CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Themes that emerged from the ESL students' focus groups were compared and contrasted to the themes generated from the in-depth individual interviews with the academics. In this chapter the results will be analyzed via thematic content analysis within the context of the literature reviewed in chapter two.

4.1 Method of analysis

From the literature it has been found that content analysis is commonly defined as an analysis in which the researcher makes predictions or inferences about phenomena in a text utilizing systematic procedures. Stone, Dunphy, Smith and Ogilvie (1996, p.6) defined content analysis as "any research technique for making inferences by systematically and objectively identifying specified characteristics within a text". Likewise, Holsti (1969, p.14) defined content analysis as "any technique for making inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages". Krippendorf (1980, p.2) concurred, writing that, "content analysis is a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from data to their contexts". Weber (1985, p.9) also explained that, "content analysis is a research methodology that utilizes a set of procedures to make valid inferences from a text". Palmquist (1993, in Mouton, 2001, p.33) elaborates:

> content analysis is a research method which examines words or phrases within a wide range of texts…By examining the presence or repetition of certain words and phrases in these texts, a researcher is able to make inferences about the philosophical assumptions of a writer, a written piece, the audience for which a piece is written, and even the culture and time in which the text is embedded.

4.1.1 Thematic Content Analysis

Thematic content analysis can be understood to be an interpretative application of content analysis in which the focus of analysis is on thematic content that is identified, categorized and elaborated on the basis of systematic scrutiny (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994). According to Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998), thematic content analysis is one of the various ways of analyzing narrative material. It enables scholars,

observers or practitioners to use a wide variety of information in a systematic manner. Thematic content analysis allows a researcher with a qualitative method and design to translate observations, provides access to discoveries and insights generated, and enables communication and dissemination of ideas and results (Boyatzis, 1998). Boyatzis (1998) defines thematic content analysis as a process for encoding qualitative information, the encoding requires explicit *codes.* An example of a code is a theme, that is "a pattern found in the information that at minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomena" (Boyatzis, 1998, p.4). Themes may be initially generated inductively from the raw information, or generated deductively from theory and prior research (Boyatzis, 1998). Coffey and Atkinson (1996, p.27) state that, "coding can be thought about as a way of relating our data to our ideas about these data".

Krippendorf (1980) outlined the principles guiding the categorization of data for content analysis in terms of the purposes for defining the data and the process needed for defining the data. Eagle (1998) explains that this could be understood as asking 'why', 'what' and 'how' questions of data analysis. She further argues that there is little discussion of the epistemological basis of content analysis in texts about the methodology, and that it appears that data categories can be both theoretically and empirically derived. Thus, some categorization may be *a priori,* while others may be generated within the process of data analysis (Eagle, 1998). The research question and aim(s) to be addressed by the research are always used as the basis for categorization. Guba and Lincoln (1985, p.243) state that, "theory, hypotheses, and inquiry alone ought to guide the coding process and determine content categories".

Eagle (1998) alerts researchers to two important points regarding categorization within content analysis. She argues that categories need to be as inclusive and exhaustive as possible in order to ensure rigor in coding. Moreover, in the event that different levels or bases of category construction are used, analysis must be undertaken independently before comparisons can be drawn.

Thematic content analysis is the method most suited to the aims of this research study, which involved eliciting and analyzing the narratives of ESL students and academics in the university context. The categorical/thematic content analysis approach described by Lieblich,

Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) was used. In the case of the present study, themes were largely predetermined by the interview schedule, discussed in chapter 3.

A limitation of the analysis is that, although the participants' responses were given within the context of academic writing for ESL students, sometimes responses from both students and academics may be seen to relate to academic writing in general, and may refer to the general body of students at university. This means that the findings were not analyzed strictly within the boundaries of ESL academic writing, but tapped issues pertaining to all student' writing at university. A limitation of the analysis of themes relevant to ESL students' academic writing was that any of the themes could be a result of the researcher's own academic issues and dynamics, rather than responses that could be generalized to the field of academic writing on the whole.

4.1.2 Steps in the analysis

In the current study, ESL students' focus group interviews and academics' semi-structured individual interviews were analyzed by means of the following steps detailed by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998).

1) <u>Selection of the subtext:</u> Relevant texts or parts of the narrative were selected for each of the questions asked and placed in new subtexts or files, for ESL students and academics separately. For example, for the question about the understanding of academic writing at university, any text that referred to the meaning of academic writing, the elements of academic writing, how it is produced, the distinction between the BICS and CALP of language use, were selected and placed into one subtext.

2) <u>Definition of the content categories:</u> In this study, the categories were predefined by the relevant theory as described in the literature review. All predefined categories, however, were read openly to define further content categories, or themes. Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) point out that readers bring their own theoretical or commonsense assumptions to the material that they are attempting to synthesize and interpret, so even predefined categories/themes may undergo some revision, based on the text.

3) <u>Sorting materials into the categories:</u> Actual sentences or quotations were allocated to relevant categories/themes, which included relevant material from the same narrative or across several narratives.

4) <u>Drawing conclusions from the results:</u> The sentences or sections of text were processed descriptively, to generate a coherent representation of the content.

4.2 Themes identified

Issues, under the following themes, were identified, described and analysed:

- How academic writing is understood at university by ESL students and academics.
- ESL students' academic writing experiences and academics' expectations.
- Writing difficulties facing ESL students.
- Academic writing support.

In the ensuing discussion these themes are further elucidated.

4.2.1 How academic writing is understood at university by ESL students and academics

4.2.1.1 Why academic writing is seen as a 'specific kind' of writing

The purpose of this discussion is to explain what both ESL students and academics in this study understood by *academic writing*. ESL students understood it to be a kind of formal writing with particular rules and regulations that have to be followed, as set out by the academics within the community of the university (Angelil-Carter, 2000). ESL students seemed to think that academic writing is a specific kind of writing, which does not consider personal experience to matter. As some students point out:

> *I think academic writing is something that isn't general. It's a type of writing that somehow you do not include your experiences, you do not narrate in a way, you do not describe. You learn a particular thing then you interpret it but do not lose the meaning and stray from it.*

I agree with her, academic writing is formal writing. There is a pattern to be followed, and it has to be accepted by the society as a whole. Formal writing is something that has to be accepted by the community of the university (Extracts from student focus group, 23 September, 2004).

ESL students further explained that formal writing means the use of a specific kind of language that is unlike everyday language. It requires one to be more sophisticated, meaning that one's level of English has to be higher than what one would usually use in everyday contexts. This shows that ESL students recognize the distinction between the social/interactional uses of language on the one hand, and the informational and transactional use of language on the other hand (Halliday, 1975; Leech, 1981). According to the ESL students, for one to attain this higher level of English use one has to write with correct grammar, a varied vocabulary and preferably in the third person narrative. As Cummins (1984) explains, for ESL students to achieve communicative competence in academic contexts, they require academic skills and a level of language proficiency that extends beyond basic interpersonal communicative skills. The ESL students in the study commented on the language necessary for academic writing in the following ways:

In terms of language and writing I've noticed that because it's a university there's this higher standard of language and that everyday colloquial language is not good enough, because when you are at university they expect you to use higher grade English in your writing. And instead of putting something in simple words they expect one big word. The grammar is important in academic writing as they said. It helps to develop your writing to a certain level.

Academic writing is writing in a formal way. You have to like…use the third person and not the first person (Extracts from student focus group, 5 October, 2004).

In this regard, some academics concurred that this university discipline has structural expectations of students' academic writing. Integral to academic writing is the ability to abide by certain rules and structures stipulated by each discipline. Academics explained that if these criteria are not fulfilled, the writing is not considered to be academic. The academics' perception in this case is in agreement with Angelil-Carter's (2000) argument that academic disciplines may be viewed as cultures in which academic discourse is maintained and expressed. In other words, for ESL students to become part of the academic culture they have to enagage in academic discourse as expected by different academic disciplines:

Academic writing for me is about following certain rules and structures. So, regardless of the content in a first year essay, for me they have to follow the basic criteria for each discipline. I know each discipline has is own criteria. I could read a journal article and if I see that lack of attention to detail in terms of the rules we need to follow then that for me is not an academic piece of work. For me academic writing is basically being schooled in the particular rules and structures that are required by the disciplines and follow that in whatever writing (Extract from interview with academic, 15 October, 2004).

