Assessing Students' Academic Writing at Tertiary Institutions: Implications for Teaching Writing

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ABSTRACT The prime focus in the research is to assess whether students that write in their second language are able to write coherent texts. For the purposes of this paper, students at a tertiary institution in South Africa were given an essay to write on *Challenges Facing Education in South Africa* and those essays were marked focusing at coherence and cohesion. The findings showed that the not-so-competent students in academic writing failed to contextualize the topic. Their paragraphs and sentences were not linked. Their essays were disjoint, in the sense that what had gone before did not provide a smooth transition for what was coming next and a number of issues were discussed in one paragraph.

INTRODUCTION

Academic writing always requires a conscious effort and much practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas (Myles 2002). For black learners who have to deal with writing in an unfamiliar language, this presents additional difficulty. Black learners at tertiary institutions in South Africa have to write in a second language (L2) and, thus, are also confronted with social and cognitive challenges related to second language acquisition. As they do not often consider the social contexts in which L2 academic writing takes place, models of first language (L1) writing instruction and research on composing processes are often found wanting in L2 writing pedagogy (Mc Laughlin 1987). Following Myles (2002) language proficiency and competence is the cornerstone of the ability to write in the L2. This is critical in South Africa considering the apartheid legacy and the deprived social conditions under which black learners often live and acquire their education.

The lack of academic writing proficiency meant that black students often experience difficulties with their studies at tertiary institutions. In South Africa, there is no institution offering tertiary level education in an African language medium. Thus, it could be argued that the medium of instruction often bars African students from obtaining a proper educational qualification (Van Zyl 1994).

Further, the paper explored errors in context, cohesion and coherence in relation to L2 writing strategies used by black learners at a tertiary institution in South Africa. The research focused on errors of contextualization and coherence, with the aim of exploring the strategies used by black students to write coherent academic texts. The researchers investigated the L2 writing process adopted by competent and non-competent black learners to produce coherent academic texts. This was done through a comparison of the writing processes adopted by the competent and the not-so-competent learners.

Research Questions

This research aimed at answering the following research questions:
i. What writing processes do black students adopt with regard to English Second Language (ESL) academic writing?
ii. Is there a differential effect in academic writing skills between those students who attended rural or township Department of Education and Training (DET) schools and those who attended white (Model C) schools?

Literature Review

Coherence

To address the above-mentioned questions, the study assessed coherence and cohesion of students' academic writing. Cook (1989: 40) defined coherence as the 'quality of being mean-

ingful and unified'. Halliday and Hassan (1989: 48) gave a more comprehensive explanation of coherence, when they say: a text is characterized by coherence when it hangs together. At any point after the beginning, what has gone before provided the environment for what is coming next. This sets up internal expectations, which are matched up with the reader's own expectations. The latter's expectations are sourced from the external context of situation and culture.

Besides, Ross and Murray (1975: 82) defined coherence as a link between sentences, paragraphs and a logical connection. Thus, coherence is the product of two factors: paragraph unity and sentence cohesion. It is also the use of transitional devices, for instance, 'yet' introducing a contrasting statement and 'therefore' setting up a conclusion of the train of thought. These devices and many more help to link ideas within a paragraph (Kies 2004).

Another way of tying sentences and paragraphs together involved using reference words that pointed to an idea mentioned previously. Words like; 'this', 'these', 'such' and 'that' can be used to tie one sentence to the other. These reference words should not be used by themselves, but should be combined with the important words and phrases from previous sentences or paragraphs. To achieve paragraph unity, the learner must ensure that the paragraph has a single generalization that serves as the focus of attention, that is, a topic sentence. He/she must also ensure that other sentences in a paragraph maintain the same focus of attention, as the topic sentence (Winterwood and Murnay 1975: 88-94).

Banda (2003) argued that the ability to write a text that is error free is not a naturally acquired skill but is formally learned or culturally transmitted as an asset of practices in formal instructional settings. The students can only learn the skill in a school situation. Writing skills must be practiced and learned through experience. Writing involved composing, conducting research, developing ideas, analyzing ideas, writing the first draft, editing and writing the final draft (Omaggio 1993). It is an act of composing that creates problems for those writing in L2 in academic contexts.

