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An exploration of ESL- English as a Second Language students' experiences of academic writing in the discipline of Psychology

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CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHOD

The purpose of this chapter is to describe how the research was planned and implemented. It includes a discussion of the context of the study, the research paradigm, the sample and procedures, and the instruments. Limitations are deliberated upon at the end of the discussion of each step of the research method.

3.1 The context of the study

According to Riddel (1997), more research is required, which places student experience at the centre of educational change and reform. Hence, this study adopted a student-centered approach in order to contribute to teaching and learning in higher education in South Africa. In this study, ESL students' experience of academic writing was investigated through the use of focus groups. The academics' expectations of the necessary skills which students should have in order to write effectively in a tertiary context was elicited from in-depth semi-structured individual interviews. The data that emerged from the focus group sessions was analysed via content analysis and the findings were compared and contrasted to the findings from the in-depth semi-structured individual interviews.

The following research areas were pursued:

1) ESL students' experiences of academic writing.
2) Academics' expectations of students' academic writing.
3) ESL students' and academics' ideas for improving academic writing at university.

Before commencement of the research, a seminar was arranged in which the researcher presented the research method to be used in the study. The seminar consisted of academics from the disciplines of Psychology, Education and Applied English Language studies respectively. The seminar lasted for approximately fifty minutes and was conducted in the staff room of the Psychology department. Academics, having read the research proposal, critiqued the proposed study on both theoretical and practical levels. A major outcome was that a qualitative research method seemed appropriate in the exploration of ESL academic writing in a tertiary context, given that academic writing is a sensitive issue, but one that

requires attention in order to provide constructive solutions to the writing problems facing ESL students.

3.2 The research paradigm

This research is consequently framed in the qualitative paradigm, with the aim of providing an in-depth understanding of the meanings at work (Van Manen, 1990). The qualitative paradigm is distinguished from the quantitative paradigm by its interpretative nature and tradition, drawing on narrative to document the "episodes of lived experience representing as closely as possible how people feel, what they know, and what their concerns, beliefs, perceptions and understandings are" (Castle, 1996, p.15). Hence, the qualitative paradigm is characterized by an exploratory and descriptive focus that attempts to gain a deeper understanding of experience from the perspective of the participants in the study. Inquiries are made in natural settings since the researcher is interested in understanding people's experiences in context. The data that is gathered is often people's words, and one useful way of obtaining this form of data is through interviews (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994).

Interviews have been recognized as an integral method of data collection in the qualitative paradigm, providing access to information that relates to the authentic feelings of the participants and exploring their lived experiences (Yin, 1986). Semi-structured interviews are based on structured, pre-arranged questions around the issue under discussion that encourages the participants to elaborate on their experiences. The interviewer intervenes only for clarification or elaboration, thus allowing for "the participant to speak as freely as individual recipients and implementers of a process" (Osman, 2003, p.25). The results obtained from the semi-structured interviews are presented within a rich narrative, with great depth (Fontana & Frey, 1994).

This study used semi-structured individual interviews to explore the experiences of academics. In this way, the researcher was able to draw on a schedule of questions, pre-arranged in broad themes. The themes for the interview schedules were generated from the review of the literature and from the researcher's experiences of working with ESL students' academic writing in a tertiary context. The semi-structured individual interview also gave the researcher the opportunity to pursue other relevant areas, such as reading and essay feedback,

which emerged from the interview, in order to research perceptions, experiences, attitudes and the formation and emergence of ideas and world views of the participants (Allan, 1991).

The value of semi-structured interviews is dependent on the competence of the interviewer. In cases where the interviewer is incompetent, many biases are introduced, in particular, recording the information obtained from participants appropriately. It has also been found that participants may be embarrassed by sensitive, confidential and private issues posed by the interviewer (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000). In this study, such a danger was overcome by allowing the participants to decide what aspects of the questions they felt comfortable to answer, without overwhelming them with questions for further data. However, there were times at which the researcher had to probe for clarification, in this way biasing certain aspects of the interview above others.

