articulation.

Teachers must also guide students to identify key words and pronouns which should be repeated to tie ideas together, to form reference chains and also to indicate major participants and their importance. To do this, one has to identify presuming referent in a text and then seek to link all mentions of that participant. Students find this a daunting task, and yet teachers often assume that identifying participants is rather obvious and not worth spending valuable teaching time on.

It is the duty of teachers to guide students on how to use chains of clauses and sentences to relate the text to its area of focus. They must also be guided on how to use expectancy relationships (that is, the relationship between the doer and the action) to create lexical cohesion. There is no doubt this could be hampered by students' lack of requisite vocabulary and grammar. Encouraging students to read outside set texts and retell and recount in their own words what they read, could be a useful tool in this regard.

Also, teachers should guide students on how to combine clauses. They should emphasise that clauses that are related or co-ordinated should be joined using explicit, implicit, elaborating, enhancing, and extension conjunctions to create semantically meaningful structural links between clauses.

It is clear from the findings that the not-so-competent learners do not use different writing strategies compared to competent ones but the problem with them is that they are not familiar with academic writing strategies because as mentioned before, most of them are from rural schools and do not read due to lack of reading materials at home.

FUTURE RESEARCH

There is need to broaden the scope of research in academic writing to include the vast body of knowledge that a writer uses when successfully completing the activity of writing. In this sense, focus should not only be on linguistic knowledge (for example, on lexical, orthographic and syntactic knowledge); it should also be on units of discourse, and how people acquire knowledge of forms of discourse appropriate to the various fields (genre).

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