To use language effectively, the learner must ensure that the language holds together into a coherent, intelligible whole. In a paragraph, ev-ery sentence and every phrase contribute to the meaning of the whole piece. A coherent paragraph does more than simply lay down facts; it organizes them, thus, creating a logical argument that makes sense from one idea to another. The unity and relatedness of a text is in part a result of a recognizable pattern for the propositions and ideas in the passage, but it is also a function of the grammatical devices that strengthen the global unity and create local connectedness (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain 2000: 8). This is where cohesion, in particular, the grammatical devices of reference come in.

Cohesive devices are linguistic resources that language has for linking one part of a text to another (Halliday and Hassan 1989). Although, the overall coherence of a longer text depends on the presence of a conventional scheme or organization that is recognized as generic or specific to a particular communicative purpose and discourse community, the overall coherence of such a text also depended on the degree of coherence within each paragraph or section of a passage (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain 2000: 8). Each sentence or utterance should be related both to the previous and following sentences in such a manner that the reader finds it easy to effectively interpret the text.

One can improve coherence by referring to nouns in a previous sentence, thus, emphasizing the connection in thought from one sentence to the next avoiding unnecessary repetition. In addition, repetition can be used to link ideas within a paragraph. This can be used to emphasize an important point (Ross and Murray 1975: 88-94). Using the synonyms can create sentence cohesion, since synonyms actually share several elements of meaning. Using a pronoun to make explicit reference back to a form mentioned earlier is another way of creating cohesion. Pronouns are used to avoid repetition of the word, as mentioned earlier. Use of overt markers (for example, 'first', 'finally') of sequence to highlight the connection between ideas creates cohesion in a sentence. This system can link ideas that are otherwise completely unconnected.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers conducted the present study within primarily qualitative approach. This is because the qualitative approach brings together a combination of methods. It also used

the naturalistic approach that sought to understand phenomena in context. The qualitative research is any kind of research that produced findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures (Strauss and Corbin 1990: 17).

For the purposes of this study an essay was given to two groups of first year students at a tertiary institution. The essay topic was 'Challenges Facing Education in South Africa'. The groups were composed of 10 students who were competent in academic writing and 10 students who were not so competent in academic writing. All the participants were purposely selected and voluntarily consented to take part in the study. Their competency was measured on the basis of their essays. Most of these students were from rural or township schools. These groups had at least 10 years of formal instruction in English. The purpose of the essay was to identify the kinds of strategies that were critical in coherent English second language academic writing for black students in South Africa. These essays were marked using, amongst others, impressionistic procedures sometimes applied in marking an essay. While the procedure relied 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 affected coherence and cohesion. Bachman and Palmer (1996) recommended that broad specifications be used to define the criteria by which the quality of the essays is evaluated. In this case, contextualization of the topic, coherence and cohesion were used.

FINDINGS

The Not-So Competent Students Contextualization of the Topic

Findings showed that the not-so-competent students had problems with contextualization coherence as well as cohesion.

One of the major problems that the researcher noticed in the essays was the students' contextualization of the topic. Since language and context are interrelated it is not possible to use language correctly if you do not take into account the context of use. Without contextual information it is not possible to determine which meaning is being made (Eggins 2004: 8). The problem of contextualization can be attributed to the students' failure to include background knowledge and linguistic structures needed in academic domains, or more likely, their lack of such knowledge and the linguistic structures to express it (Extener 1996: 1-4).

In essay number 10 there was nothing about education and South Africa, linking it to apartheid and its legacy. Instead of discussing the education system in South Africa, the student discussed education as a course. This showed that this student did not contextualize the topic due to the lack of background knowledge of linguistic structures needed in academic domains. As a result, the student could not distinguish education as a system and a course.

This problem was also observed in essay number 3 where the student discussed colonization of South Africa by Britain, freedom, and the fact that South Africa had a black president. These facts are relevant only if they could be linked to education and not discussed in isolation. The student also failed to synthesize the facts so as to address the topic coherently. As students were supposed to write on "Challenges Facing Education in South Africa", in some essays there was no mention of education in South Africa. Their paragraphs and sentences were not linked.