The second type of interview used in this study was the focus group. According to Stewart and Shamdasani (1990, p.7) "the focus group is by definition an exercise in group dynamics and the conduct of the group, as well as the interpretation of results obtained must be understood within the context of the group interaction". The focus group method provides the researcher with the opportunity to access rich information that relates to the span of experiences of the participants (Yin, 1986). A focus group consists of between four and eight respondents, all interviewed together (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000). In the focus group setting, the researcher draws up a list of questions pre-arranged in themes. In this study the themes covered ESL students' experiences of academic writing, academics' expectations of students' academic writing and ESL students' and academics' ideas for improving academic writing at university. Themes are used to generate discussion among the focus group participants. Participants discuss the issues in question with each other, meaning that one person's ideas may set off a string of related thoughts and ideas in another person in the group. Similarly, participants may disagree with each other's viewpoints. This disagreement is seen as an opportunity for the whole group to explore their differences, thereby producing a much deeper understanding of the problem. The focus group gives the participants the chance to learn from each other, and perhaps to resolve dilemmas with which they are confronted. This setting, according to Bless and Higson-Smith (2000, p.111), resembles "many African cultures who make constant use of small groups to address concerns within the community".

In a focus group the researcher has the responsibility of ensuring that "a safe environment for uncensored communication is created" (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000, p.111). All participants should have an equal chance to contribute, without anyone being unable to freely express their ideas. The researcher has to restrain, on the one hand, those participants who tend to dominate the discussion, and encourage, on the other hand, those participants who find it difficult to express their thoughts. The onus is on the researcher to deal with this group dynamic sensitively, as the results of the focus group could be biased towards those participants who contribute more to the discussion by virtue of their educational backgrounds, linguistic skills and general self-confidence (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000). It is not always possible for the group composition to have similar educational backgrounds, social status and so forth, and participants may find it difficult to speak honestly and openly about sensitive subject material in front of unfamiliar peers. Hence, the success of the focus group rests on the shoulders of the researcher, who has to pay careful attention to the facilitation and composition of groups (Bless & Higson-Smith, 2000). In this study, the composition of the focus groups could not be entirely controlled as the participants arranged themselves according to the times they were available. Nonetheless, the researcher tried to manage sensitive issues by ensuring that all participants had equal opprtunity to contribute to the discussion. Participants could also request a follow-up interview if they felt that they could not speak freely about the subject matter that arose in the focus group.

In this study the researcher attempted to access participants' understanding of and perspectives on their cognitive and linguistic proficiency via their experiences of academic writing in Psychology One. Through focus groups, certain stereotypes and negative connotations surrounding ESL students' engagement in academic writing were also revealed. Focus groups provided an environment to explore these issues better. ESL students were allowed to discuss and engage with issues and offer deeper explanations of their academic writing. However, at the same time, it was evident that some students felt less comfortable offering explanations regarding their academic writing in a group context. This discrepancy became increasingly visible when, in a focus group, there were students from rural and urban areas. In this case, views on academic writing differed considerably because students' high school experiences were entirely different and often in opposition. While some students hailed from affluent, private schools, others came from more disadvantaged public schooling systems. This reaction, nonetheless, was in line with the researcher's rationale for employing focus groups, namely that ESL students would become more aware of their cognitive and

linguistic proficiency in academia when confronted with disagreement and would, in turn, be prompted to analyze their own writing processes more intensely. Through attempting to resolve differences in their personal experiences of academic writing it was evident that ESL students tried to deliver more comprehensive accounts to explain their various experiences, beliefs, attitudes, feelings and behaviors towards their own cognitive and linguistic proficiency.

The validity of research in the qualitative paradigm is recognized from data which is systematically obtained, described, analyzed, argued about and subjected to open-ness (Jaeger, 1988; Le Compte & Preissle, 1993; Merriam, 1998). In line with these requirements, this research claimed its internal validity from its data collection and analysis methods, and from a clear and complete rendering of the findings placed within a rigorous theoretical framework.

