

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of the research findings

This research pursued three areas. Firstly, ESL students' experiences of academic writing; secondly, academics' expectations of students' academic writing; and, thirdly, ESL students' and academics' ideas for improving academic writing at university. The findings from this study are consistent with Turner and Street's (1999) assertion that academic writing is an issue of much contention in many university settings, and to date academic writing is a field of inquiry that still requires investigation. Although learners in South Africa are at the centre of change and transformation in international educational policy and theory (Erikson & Schultz, 1992), Osman (2003, p.224) has found that "very little is done in South Africa that places participants' experience at the center of such change and reform. This is true for school and university reform".

On entering the field of academic writing it was apparent that one was entering an arena that is complex and contested. The findings of this study support Makoni (2000) and Stephenson and York (1996), that in the South African context writing in general, and academic writing in particular, is rooted in the history of the country's education. One of the most urgent concerns that arose from the study is that of the novice student writer who is invariably challenged with learning the traditions and conventions of academic discourse. At the same time, it was discovered that South African universities, like universities in other parts of the world, have been struggling to resolve the difficulties associated with academic writing in order to produce more articulate student academic writing. Higher education attempts to develop student academic writers are motivated by increasing literature that points to an inherent gap in student experiences of academic writing and academics' expectations of their writing (Clark, 1992; Hyland, 2002; Ivanic, 1998; Ivanic & Roach, 1990; Lea, 1994; Lea & Street, 1998, 1999; Street, 1990, 1995; Turner & Street, 1999). The current study explored this dilemma, focusing specifically on ESL students within a tertiary institution in South Africa. It proceeded in its quest, underpinned by Cummins' (1978; 1980a; 1981a; 1984; 1989; 1991; 1994; 1996; 1997; 2000; 2001; 2003; 2004) theory of language proficiency, particularly his distinction between BICS and CALP. Cummins (1984) postulated that individuals may acquire BICS in their mother tongues but that does not necessarily mean that they are capable of achieving the required levels of CALP needed to engage in

decontextualized academic tasks. ESL students' experiences of academic writing at university were investigated, with the intention of uncovering related issues of cognitive and linguistic proficiency in L2.

The findings of the study showed that both ESL students and academics have particular understandings of academic writing with regard to structure and content. In terms of the former, academic writing was explored through being schooled in particular rules of academic discourse. This study raised the issue of the university as a community of practice with defined protocols and specific sets of practices. The findings of the study support Cope and Kalantzis' (1993) and Kress' (1985) assertion that students have still to inculcate the language of this community and the medium of communication set by the members of the community. However, academics in the study acknowledged that for students to learn the practices and to engage efficiently in academic writing would require more exposure to the powerful genres of academic discourse. In relation to showing an understanding of the content, the students have to deal with more pragmatic aspects of language and cognition, for example understating semantic and functional meanings respectively.

The findings of the study also illustrated that ESL students recognize the distinction between surface fluency and deeper levels of language proficiency. The results support the idea that ESL students struggle with academic writing because they achieve surface fluency but are unable to develop sufficient CALP to cope in the academic environment (Cummins, 1980a, 1981a, 1984, 2003, 2004), resulting in a failure to perform tasks of analysis, synthesis and evaluation, below the surface. From their experiences, the ESL students in the study assumed that their difficulty with application in L2 is due to thinking in their mother tongues, a common misconception amongst ESL speakers and learners which stands in contrast to Cummins' argument that it is important for learners to learn to think and function in their L1, so as to develop CALP. In other words, for ESL students to overcome their academic writing difficulties they need to be encouraged to develop their common underlying proficiency (CUP) in both their L1 and L2.

There were ESL students in this study who felt that they are unable to transcend their *English Second Language* 'label'. They explained that having English as a second language in the community of the university automatically translates into needing support to be successful in academia. It was found that the support structures meant to develop students academically

seem to be a cause of embarrassment to ESL students. Being labelled 'ESL' has shown to decrease ESL students' confidence and self-esteem, particularly necessary faculties for thinking, learning and, eventually, writing.

Furthermore, the findings of the current study support the claims by Lea and Street (1999) that there is a level of conflict and miscommunication between students and academics with regard to academic writing expectations. It appears that the most contested of these expectations is about students' ability to respond critically to subject content. The academics in this study have established that to expect students to engage in complex cognition at deeper levels of academic language proficiency is problematic when students are still struggling to understand and comprehend academic content. They expressed the need for academics to re-examine their academic writing expectations in order to assist all students to cope effectively with context-reduced, cognitively demanding academic tasks central to study in the community of the university.

5.2 Implications for future research

Despite the small sample size of the existing study, and hence limited generalisability, there are some valuable issues that emerged which warrant further investigation into ESL students' academic writing in the South African context. It is evident that the gap between students' experiences of academic writing and academics' expectations of their academic writing needs to be narrowed. Future research could examine ways in which to bridge this gap. Essay feedback emerged as one area which could be further developed. Perhaps an analysis of essay feedback, how it is conveyed by the academics, and how the students receive it, could generate useful research about diminishing conflict between academic writing experiences and expectations.

This research focused predominantly on writing. However, in all discussions of writing it was not uncommon to find that the issue of reading emerged. Learning at tertiary institutions requires much reading and writing for academic purposes, but this study found that ESL students are not always certain how to go about this task. Future research could investigate ESL reading, specifically for academic writing. Moreover, emphasis could be placed on the selection and integration of resources in the operationalisation of the writing task.

The development of ESL learners' reading and writing in their first languages is also a possible research area, given that the development of Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) in the L1 is useful in the development of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in L2. Investigating ways in which to strengthen the common underlying proficiency which underlies the surface manifestations of both L1 and L2 may prove to be invaluable for the transfer of cognitive/academic skills across languages.

In conclusion, it is apparent that academic writing at university, particularly ESL writing, warrants further research, given the unique combination of historical, political, social and economic factors which inform this context. It is further postulated that the nature of language proficiency and its relation to academic achievement is likely to remain a controversial topic, given that there is still no cross-disciplinary consensus on the subject and its concerns for the population of ESL students. In view of that, ESL students' experience of academic writing is believed to continue to be a crucial factor in the development of ESL thinkers.