It is evident that the ESL students in this study seemed to emphasize the structural expectations of writing. Technically sound writing in which students display their ability to use particular rules and structures of formal writing arguably denies the growth of ideas and the meanings that are generated through the writing. It may also be the case that many ESL students perceive the meaning of subject content before being able to structure it correctly, and through the process of devising structurally correct assignments, meanings are lost. This could be the reason why some academics in this study also felt the need to emphasize the importance of both structure and content in academic writing. They argued that students have to appreciate the importance of the content they are learning. If they are able to grasp concepts theoretically, then they begin to think critically about these concepts and would eventually be able to relate their ideas to each other logically in structurally sound essays.

With regard to Cummin's (1980a) Common Uunderlying Proficiency (CUP) model of bilingualism, this means that the students' surface fluency and consequent visible, quantifiable aspects of language presented in academic writing, results from a strong central cognitive processing 'engine' that rests underneath surface fluency. Although ESL students may possess more than one language, they have one integrated source of thought. It could be argued that this integrated source of thought often results in ESL essays in which students seem to have a basic understanding of the subject but do not use technically and grammatically correct structures to represent their arguments. If ESL students continue to develop their central cognitive processing abilities, there will be a greater chance of them developing their academic writing. In this way it can be argued that the central cognitive processing engine is well-equipped to deal with writing in academia. Hence, functioning in both L1 and L2 seem to impact cognitive functioning and academic performance.

Academics in the current study saw the value of socialising the student in the discipline in the following ways:

What I think is the most important thing about academic writing is to learn the structure of the writing and to apply it theoretically to the South African context. Students must be familiar with the key theorists, the key concepts and the key definitions in order to do this. Ideally they should be able to relate ideas to each other in a coherent way. By the end of the year, essentially what they should have is a critical ability. The ability to see the value of the theories in a South African context and to be able to show their understanding of the theories in a well-structured essay (Extract from interview with academic, 18 October, 2004).

When I read student writing I always try to read for meaning. I found that those essays that do well are generally those that are easy to read. That is generally my first impression. But I do believe that that lies in the understanding of the content of the subject. You can see the progression of ideas, there's correct use of academic language, and they have understood the language at a personal level and have given it back to you. The ability to take out the essence of the reading, the ability to summarize, the ability to put that information together and if they haven't done that their writing is disjointed, plagiarized and un-understandable (Extract from interview with academic, 15 October, 2004).

This basic understanding of content, as some academics pointed out, makes the practice of writing academic. When students understand the content it is believed that they are then able to show the reader through communicating the knowledge that they have been taught in language that is suitable to the specific standards prescribed by the academic community.

For me academic writing is about inherently communicating knowledge. It has a set of protocols, standards and values that are integral to the academic community. Given that there are a number of unwritten practices, the writer has to communicate to others the intention of having learnt these practices by way of theoretical or clinical exposition (Extract from interview with academic, 19 October, 2004).

4.2.1.2 Developing the 'argument' in academic writing

It may be argued that knowing 'who said what' is an imperative pre-requisite for the student to obtain a deeper understanding of any discipline, in particular an understanding of knowledge as constructed, debated and contested. A key concept in presenting 'who said what' in academic writing is the *argument*. The argument refers to making a particular claim or assertion and providing justification for it. It also refers to the end product of the text as a whole. The support for the argument establishes the validity of the argument, which in turn works to persuade the reader (Turner, in Turner & Street, 1999).

In order to generate the argument there has to be knowledge and understanding of the subject. The writer has to know the theory behind the subject and then be able to relate that theory to a problem pertaining to the topic. The ESL students in the study recognized that the knowledge of content (who said what) is imperative to be able to write about a subject. A sound subject knowledge allows for theories to be argued, proved and counter-argued more extensively. On the other hand, weak essays tend to display a poor understanding of content needed to argue the question effectively. Thus, a lack of knowledge of content means that the writer cannot provide evidence for the claims or assertions being made. From the ESL students' experiences, it was found that:

> *Well, I also say that the content helps you to get the academic vocabulary and accurate sentence construction so that you can form paragraphs* (Extract from students focus group, 23 September, 2004).

> *For good academic writing there must be understanding of the subject* (Extract from student focus group, 30 September, 2004).

> *I think you really need comprehension skills and you have to understand the main content, like you have to know the concepts...you need the background knowledge* (Extract from student focus group, 5 October, 2004).

Although it is understood by ESL students that academics want them to comprehend the content of the subject before structuring it into an essay, the students felt that to accomplish this task, invariably a good grasp of English is necessary. Hence, their focus is on English proficiency rather than cognitive competency. In relation to the CUP model, this would mean that ESL students place more emphasis on the visible, formal aspects of language than on the less visible, pragmatic aspects of cognitive functioning. However, these students do not realize that the production of quality, structured essays depends as much on the quality of thought and information processing beneath the surface as it does on a display of competence in L2, since cognitive competence and language proficiency have been shown to be inter-connected in the CUP model.

It is unclear why the ESL students in the study, who recognize the significance of understanding subject content, still prefer to think that English proficiency is more central to writing. Perhaps one could find evidence for such thinking in the history of English in South Africa, where the language policy of pre-democratic South Africa was geared towards engendering positive attitudes towards English at the expense of African languages and

culture. Much like this pre-democratic ideology, the present South African society favors a good command of English. Moreover, a good command of English is also considered by the non-English speaking population as a powerful tool to improved socio-economic and socio-cultural statuses. Although much has changed in terms of the socio-political conditions in South Africa, much has stayed the same in terms of the value of English for enhanced socio-economic standing.

ESL students in the study further said that besides being expected to understand the content which is taught in class, the readings that are both prescribed and recommended, and the essay topics which are asked, they are expected to show that they can apply what they have understood from the content.

> *Lecturers expect us to show 'our' understanding, to apply the knowledge we get from the readings and from what they taught us. Do you understand the theory? Are you able to apply the theory?* (Extract from student focus group, 5 October, 2004).

4.2.1.3 From 'comprehension' to 'application'

It was found that it is at the level of transition from *comprehension* to *application* that ESL students in the study experience difficulty:

> *According to the assignments that I've written as a second language English speaker, I've found that the lecturers expect a lot more from me…but I can't express myself properly, the way they want me to, academically. It's hard when you're an ESL student, because I think Zulu in my head and then I have to interpret into English. It's kind of difficult to adjust to English and to express myself properly in English* (Extract from student focus group, 7 October, 2004).

The ESL students in the current context seemed to feel that their difficulty with application is as a result of thinking in their mother tongues. It has been suggested by Cummins (1984) that fully functioning bilinguals often think in the language in which they are talking and are constantly faced with the challenge of interpreting their ideas into a second language. During this interpretation phase their ideas lose potency, resulting in awkward expressions and poor language use overall. Hence, Cummins (1984) would argue that there is no danger in thinking in one's mother tongue. He posits that the most crucial cognitive development of any learner occurs in the mother tongue. The proper mastering of the basic learning skills and concepts in the mother tongue is essential before a second language can be gradually introduced, since

the individual possesses a common underlying proficiency, which underlies the surface manifestations of both L1 and L2. This makes possible the transfer of cognitive and academic skills across languages.

For Cummins (1984) it is important that the learner learns to think and function in the L1 up to Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) level, at which point the learner could transfer to the second language the system of meanings he/she already possesses in his/her L1. Since "a foreign word is not related to its object immediately, but through the meanings already established in the native language, the native language serves as an established system of meanings" (Vygotsky, 1989, p.197), it could be argued that ESL students' difficulty with application in their L2 is due to poor functioning in both L1 and L2 and overall weak common underlying proficiency (CUP). In other words, many ESL students' cognitive and linguistic ability is not developed enough in either L2 or L1. As a result, these students are unable to cope with the curriculum processing of the decontextualized academic setting, where they are expected to understand the content that is taught in class, and where they are required to assimilate information from readings that are both prescribed and recommended and draw out what is necessary from what they have learnt to develop a coherent argument in order to answer the essay topics they have deconstructed.

4.2.1.4 The value of a strong mother tongue

Cummins (2000) points to the importance of bilingual students' mother tongue for their overall personal and educational development. He argues that when bilingual students continue to develop their abilities in two or more languages throughout their primary school years, they gain a deeper understanding of language and how to use it effectively. Bilingual students develop more flexibility in their thinking as a result of more practice in processing information through more than one language.