Students' difficulties in accessing meaning results from their low level of linguistic knowledge as well as from their lack of socio-cultural knowledge required for interpreting and writing texts (Leibowitz 2004). This is caused in part by the fact that they do not read academic texts. Besides, competent learners were on the whole able to contextualize the topic. Their paragraphs and sentences were linked. Overt markers such as, 'the first' and 'the most' were used to link ideas. Paragraphs were well organized. This kind of writing style showed that these learners used the strategies that were required in academic writing, as they were able to produce coherent texts that were coherent.

Coherence in Texts of the Not-So-Competent Students

Lack of coherence is the other major difficulty the researcher found in all ten essays of the not-so-competent students analyzed. The pattern that has emerged in all these essays is that there was no sentence and paragraph unity. The

learners tended to discuss a lot of points in one paragraph. Their sentences were disjointed, and there was no common thread running across the paragraphs. What was discussed in the previous paragraph, does not relate to what is discussed in the following paragraph. So far these essays lacked registerial coherence. As mentioned before, a text has registerial coherence when it hangs together (Eggins 2004: 29) when we can specify for the entire collection of clauses the domain on which the text is focusing (Ross and Murray 1975: 82). These essays also lacked registerial coherence since we cannot identify a unified purpose of some of the texts (Eggins 2004: 29).

To achieve paragraph unity, the learners must ensure that a paragraph has a single generalization that serves as the focus, that is, a topic sentence. However, most students failed to achieve paragraph unity as a number of unrelated issues were discussed in one paragraph. Specific illustrations are given below:

This lack of coherence in students' essays is a reflection of their problems with academic writing and lack of internal organization (Eggins 2004: 29).

Colloquialism and Direct Translation from Mother Tongue

The not-so-competent students relied on the use of colloquialism and direct translation from their mother tongue. Unfortunately, that strategy did not work for them given the register and generic constraints. Colloquialism is language commonly used in informal speech and writing (Richards et al. 1997: 63). Gough and Bock (2001) have identified black learners' over-reliance on primary discourse writing strategies as contributing to poor academic writing skills. As opposed to secondary discourse strategies, primary discourse is oral-based.

In the following examples, the students addressed the reader directly, as in oral speech. The spoken text contained everyday sorts of words, including slang and dialects and often sentences that were written in the spoken language which did not follow grammatical conventions (Eggins 2004: 93).

In the apartheid era *you'll find only teachers* in your area not a black lawyer's or doctor's which owns his/her surgery.

In the above sentences the learner is addressing the person directly as in spoken language, which is clearly the wrong mode for the topic and task given.

Sometimes, the learners translated directly from the mother tongue to the second language. Direct translation according to Lindholm and Padilla (1978: 37) is using the equivalent words in the appropriate language. As a strategy this is not a problem in itself, but could affect coherence in the text, as the clause and transitivity structures of African language are not the same as that of English language (Banda 2003). The meaning and logical relations in the following sentences have been impaired as a result:

1. The department of education often asked the government to *add* the schools.

(*Xhosa version - Isebe Lezemfundo soloko licela urhulumente ukuba ongeze izikolo)*

In Xhosa, 'add' means both, 'counting' and 'building'.

Further, the students used informal language or incorrect expressions, which sometimes lead to incoherent sentences as shown in the following sentences:

In South Africa there was the segregation that 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 about there was a say which was saying the place of the womens is in kitchin.

Cohesion

The other major weakness with the essays is with cohesion. Yule (1999) viewed that cohesion refers to the ties and connections that exist within texts. On the other hand, cohesion, according to Halliday and Hassan (1976) referred to the way we relate or tie together bits of discourse. These ties and connections relate to grammatical devices, which have affected cohesion in students' essays. These grammatical devices are: referencing, conjunctions, exemplification, verb forms, spelling, and prepositions. It occurred where the interpretation of some element in the discourse is dependent on that of another. The one presupposes the other, in the sense that it cannot be affectively decoded except by recourse to it. When it happened, a relation of cohesion is set up and the two ele-

ments, the presupposing and the presupposed, are thereby at least potentially integrated into a text (see Halliday and Hassan 1976).

