

EXPLORING STUDENT AND LECTURER PERSPECTIVES ON ACADEMIC WRITING: A CASE STUDY AT THE CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY, SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

This study explores the perceptions of students and lecturers regarding the Academic Literacy Course (ALC) at the Central University of Technology (CUT), South Africa. Academic literacy encompasses critical skills for effective communication, while academic writing provides a structured framework for presenting ideas, arguments, and research. The study investigates attitudes toward the course's relevance, effectiveness, and its impact on students' academic writing abilities. Using a qualitative approach, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with students who completed the course and lecturers from the Communication Sciences Department. Thematic analysis revealed recurring patterns and insights from participants. Findings indicate that both students and lecturers value academic literacy as essential for academic writing success. Participants highlighted the course's focus on critical reading, writing, information literacy, and communication skills, expressing predominantly positive opinions. However, a majority of students (90%) and lecturers (80%) emphasized the need for tailored content and additional resources to address specific academic writing challenges. The study provides valuable insights into the strengths and areas for improvement in the ALC. It suggests that a more discipline-specific approach, incorporating relevant terminology and practices, could better align with students' academic needs. Recommendations include redesigning the course to integrate discipline-specific content and adapting it for both in-person and online delivery. These findings have significant implications for curriculum development, offering strategies to enhance the course's effectiveness in fostering students' academic literacy and writing proficiency.

Keywords: *academic literacy; academic writing; communication*

1. Introduction

Academic literacy encompasses a broad range of skills, knowledge, and competencies essential for achieving success in academic settings (Bloomaert, 2016). Similarly, Bilikozen (2019) defines academic literacy as a collection of abilities, strategies, and information needed to successfully interact with, comprehend, and create academic material in a university setting. Scholtz (2016) elaborates that academic literacy encompasses reading,

writing, critical thinking, research skills, and comprehension of disciplinary conventions. Therefore, academic literacy in South Africa equips students with essential skills needed to engage meaningfully with academic content through reading, writing, or participating in scholarly activities (Eybers, 2015). Another explanation pertinent to the South African context is that of Sebolai (2016), who states that academic literacy involves being able to read, write, and critically analyse academic texts. In the context of this study, academic literacy encompasses students' capacity to write clearly and coherently, demonstrate knowledge of writing norms, integrate information effectively, comprehend written material, and engage in critical thinking.

In South Africa there are 12 official languages. Many students are confronted with significant challenges in academic writing, particularly because English is often their second, third or even fourth language, despite it being the primary medium of instruction at tertiary institutions across South Africa. It therefore appears as though South Africa's linguistic diversity contributes to students' varied levels of English proficiency. This challenge coupled with promoting multilingualism in a post-apartheid era exacerbates the current problem of academic writing in South Africa (Ntereke & Ramoroka, 2017).

Moreover, this issue has become more distinct post-COVID-19, as face-to-face instruction has resumed, and students demonstrate a regression in their writing skills. Challenges such as unfamiliarity with academic language conventions, difficulty in following written instructions, struggles with sentence formulation, and ineffective research capabilities have been documented (Pineteh, 2014). Therefore, understanding the perspectives of both students and lecturers regarding these academic writing difficulties is crucial, especially considering the observed decline in writing ability, which hampers students' ability to achieve educational outcomes across various disciplines.

2. Literature Review

The literature reviewed in this section is organized around two central themes: the challenges students face in mastering academic writing and the strategies developed to address these challenges while improving their academic writing skills. Studies have consistently shown that academic writing poses significant barriers for students transitioning from secondary to tertiary education, with issues ranging from inadequate literacy preparation to emotional and cognitive hurdles (Bailey, 2018; Conteh, 2020; Scholtz, 2016). Moreover, interventions designed to enhance academic writing proficiency emphasize the importance of contextual, interdisciplinary, and student-centered approaches to bridge gaps in students' writing capabilities (Clarence & McKenna, 2017; Pineteh, 2016). This review explores the nuanced complexities of academic writing challenges and evaluates the effectiveness of interventions aimed at fostering student success.

