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Promoting writing skills at Universidade Metodista de Angola: foundation year students

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ABSTRACT

The present research study was prompted by the general belief in Luanda that state secondary and middle schools students are ill-prepared to write adequately in English as a foreign language. These beliefs are based on the fact that the English Language Teaching (ELT) system in Luanda has been faced with insurmountable problems since the British Council left the country in 1997. As a result, students admitted to university perform very poorly.

The purpose of this research was to carry out an in-depth analysis of teaching and learning writing practices focussed on the Foundation year at *Universidade Metodista de Angola* (UMA) in Luanda, in order to find solutions.

The research took the form of a case study and used a combination of various sources of data collection for the purposes of understanding the problems by using triangulation. The sources of data were as follows: *Individual Audio-Recorded Interviews* with all the six Foundation year teachers and nine randomly selected students; *Course Documents* such as the students' course-book (syllabus), the teachers' book, the students' workbook and the *Sample of Students' Writing*. The sample of students' writing included the entrance examination papers, the assignments and the exam equivalent tests.

The research found out that UMA admits two groups of students: *low-proficiency*, the vast majority and *relatively high-proficiency*, the minority of students. These students arrive at UMA exhibiting low levels of English writing skills. Their difficulties include grammar problems with English, poor vocabulary, word choice, sentence and paragraph structure, and Portuguese interference.

The research study also found that grammar and translation methods are widely used indicating that other skills like writing are seriously undermined. Findings of this study revealed that Foundation year teachers are course-book oriented and resort to outdated philosophies of teaching. Furthermore, the research found that the Headway elementary course-book is inadequate as it does not emphasise writing and the tasks are not cognitively demanding. The study concluded that the teaching/learning, assessment and the intended learning outcomes are not in alignment, and that teachers need pedagogical in-service training so that they can carry out the teaching of writing more adequately in order to foster learning. Among other recommendations to help the situation, the study recommends the introduction of the 'Process-genre approach'; the designing of a 'Full Syllabus' in which the teaching/learning, assessment tasks and the learning outcomes are constructively aligned.

Lastly, the study recommends encouraging deep-level teaching and learning through the process of writing and selection of specific reading texts based on topics relevant to the students' interests and needs.