Since the researcher was the primary interviewer conducting the research, interpreting and analysing the data, it was necessary to take steps to avoid biases and expectations, and to account for how the data would be processed. Miles and Huberman (1984, in Kelly, 1999) recommend an *audit trial*, where the researcher leaves a trail and describes in detail what he/she has done. Apart from keeping an analytic diary or reflective journal, in which the researcher accounted for what was done and why it was done, she tried to "meticulously document every step of the data gathering and analytic process" (Kelly, 1999, in Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999, p.427). Le Compte and Preissle (1993) confirm that one way of achieving high internal validity in qualitative research is from data collection and analysis.

Communicative validity was established through a process of triangulation, whereby the different perspectives on academic writing were "pitted against one another in order to cross-check data and interpretation" (Denzin, 1978, in Guba & Lincoln, 1983, p.327). Communicative validity involved testing the accuracy of the data that emerged from the student focus groups by clarifying ambiguous aspects of the data obtained with the participants in the focus groups. The researcher found that the academics' in-depth semi-structured individual interviews were clear and did not require further clarification.

Triangulation was achieved by arranging a third round of interviewing with one group of the original sample of ESL student volunteers, in the second quarter of the 2005 academic year. The focus group was conducted on Wednesday, 20 April 2005. It lasted for approximately fifty minutes of the lunch hour. The researcher explained to the students that the purpose of the third round of interviewing was to test the validity of the data that emerged from the student focus groups by calling on them to evaluate and verify the initial findings of the research. It was stressed that the data would still undergo further interpretation, especially to compare and contrast the findings from the student focus groups to the academics' semi-structured individual interviews. Those students who volunteered to participate in this session evaluated and validated the initial findings of the research. Although the researcher was unable to get all thirty participants of the original sample together for the third round of interviewing, it was taken that the responses of the six who participated would serve as some form of representation of the entire sample used in the study. In a sense, the confirmation and criticism of the findings generated from the original focus groups served as the index of validity for the research, ensuring that the researcher documented the data as it was intended, without altering any meaning or subjecting it to any biases (Kelly, in Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

From a traditional quantitative viewpoint, a qualitative methodology is believed to entail various disadvantages, one criticism being its subjectivity. It is argued that descriptive accounts do not necessarily yield more than what is already assumed by the researcher (Peterson, 1994). This problem extends into the use of semi-structured questionnaires, where questions can lead the participants to respond in expected ways, rather than explicate original material. It means that the focus groups and semi-structures interviews may elicit information in a way that confirms preconceived notions of the topic. In the same way, the data analysis process in this study could have been influenced by the researcher's subjective and preconceived ideas. It was found that in keeping an analytic diary the researcher was able to reflect constantly on her research process, critically and objectively. However, researcher subjectivity is a consideration to the study.

A further criticism of qualitative research is the lack of criteria by which to judge the trustworthiness and relevance of the results. Atkinson, Heath and Chenail (1991) argue that the legitimization of knowledge occurs via the judgment of relevant stakeholders, not only through the presence and implementation of organized and systematic research methods.

3.3 The sample and procedure

The researcher made use of two samples, namely a sample of students and a sample of academics. In terms of the student sample, ESL volunteers, of either gender, who were first time entrants to the University, having no previous tertiary experience apart from the first six months at University, were drawn on. The volunteers were drawn from the undergraduate, first year Psychology classes in the second half of the 2004 academic year in the fourth quarter, between 23 September 2004 and 19 October 2004. This was before they submitted their second Psychology One assignment at the end of the quarter. By this time the students were already exposed to middle order assignment questions and higher order assignment questions. The former, according to Bloom's taxonomy, consist of comprehension and application questions, which call on the learner to demonstrate comprehension and an ability to apply existing knowledge to a new context and/or to demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between various ideas. The latter consists of analysis, synthesis and evaluation questions, which demand that the learner go beyond what is known, to predicting events, creating or attaching value to ideas, and using creativity and skills to generate novel ideas (Bloom, 1956).