According to Cummins (2000), ESL students who have a solid foundation in their mother tongue develop stronger literacy abilities in their second language. Students' knowledge and skills transfer across languages from the mother tongue they have learned in the home to the second language. Hence, from the point of view of ESL students' development of concepts and thinking skills, the two languages are interdependent. They learn concepts and intellectual skills that are equally relevant to their ability to function in their second language.

For example, young ESL learners who know how to tell the time in their mother tongue understand the concept of telling time. They do not need to re-learn the concept of telling time in their second language. They simply need to acquire new labels or 'surface structures' for the intellectual skill they have already learnt. In the same way, there is a transfer across languages in academic and literacy skills at more advanced stages, such as knowing how to distinguish the main idea from the supporting details of a written passage or story, identifying cause and effect, distinguishing fact from opinion, and mapping out the sequence of events in a story or historical account (Cummins, 2000).

Willingness to view ESL students' home language and culture as an important resource is an opportunity to enhance a democratic South African society. Asmal (1994, in de Wet, 2002) asserts that home language and culture is one of the most important conditions for the nurturing of a democratic environment, as it allows learners to feel they are 'equal' when they enter the formal educational arena. As such they feel that their home languages, their religions, their home environments, their home custom, are all equally important. Further, by learning from the diverse linguistic and cultural traditions ESL students present, substantial opportunities are created to develop socially competent communities responsive to issues of social justice. The next section elaborates on ESL students' experiences of academic writing in light of what they understood academic writing to mean.

4.2.2 Academic writing experiences and expectations

This section details ESL students' experiences of academic writing. Their ideas about what academics expect from their academic writing were compared and contrasted with what the academics themselves identified as necessary requirements for student writing at university.

4.2.2.1 ESL students' experiences of academic writing

Most ESL students who participated in the study seemed to experience difficulty with academic writing. In particular, they indicated that they find it difficult to understand the meaning of *academic language* and *academic style.* As explained above, ESL students make the distinction between the social/interactional use of language and the informational/transactional use of language, and disinguish academic writing from the writing they produced in high school. While at high school a creative, first person narrative

was acceptable, at university that style of writing is problematic. The students are aware that academic writing requires a certain style and is bounded by certain rules. This experience supports Angelil-Carter's (2000) view that academic literacy and writing is intimately related to disciplinary inquiry. In order to understand how to write within a specific discipline, the student has to embrace the rules, permissions and prohibitions of the academic writing required. ESL students in this study, however, expressed that they find it difficult to adjust to and apply the disciplinary rules of academic writing.

> *Psychology is the only course that I'm doing that has made me actually think theoretically, reading and applying theories in essay writing. Initially it was very hectic for me because we were told that it's a very different kind of writing, you don't write and use the type of writing like you used to in high school. So you have to adapt and to work on your writing. So I had to adapt to this new way of writing and some how I got it right!* (Extract from student focus, 22 September, 2004).

A number of ESL students in the study were optimistic about their academic writing. They saw an improvement from when they first entered university. They agreed that academic writing is difficult, but they practiced their writing in order to internalize the requirements for good academic writing. Perhaps it is through such individual essay writing practice that these students begin to apply the rules and styles of academic writing, which they would otherwise not apply.

> *At the beginning of the year it was different, I looked like I was a grade 12 child writing! My English was not that good, but now I see I'm getting somewhere. Maybe I'm not where they want me to be at this point in time but I'm working hard to get there* (Extract from student focus group, 5 October, 2004).

> *In my experience it hasn't been that difficult, basically you just have to lay a certain pattern to follow, understand what is required of you and practice* (Extract from student focus group, 19 October, 2004).

Unlike the optimism displayed by the students cited above, other ESL students expressed anxiety about their academic writing. It appears that their anxiety is tied to a lack of self-esteem, which in turn translates into poor academic writing:

> *I don't have those moments like it was easy! I'm always nervous to get my assignment back. There's always this thing that I'm not good enough...* (Extract from student focus group, 22 September, 2004).

Confidence and self-esteem emerged as important psychological factors impacting students' academic writing. ESL students in the current study found it difficult to share their writing experiences. They were overly critical of themselves and their academic writing generally, under-estimating their writing capabilities. Bouwer (in Eloff & Ebersohn, 2004) argues that an inadequate culture of literacy and/or learning in the home (frequently associated with a socio-economically disadvantaged environment) may inhibit confidence in writing and overall communicative development. The stress of generating and communicating knowledge and experiences in print, and the embarassment and fear of being evaluated for the written product, often impacts on the quality of academic writing:

> *I have this notion that I don't know...I'm not good in English. But most of the things are being done in English. So I don't know? That notion of not being good is already there even if I know I can improve* (Extract from student focus group, 7 October, 2004).

This finding confirms Moore's (1996) claims that ESL students in South Africa bring with them a history of educational deprivation that continues to result in educational under-preparedness. Related to this is the lack in necessary confidence and self-esteem that learners require to attain academic success. This finding also raises broader questions of educational democracy, alluded to by minister of education Asmal (1994) in Moore (1996), who calls for the recognition of all South African languages in fostering a democratic South Africa. It is evident that ESL learners do not feel that they enter the higher educational arena on the same footing as their English first language peers. Consequently, they do not feel that their home languages, their environments, and their customs are as important as having a good command of English for academic and other purposes.

Cummins (1994) draws the distinction between 'additive bilingualism', in which the first language continues to be developed and the first culture to be valued while the second language is added, and 'subtractive bilingualism', in which the second language is added at the expense of the first lanaguage and culture, which diminish as a consequence. Cummins (1994) quotes research that suggests students working in an additive bilinlingual environment succeed to a greater extent than those whose first language and culture are devalued. In order to foster an additive bilingual environment, ESL students need to appreciate that their culture and language are equally as valid and valued as the dominant culture and English language that dominates South African tertiary education.

A first step in validating bilingual students' mother tongue is to recognize that the attempt to eliminate their home language from the educational context is a blatant example of coercive relations of power, where power is exercised by a dominant individual, group or country to the detriment of a subordinated individual, group or country (Cummins, 1996; 1997; 2000). The 1976 uprising, in apartheid South Africa, was in direct protest against the enforcement of Afrikaans as the language of instruction in schools. This example illustrates the coercive relations of power exercised by the apartheid government to eliminate Black students' first languages from schools. After aparthied, much has been done to counteract the operation of coercive relations of power in the educational context. Coherent language policies have been developed to validate bilingual students' home languages across the curriculum and in all phases of instruction, although this is generally conducted in English due to the diversity of students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As such, the entire educational system has organized itself to communicate a strong positive message about the value of bilingual students' L1 and their endeavour to maintain fluency and literacy in more than one language.

In order to uplift their confidence and self-esteem in their attempt at fluency and literacy in English, ESL students have found solace in peer support. They indicated that they receive support from their peers who read their essays and make comments. This type of audience makes them feel more confident about their writing. However, it is questionable whether their ESL peers edit essays correctly, as they may also be struggling with the same ESL writing issues. As such, ESL peers may not necessarily be able to identify the problems in the essay in the same way that a first language speaker could, as the following quotation shows:

> *The older students help, even they cannot go over the whole essay. They just explain what they see is a problem, but you can't be sure if they are correct because one would say 'no it's like this' and the other would say 'no it's not' and we get confused!* (Extract from student focus group, 30 October, 2004).

The preceding section contrasts the academic writing experiences of ESL students with the academic writing expectations held by the academics who mark the written assignments.

4.2.2.2 Academics' writing expectations

On the subject of academics' writing expectations, Street (in Turner & Street, 1999) argues that academics need to make more explicit the process of academic writing and what is

expected from students in a way that students actually understand. In so doing it also has to be taken into consideration that writing is in itself a subjective process that, to a large extent, undergoes subjective assessment. In other words, different markers reward different aspects of the writing. While some academics' expectations are *structural*, others mark for *content.* Therefore, students in general have to understand that it is not uncommon to receive differing marks from different lecturers. Such subjectivity does, however, become problematic when there is inconsistency in student marks. Nonetheless, the chances of large discrepancies in students' marks ocurring is often minimal, in that a lenghty process of 'moderation' often occurs where lecturers have a chance to critique each others marking. Through this process of deliberation, students' academic writing is debated, contested and scrutinized, so as to award the most suitable mark for the assignment.

