

Writing for Academic Genres: Research Report Writing: Problems, Issues and Discussion

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Abstract

Good writing skills are a key to academic and professional success. Students in higher education need these skills for academic survival and excellence. Despite this fact, there is evidence that such skills are lacking amongst our students. This paper explores students' writing problems in the genre of report writing. The paper is based on a survey of research reports of undergraduates at the Institute of Development Management Mzumbe. Sample extracts from Third Year students are examined to find out the problems which make these reports deviate from what might be considered acceptable in research reporting. The survey shows that students' writing problems are not only at the macro (i.e. discourse) level but also at the micro (i.e. basic sentence) level. Also frequent are problems of general non-conformity to writing for academic genres.

Introduction

Writing skills are of paramount importance to academic studies, professional success and personal development in most parts of the world today. This is particularly true of situations where one's academic or professional success is dependent on demonstrable writing ability.

Good writing knowledge is, therefore, of prime importance for students, especially students in higher education. These students are not only required to communicate using the second or foreign language, but they are also required to participate in a wide range of extended academic writing, including writing examinations, assignments, paper presentations, project proposals, research reports and term papers. All of

these writing activities are fundamental to students' academic survival in any academic institution of higher learning.

Despite this high demand of knowledge in writing skills, this is the area where most students experience a great deal of difficulty. Both internal and external examiners have recorded that most students in higher education fail to demonstrate adequate ability in writing skills. And in some instances they exhibit serious deficiencies not only at the macro-level (use of discourse features to establish relationship of ideas in discourse) but also at the basic clause and sentence level.

Experience has shown that learners do not handle discourse features such as anaphoric reference, signalling vocabulary, conjunctions, signposts, prepositions, the article, ellipsis and or substitution at the text level as efficiently as they might. This is accounted for by inadequate exposure of non-native speakers to extended academic writing.

James noted a marked disparity between native and non-native student writers of English during his teaching career in British universities. He then makes a subtle observation, that native students are advantaged by the strong essay-based tradition embodied in the British education system, whereas many non-native students are correspondingly disadvantaged by their education backgrounds in which the tradition of extended essay writing does not seem to have a strong base (James 1984).

In so far as undergraduates in Tanzanian higher education are concerned, language and other subject experts have repeatedly cited lack of good language background as one of the compounding factors for students' poor writing skills. Accordingly, a brief survey of external examiners' reports for the undergraduates in this sample study unearthed revealing comments on students' handicap in conveying their thoughts in writing. Below are some of the examiners' comments on students writing weaknesses.

- Generally English language was a problem, as such most students failed to explain themselves.

- Communication in English is falling pathetically. What do we do?
- The biggest problem facing most candidates is language.
- Poor communication skills despite the incentives offered by the internal examiner (sic.). I suggest that more concrete and positive actions be taken towards improving this situation
- The candidates' standard of English leaves a lot to be desired.
- Most of the candidates appear to be not very precise on the definitions of the key concepts.

[Extracts form External examiners' reports at the Institute of Development Management Mzumbe for the academic year 1997/1998]

Similar comments are, undoubtedly, a common phenomenon in any institution of higher education in the country. And one need not overemphasise Rubagumya's observation that, "There is a general consensus that the level of English language competence in schools and institutions of higher learning in Tanzania has declined over the past couple of decades" (1989: 107). The same opinion is echoed by, among others, Kibogoya (1989), Mekacha (1997), Ndoloi (1997) and Rubagumya (1997).

Admittedly, there are genuine problems with our students' writing skills, and numerous research works undertaken so far have overwhelmingly cited lack of competence of the English language as a factor. This paper attempts to explain students' writing problems from a genre analysis approach. But before doing so we wish to argue that there are two scenarios in relation to this problem: the first is that our students are supposed to be writing in a second or foreign language. The second scenario is that students are supposed to be writing in an unfamiliar genre i.e. academic genre or discourse (the concept of genre will be defined in due course). The university sets demands and expectations all of which are largely new to the university entrants. And so Ballard's observation, that when a new student enters a university he/she has to undergo a difficult process of adapting into a new cultural system, the

academic culture, is quite instructive. The student has to acquire the new language, the new interests, and the new behaviour appropriate to the new culture, the university culture (Ballard 1984: 43).

This process is particularly complex as the university cultural system consists of many distinctive sub-cultures, each based in a different discipline and nurtured in a separate department. The first year student “is induced into these disciplines at the formal level - through lectures, tutorials, laboratory work and reading, but it is through *written* assignments that the success of his acculturation is most commonly judged. The acquisition of cultural literacy, therefore, becomes both the key to and the measure of academic progress” (Ibid.).