2.1 Challenges in Academic Writing

Researchers worldwide have begun collecting feedback from students and lecturers regarding students' academic writing skills to explore the various perspectives because academic writing has been identified as one of the key contributors towards academic failure. Consequently, impeding student progression and success. (Bailey, 2018; Conti, LaMance & Miller-Cochran, 2017; Gallaway & Rose, 2019; Rowe, Fitness & Wood, 2015; Sebolai & Huff, 2016). Similarly, research regarding academic literacy conducted by Conteh,

(2020); Fouché, Van Dyk & Butler (2017); Scholtz, (2016) & Tardy, Reed, Slinkard & LaMance (2021) also acknowledge that one of the key factors affecting students' performance as they transition from high school to university is their proficiency in academic writing.

Researchers have rigorously explored the perceptions of students and lecturers on academic writing. The inquiries have focused on students' comprehension of academic literacy, their self-assessment of their writing capabilities, and the areas where students and lecturers differ or share common ground (Conteh, 2020; Hitge, 2011; Sebolai, 2014; Solikhah, 2015 & Wu, 2023). These studies indicate that many students and lecturers believe that the writing process and the academic expectations at university present several challenges for students, especially when they transition from high school to university. These challenges include but are not limited to knowing basic writing conventions, sentence construction, paragraphing, grouping ideas together, synthesising information, and understanding written instructions. These problems are evident in South African universities and the university where this study was conducted.

In addition, Scholtz (2016) argues that the beliefs of lecturers and students regarding academic writing skills do not change the reality of students' limitations in this area and the National Benchmark Test Report, which Grade 12 learners must complete before entering tertiary education confirms the argument put forth by Scholtz. The NBT report affirms that students have varied problems with academic writing. The problems identified include writing conventions, sentence construction, paragraphing and critical thinking.

Furthermore, Rowe et al. (2015) found that lecturers acknowledge that students faced challenges with both content and the requirements of the academic writing process. Their participants were lecturers and students selected from different disciplines such as Accounting, Arts, Chiropractic Studies, Education and the Sciences. They reported that students based their academic skills on their emotions rather than the reality of whether they know how to write academically or not. This finding is significant because the researchers concur that emotions play a significant role in the academic success of students, influencing various aspects of learning, motivation, and overall performance. Previous research has shown that study-related emotions influence students' learning and achievement (Liao and Wong, 2019). Rowe et al. (2015) concur and state that lecturers find it difficult to create enthusiasm and encourage students to feel less anxious and emotional during classes.

Similarly, Khumalo and Maphalala (2018) found that first-year students struggled with academic writing because they were indifferent about the expected topics which follow certain writing norms and must be written in an academic and formal manner. Similarly, Holmes et al. (2018) stated that as much as the academic writing and academic literacy skills are not based on students' emotions, the reality is that even postgraduate students experience anxiety when they interact with academic texts they do not understand. Holmes et al. (2018) concurs with Rowe et al (2015) that most postgraduate students experience anxiety (negative emotions) in subjects like research and during the dissertation writing process.

Additionally, academic writing studies that were done globally at different universities (Cai, 2017; Chokwe, 2022; Galloway & Rose, 2018; Ntereke & Ramoroka, 2017; Boughey & McKenna, 2016) found that students and lecturers believed that the academic writing process is complex and both students and lecturers struggle to follow the academic

writing rules. In this study lecturers stated that they cannot blame students for struggling to write while they as lecturers also find it difficult to understand the academic writing process in their own research. Participants reported that synthesising material was the most difficult writing process for them (students and lecturers), although their overall writing abilities increased because of the constant feedback from their lecturers and research supervisors.

Galloway and Rose (2018) found that numerous researchers (Blommaert, 2016; Butler, Butler & Schutte, 2022; Conti, LaMance & Miller-Cochran, 2017; Marais, Nel & Fourie, 2019; Sebolai & Huff, 2016; Solikhah, 2015 & Tardy, Reed, Slinkard & LaMance, 2021) support the idea that students' academic writing skills are a challenge that is widely recognised by many academics across many countries. Most of these researchers engaged students and lecturers to assess the problem with students' low academic literacy levels on how to better assist students to improve their academic writing skills.

Chokwe (2022) also states that students and lecturers believe there are multiple factors involved in students' low academic literacy levels and students' inability to understand the academic writing process. Consequently, Holmes et al. (2018) discovered that students claimed they were unable to understand academic writing rules, especially concerning assignments due to issues like anxiety, poor language usage, a dislike of reading, and not receiving feedback on their writing. According to Tardy, Reed, Slinkard, and LaMance (2021) academic staff and international students expressed their frustration with the academic writing requirements at most international universities, claiming that students still struggle to comprehend academic texts. The students underwent a two-course programme of fundamental writing (Tardy et al., 2021). These findings came from Pennsylvania State University and the University of Arizona.