In this study, academics felt that they were explicit about what they expected from student writing. They did this by making a distinction between the *structural* expectations of the essay and the *content* that the student needs to be familiar with in order to produce a good piece of academic writing:

> *Use of correct language and basic grammar…these are basic structural expectations that for me are really important. In terms of content, we expect them to do their homework, do the research, give their own interpretations…you always have that division between structure and content* (Extract from interview with academic, 18 October, 2004).

The distinction made by the academics can be explained in terms of Cummins' (1984, 2003) distinction between surface fluency and conceptual-linguistic language. Academics seem to be emphasizing ability in both the linguistic and cognitive domains. In the former, the student is expected to fulfill the linguistic demands of grammar, vocabulary and so forth. In the latter, the student needs to engage in cognitive processing at the simplest level (knowledge, comprehension, application) to the most complex (analysis, synthesis, evaluation) (Bloom, 1956).

Some academics in the current study cited the importance of conceptual-lingusitic thought over surface fluency. Carter and Nash (1990, in Turner & Street, 1999) agree that in many courses there is a tendency to look past language to the more important ideas or content that a text contains. These academics in Psychology seem to focus on the value of language analysis for deeper interpretative insight. They emphasized that it is more important that the

student is able to understand, interpret and deliver psychological content than it is to do so in flawless language. Students need to appreciate writing as the skill one utilizes to show the understanding of the theory within a specific academic field:

> *I mark first for content, because for students it's important for me that they have learnt the content matter. If this was a course in English, I would be more strict and I would look specifically at the quality of language, but it's not. I think here it is important to know the content first before refining their language technique and to be over critical of what students have written. In a way I tell them why I have certain expectations, not for this essay alone, but for writing on the whole. I try to make it clear that it's not just a matter of academic reading and writing within specific fields, but it's practice in eventually being able to develop a skill. You develop a feel for what information is applicable to the field and how you can use that information and put it across to the reader* (Extract from interview with academic, 15 October, 2004).

Academics in the study also explained that they do not expect students to know exactly how to engage in academic writing without experience. They recognized that students are new to this form of writing, and in many cases to the practice of writing on the whole. Even though they may understand the theory they often struggle to present it clearly and coherently. This lack of *clarity*, according to academics, accounts for poor academic writing:

> *Obviously you can't expect and I certainly don't have the expectation that students must know how and understand academic writing without having done it before. For me the single most significant thing is 'clarity'. For me very often that's the problem, they have the idea but they are unable to express it clearly and coherently* (Extract from interview with academic, 19 October, 2004).

The academics in this study further explained that *critical analysis* is an important skill for students to develop in order to write good academic essays:

> *The skill of critical analysis is imperative. To be able to criticize somebody else's work and to be able to put it back into an acceptable language form, that is critical at an academic level. So students basically have to be critical, make it their own work and be able to give it back* (Extract from interview with academic, 15 October, 2004).

According to Cummins (1984, 2003, 2004), engagement in deeper levels of cognitive processing, such as critical analysis, also requires a reasonable amount of CALP. Interestingly, the ESL students who participated in this study did not identify critical analysis as an important skill for academic writing. As a result, they did not appear to realize that being critical in their thinking and writing is a significant academic writing expectation. This

may partly explain why their academic writing does not transcend surface levels of cognitive and linguistic proficiency.

> *I get essays from ESL students who have good understanding and comprehension but they are not able to go beyond that, they haven't been able to tackle the whole content area 'critically'. They aren't able to critically discuss any topic. They excel at descriptive essays. All our essays require critical analysis and evaluation…but there's not that required level of critical engagement. This is actually where the bulk of the first year essays are, 'descriptive essays'* (Extract from interview with academic, 18 October, 2004).

This experience illustrates that the ESL students in this study are generally unable to meet higher order cognitive and linguistic expectations, possibly because they are still internalising issues of content and structure. Although ESL students may show cognitive ability at a surface level they seem to struggle with more complex cognitive processing. Thus, to expect students to review information *critically*, and to engage in complex cognition, is problematic when they are still grappling with the basic understanding and comprehension of content. As a result, academics have begun asking themselves what are reasonable expectations of students' academic writing:

> *The writing should reflect, even if it's not critical, on the theory and quite importantly show some understanding of the content. What I've discovered is that very often we demand a critical response, critical acclaim, a coherent argument which very often cannot be met because students are still dealing with understanding the content. So in principle they cannot engage with the content in a critical way because in fact they don't understand the content itself. This has got us asking what kinds of demands are reasonable to expect from students. How reasonable is it to ask them to critically engage when they still struggling with the content?* (Extract from interview with academic, 19 October, 2004).

With regard to academics' expectations of their academic writing, ESL students in this study expressed uncertainty as to what is expected of them, claiming that sometimes they do not understand exactly what academics require from them. ESL students attribute this uncertainty to differing expectations from lecturers. It seems that what some lecturers want from their essay writing may be very different from the requirements of others:

> *I don't know…you look at different lecturers and it seems as if different lecturers want different ways of writing and it feels as if you can't always meet what that particular lecturer wants* (Extract from student focus groups, 15 October, 2004).

This finding suggests that there is a level of misconception between ESL students and academics in terms of what is expected in academic writing, and confirms Lea and Street's (1999) contention that conflict and miscommunication around academic writing often occurs between students and academics. It is argued that at university, students are exposed to a new genre (Cope & Kalantzis, 1993), which has considerable power in the institution of the university and students need to learn to use it just as they learnt how to develop other genres in other contexts, for example, for high school essays, personal writing and business letters and so forth. However, it is evident that the process of acquiring the necessary academic skills for academic writing requires further explication for students.

This section investigated what academics' expectations are of students' written work. ESL students in the present study pointed out that what academics cite as the necessary criteria for good academic writing seem to be problematic areas for them. These problem areas are explored in more detail in the next section.

4.2.3 Major writing difficulties facing ESL students

This discussion focuses on academic expectations that were identified by ESL students as major areas of difficulty. It was found that ESL students experience problems with understanding and interpreting the topic; structuring the essay; referencing, plagiarism and paraphrasing; language and translation; academic writing and reading; academic writing practice and time-management. Each of these problems will be elaborated upon.

4.2.3.1 Understanding and interpreting the topic

The ESL students in the current study were aware of the focus academics place on understanding the topic of an essay. They knew that they are expected to understand the topic before attempting to write the assignment, and commented:

> *You must make sure you understand the topic first and then try to answer the question as clearly as possible* (Extract from student focus group, 7 October, 2004).

However, ESL students also expressed that many of them are challenged with interpreting the topic correctly. This results in writing off the topic and not answering the essay question. The

students explained that it is often difficult to interpret the topic when the task language is complex:

> *The problem lies with the question, I can't interpret a question correctly! So sometimes I can read, I can write the answer but I find that I failed, in fact I never answered the question!* (Extract from student focus group, 7 October, 2004).

> *I'm not happy, I can do better, but when I go back to my lecturers, they say 'No, well, that's not what I wanted!' Then when I look at the question again I think what did she want? In the meantime I had a different idea of what she wanted. Maybe the language she used in the question was a problem* (Extract from student focus group, 7 October, 2004).

This finding may be explained in terms of Cummins' (1980a; 1981a; 1984) postulation that understanding the essay topic is directly related to contextual support. Understanding and interpreting an essay topic correctly would be classified as a task that is cognitively demanding and that requires context-reduced communication, in which students rely mostly on linguistic cues for meaning. To interpret the essay question correctly, ESL students need to have sufficient knowledge of the task language itself because the context does not provide enough meaning to assist in the interpretation. As such, it could be argued that the ESL students struggle because they do not possesses the necessary level of linguistic ability to engage in the cognitively demanding, context-reduced task of understanding and interpreting the essay topic. Furthermore, insufficient linguistic and cognitive ability impacts on the general structuring of assignments.

4.2.3.2 Structuring the essay

Academics in this study stressed that the structural requirements of essays are detailed in lectures, compulsory tutorials, academic development (AD) tutorials and hand-outs. Despite this, they find that students do not seem to take heed of these requirements:

> *We make our expectations clear in the first two lectures and tutorials on essay writing in Psychology. That's where we orientate them into the structural requirements of first year essays. So they get a lot of lessons on essay writing in Psychology. Our guideline to essay writing is about ten pages, but I don't know if students actually read it* (Extract from interview with academic, 18 October, 2004).