This research revealed that the students, who are not so competent in academic writing showed serious problems with referencing, compared to other grammatical devices. They used the reference 'the' not referring to what had been mentioned before or to what was still going to be mentioned. The same reference was included in sentences where it was not supposed to be used. Sometimes these references were omitted.

Another major weakness of students was the incorrect use of conjunctions. Conjunctions, as defined by Halliday and Hassan (1976), Scollon and Scollon (1995) and Richard et al. (1997) are lexical items which are used to join two clauses and which show the relationship between those two clauses. Martin and Rose (2003) stated that, conjunctions look at inter-connections between processes of adding, comparing, sequencing or explaining. They help to create semantic unity and are also cohesive devices. These are causal, adversative, additive and temporal conjunctions. Incorrect use of these conjunctions affects cohesion in a text.

The findings showed that verb forms were also another problematic grammatical category that affected coherence and cohesion in students' texts. The students used different tenses within a sentence. They also confused verbs that were in the gerund with the progressive tense. Sometimes they did not know how a perfect tense was formed. Furthermore, they used verbs that were in the infinitive with a past tense marker 'ed'. Modal auxiliaries that are used with other verbs to show obligation and uncertainty (Martin and Rose 2003) were also incorrectly used. These auxiliary verbs are supposed to be followed by a verb in the infinitive but students used them with verbs that were in the past tense.

Essays of students who are competent in academic writing did not display major problems of contextualization, coherence, and cohesion, as had been the case with essays of students who are not competent in academic writing. The competent students also proved that they were competent in academic writing by using overt markers of sequence such as, 'the first' and 'most,' telling the reader that a new stage is beginning, highlighting the connection between ideas and also comparing things.

Competent Students

Essays of students who are competent in academic writing did not display major problems of contextualization, coherence and cohesion, as had been the case with essays of students who are not competent in academic writing. Context, according to Celce-Marcia and Olshtain (2000: 11), are factors and written elements that are non-linguistic but which affect spoken or written communicative interaction. All language use has a context whose textual features enable the discourse to cohere not only with itself, but also with its context of situation in which the text functions (Halliday and Hassan 1989). On the topic "Challenges Facing Education in South Africa", a few essays were analyzed to demonstrate how the competent learners were able to contextualize the topic, where the not so competent failed. Students started with the introduction and then moved to different challenges of education and then concluded by what the country needed to do to face these challenges.

Some of them discussed the education system in the introduction, then the financial problems experienced by students, lack of resources and different subjects. As a conclusion they discussed what the government was doing to face these challenges. The two students mentioned above have contextualized the topic.

Further, in their essays, sentences and paragraphs were linked. Linking devices such as, 'since', which is used to realize the cause and 'indeed', expressing similarity had been used (Martin and Rose 2003: 117). These conjunctions made it clear to the reader that we were focusing on two similar things. These conjunctions had indeed been used to make their essays coherent. Also demonstratives such as 'there', 'these', 'etcetera' had been used correctly

These students also proved that they were competent in academic writing by using overt markers of sequence such as, 'the first' and 'most,' telling the reader that a new stage was beginning, highlighting the connection between ideas and also comparing things, (Martin 2003: 156). This system according to Kies (2004) has many advantages as it can link ideas that are otherwise completely unconnected. On the other hand, these markers were absent in the essays of not-so-competent students.

These students had mastered the stylistic skill of writing which, according to Heaton (1975:

138), is the ability to manipulate sentences and use language effectively. Stylistic skill is related to cohesion. This skill ties together bits of discourse and expresses the continuity that existed between one part of the text and another (Halliday and Hassan 1976: 2-4). This involved the use of reference, linkage and expansion devices for coordination and subordination.

Further, most of them knew how to construct sentences and the devices that were used to construct sentences. They could differentiate between a verb and a noun. These learners also knew about concord, which is the subject verb relationship (Richards et al. 1997: 75). These students had academic writing skills that were needed at university level. In any piece of writing, being able to organize ideas and express them in your own words is a skill that was displayed by the students (Heaton 1975: 134). This skill is essential for real life communication and also for tertiary education.