This is an indication that first world English speaking countries have similar challenges with students' academic literacy levels and their academic writing skills. The consensus is that students' academic literacy levels and academic writing skill are a global concern. Academic writing is still a major problem for Asian students as well who are learning English as a second language (Cai, 2017). In a survey of fifty Master of Arts students enrolled in a new English for Academic Purposes programme at the University of Hong Kong was the subject of a very small-scale needs analysis (Cai, 2017). The study revealed that many students and academic staff expressed concern that even students who did English as a major also had trouble with academic writing.

In a different study in China, Zhou, Zhao, and Dawson (2019) evaluated student and academic staff's perceptions regarding students' academic writing skills by focusing on the synthesising of academic texts. A key finding in this study was that students stated that they were ignorant of the rules of academic writing. Both students and academic staff assert that their lack of academic literacy skills, and anxiety to write academically forced them to rely heavily on their prior writing experience.

The literature reviewed in this section confirm that there are several factors contributing to students' challenges in academic writing, including anxiety, emotional distress, and disinterest. Issues such as unfamiliarity with writing conventions, paragraphing, and synthesising information have also been identified as barriers to effective writing. Noteworthy, is that the problem was present before COVID-19 but as stated by the researchers it has worsened post-COVID-19, which indicates the relevance of the current study. Furthermore, the researchers need to stress the importance of fostering enthusiasm for writing, understanding academic writing rules, and recognising the impact of

multilingualism and diverse languages in South Africa. By addressing these complexities, lecturers can better support students in overcoming obstacles and enhancing their academic writing skills.

4.2 Academic Literacy Interventions

Improving the academic writing skills of students can be approached in various ways. One effective strategy discussed in Pineteh's (2016) study is the redesign of curricula with a focus on the needs of students. This emphasises the importance of adopting a student-centered approach when developing academic literacy courses, ensuring that the design and delivery of these programmes cater to the unique challenges and requirements of learners. However, this intervention only considers re-curriculating but does not address improving academic writing holistically, nor would it be able to address the needs of students already at university.

It is essential to recognise that academic writing cannot be isolated from the main subjects that student's study. Learning crucial skills often occurs through interaction with peers and experienced lecturers of a particular discipline. This engagement allows students to grasp the specific discourse practices and expectations of their discipline, which is vital for their academic success (Jacobs, 2007). However, the researchers have found that it is difficult to convince lecturers in other disciplines to assist with academic writing conventions because they perceive this as additional work. Also, lecturers have been given additional administrative tasks and must take more accountability for low pass rates. Therefore, they prefer focusing on their own courses. However, fostering interdisciplinary interactions, academic writing interventions can equip students to tackle the demands of their assignments effectively.

There is also a strong view from lecturers that in the long term, students should be encouraged to take ownership of their own learning, especially at university. This involves adequately preparing for academic tasks and understanding the significance of academic writing in achieving their educational goals. This seems to be lacking among students and recent data indicates that students need to recognise their own weaknesses, particularly in academic literacy (Pineteh, 2016). In this way they can actively work on improving their writing skills and enhance their overall academic performance.

One notable initiative in this area is the development of a university academic writing course personalised for students learning English as an additional language (EAL). This course integrates content-based teaching with a focus on language and genre awareness, promoting critical engagement with concepts related to global English (Tardy et al., 2021). However, in a culturally diverse society like South Africa, promoting multilingualism is a priority, despite previous challenges in integrating indigenous languages into curricula. While previous attempts may have faced difficulties, new initiatives are now being advocated to successfully incorporate indigenous languages into educational frameworks.

Additionally, Clarence and McKenna (2017) identify three primary approaches in the South African academic literacy landscape, including writing-intensive courses, collaborative modules co-taught by lecturers and academic literacy practitioners, and stand-alone courses focused on study skills and essay writing. While integrating academic writing support within subject disciplines offers significant benefits, it also presents challenges, such as the need for adequate staff to facilitate these courses effectively (Deveraux & Wilson, 2008). The

approaches mentioned can assist improving academic writing, but these strategies are often stifled because there are insufficient lecturers and academic practitioners appointed, less time is afforded to academic writing modules because it is not a major for most programmes, except for students majoring in languages, who receive additional support during courses.