> *We have introductory lectures and tutorials with handouts that make departmental expectations clear to students. I personally ask students in my tutorials 'what are your expectations of the course?' I try to demystify the learning process. I try to integrate their*

expectations into my lesson plan (Extract from interview with academic, 19 October, 2004).

4.2.3.2.1 Lack of creativity of expression

When students do abide by departmental requirements, it appears that they do so inflexibly and unoriginally. They write within the prescribed limits and boundaries drawn up by the department, and few care to venture beyond these set criteria. ESL students in this study confirmed that the formula for a coherent essay is an introduction, body and conclusion:

> *We have a model and frame of essay writing that is suggested to students and I believe that very often that is the level at which people think and remain when it comes to writing* (Extract from interview with academic, 19 October, 2004).

4.2.3.2.2 Lack of integration

It is possible that students remain within the confines of the prescribed models and examples of structuring essays in the manner stipulated by the department because structuring essays require a selection of content from a range of sources. Once the student has selected the relevant information he/she has to show that the content has been understood. In order to do this the student has to develop arguments and make claims for and against certain assertions, providing justification at each point in the overall argument. Arguably, students resort to a linear fashion of introduction, body and conclusion, with each succeeding paragraph answering a particular aspect of the question because of difficulties not only with selecting appropriate material, but also with displaying a deeper understanding of the debates in the field and the consequent knowledge claims being made.

Thus, students show signs of integration when they are able to select information from texts, interpret it and formulate arguments. An inability to integrate content appears to indicate that a student's cognitive ability is at a surface level, where they comprehend the basic meaning of concepts without synthesizing different material to form an argument. Such students have not developed sufficient CALP to engage in deeper level cognitive tasks, such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation, and are unable to conceptualize the content that they read.

I think their biggest problem is integrating information from different sources. In the body, they give a paragraph about this and a paragraph about that, without any link between them, because they haven't understood how to. I encourage students to take the information and give it back to me when they have understood it and are able to put it into their own words. I say to them, 'Make it your own words and then make it a concept which is your own'. It seems to me they take a piece of writing to answer a specific part of the question. Then the next paragraph will answer another part of the question from another reading (Extract from interview with academic, 15 October, 2004).

ESL students' difficulties with integration seem to result in poor expression and academic writing that does not seem to be 'thought through' well enough. As such, what has been found is that ESL students often display a general 'lack of logic and coherence' in communicating the content of the subject.

4.2.3.2.3 Lack of logic and coherence

ESL students in the current study were aware of the value academics place on logic and coherence in structuring assignments, but they confessed that they are not always clear on what is meant by 'logic and coherence'. Despite their confusion, they offered the explanation that ideas are linked coherently to each other when they flow from one to the other in logical progression. When ideas are incorporated in this way, the writing is coherent and easier for the marker to read:

There should always be logic in whatever you are writing. There must be flow from one paragraph to another, from one idea, to another to make it logical.

When your essay has flow it is also easier for the other person to understand. The essay makes sense! (Extracts from student focus group, 23 September, 2004).

The academics in the study agreed that a good academic essay has a logical, clear and coherent structure where arguments illustrate an understanding of the theory:

A good academic piece is logical and coherent. What the student is writing is clear and understandable. It is concise. When I say concise I do not mean a summary of the textbook, but rather the use of information in a well integrated way, essentially well paraphrased and referenced. There is a clear reflection of the understanding that the student has of the theory. Relevant examples from the textbook or real life are given. It's clear that the sentences flow, the paragraphs are structured and consistent showing the progression of ideas (Extract from interview with academic, 18 October, 2004).

The issue of logic and coherence may be illustrated in terms of the level of active cognitive involvement as seen along the vertical continuum of Figure D. This level of cognitive involvement, according to Cummins (1984), is determined by the amount of cognitive effort required to organize specific information into a coherent piece of discourse. When academics expect essays that are logical and coherent in structure, they are requiring that the student engage in a cognitively demanding communicative task. Making a mind-map of separate ideas would be less cognitively demanding than combining ideas into a logical and coherent essay. Cognitively demanding tasks call for the ESL student to engage in active cognitive involvement, because the communicative tools have not been automated. Once the ESL student has obtained sufficient mastery of the language skills to enable easy communication, the task becomes cognitively undemanding.

4.2.3.2.4 Essay feedback

The issue of essay feedback arose in most discussions of 'logic and coherence'. The ESL students in this study found that in their essay feedback, academics highlight inconsistencies in the flow of the argument, logic and coherence. However, the ESL students in this study were of the opinion that they are unsure of 'how' to correct errors of logic and coherence and when they are asked for 'further clarity' they do not know how to explain themselves more clearly:

> *Comments have to be clear because a person just says 'you are unclear', but really explain how was I unclear?* (Extract from student focus group, 23 September, 2004).

Some ESL students also expressed the view that they find feedback in the form of 'single comments' problematic, as they are unsure exactly what is correct and what needs to be changed. Moreover, when ESL students seek further elaboration on where they went wrong, they struggle to articulate their concerns given that they did not understand how to correct their mistakes. This finding confirms that of Turner (in Street & Turner, 1999), who reasons that comments such as 'you do not focus your ideas clearly enough', 'pay more attention to structure', and 'this is illogical', underspecify what is actually expected in student academic writing. Injunctions to tighten the structure or express the argument more clearly and coherently are often a source of confusion to ESL students, who believe they have expressed themselves as clearly as they could. Turner (in Street & Turner, 1999) stresses that notions of

argument and structure need to be explicated more thoroughly, since they play an integral role in the assessment procedures of higher education, and demonstrate a critical awareness of the evolution of academic writing in a specified intellectual and cultural tradition.

Academics in this study felt that they provide students with comprehesive academic guidance in the way that they give essay feedback. In Psychology, detailed feedback evaluation worksheets are used to assesses academic essays. The evaluation worksheets indicate performance at the level of both structure and content. This means that once students receive their essays they are able to see exactly where they performed well or otherwise. All comments made in the body of the essay are therefore substantiated by the feedback in the evaluation worksheet.

It can also be argued that the issue of 'single comments' may not necessarily be attributed to a lack of comprehensive academic guidance on the part of the academics. Instead, it is possible that essay feedback in the form of single comments may even be cognitively too demanding for ESL students, who require further context-embeddedness to understand the essay feedback and consequently where and how they went wrong in their essays. Indeed, essay feedback emerged as an integral factor in the discussion of logic and coherence. It was found that structuring the argument in a logical and coherent manner thus requires not only the superficial knowledge of ordering information, but also deeper aspects of integration and coherence which are better achieved through understanding the content and referencing it correctly.

4.2.3.3 Referencing, plagiarism and paraphrasing

The subject of referencing was one of contention amongst ESL students in the existing study, the results of which show that there are conflicting understandings amongst ESL students about its role. There are those who understood that everything has to be referenced in an essay, a finding in line with Angelil-Carter's (2000) observations that an overwhelming number of students understand referencing to be a display of the coverage of the readings in a course. These students understand that the role of referencing is to demonstrate to the marker that they have read and how much they have read, as well as to acknowledge the ideas of those they have read. The impression appears to be that the more they reference the better their marks will be. Hence, a lack of referencing results in a loss of marks. Penalizing

students for not referencing may compel them to reference correctly, but it is debatable whether penalization helps them to understand the role of referencing in academia:

> *At first students don't see why they need to reference. We explain the significance of referencing and they get bored while we were go through the guidelines. I even warned them in tutorials 'If you don't reference properly it's minus five percent', but the only time they actually realize it is when they get their essays back and see they actually got minus five percent. Now they realize 'Wow, I must reference properly' They realize through experience that if they reference correctly they won't be penalized* (Extract from interview with academic, 20 October, 2004).

On the other hand, there were also students in the study who expressed confusion about how to integrate both personal experience and referencing. They argued that personal opinions are not acceptable unless they are supported by referenced material. They explained that how they understand what they have learnt seems to be less important than referencing the authors. In this way, referencing becomes problematic since students are uncertain about how to write an academic piece without referencing everything and without including their own opinions. On the subject of writing and learning, Vygotsky (1989) stressed that by relating new knowledge to existing frameworks, the learner is using established knowledge to organize and make sense of the new. In a sense, writing can be seen as representing a unique mode of learning in which learners need to bring together old and new knowledge (Emig, 1977). Angelil-Carter (2000), on this point, emphasizes that by acknowledging the incorporation of the student's own ideas, in their own words, students are encouraged to think and present their ideas originally and are discouraged from 'parroting' sources, even if they are referenced. In other words, it is important that students learn to present their ideas in acceptable academic language, incorporating relevant references to support their assertions.