The discipline of Psychology has a large pool of first year students, who are not only meant to learn the theory of Psychology, but more importantly, are expected to engage with it through written academic expositions. This implies that students, in their quest to learn Psychology, have to display an understanding of psychological theory through engagement of academic discourse. In reality, it is not enough that first year students are able to understand Psychological theory; they have to provide evidence of this in their written texts. To be able to fulfill this need, the importance of academic writing has been emphasized in lectures, compulsory tutorials, and academic development tutorials[3], as well as through a compilation of notes covering the required academic practices in Psychology. Because of the large number of first year students, as well as the department's efforts to assist with students' academic writing in various ways it was decided to select a sample from the Psychology One class.

[3] Compulsory tutorials in Psychology One are structured weekly for all first year students to attend, whereas academic development tutorials are voluntary and function to supplement compulsory tutorials and lectures. Academic Development tutorials are weekly gatherings in which first year students are given the opportunity to further reinforce and apply the theory they have learnt in the week. Students are encouraged to bring questions concerning areas of the theory they find difficult to understand to AD tutorials.

Student volunteers were approached in the Psychology One lecture hall at the beginning of the first lecture in the second semester. The researcher proceeded to the Psychology lectures on both streams A and B[4]. The lecturer's permission was sought to explain to the class the nature of the research and to invite ESL first year students to participate in it. The researcher expressed the need to investigate ESL students' experiences of academic writing in Psychology so that areas of difficulty could be identified and students themselves could comment on how their academic writing could be improved. The students were informed that the researcher would also investigate what the academics expected of ESL students' academic writing. In this way, the researcher explained that she hoped to illustrate what the academics perceived to be necessary tools for academic writing. A total of thirty, first year students volunteered to participate in the research. All thirty participants were born and high-schooled in South Africa. Their home languages were either one or two of the nine indigenous African languages[5] that make up the eleven official languages acknowledged by the South African constitution. Thus, all the participants had English as a second or third language. Twenty-four of the thirty students were female.

The student participants were asked to come to a first meeting of no longer than thirty minutes. Students arranged themselves into seven focus groups, based on the times that they were available. The focus groups comprised more than five students and no less than three. A perusal of focus group research in Psychology indicates that nine participants per session is conventional, while researchers such as Albrecht, Johnson and Walther (1993) advocate between four and eight participants per focus group as ideal. The focus groups were directed by semi-structured open-ended questions (Refer to Appendix A for interview schedule), wherein students were encouraged to elaborate on their experiences of academic writing at university. The focus groups took place between 22 September 2004 and 19 October 2004. The tutors' room in the Psychology department was used as the designated venue for the focus group sessions. This venue was easily accessible for students and was chosen for optimal sound quality for recording. Most sessions were conducted during the lunch break as this was seen by students to be the most appropriate time for them. The focus group sessions did not last for more than one hour at a time.

[4] Because of the large number of first year Psychology students the class is divided into two streams, A &B.

[5] Nine indigenous African languages have been added to the two former official languages English and Afrikaans. The nine African languages are tshi-Vendi, xi-Tsonga, isi-Ndebele, isi-Xhosa, isi-Zulu, si-Swati, se-Sotho, se-Tawana and se-Pedi. Of these isi-Zulu is the largest numerically (Granville, Janks, Mphahlele, Reed, Watson, Joseph and Romani, 1998).

The researcher began each focus group session with an introduction and explanation of the rationale for the research. The researcher requested students' consent to record the discussion by means of an audiotape and to make written notes. Students were assured that these would be destroyed at the end of the research. They were also informed that they could request that tape recording be halted at any point in the focus group session and could also withdraw from the research at any time without any consequences. Students were guaranteed that no reference was to be made to any student or academic in particular and no course marks for Psychology One were required.