Consequently, the CUT initiated the implementation of a mandatory academic literacy programme. The main objective of the Academic Literacy Programme (ALP) is to support first-year students in improving their academic writing skills (Hitge, 2019). This ALP was introduced as an intervention to narrow the divide between literacy levels in secondary school and that of the academic writing demands at tertiary level (Sebolai, 2014). A study carried out at the CUT suggests that the ALP seemed functional in bridging the gap between students' basic literacy skills from secondary school and the academic literacy requirements of first year studies (Hitge, 2019), but since COVID-19 this is no longer the case.

The researchers have conducted a comprehensive review of existing literature on the challenges students face with academic literacy and the interventions aimed at mitigating these issues. Despite the extensive research conducted globally, the prevalence of academic writing problems persists. This emphasizes the need for a fresh perspective and new insights to address this ongoing issue and enhance student writing effectively. The gaps identified in the literature emphasises the relevance of this study, as it aims to provide innovative solutions and strategies to bridge the existing gaps and contribute to the advancement of academic writing practices in educational settings.

3. Research Method

The overall approach and explanation behind the research process, including the procedures, methods, and strategies employed for data collection and analysis, are referred to as the research method. Qualitative research aims to investigate phenomena in-depth using methods including content analysis, focus groups, and interviews (Peterson, 2019). A qualitative method was used for this study to gather information about how students and lecturers at the CUT, FS, perceive academic literacy and academic writing. Semi-structured interviews incorporate conversational components intended to help researchers ensure that participants answer questions honestly and voluntarily, they were used to collect data (Peterson, 2019). Additionally, as stated by Ruslin, Mashuri, Rasak, Alhabsyi, and Syam (2022), semi-structured interviews allow for the acquisition of insight by providing the interviewers with the opportunity to probe further and clarify the interviewees responses, as was the case in this study.

Senior students enrolled in first-year undergraduate and postgraduate programmes at the CUT between 2018 and 2023 were the study's target group. The students were divided into two groups and both groups were further divided into subsets. The subsets were made up of students who completed the Academic literacy course (LCS5011/12/5001) for mainstream students from the Faculties of Health and Environmental Sciences (FEBIT), Management Sciences and Humanities, with some groups from the Faculty of Engineering, Built Environment and Information Technology. While the other subset of students who completed the ALC5011/12 course, and these students were registered in FEBIT for the Diploma in Civil, Electrical and Mechanical Engineering. The difference between the two subsets were that the ALC5011/5012 course consisted of an academic literacy and

communication component, while the mainstream group only consisted of an academic literacy component. Appreciating that both subsets of students had completed their respective academic literacy modules, they were able to offer relevant information regarding the course's advantages and disadvantages. Ten lecturers and forty students from all four faculties made up the sample. Given that this study was conducted at the CUT, the limited number of participants was essential to ensure in-depth information was obtained, thereby facilitating data saturation within the research context. Additionally, to reduce selection bias and guarantee the generalisability of the study's conclusions, the researchers employed purposive sampling as a method for choosing a subset of the population.

Elliot (2018), states that data analysis is the act of classifying, ordering, manipulating, and summarising data to obtain answers to research questions. Thematic analysis was used to evaluate data and identify recurring themes. According to Terry, Hayfield, Clarke and Braun (2017), thematic analysis is an approach used to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns or themes within qualitative data. Frequently used in research, thematic analysis assists researchers to make sense of complex datasets, particularly those gathered from interviews. This approach offers a flexible framework for understanding patterns in qualitative data, adaptable to research needs, as was the case in this study.

According to Wickham and Wickham (2016), data analysis is the process of sorting through datasets to find patterns. To improve comprehension of the data and facilitate the presenting of findings, Patton (2014) describes it as a methodical process of organising and sorting through all the information interview transcripts, and other materials gathered (McCurdy & Ross, 2018) as was the case in this study.