In their evaluation of students' academic writing, academics in this study found it distressing that students in general, even after extensive guidance, still displayed difficulty referencing correctly. In addition, students also struggled to understand the importance of referencing correctly:

> *I found it very strange that even though handouts were given and explanations were provided, how few students internalized the importance of acknowledging sources, it was so poorly done you wonder if they understood the idea of referencing sources at all* (Extract from interview with academic, 19 October, 2004).

In their attempt to understand why students at large find it so difficult to acknowledge sources, some academics argued that writing from multiple sources, in addition to referencing, is an activity with which most first year students have had limited or no experience. This means the ESL students in this study, like all first year students, have had little to no experience of working with an academic text, drawing out ideas and putting it into their own words. As such, the genres of academic disciplines are foreign to the entering first year student. Students simply do not know how to write appropriate academic essays because they have not been taught the forms or the functions of this genre. Moreover, the prior literacy practices of many students do not support the discourses of tertiary institutions (Angelil-Carter, 2000). Students from the South African secondary educational context are more likely to have experience of writing personal accounts than of writing argumentative essays. This may create a difficulty in understanding the university as a community, with a specific set of practices. Students have still to appreciate the language of this community and the medium of communication set by the members of the community (Kress, 1985). It is believed that once students can come to terms with the community's expectations, they will begin to internalize notions of theory, engage in varied expression of ideas, and show a proper acknowledgement of sources. Academics in the study commented on language in the community of practice of the university in the following way:

> *At some level, the notion of higher degree study has to be understood. As we said, when you become part of a community you need to communicate in a certain way and I believe that is something we really need to work on. That is to make students aware that they have become part of a community with a very particular practice. That we have an idea of a community of practice and that a lot of these practices you kind of pick up in a sense by being part of this community. The language of practice and the specific use of language can be seen as part of the community. So you need to begin to internalise a way of writing, a way of expressing your ideas and acknowledging sources, but this unfortunately is not sufficiently emphasized to others who enter the community* (Extract from interview with academic, 19 October, 2004).

The manner in which ESL students in this study approach their academic writing seems to indicate that they are only beginning to engage with the entire process of academic writing. It can therefore be argued that these ESL students still have to come to understand academic writing at university as a distinct practice, governed by particular principles and operationalized in a particular form, using particular language.

In order to achieve this outcome, Cope and Kalantzis (1993) and Kress (1985) make a plea for the explicit teaching of powerful written genres, such as the academic essay. Angelil-Carter (2000) agrees that in order to present the genre explicitly those who teach it need to be explicit about their understanding of how the genre operates, its rules and systems. One of the most important rules of the genre is *plagiarism,* which is evident in academic writing in various ways. When quotations are strung together with little integration, it suggests to the marker that the student has plagiarized. At other times, the author's words are used directly without quotation marks:

> *…If they use information without referencing it, like they don't add the inverted commas I do make a comment like 'I don't think this is your own idea?' Sometimes we don't have enough proof to say someone has plagiarized, but when you read some essays you can immediately detect plagiarism especially from the texts you know* (Extract from interview with academic, 21 October, 2004).

There are also instances when ESL students use others' ideas without referencing them. Some students appear to believe that only the words that are taken directly from the text have to be referenced while ideas belonging to others can be used as your own:

> *Students are under the impression that 'if it's my words, I'm not making a direct quotation then I don't need to reference'. They can't see the difference between common sense and the key ideas. If they think it's common sense statements that they're making they don't need to look for it in the text nor do they have to reference it. You have to teach students that regardless of it being your words this is not your idea and you have to reference it. I've stressed it over and over again to change it from what that person says to you own understanding of it. An ability to take information and put it into your own words, I think students don't have the ability to do this* (Extract from interview with academic, 15 October, 2004).

It is evident that the ESL students in this study were unable to differentiate between what requires referencing and what does not. They either made the mistake of referencing everything religiously or not referencing words and ideas belonging to other authors. These students claimed that the problem lies, as explained above, with structuring and selecting information from readings. When they select necessary information from books and articles, these ESL students do not seem to know how to present it understandably in their own words.

It was a concern amongst some academics in the study that students are given so much information that if they fail to develop the skill to select and integrate it at an early stage, they

tend to become overwhelmed by an 'information overload', which in turn does not help with structuring and organization.

The ESL students in this study further reported that when they paraphrase they are often accused of plagiarism. ESL students paraphrase by changing the authors' words so that they are not the exact ones, but express the intended idea:

> *I also paraphrase a lot. I take the authors quote and juggle it around and play around with it to get my own understanding. Then you have to reference it to show where you got the idea* (Extract from student focus group, 7 October, 2004).

On many occasions these students also found that they seem to be changing a few words, but that the quotation is essentially the same. In the process of changing words around, the meaning may also be lost. Consequently, some ESL students in the study suggested that it is better to quote the author directly and then to reflect on that quotation, so as to show one's understanding of what is being said. This distinction between paraphrasing and plagiarizing is something that academics believe ESL students struggle to conceptualize and follow through in their academic writing practices:

> *Students don't recognize that it's not just stealing an idea, but if you take someone else's words as long as you reference it and give the page numbers you can give the impression that you understand the theory and that you have actually made your own claims of what was being asked. In their minds merely paraphrasing is sufficient to constitute understanding. They don't recognize the idea of stealing words, which are not their own* (Extract from interview with academic, 19 October, 2004).

4.2.3.4 Language and translation

It is contended that ESL students' difficulty with paraphrasing may be attributed to insufficient language proficiency, in that paraphrasing is closely related to having a good grasp of language. However, the correct use of language for academic purposes is new to all students entering university. According to Cummins (1984), first language speakers may find it easier to engage in academic writing as they have sufficient CALP to do so. ESL students may lack CALP, which however, over time they may come to develop. ESL students seem to be 'stuck in translation'. They reported that it is difficult to express themselves when they have to translate ideas from L1 to L2:

When you have to translate your thinking into English, you are not able to express your feelings in the same way that you are able to in your own language (Extract from student focus group, 23 September, 2004).

I think it's difficult and I struggle to put my thoughts into English...to express my thoughts like a first language English speaker (Extract from student focus group, 7 October, 2004).

The fact that there has to be active translation across languages implies that the common underlying proficiency between L1 and L2 is underdeveloped, negatively effecting cognitive functioning and academic performance, as explained in the literature review (Cummins, 1978; 1980a; 1981a; 1984; 1989; 1991; 1994; 1996; 1997; 2000; 2001; 2003; 2004).

At times, ESL students struggle to find the corresponding vocabulary in English. They say that there are words in the vernacular for which there is no explanation in English. On other occasions they explain that they are faced with task words that give different instructions in English but which share a common meaning in their mother tongue:

There are some words in English that mean the same thing to us, for example, if you tell me 'explain what Psychology means' and 'describe what Psychology means' I'll give you the same answer because in my language 'explain and describe' mean the same thing (Extract from student focus group, 23 September, 2004).

This finding confirms Mascher's (1991) claim that in the South African context, L2 is a language non-cognate to the ESL learner's first language. This means that often L1 and L2 for the ESL student are historically and culturally different, with dissimilar grammar and vocabulary usage. ESL students may be faced with the dual task of learning through the non-cognate language and learning the non-cognate language itself. As a result, ESL students become confused about the meaning of an idea in L2 as compared to when they translate it into L1. In order to become familiar with the vocabulary and grammar of the non-cognate language, ESL students will have to read more, in both L1 and L2, as writing is closely associated with reading. According to Cummins (1991, 2004), conceptual language developed in one language helps to make input in the other language comprehensible. If the student already understands the concept of 'justice' or 'honesty' in L1, all they have to do is acquire the label for these terms in English. The task is far more difficult if both the label and the concept have to be acquired in the second language. Hence, first language development needs to be encouraged through reading extensively in students' native language.

