Academic Writing Difficulties of English Second Language Learning: What Lecturers Have to Say

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Abstract-A case study was conducted in a selected university in the Eastern Cape Province primarily to examine lecturers 'views about the difficulties of students' academic-writing in English second language learning. This university provides access to knowledge to a diversity of students from mainly rural, poor, and disadvantaged communities andsome of them joined the university without having reached competency in Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS), and without reaching a sufficient level of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) at high school level. The constructivist approach was used as the lens of the study. The author employed a qualitative approach, and semi-structured interviews were used to gather data from lecturers teaching English second language in the Faculty of Education, with sampling resulting in six lecturers being purposively selected. Thematic data analysis was used. The findings revealed that first language interference contributes to students' academic writing due to a lack of vocabulary and creative thinking skills, students' inability to construct meaningful sentences and to paraphrase otherwriters'words. The findings also revealed plagiarism, incorrect use of citations, and referencing. The study, therefore, recommends that lecturers encourage the students' extensive reading to increase their vocabulary, discussion, and debates to build their self-confidence and develop their creative and critical thinking skills.

Keywords-debate;diversity;interference;plagiarism;vocabulary;

I. INTRODUCTION

Many universities in sub-Saharan Africa (and South Africa), including the University under study, have identified academic writing as a challenge encountered by many students. First year students are the most students with poor academic writing. According to Chou (2011) these students encounter a lot of stress and obstacles when writingtheir assignments because at high school level, they were fully dependent on teachers. Furthermore,they lack creative and critical thinkingskills and consider themselves havinglower expectations thanthose of their lectures as they consider themselves second language students. Dway (2011) asserts that the challenges facing the institutionsof higher learning, among other things, are a large number of first year students who lack general academic skills. The findings of the Saudi English-major undergraduates studying at Taif University study conducted by Al- Khairy (2013)andthestudyof internationalstudentsoffournationalities(namelyKorean,Chinese,Taiwanese,andOmani) conducted by Ibtisam Ali Hassan Al Badi (2015) at a university in Australia, and an investigation on English academicwritingproblemsencounteredbyArabInternationalUniversitystudents inSyriaconductedbyAl-Mukdad (2019) confirms the academic writing difficulties encountered by second language learners. Academic writing not only improves student's self-esteem, morale, and attitude, but also improve the student's academic achievement across all subject areas. This implies that if lecturers focus more on developing students' academic writing, it is tantamount to saying that the lecturer is proactive in improving the pass rate in his or her subject.

Therestofthepaperisorganizedasfollows.Literaturereview,theoreticalframeworkandmethodologyareexplained in sectionII.The findingsanddiscussions are presented in sectionIII. Concludingremarksare givenin sectionIV.

II. LITERATUREREVIEW

A.　　Academicwritingdifficulties–

Low language proficiency obstruct most students' academic writing. Lecturers with high expectations are of theview that students at first year Bachelor of Education level are qualified enough to produce accurate pieces of writing. Theyassign demanding topics. Lowlanguage proficiency hinders students to move on in their writing, they strugglewith generatingideaswhenwritingaboutatopic(Al--Murshidi,2014). AccordingtoAl-Khairy (2013)the

major problems encountered by such students are grammatical errors, the use of irregular verbs, and incorrect punctuation and spelling. The challenge in reviewing grammar includes subject-verb agreement and joining sentences together to make a coherent paragraph (Ibtisam Ali Hassan Al Badi, 2015).These challenges enabled students to paraphrase and summarise work by others((Ibtisam, 2015), construct meaningful sentences and expressing own voice which leads to plagiarism. In academic writing students should be able to acknowledge the sources bystating fromwhere the ideas have beentaken. Students withpoor academic writingskill are also labelled as 'students at risk'. The lack of vocabulary has also been identified as one of the challenges the students are facing intheirEnglishclassrooms.Theystruggleinchoosingappropriatevocabularytoconstruct meaningfulsentence.Ina piece of writing where appropriate vocabulary is used, the sentences are logically related, the ideas are clearly expressed, and the paragraphs are coherent (Ibtisam et. Al. (2015).Students who do not have vocabulary struggle to write convincing supporting sentences in a paragraph. Referencing and citations is also a challenge when studentsare writing assignments. Chokwe (2013) is of the view that academic writing should not be relegated to one department (English) or to Academic Literacies Centres but should be a joint effort of both language and discipline specialists. The students' poor academic writing skills inevitably leads to academic exclusion as these students are likely to dropout due to lack of success in their studies or subsequently lead to withdrawal of funding by sponsors (Chokwe, 2013).