In terms of the academics, semi-structured individual interviews were requested from all willing members of staff, including lecturers and tutors[6], teaching on the first year Psychology program to investigate the academics' expectations of students' academic writing in Psychology. Academics were approached during a weekly staff meeting. The reseacher explained that she wished to explore ESL students' experiences of academic writing in Psychology in order to identify their perceptions of academic writing, the difficulties they encountered and the skills needed to write effectively and to compare and contrast these findings to academics' expectations of students' academic writing. In so doing, the researcher hoped to address the gap between academics' expectations and students' experiences of academic writing. The researcher expressed to the academics that the research would also have relevance for their assessment of students. Six academics agreed to participate in the research. Two of the six were lecturers in the Psychology department, while the remaining four were tutors. The interviews took place between 15 October 2004 and 21 October 2004, in the offices of the academics, at times that were convenient for them. The individual interviews with the academics were based on semi-structured open-ended questions (Refer to Appendix A for interview schedule). Most interviews were no longer than forty-minutes long, although some continued for more than an hour. The researcher requested the academic's consent to record the semi-structured individual interview verbatim by means of an audio-tape and longhand notes, which, they were assured, would be destroyed at the end of the

[6] Lecturers are the core presenters of courses in disciplines at university. For example in Psychology One a lecturer will present a course in Developmental Psychology to the entire group of approximately one thousand first year students. Tutors teach aspects of theory to smaller groups of students. The theory covered in tutorials may/may not have been covered by the lecturer in the class lectures. The tutors are generally at the forefront of developing students' ability to apply theoretical constructs. For example a tutor on the Developmental Psychology course may implement an activity on 'observational learning' to reinforce the theory of observational learning covered in lectures. The number of tutors on each course varies according to the availability of tutors in each discipline. A lecturer who core presents may also be a tutor.

research. Academics could request that tape recording be halted at any point in the interview and they could also withdraw from the research at any time without any consequences. They were assured that no reference would be made to any academic or student in particular and no student's marks for Psychology One was required.

A major limitation of the study stems from the sample. The researcher found that ESL students were very reluctant to participate in the research. The term *English Second Language* is problematic in its use. ESL students seem to resent this label, as it appears to denote an inferior status in the academic context. Consequently, when the students were approached in Psychology One lectures, it seemed that they had already decided that the research, like Academic Development, was an attempt to assist academically disadvantaged students. Many ESL students seem to feel a great sense of shame and embarrassment where writing is concerned, possibly because in South Africa educational background and socio-economic status is easily recognizable by virtue of one's grasp of the English language. As Granville, Janks, Mphahlele, Reed, Watson, Joseph and Romani (1998) have shown, Black South Africans seem to know that a good command of English implies social mobility and middle class jobs that yield middle class salaries. Hence, access to language means access to social goods. The resistance to *ESL* as an inferior label may have resulted in a sample which was less representative of the population, since it is possible that those students in real need of academic writing support may have shied away from involvement in the process. This could also have resulted in the small sample size, where a larger sample size may have increased the capacity for more complex analysis. The female: male ratio in this study seems to be reflective of the ratio of female: male in the Psychology class in 2004. Although this ratio may have been representative of Psychology students at the University at the time, it may not necessarily have been true for the entire population of students at the University. The composition of ESL males and females in the sample made it problematic to generalize the findings of the study to the general body of ESL students at the University.

The sample of academics who participated in the research were those involved in tutorials and in running the Academic Development Program in the Psychology department. Their interest in the study understandably came from their role in assisting ESL students academically. It would have been useful if the sample had also included other Psychology lecturers outside of the above-mentioned forums as in this way a more holistic account of academics' perceptions of ESL students' academic writing could have been compiled.

3.4 The instruments

The interview schedules were informed by the theory pertaining to academic writing at university, looking specifically at the informational/transactional functions of language for academic discourse, as opposed to the social/interactional everyday language use, a distinction further operationalized by Cummins' (1984) notions of BICS and CALP. The first question explored ESL students' and academics' understanding of academic writing in light of the controversies around what academic discourse is, what it entails, how it is done, by whom and the divergent meanings it is able to generate (Angelil-Carter, 1993, 2000; Boudieu & Passerson, 1994; Cope & Kalantzis, 1993; Kamler, 2001; Kress, 1985; Mendelowitz; 2003; Street; 1990, 1995; Turner & Street, 1999).