4.2.3.5 Academic writing and reading

It needs to be understood that reading is part of the learning process, in the same way that writing is. In order to get to read and understand more complex academic texts, ESL students in the study, found that they have to read widely in general. This means reading simple texts such as magazines, newspapers and novels. Such non-academic reading is cognitively undemanding and context-embedded, and acts as a means of developing survival vocabulary:

> *Reading is just the same as learning, it's an ongoing process also. You just can't learn and that's it...you have to learn everyday, you have to read everyday. And reading academic stuff is not like reading a magazine, because you have to have an understanding of everything you are reading. Like you read a paragraph, from that paragraph you have to know what the paragraph was all about...and be able to summarize it. If I'm reading an article in a magazine I don't have to summarize it, it says everything I want to know.*

> *Yes, we don't practice our simple English. There is no time to read a magazine, no time to read a book, but you have to read the course readers...sometimes we need to first practice simple words to get to understand bigger words...*(Extracts from student focus group, 23 September, 2004).

> *We have to improve our language in order to write better, and to do this we have to read more* (Extract from student focus group, 7 October, 2004).

Hence, reading and writing can be considered to be two skills that are inter-dependent and cannot be easily separated from each other. Through reading the learner is in the process of building language by incorporating new words and new sentence structures into existing schemes. It is imperative that students apply new learnt vocabulary in writing so that it is steadily integrated into their network of vocabulary for essays.

Despite the emphasis placed on the value of reading for writing, some academics claimed that students do not read enough. Academics suggested that reading and writing groups could be created to encourage the development of these skills. In this way reading and writing would be further integrated into the process of learning. In addition, it was suggested that in order to encourage students to read more, reading skills could be incorporated into AD tutorials so that students have an opportunity to practice their reading. In this way, academics believe that students' cognition may improve:

I think reading is essential. I mean I'm a second language speaker myself. You get handouts and readings and you have to read them...AD for the next year should work at the level of getting students to read more and then explain to them what they didn't understand. More like a top down process. If we actually encourage reading we'd be more involved in their thinking process and we can give them feedback (Extract from interview with academic, 18 October, 2004).

4.2.3.6 Academic writing practice and time-management

The ESL students in the study associated both reading and academic writing with practice. They felt that in the same way they needed to practice their reading they also needed to practice their academic writing. This finding is in line with Cummins' observation that academic writing is a skill that develops over time and with experience. It is also believed that short essay exercises practiced in tutorials could better prepare students to write major essays. Hence, when they are eventually faced with major essays they would not have to deal with the anxiety of writing an entire essay. On this point the ESL students commented in the following way:

I think we need to really practice more exercises, sort of short essays during the tutorials, so that we can get used to this writing, then when you write an essay you don't panic you are just faced with the topic to think of, not the whole idea of an essay. They shouldn't give us one-word questions, they should give us more short essays so that we get used to it. When I have a major essay I don't have a problem...because by then I am used to writing essays (Extract from student focus group, 23 September, 2004)

By constantly practicing their academic writing, ESL students are more likely to gain experience, and it is through this experience that they can correct their errors and work on the suggestions made for improving their academic writing:

I think it comes with experience, because it's only now have we learnt what is expected of us and only now can we apply what we know. So I think it comes with experience. As time goes we can learn more from the mistakes we make. After three or four essays I think it will come about. That's if you learn from the mistakes that were highlighted and the comments that were made in the essay. I think then it's up to us (Extract from student focus group, 22 September, 2004)

According to the academics in the study, essay-writing practice, however, requires students to manage their time better so that they spend enough time revising their essays before submitting it for evaluation. However, academics have found that students overall spend little time on their essay writing practice. The academics in this context believe that devoting time

to the construction of essays may improve students' marks, irrespective of whether the subject content is difficult to understand. Notwithstanding their support structures, the ESL students in this study admit that they do not find the time to devote to developing their essay writing. They are aware of the importance of reading, writing, researching, organizing and planning their academic writing, however, they confess that they fail to put these strategies into practice in order to achieve the marks they desire, and to attain overall academic success at university:

The thing is time-management, like if we are given an assignment we got to start immediately when we are given the topic, but we wait until the time is gone, then we are pressurized and we make a lot of mistakes!

I think if you have an essay to write you must make the time to plan and think and research. Write a first draft, because some tutors allow you to write a first draft and to give it to him/her to correct (Extracts from student focus group, 30 September, 2004).

The academics in the study were of the opinion that the ESL students, like all students at university, seem to perceive writing as distinct from learning. This they claimed is evident in the time allocated to writing. The academics argued that ESL students appear to leave the writing for last, not realizing that writing is in fact the culmination of all previously unarticulated thought. This means that the sooner students learn to see writing as a unique mode of learning (Emig, 1977), a synergy of old and new knowledge, the quicker they will come to appreciate writing as an expression of how they have understood and corroborated knowledge, old and new.

In this section, the focus was on those areas the ESL students who participated in the study identified as being problematic for them, namely understanding and interpreting the topic; structuring the essay; referencing, plagiarism and paraphrasing; language and translation; academic writing and reading, academic writing practice and time-management. The ensuing discussion explores the nature and availability of the support ESL students receive to assist them with these academic writing difficulties.

4.2.4 Academic writing support

This section examines those factors that ESL students identified as supporting their academic writing at university. They point towards the value of compulsory tutorials, the Academic Development Program (ADP) and the University's Writing Centre.

4.2.4.1 Compulsory tutorials and Academic Development (AD) tutorials

The ESL students in this study were of the opinion that compulsory tutorials help them at the level of content more than structure. Compulsory tutorials help them to understand the theory, but they pointed out that they should also include more writing practice:

> *I feel the tutorial groups help a lot with Psychology, we can discuss and get more advice on our essays* (Extract from student focus group, 5 October, 2004).

> *They need to make us write more for compulsory tutorials. Like where you actually have to go home and research and write* (Extract from student focus group, 15 October, 2004)**.**

ESL students felt that, unlike compulsory tutorials, Academic Development (AD) tutorials engage students at more than one level. The general consensus amongst ESL students in this study was that AD tutorials are useful for learning theory and also assist with structuring their essays:

> *Yes, sometimes I wish we could have the ADP tutors for the main tutorials. They are able to put the message across to us* (Extract from student focus group, 7 October, 2004).

> *The AD tutorials also helped me with structuring of the essay* (Extract from student focus group, 30 October, 2004).

Some academics have found that AD tutorials are useful in getting ESL students to interact as well as engage with content. ESL students seem to feel more confident to share their ideas in an AD class than in mainstream tutorials. They are also more comfortable to ask for explanations. This observation seems to illustrate that students in AD tutorials are using BICS to deepen their level of cognitive and linguistic proficiency in a non-threatening environment with similar peers. Discussing academic issues in a context-embedded, cognitively less demanding space, seems to help ESL students to develop the necessary CALP for more decontextualized academic tasks:

> *In the AD classes there is more contact and group work, more interaction and participation with the information. Some ESL students need this kind of sounding board to say 'I don't really understand this' or 'I can't phrase this' or 'Can I say this as well?' or 'I got feedback but I don't know how to interpret it'. In the AD tutorials you can see that students will come forward whereas they don't have the confidence to come forward elsewhere* (Extract from interview with academic, 15 October, 2004)**.**

At the same time there was some dissonance between the ESL students valuing AD tutorials and negative perceptions associated with AD. There were ESL students in this study who perceived that support structures such as AD tutorials are perpetuators of labels. According to these students, the label 'AD' tends to make them feel that they are unable to transcend their *English Second Language* category, and that having English as a second language automatically translates into needing support to be successful in academia. In fact, the support structures that are meant to develop students' academic development cause embarrassment to ESL students. Being labelled as needing AD serves to decrease ESL students' confidence and self-esteem, which are particularly necessary for thinking, learning and, eventually, writing.

There were academics in the study who also had a less positive view of AD tutorials in 2004, arguing that AD tutorials encourage students to be passive recipients of information rather than attempting to participate in discussions and group work. AD tutorials in previous years were openly directed towards ESL students and, as explained above, it was felt that this approach labels ESL students as needing extra help, thus causing them undue embarrassment. Subsequently, AD turorials were advertised for all students to attend, but even under these conditions, those who chose to attend AD tutorials seemed unwilling to engage:

> *This year students are passive. They come to the AD tutorials, sit down and expect the tutor to tell them what to do instead of engaging with the issues themselves. Last year we actually went to lectures and said 'If you're a second language student come to AD!' Consequently, we felt that we were targeting those students and causing them embarrassment, like automatically if you're an ESL student you need help. So we thought this year lets say 'Here's AD, this is what we do, if you're interested come along' but the numbers are still low. I mean in my tutorial I only have two ESL students. Usually AD tutorials are a place where students can voice their opinions regardless of how stupid it may seem. But these students just remain passive and un-cooperative* (Extract from interview with academic, 18 October, 2004).