i) Factorscausingacademicwritingdifficulties-
   o   UnfamiliaritywithhowtheUniversityworks

First year students are not familiar with how teaching and learning take place in institutions of higher learning. According to chokwe (2013) what students learn in high school either prepares or under-prepares them foruniversity studies. He further argues that if student writing is not addressed adequately at school level, the higher education sector will always be inundated with students who are academically under-prepared. First year studentsare not familiar with lecture method used by the lecturers and inquiry-learning they are exposed to at the university. According to Yong (2010) the transition from high schools to universities poses a serious challenge for many students in terms of academic writing.

   o   Under-preparednesscausedbyineffectiveteachingofwritingatschoollevel

Several researchers argue that the problemof student writing is also exacerbated byteaching staff members who are at times under-qualified, underprepared and inefficient (Engstrom 2008; Chokwe, 2013). At high school they are dependent on the teachers' notes and what is written on their textbooks. It is their responsibility to read and write what is written without adding their voices. They are not aware that they can even critique what is written. Rote memorisation is encouraged. To address academic writing difficulties, lecturers or tutors should also see themselves as active participants in the process by making sure that they are fully equipped and trained to help students with academic writing. Lecturers should also reflect on their practice and be introspective about what might be right or wrong about the pedagogic practices and approaches that they employ in their English FAL classrooms.

   o   Socio-economicissuesandinadequatereading

Due to socio-economic barriers, some students have no access to libraries, and internet that would assist him meet the demands ofuniversityreadingand writingtasks. Some ofthem frompoor familiesand are not funded. Lecturers should motivate students to read. They should help students believe that they can be successful writers if they practice andthey must believe that writing is a skill gained through hard work.

ii) Academicwritingconventionsandstrategies-
In line with international benchmarks, the use of technology (Applications such as Turnitin, grammarlly etc) has been identified as an appropriate tool to support students, improve their academic writing skillsand quality of teachingand learningEnglish L2.Readings suchasbooks,journals,and even some websiteshave beenidentified as the invaluable source on whichlearnerscould relyto enrich their lexicon withacademic vocabularyand expressions (Caga, 2020). Abdulkareem (2013) asserts that teaching students how to brainstorm ideas can contribute in minimizing their problems in academic writing. Furthermore, students should be trained on how to use sources to motivate their ideas and avoid plagiarism which is one of the academic crime they should be aware of. Their lecturers should teach them how to find references electronically (Caga, 2020). Some scholars are of the view that first language interference contributes to students' poor academic writing, therefore students should be discouraged to use their mother tongue in their classroom. It is the lecturers' responsibility to select the contemporary teaching methods that have an ability to motivate students to actively participate in the classroom and attain high language proficiency.Ontheotherhand,studentsshouldbeaffordedanopportunitytowriteaboutwhatinterestthemand

focus on the quality of the writing they produce (Yugianingrum, 2010). According to Al- Murshidi, (2014) students become motivated when they write about the topics of their interests, andthey continue to read even if they encounter difficulties. Al-Badi (2015) argues that students should have sufficient opportunities to practice writing continuously. It is believed that when they are introduced to the processes of writing (generating ideas, planning, drafting, and revising) and lecturers monitor them and give them constructive feedback it is likely that students can master those techniques and have learning autonomy.