The researchers adhered to ethical standards in this study by obtaining prior approval from the Faculty Research and Innovation Committee (FRIC) at the CUT. Participants were requested to complete an informed consent form before interviews were conducted. During the interviews participants were assured that all disclosed information would be handled confidentially, with no mention of names in the research, and that data transcripts would be securely stored. Both lecturers and students were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any point, and the study's objectives were clearly elucidated to ensure transparency.

4. Results and Discussion

The findings and subsequent discussion focus on students' and lecturers' perspectives regarding academic literacy, including opinions on students' academic writing skills, assessments of their own writing abilities, and the overall quality of academic writing. The qualitative data collected was used to interpret to organize and interpret the findings.

4.1 Student views regarding academic literacy and their academic writing skills

Participants' responses revealed several views. Most students stated that the course provided useful and insightful information because they were more confident in tackling writing tasks, assignments and activities. They credit their confidence to lecturers who offered comprehensive guidance, particularly emphasising the interpretation of information in writing assignments. Afterwards, they helped students with the actual writing of their assignments. One student said that "I am more confident in doing my assignments because my lecturer was able to demonstrate how I should read and interpret what is required from

the assignment". Another student said that "the fact that I understand what is expected from me makes me feel that I can do my assignments". These positive remarks were a common trend among students. It also shows that reading and writing should not be taught in isolation but dealt with concurrently. This finding aligns with Hitge (2019), Scholtz (2016) and Sebolai (2014), who similarly found that students believed the course helped them enhance their writing skills. There were notably more students who found that the course was beneficial to them.

However, there were students who indicated that the course was not beneficial to them. One student remarked, "my writing skills did not improve even though I attended the classes". Another student said that "the lecturer simply put up a PowerPoint presentation and read from the slides, I did not understand anything". This student further states when he attempted to ask for clarity, the lecturer said that he did not have time to answer questions". This finding directly reflects Tardy et al's (2021) view on the frustration students experience when they are unable to master and enhance their writing skills.

Another group of students indicated that the course merely assisted them to a certain degree because their lecturers failed to teach them how to apply the theoretical concepts they learned to their practical writing. One participant stated that, "My lecturer explained how I should do my citations, but I was not given a practical example, I was still confused". Another student said that he to a certain extent understood what academic writing entailed but failed to see how different it was from what they did at school. He said, "I am not sure there is a difference, it is still about writing". Similarly, Cai (2017) discovered that Asian students said that English was taught more generally and that their academic writing skills did not show a vast improvement (Chen, Zhang, Yu & Hou: 2023).

There were also specific problems students mentioned that they found difficult. For example, several students stated that they struggled with assignments in several of their courses. For those assignments they had to do in other subjects they found that they lacked structure and organisation. One student pertinently stated, "I do not know where to start with my assignment because in academic writing I am taught about an introduction, body and conclusion but when it comes to some of my other courses this does not apply". Another student asserted, "I seem to understand when I am in the class but when I have to do the assignment I am lost". This finding is prevalent at many universities in South Africa and abroad where students have difficulty writing assignments.

Another common issue students frequently mentioned is the challenge of understanding academic texts. Another example is their struggle to comprehend the prescribed texts when it came to reading. Frequent remarks in this regard include, "I do not understand what I am reading, I do not understand the words, the passage does not make sense to me". This finding confirms the researchers concerns regarding reading with comprehension. This is largely due to English not being the mother tongue of the students at the CUT.

Furthermore, students perceived the lack of assessment writing practice as another specific reason as to why their academic writing did not improve. One participant stated, "We never do any assessments". Several participants indicated that they were only given two written tasks for the semester. A verbatim response from one of the participants is as follows, "I was only given a paragraph to write and then one essay". Similarly, Cai (2017) found that Asian students noted English was taught in a more general manner, leading to limited improvement in their academic writing skills (Chen, Zhang, Yu & Hou, 2023). This

finding is significant because a lack of assessments and opportunities to practice their writing does impact whether students writing skills will improve or not.

A few students also stated that they did not accurately use grammar, sentence construction, spelling, punctuation, citations and language effectively resulting in them not achieving a pass mark in the assignment. Verbatim responses of students include, "I struggle with concord, when I read the sentence that I have written it sounds correct but when my lecturer marks then it is incorrect, I seldom know when to use punctuation, so I just leave it out" This is similar to what Homes et al. (2018) has found regarding language conventions and researchers commonly point towards a lack of knowledge conventions impede student writing.