In addition, these students, unlike the not-so-competent group, demonstrated they had the background knowledge and linguistic structures needed in academic domains (Extener 1996: 1-4). Most of them used the correct register, which is the role language plays in interaction (Eggins 2004: 90). The competent students were able to use the various kinds of register (including slang, jargon, archaic words) standard English and language used by educated writers of English. Use of correct register in writing, implies an awareness not only of a writing goal, but also of a particular audience (Heaton 1975: 139).

It was not surprising that there was coherence and cohesion in their essays. Coherence, as mentioned before, is the text relationship to its extra-textual context (Eggins 2004: 24). In these students' essays the paragraphs and sentences were linked and were not disjointed, as was the case with the essays of the not-so-competent group. One prime idea was discussed in each paragraph and ideas flowed into each other and there was a logical development of ideas and argument (Owino 2002).

Although, these essays could be categorized as fairly good, there were very few incorrectly spelt words, for example, 'governance' instead of 'government'. Kembo-Sure (2004), says we need not be worried about these deviations, as they should disappear as the learner progresses along the acquisition scale. He went on to say that these mistakes are unstable unless they are allowed to fossilize. Although, there were spelling errors in their essays, these did not impair cohesion or coherence. It was also evident that these students had planned their essays, starting with brainstorming, up to editing since they knew the stages followed in academic writing.

Although most of these students had acquired academic writing skills, some of them had problems with mechanical skills, which, is the ability to use punctuation marks. Some students used capital letters randomly.

CONCLUSION

The findings showed that competent students did not have major problems with contextualization, coherence and cohesion. Their essays were not disjointed and have logic. There is a vast difference between the not-so-competent students and the competent ones. Not-so-competent students are from rural schools and competent ones are from urban schools. Poor infrastructure, lack of resources, untrained and poorly trained teachers and poor quality of education in rural schools affected these students' writing skills.

To address the problem of the falling standards of academic writing amongst black learners in South Africa, a number of issues need to be tackled immediately, that is, training of the teachers to be able to teach academic writing, changing the curriculum to address academic writing needs of learners, ensuring that there are resources in rural schools, and introducing an academic writing model, but there is no doubt that government will need to play a much greater role than it is currently doing, provide funding, training, and materials. In general, the government needs to provide a conducive environment both in the schools and communities for effective learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To improve the academic performance of students at ECT, it is important to improve the students' academic writing skills. Thus, the academic writing requires conscious effort and practice in composing, developing and analyzing ideas. In addition, the writing process incorporates pre-writing activities such as brainstorming, drafting, revising and editing, multiple drafts and peer group editing. Further, the students

writing in an L2 have to acquire proficiency in the use of the language as well as writing strategies, techniques and skills. Enriching the learning environment by providing well-equipped libraries in each school can help to improve proficiency of students

Writing should not be viewed as an individual-oriented, inner-directed cognitive process, but as an acquired response to the discourse. In this regard, effective instruction should afford black students the opportunity to participate in transactions with their own texts and the texts of others. One way of doing this is through group work, in which academic writing tasks are done in mixed groups comprising both competent and not-so-competent students.

Black students need to be encouraged to read academic texts to help them improve their writing skills. To facilitate the writing process, students can develop the writing strategies. The strategies included the meta-cognitive, such as planning the organization of written discourse; cognitive, which is using known linguistic information to facilitate a new learning task and using new vocabulary; and social strategies, that is, intertextual knowledge which involves peer revision. Interaction and input also play important roles in the writing process. Black students need to receive adequate L2 input and feedback from teachers to form a new hypothesis about syntactic and rhetorical forms in the target language, hence, students need to be apprenticed to academic writing and be taught grammar. The students should also be encouraged to analyze and evaluate feedback themselves in order for it to be effective.

The students may also be able to write well if they are exposed to a variety of genres of writing including flyers, magazines, papers and books, amongst others.

One other major problem that affected the academic writing of students is unavailability of resources, including human resources, funding, school facilities, materials and books.

Most reading and writing in South Africa is in English, which to most South Africans is an L2. Having said this, reading and writing to L2 speakers is always a burden. If material in an African language is available, black students are more likely to read that (Banda 2004).

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