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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 1: INTRODUCTION

The issue of literacy is of fundamental importance in the modern world. In the current state of education in South Africa, tertiary in particular, there appears to be a writing crisis, with many tertiary level students not writing as perceptively, fluently or even correctly as the academics at university may expect them to, and many unable to master any form of writing. When students enter university they are generally new to their fields, and consequently to the material they are attempting to synthesize and write about. Even as they proceed through university, very often they are unfamiliar with the traditions and conventions of writing within a specific discipline at the university. In addition, many are unsure about various technical and grammatical rules that they have should have been taught at school (Chiseri-Strater, 2000).

This uncertainty seems to be particularly prevalent amongst English Second Language (ESL) students, who though literate in two or more languages, display in their writing a range of common ESL errors. This problem is not unique to South Africa, with many universities around the world experiencing the same difficulties (Chiseri-Strater, 2000). There is at tertiary level an ever-increasing demand for students to present and produce grammatically correct and technically fluent writing (ibid), however it is questionable whether they are encouraged to think of language as an expression of previously unarticulated thought in a non-linear, recursive process.

There is a growing body of literature, which documents students' experiences of academic literacy and specifically examines the gap between academic expectations and student interpretations of them (Clark, 1992; Hyland, 2002; Ivanic, 1998; Ivanic & Roach, 1990; Lea, 1994; Lea & Street, 1998, 1999; Street, 1990, 1995; Turner & Street, 1999). This research intends to add to that growing body of literature by exploring ESL students' experiences of academic writing at university and comparing and contrasting the findings to academics' expectations. The research is underpinned by Cummins' theory of language proficiency (1978; 1980a; 1981a; 1984; 1989; 1991; 1994; 1996; 1997; 2000; 2001; 2003; 2004), which makes a distinction between surface fluency and conceptual-linguistic knowledge, formalized in terms of Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) (Cummins, 1984). BICS is defined in terms of language proficiency in everyday communication contexts, whereas CALP is the manipulation of

language in decontextualized academic situations. Although the understanding of literacy skills in a second language (L2) depends on an analysis of the context in which the language is acquired, first language (L1) use may enhance conversational skills in L2 but does not necessarily enhance language skills necessary for the decontextualized academic context (Snow, Cancino, De Temple & Schley, 1991). In other words, while individuals may automatically acquire BICS in their mother tongue, not all individuals are capable of achieving the level of CALP required for academic study.

1.1 Research aims and objectives

This research sets out to investigate how the notion of BICS and CALP can be used to explain why ESL students experience difficulty with academic writing. It appears that ESL students achieve surface fluency, but are unable to develop sufficient cognitive academic language proficiency to cope with the demands of the curriculum (Cummins, 1984). In the study, ESL students' cognitive and linguistic proficiency in English L2 is explored through their experiences of academic writing. In focus groups, they were asked to comment on whether they found their academic writing skills to have developed from answering lower order knowledge questions in which they had simply to describe and recall facts or definitions to higher order questions, to a position where they could go beyond what they knew through predicting events and applying principles. Simultaneously, academics, in semi-structured individual interviews, shared their cognitive academic language expectations of student writing at university.

Hence, this research used the framework of qualitative research to pursue the following objectives:

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

Chapter One provides a general overview of the issue of academic writing at university. It also explains how academic writing is explored in terms of Cummins's BICS and CALP.

Chapter Two focuses on the theory of academic writing and language use. A review of literature covers the issue of language in the history of education in South Africa, arguments from major theorists on the state of academic writing at university, the different functions of language followed by a section focusing particularly on Cummins notion of BICS and CALP and his theory of language proficiency, ending with relevant criticisms of the theory.

Chapter Three provides a detailed description of the study. It begins by outlining the context of the study, followed by an explanation of the research paradigm used and the appropriateness of the paradigm for this study. A description of the subjects, the procedures and instruments used is then provided. Limitations of the research method are also addressed here.

Chapter Four is a presentation of the results obtained. It provides a discussion of the comparison between ESL students' experiences of academic writing and academics' expectations of students' academic writing in the discipline of Psychology at a Gauteng university. This consists of an interpretation of the findings by linking them to the theoretical discussions in chapters one and two. The interpretation covers major themes derived from the interview schedule of pre-arranged questions. The first theme explores how academic writing is understood at university by ESL students and academics. This is followed by theme two, ESL students' academic writing experiences and academics' expectations; theme three, writing difficulties facing ESL students and the final theme, academic writing support.

Chapter Five summarises the main findings of the study and higlights implications for future research.