Theorists documenting students' experiences of academic writing have revealed that there is a gap between academic expectations of academic writing and student interpretations of those expectations (Clark, 1992; Hyland, 2002; Ivanic, 1998; Ivanic & Roach, 1990; Lea, 1994; Lea & Street, 1998, 1999; Street, 1995; Turner & Street, 1999). The study set out to investigate this disparity. Hence, question two was directly aimed at exploring ESL students' experiences of academic writing at university. The sub-question inquired about what ESL students thought academics expect from their writing. This question was mirrored onto academics, who were asked to comment on what they expected from students' academic writing, how they went about making their expectations known, and the responses they received from students.

In question three, ESL students were asked specific questions about the difficulties they experienced in academic writing and what they found less difficult to do. These questions generated themes around the extent of ESL students' cognitive and linguistic proficiency in L2. It provided insight into ESL students' surface fluency and conceptual linguistic knowledge in terms of BICS and CALP (Cummins, 1984; 1989, 2001, 2003). Question three for the academics asked them to point to the most common student errors in academic writing. The sub-question specifically explored errors in academic writing most frequently found with ESL students. Themes that arose here pertained to ESL students' difficulty in dealing with the cognitive and linguistic demands of the University curriculum.

Questions four and five focused on the knowledge and skills necessary for good academic writing. The responses from both ESL students and academics to these questions produced information about the knowledge and skills required to deal with lower order questions and higher order questions, as operationalized in terms of Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives. It gave an indication of the contextual support and cognitive involvement underlying the language performance of ESL students. Questions six and seven supplemented questions four and five. The knowledge and skills cited as necessary for good academic writing helped ESL students to draw the distinction between good and weak academic writing. In this way, Cummins' (1984) distinction between context-embedded/ conversational and context-reduced/academic language proficiency was further illustrated.

The additional follow-up questions specifically addressed the research aim to provide ideas for improving academic writing at a tertiary level. It gave ESL students the chance to comment on what they found to be useful support for their academic writing, and to generate new ideas for academic writing development at university. Academics, in their follow-up questions, were asked to shed light on how the AD program in Psychology had helped to improve students' academic writing, and to indicate ideas for further academic writing support. These questions raised themes useful for the mapping and re-mapping of academic writing and support in the future. They aimed at narrowing the disjuncture between ESL students' and academics' views on academic writing development, as alluded to by theorists in the field of academic writing (Clark, 1992; Hyland, 2002; Ivanic, 1998; Ivanic & Roach, 1990; Lea, 1994; Lea & Street, 1998, 1999; Street, 1990, 1995; Turner & Street, 1999).

The research study was cleared by the University's Research Committee (Refer to Appendix B for Ethical Clearance Certificate). Participants in the study participated voluntarily. The researcher requested the students' and academics' consent to record information verbatim by means of an audio-tape and long hand notes. Participants were assured that these would be destroyed at the end of the research. They could request that tape recording be halted at any point and they could also withdraw from the research at any time without prejudice. They were also assured that no reference would be made to any academic or student in particular, and no student's marks for Psychology One was required.

The aims of the research study and invitation to participate was outlined in the Subject Information Sheets for ESL students and Academics respectively (Refer to Appendices C and

E). The names of the participants were not mentioned in the study. They were, however, asked to sign Letters of Consent for Tape Recording and Longhand Notes (Refer to Appendices D and F, for ESL students and Academics respectively). The use of consent forms was necessary as it was recognized that the study would explore information that may be personal and analyse and comment on sensitive educational issues.

This chapter has described the planning and implementation that went into the undertaking of the study. A discussion of the context of the study, the research paradigm, the sample and procedures and the instruments was provided. Important limitations of the research method were also addressed. In the next chapter I turn to the analyses of the findings and the discussion thereof.