Most students stated that they especially found argumentation difficult. They felt that they did not have the vocabulary to do so and could not write clear statements and support this with apt reasons. In this regard students mentioned the following, "To argue a particular point is very difficult, I struggle to support my views, it is difficult to put into words what I want to say". Both students and lecturers agree that students' use of informal language was common, and they favoured using colloquial language, slang, or contractions instead of formal academic language which in the students view reduced the credibility of their work (Scholtz, 2016). This finding is common in literature regarding academic writing. Solikhah (2015) concurs that students struggle to write clear, concise statements, in a formal manner and which are essential because it guides the direction of their argument

Another reason why students struggle with academic writing is because they plagiarise. Verbatim responses in this regard include, "I just write from the text, I cut and paste and hope that it makes sense, I have not mastered how to write in my own words" In this instance students admit to plagiarising because they do not understand the rules of academic writing, nor are they able to paraphrase information. Additionally, in language courses where writing is a core skill students acknowledge that they could not cite sources correctly. Singh (2023) corroborates this finding because in his study several students also mentioned that they misunderstood citation styles as there are a few (the MLA-Modern Languages Association system, the APA-American Psychological Association system, the Harvard system, and the MHRA-Modern Humanities Research Association system) and they failed to cite sources accurately.

Several of the students who were interviewed also mentioned that could not analyse content because they lacked critical thinking skills. One student stated that "critical thinking is a buzz word at the university, but I do not fully understand what it means". Another student stated that, "I truly do not know how to interpret information that I read". This finding is significant because it has also been the experience of the researchers. Butler et al. (2022) purports that simply summarising information without analysis or failing to critically engage with sources and to synthesize is a common problem among students. Moreover, most students indicated that they did not know how to synthesise information or how to apply this skill. She said, "synthesising information is very difficult, I do not know how to do this". Mgqwashu and Bengesai (2015) and Scholtz (2016) states that academic writing often requires evaluation and synthesising information and not just provide a response but also highlight that students have trouble with this skill.

Noteworthy, is that a few students admitted that they could not blame the academic literacy programme for their poor academic performance. These students stated that

external factors played a significant role in them performing poorly in the ALC course. The students claim that they were overwhelmed by the transition from high school to university. They revealed that they had never left their homes which are in the rural part of some provinces (e.g., Venda, Limpopo, Mpumalanga and the Eastern Cape) finding themselves overly excited and anxious at the same time. This led to them losing focus and prioritising other subjects over the ALC course because they did not view it as equally important. Some of the verbatim responses from students include, "I did not take the course seriously, this was not my main course, I did not see the importance of this course". This finding confirms that very often students do not take writing courses seriously, nor do they see the importance of improving their academic writing. Similarly, Meehan and Howells (2018) found that for students who moved away from home to attend university, the role of university, their families, and other individuals in their new surroundings changed. Meehan and Howells (2018) found that there are many external factors that influence students transitioning from high school to university. Likewise, Amaechi, Bennett, Kafilatu, Kayit, Lillyman, Okeke and Paciente (2013) found that students expressed a range of emotions, including both enthusiasm and fear, after deciding to travel to an unfamiliar environment or an international university and this experience overwhelmed them.

The comprehensive perspectives of all student participants regarding academic literacy hold significance as they offer contextual insights into the academic milieu. However, it is pleasing to note that there are students who have benefited from the course. To address the decline in academic literacy levels, the learning environment should foster an inclusive opportunity for all students to achieve success.

4.2 Lecturers' opinions regarding students' writing competencies and their academic literacy skills

Several lecturers expressed that there is a challenge with students' academic writing skills and students lacked the ability to write good assignments. Verbatim responses to support this view include, "students having difficulty expressing themselves in English, English is not their mother tongue, the students write incomprehensibly, students struggle with basic sentence construction". Similarly, Nizonkiza and van Dyk (2015) believe that students perceive academic writing at university as difficult. Therefore, they avoid the writing attempting to write and opt to plagiarize. Holmes et al. (2018) concur that students have trouble writing because they are not proficient in English, avoid reading because they do not understand the content, are apprehensive towards writing because they have repeatedly been told that they cannot write and opt for plagiarizing.