B.   TheoreticalFrameworkandMethodology–

TheConstructivisttheorywasusedaslensofthestudy.The theorypositsthatstudentsbeactiveparticipantsintheir learning. Students should be afforded an opportunity to construct knowledge on their own through trial and error.

The study will adopt a qualitative case study research design because it allows the researcher to seek multiple realities regarding. According to Creswell and Poth (2018) case studies enable the research to focus on a particular issue and study it in the shortest possible time.This study was informed by the interpretive paradigm. Theresearcherusedpurposivesamplingto select sixlecturersteachingEnglishL2module,intheBachelorofEducation (B Ed 1) first year programme in the Faculty of Education in the selected university. The university was conveniently selected because of proximity. The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews using semi-structured and open-ended questions to collect data. The three open ended questions were asked to get data on the students' academic writing difficulties in English L2 classrooms and the interview schedule was used to guide the researcher. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The pseudo-names were used to protect the identity of participants and university.

III. EFINDINGSANDDISCUSSION

The interview schedulehad 4 questions and all the participants were asked the same questions. Lecturers are referred to as L below to protect their identities as explained above.

The first question required the interviewees to explain their understanding of the term " academic writing skill". There were various responses that explained the term and they showed that lectures understand what academic writing is and its purpose although the majority of them expressed how they feel as English teachers regarding students' poor academic writing. Some of them were blaming students' who are not goal-oriented whist others were blaming academics teaching other subjects and others were blaming the apartheid regime. Below are few of their different views.

L1 : " Academic writing refers to the students'abilityto writesentenceswhich are meaningful and grammatical correct.Thisisachallengetoourfirstyear studentsbecauselecturersteachingothermodulesfocuseson the subject content not on students' language proficiency".

The lecturers teaching other subject should also be responsible in equipping students with academic writing skills. Lecturers should also reflect on their practice and be introspective about what might be right or wrong about the pedagogic practices and approaches that they employ in their English FAL classrooms. I addition, in the literature reviewed Caga (2020) suggest the use ofreadings such as books, journals, and even some websites have been identifiedastheinvaluablesourceonwhichlearnerscouldrelytoenrichtheirlexicon   withacademic   vocabularyand expressions

L5:"Academicwritingrefersto"…."Ispend30minutesofmytimeineachlectureon academic writinginmy 1st year class first semester because these students do not know how to structure a paragraph even in essay writing. They do not know the main idea / topic sentence and supporting sentences. they just write That's what they do at high school".

L3:"Forme,itmeansgoodpieceofwork   writtenbyastudentwithlogicandallthe…Itssomethingreartofind Inourstudents.Becauseoftheirbackground,asyouknowmostofthemarefromruralareas   wherethere   are   no libraries and they do not afford to buy gadgets the vocabulary is lacking."

The lecturer above agrees with scholars above who are of the view that due to socio-economic barriers, some studentshavenoaccesstolibraries,andinternetthatwouldassisthimmeetthedemandsofuniversityreading   and   writing tasks

Thesecondquestionrequiredtheintervieweestoexplain   themajorityoftheirstudents'   socio-economicstatus andwhetherithasanimpact/influenceintheirstudentsacademicwritingandsomeofthemhadrespondedto the question before it was asked, trying to justify why their students are having poor academic writing skills.

  L3:"Ithink,thefactthattheteachingmethodusedhereisdifferentfromwhatteachersdoathighschoolthat   confuse   them because here I am concerned about the application more that the theory and I want to heartheirvoicesandIwantthemtoacknowledgethevoicesofotherswhichisnotthecaseathigh school.

The lecturer above is in line with Yong's (2010) assertion that the transition from high schools to universities posesa serious challenge for many students in terms of academic writing. Chokwe (2013 further argues that if student writing is not addressed adequately at school level, the higher education sector will always be inundated with students who are academically under-prepared. At University level, lecturer should familiarize students with referencing techiques.

