

ABSTRACT

This study investigated English Second Language (ESL) students' experiences of academic writing in a tertiary institution. It focused particularly on ESL students' interpretations of what is expected in academic writing. Consequently, ESL students' expectations were compared and contrasted to the academic writing expectations of a group of academics in the same institution. The study aimed to explore how the concepts of Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) were manifest in the students' expectations and writing. The main aim was to identify the BICS and CALP distinction in ESL students as explanatory of their ability to write academically. In other words, the assumption was that ESL students experience difficulty with writing because they achieve surface fluency in terms of BICS but do not seem to develop sufficient levels of CALP to cope with the demands of the curricula in academic study. The sample consisted of thirty first year ESL Psychology students and six academics who taught on the first year Psychology course. ESL student volunteers were organized into focus groups, while academics were asked to participate in semi-structured, individual interviews. The participants' responses were recorded and subsequently analyzed using thematic content analysis. It was found that academic writing was conceptualized in terms of structure and content. Through this distinction, ESL students recognized that, although they are able to operate at surface levels of language proficiency they find it problematic to operate at deeper levels of cognitive academic language proficiency. This in turn explained why they found it difficult to perform higher order academic tasks that go beyond the rote recall of content to analysis, synthesis, evaluation and application of concepts and theory. Further findings were extrapolated that lie at the level of the ESL student and the tertiary institution. It was found that academic writing expectations needed to be communicated to students by academics in more distinct terms. The internalization of academic discourse by ESL students, and students in general, seemed to require further facilitation by academics in the tertiary community of practice. Furthermore, the study raised the issue of English Second Language as a label impacting on ESL student's confidence, self-esteem and overall attitude towards transcending challenges associated with academic writing.