Lecturers specifically pointed out that students faced challenges in multiple areas of academic writing, including introducing topics, structuring coherent paragraphs, selecting appropriate tenses, and synthesizing information. One lecturer remarked, "Students lack the fundamental skills of essay writing, struggling with basics like planning and brainstorming". Most lecturers emphasised the necessity for intensive academic writing programmes to enhance students' writing abilities and ultimately throughput. These comments encapsulate the overall sentiment among lecturers regarding the current state of student writing at the CUT. This is a significant finding because it corroborates what previous researchers found regarding the quality of academic writing among students (Khumalo and Maphalala, 2018; Sebolai & Huff, 2016). It also confirms that student writing is a real challenge and there is a need to relook the current curriculum.

Teaching citations, summarising theories, and paraphrasing techniques rather than focusing on language conventions is another emergent theme from the current study. Lecturers expressed a preference for a communicative approach to academic writing, prioritising paragraph structure, essay organisation (introduction, body, conclusion), and various citation styles to prevent plagiarism. While lecturers acknowledged the importance of language conventions like concord, punctuation and sentence construction, they admitted to not dedicating sufficient time to these important areas. One lecturer specifically highlighted the importance of educating students about plagiarism and discouraging its practice. Another emphasised the importance of essay organisation but failed to go into more detail. This finding is significant as it sheds light on why student writing may not be improving despite concerted efforts to improve student writing at the CUT.

Lecturers acknowledged that students struggled to understand academic content and carry out instructions in written assignments or projects. Verbatim responses from lecturers include, “Students are struggling to understand the content of their work, students have difficulty comprehending academic texts, even with illustrations and explanations students are still struggling to writing comprehensibly”.

Another finding from this study is that lecturers claimed that they did not give their students enough practical academic writing tasks/assignments because they had limited time. One lecturer stated, “I do not have time to give students all the writing tasks or additional tasks because I will not be able to mark all the writing pieces”. This directly impacts whether students writing will improve or remain the same. This is concerning because student writing can only improve if students are given several opportunities to hone their writing skills. Similarly, Bilikozen (2019) also found that students’ academic writing is not improving because they receive only a few assessments/writing tasks. His discovery highlights the importance of offering students additional writing tasks or activities to enhance their writing skills. Nevertheless, it is also apparent that students choose to plagiarise, despite being given minimal writing assessments. They believe that this will ensure that they pass the course. Singh (2015) reports a similar finding regarding plagiarism. This finding raises concerns regarding integrity and indicates that the role of lecturers should also include discouraging such practices.

Furthermore, lecturers have also reported that students’ academic writing is affected by them constructing poor sentences, not adhering to language conventions and often they misinterpret topics resulting in them receiving poor grades. Verbatim responses from lecturers include, “Students cannot construct sentences, they do not or cannot using punctuation correctly, I find that students do not answer the questions”. (Rowe et al. (2015) and Boughey (2021) report similar findings in their respective studies. This finding suggests that students are struggling with basic language conventions, sentence construction and interpretation despite having attended school for twelve years.

The views expressed by lecturers regarding academic literacy are important because they provide significant insights into the current academic environment in South Africa. The extent to which students are struggling with academic writing is apparent and very concerning to lecturers.

Nevertheless, regarding the study in its totality, the findings cannot be generalised because the study was confined to one university and not all departments across the different faculties were included. Therefore, the results are only relevant to students in

particular disciplines and cannot be generalised to the entire university or to other universities in South Africa due to the diverse student demographics and the presence of different official languages in various provinces, despite English being the primary medium of instruction.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study successfully explored the attitudes and perspectives of students and lecturers regarding the ALC course, specifically examining its relevance, effectiveness, and impact on students' academic writing skills. While the findings are limited to the context of the CUT and the qualitative nature of the study impedes generalisation, the study accentuates the crucial role of academic literacy programmes in preparing students for success in higher education. To enhance these programmes, it is recommended to integrate practical writing tasks that mirror real-world academic challenges and offer a blended learning approach to accommodate the diverse student body at the CUT. This is also in line with the vision 2030 of the CUT. Furthermore, leveraging team teaching, translanguaging, and code-switching during lectures can better accommodate and support the multilingual student population. Future research could focus on assessing the long-term effects of academic literacy programmes on students' academic achievements and professional growth. By continually refining and researching these programmes, institutions like the CUT can provide comprehensive support to students throughout their academic journey and beyond.

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