  L4:"An   abilitytowriteanassignmentthatiswellstructured.There   shouldbethatgoldenthread   fromfirst sentencetothelast,   fromfirstparagraphtothelast.Divideparagraphsandreferenceintextandhave   reference list at the end.

  Thirdly,intervieweeswereaskedwhatcouldbethecausesoftheirstudents'pooracademicwriting.Allthe participants highlighted the students' background, lack ofresourcesin educationally – disadvantaged high schools, overcrowdedclassroomsinhighschools.BelowistheresponsefromL2thatisdifferentfromothersandliterature: L 2 : Despite the underqualified teachers that are allocated English subject which is not their specialization in Theirqualifications.Wearealsonotdoingjusticetothesestudents,The2styearclassesareovercrowded as they all register the module and we do not have time for individual attention. In addition, the time allocated for the module is not enough because its informed by the number of credits that are few.

The response from L2 on this question is supported by the Engstrom (2008) and Chokwe (2013) who raised the issuesofunder-qualified,underpreparedandinefficientascontributingfactorstostudents'pooracademicwriting   in English L2 classrooms.

  L5:Thecaliberofstudentsthatwearehavingarenotdedicated.Theuniversitylibraryisthereforthemto Study. Some of them do not submit work so it is not easy to identify their needs and what they are Interested in.

  L1 :   Moststudentsfromaffluentfamiliesandthosewhoarefundedbysponsorsarenotbetterthantheones   from   poor families, they buy technological devices and use them for entertainment platforms (social media) not for education purposes.

According to Caga (2020) the use oftechnology(Applications such as Turnitin, grammarlly etc) could assist studentsimprovetheiracademicwritingskills. StudentreferredtobyL1aboveshouldbeadvisedtousetheir technological devices for academic purposes.

Lastly , the lecturers were asked about possible strategies that could be employed to improve students' poor academic writing skill. Most lecturers suggested that   the university be strict with the 1st year student admission targetstoavoidovercrowded classesalthoghtheymade itclearthatthe studentsthemselvesaretheoneswho protest whentherearequalifyingstudentswhoarerejected.Theyalsosuggestthatlecturersadvisestudentstousethe techologiesasaresourcecenter   asAbdulkareem(2013)suggestedaboveandsupportedbyCaga(2020).Theyfindit necessary for teachers teaching English at high school to be a qualified teacher and use lear- centered approaches to assist learners to be more hands on in academic writing activities. Al-Badi (2015) argues that students should have sufficientopportunitiestopracticewritingcontinuously.Theconsructivistapproachwhichislensofthispaper positsthatstudentsbeaffordedanopportunitytoconstructknowledgethemselves.Itwasalsostatedthatlectrers

should motivate students to read books and journal to increase thier vocabulary as highlighted by Yugianingrum, 2010,echoedbyAl-Murshidi,(2014)studentsbecome motivated whentheywriteaboutthe topicsoftheir interests.

IV.CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study revealed that English L2 poor academic writing is a global issue. Countries like Australia, Korea, China, Taiwan, Syria have conducted similar study. The difference is that this South African study was conducted in rural university. The researcher has identified commonalities as well as differences in findings. The study revealed sentence construction, paraphrasing, citation and referencing, coherence in paragraphs, plagiarism being th most common difficulties experienced bystudents. The studyalso revealstudents' Unfamiliarity with how the university works, under-preparedness caused by ineffective teaching of writing at school level, and socio-economic issues and inadequate reading as the factors causing academic writing difficulties. The study, therefore, recommends that lecturers encourage the students' extensive reading to increase their vocabulary, discussion, and debates to build their self-confidence and develop their creative and critical thinking skills. Lecturers should teach students how to brainstorm ideas, how to search references electronically, how to use useful Applications such as Turnitin and grammarlye.t.cto avoid plagiarism. The appoint ment of qualifying teachers at high school level and students' commitment to their studies was also suggested.

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