Some ESL students seemed to have the attitude that in AD tutorials information will be transmitted to them with the least amount of effort on their part. Their expectations are that tutors provide them with the necessary information that will assist them to pass the exam. It may be that students need to be re-educated about the function of AD since they do not perceive AD as a forum in which much discussion, participation and involvement in academic issues occur as an opportunity for students to develop the cognitive and linguistic skills necessary for academic success:

We found that students come to AD tutorials with expectations of being 'spoon-fed'. They come in sit down, and take out their writing pads and they demand you teach the content. When in academia, AD tutorials are meant to be discussion groups, engagement with psychological issues, working through past papers, all kinds of activities for them to participate in. Students claim AD causes them to pass. So they insist on, for example, exam preparation AD tutorials. At some level there's a misunderstanding of the exact function of AD (Extract from interview with academic, 19 October, 2004).

This finding appears to indicate that the concept of AD needs to be explained to first year students in a way that they come to realize the usefulness of AD in their development as students in Psychology as well as students writers at the university (Angelil-Carter, 1993). Arguably, AD needs to be understood as a forum by which students can improve both their cognitive and linguistic proficiency in a less cognitively demanding, more context-embedded environment, to which they would otherwise not have been exposed. In addition to AD, the University's Writing Centre seems to be the next non-threatening space for the development of students' academic writing.

4.2.4.2 The Writing Centre

North (1984, p.441) describes the writing centre as "part of the rhetorical context in which the writer is trying to operate". Leibowitz and Parkerson (1994, p.2) argue that writing centres should challenge the notion that "students should arrive at university already armed with such (writing) skills from their schooling, or they acquire them through osmosis". According to Murphy (1995, p.117), writing centres are "constructs of the postmodern world, …reflecting the educational philosophies and socio-political currents shaping society". Writing centres can, therefore, be viewed as constructs emerging from conflicting and competing ideologies and the educational orientations associated with them.

According to Murphy (1995, p.118), "the conservative, liberal and radical debate over education has produced a rich matrix to which writing centre practice has responded". The writing centre is deemed successful from the conservative perspective when it contributes to the removal of surface and structural errors in student writing and develops 'critical thinking'. For conservatives, behavioral objectives and skill-acquisition is the backbone of writing centres, which ought to enforce hegemony of educational standards and objectives (Murphy, 1995).

The liberal perspective values education as a tool for personal enrichment and empowerment. For liberals, writing centres are ideal contexts for dialogic exchanges, and through modeling and apprenticeship teach the craft of writing. The liberal model emphasizes the uniqueness of the student in the writing process. The radical perspective also makes use of a liberation paradigm, seeing education in microcosmic terms as serving the interests of the ruling class, and so the perspective calls for a critique against oppressive forces. Radicals value multiple literacies rather than enforcing single interpretations of literacy. Murphy (1995) conceptualizes the radical perspective as arguing for a position of counter-hegemony.

The conservative, liberal and radical perspectives clearly illustrate opposing views of the purpose of knowledge within a culture. Murphy (1995) claims that the conservative model espouses objectivity, while the liberal and radical perspectives, on the other hand, impose an interpretative hermeneutic which rejects the positivistic implications of conservatism. All three perspectives raise the question of the position of the writing centre, asking what space it occupies between discipline, academic department and student writer. Zamel (1993, p.1) argues that:

> because it appears to require a kind of language with its own vocabulary, norms, sets of conventions, and modes of inquiry, academic discourse has come to be characterized as a separate culture, one within which each discipline may represent a separate cultural community.

According to Zamel (1993), it is from this sense of a separate culture that the terms 'discourse' or 'interpretative community' arises. The pedagogical implication of this conceptualization is that new students entering the community of the university have to act as members of the community by doing the disciplines more than by knowing the languages (Elbow, 1991 in Zamel, 1993). Teaching students the conventions of academic writing at university may mask true understanding. The writing centre serves as an essential social dimension that help students go beyond acquiring the discipline-specific language and conventions of a discourse. Resnick (1987, cited in Flynn, 1993) claims that that the social setting of the writing consultation provides an opportunity for modeling for the inexperienced writer. The experienced writer listens to the student and helps him/her develop their current understanding of how to write at university. The student writer is given the chance to think out loud and to venture into the realms of critical thinking.

Writing centres are social contexts where students have the chance to engage and argue with university discourses in an effort to make writing central to learning at university. The assumption is that writing is the by-product of many-layered, cognitive processes that can be intervened through conversation and made central to the construction of knowledge within or across disciplines. In essence, writing centres aim to stimulate independent learning and critical thinking by giving students the opportunity to discover and write their own meanings effectively (Dawe & Dornan, 1984). Thus, a major part of a writing centre's role is to help student writers see where they fit in or differ from established communication patterns, and so help them acculturate to a point where they can function (for change) within the culture. Cole and Wall (1987, p.313) assert:

> To present 'academic discourse' to basic readers and writers as if it were a unified body of literacy conventions and procedures to be mastered is to mystify what our students most need to have demystified: how work gets done in the university. For while we speak broadly of the university as a 'discourse community', particular interpretative communities come into existence only when particular students and teachers are gathered there. When this happens, neither students nor teachers leave their histories behind; they bring them to class, to every academic discussion and to every reading and writing assignment.

Writing centres serve to value individual diversity, where the student writer controls the direction of the learning. The focus is on developing the student's writing skills. Although the immediate aim is to resolve the difficulty that brought the student to the writing centre, the long-term goal is to foster independence of practice when students are faced with tasks that require their functioning as critical thinkers. In this study, the ESL students and academics identified the writing centre as a major support structure, akin to compulsory and AD tutorials. It has been established that writing centres are instrumental in the development of student writing across the curriculum. Hence, the central aim of the writing centre in a university is to make writing central to learning (Chiseri-Strater, 2000). In this study, however, it was found that perceptions of the Writing Centre were tied to academic support, particularly for ESL students. Inherently, the Writing Centre at the university was understood to be associated with AD. However helpful ESL students found its services to be, they still felt a sense of embarrassment about asking for writing support:

I think so far the university has done what it can by creating the Writing Centre where we can ask them what we should do, but I think most people feel paranoid to go to the Writing Centre. I'm not going to come and say I'm a second language speaker so I need help! People are shy to ask for help when it comes to expressing themselves, especially when it comes to something to do with English. So they rather keep quiet (Extract from student focus group, 19 October, 2004).

In order to correct erroneous perceptions of its function, and moreover to reduce the stigmatisation ESL students feel in attending the Writing Centre, it appears that the place and role of the Writing Centre, like AD, requires reframing in the context of the university.

Academics, on the other hand, felt that the Writing Centre is a useful support for student writing. They believe that all students can benefit from its services. Perhaps compulsory Writing Centre times and courses for students from different disciplines to attend will help to overcome the writing difficulties experienced by students in general. In this way ESL students may feel less marginalized as the only ones requiring academic writing support:

I think it has to be compulsory for 'all' students to go to the Writing Centre. Perhaps there should be specific times made for students from different departments or there should be a compulsory course specifically for essay writing where all students have to take the course. That will assist in writing across the curriculum. Academics don't really have enough time to sit with each student and go through their essays, analysing the problems, getting them to practice writing...people assigned specifically to writing can do that (Extract from interview with academic, 20 October, 2004).

This section briefly looked at the three fundamental support structures for ESL students' academic writing at university, namely compulsory tutorials, AD tutorials, and the Writing Centre.

4.2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter a comparative account was presented of results that emerged from ESL students' focus groups and in-depth individual interviews with academics. Through the method of thematic content analysis, themes were illuminated ranging from the ways academic writing is understood at university by ESL students and academics, an explication of ESL students' academic writing experiences and academics' expectations, major writing difficulties facing ESL students and academic writing support. The fifth and final chapter provides a conclusion delineating the main findings of the study and the implications for future research.