The problems new students go through in adjusting to the new culture of academic writing include:

- i. Distinguishing between disciplines, i.e. recognising that each discipline has its own distinctive method of analysis
- ii. Learning to use competently the highly specialised varieties of language derived from these distinctive methods of analysis.
- iii. Distinguishing between facts and opinions, arguments and polemics, assumptions and truth, myths and realities, dogmas and pragmatics, etc.
- iv. Learning to summarise the views of a writer where he/she is not being directly quoted.
- v. Learning to evaluate the quality of their own and others’ work
- vi. Learning to provide fairness to the evidence, i.e. balancing arguments
- vii. Learning how to use a critical approach in evaluating authority or received wisdom.
- viii. Learning how to relate others’ experiences and views to one’s own. (Ballard 1984, McCrimmon 1963).

To this end, one can say that students' writing problem is not only a result of lack of competence in the language but also lack of familiarity with the new genre.

The student has therefore to shift into a new literacy culture of academic writing, where he/she has to demonstrate high intellectual skills in an unfamiliar genre and in most cases using a second or foreign language. Students in these circumstances are faced with a seemingly insurmountable task in writing, because have to learn new genres or styles, go through a long process of conscious borrowing of forms and phrases from models,¹ often called 'template writing'. As such, one of their main constraints on their writing process is shortage of vocabulary and appropriate structuring phrases.

Scarcella (1984) did a comparative study of how native and non-native English writers orient their readers in expository writing. He discovered that native English writers, unlike non-native English writers, employ a wide variety of linguistic devices to engage their readers' attention and help them identify participants, objects and events about which they write.

In the case of our students, English is only used within the education context. All other everyday activities and functions in a student's life are carried out predominantly in Kiswahili. The role of the first language L1 in learning the second language L2 has always been a subject for debate. However, linguists have often contended that if the linguistic patterns of the L1 are closely related to those of the L2, then L1 is likely to enhance the learning of L2. If the opposite is the case, then L1 is likely to cause constraints in learning L2. The second language learning constraints can be at either the linguistic or the cultural level or both. Linguistic constraints occur where the discourse features and structural patterns of the first language play a part in inhibiting the learner in conforming to the features and patterns of the second language. This is particularly true where differences in grammatical patterns, phonology, and orthography

¹ A model can be any piece of extended academic writing belonging to a particular genre used as an example guide.

between the languages concerned are as big as is the case with English and Kiswahili

Cultural constraints, on the other hand, relate to the interference of cultural constructs of the writer's mother tongue when writing in the second language, especially in the discourse organisation structure. Studies have shown that texts of non-native writers often tend to exhibit deviations from what would be considered normal by an expert native writer. Though these deviations are more to do with matters of writing styles than problems of writing skills they are, however, worth mentioning.

Studies on cross-cultural rhetoric (Kaplan quoted in McCarthy 1994: 164) show that while English texts are characteristically linear and hierarchical, (i.e. main points followed by subordinate points), Semitic (Hebrew and Arabic) texts are characterised by parallelism and indirection. Similar differences were reported for German academic texts, which were said to allow a greater amount of parenthetical information and freedom of digression than English writing of the same kind.

Further evidence of cultural interference in second language writing is provided by Bar-Lev (quoted in McCarthy *ibid*) who found "more of a tendency to fluidity in Arabic texts (i.e. non-hierarchical progression with a preference for connection with *and*, *but* and *so*).” He points out further that parallelism is also a property of Chinese and Vietnamese texts.

Although there does not seem to be any evidence of similar cross-cultural studies on Bantu languages, Kiswahili in particular, findings of the studies done so far provide useful insights as to the nature of some of the problems faced by our students when writing in English. Taking the inappropriate use of articles, for example, one can associate this problem among our students with their first language (in this case Kiswahili) transfer to their writing in a second language. Faulty use of articles could be explained by the fact that articles in the sense of 'a', 'an' and 'the' are non-existent in the noun phrase system of Kiswahili.

Of course, not all contrastive patterns of grammar between languages amount to interference. For example, the gender system existing in English is not found in a similar way in Kiswahili, but Kiswahili speakers writing in English do not generally experience problems in using gender when writing in English.

This paper intends to explore some of the areas in which student writers experience special difficulties in conforming to genre specific writing, in particular, research reporting. The paper also discusses strategies which instructors may use in addressing these problems. The discussion is based on the findings of a survey done on research reports of undergraduates at the Institute of Development Management Mzumbe (now Mzumbe University).

The genre of research reporting is chosen because research reports constitute part of the evidence which is available to host organisations (copies of students' reports are sent to these organisations) of the students' potential in terms of academic and professional competence. As such, producing well-written reports is of prime importance not only for the reputation of the students' former academic institution, but also for the employability of the concerned students, considering that these organisations are the chief employers of the University's graduates.

Having set the background for the paper, it is now proper to define and briefly elaborate on the concept of genre itself.

The Concept of Genre

A genre is defined by Swales (1990: 58) as comprising:

... a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre. This rationale shapes the schematic structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style.

According to Swales' definition, several concepts need to be elaborated. *A genre is a class of communicative events.* Here Swales considers a communicative event as one in which language (and/or paralanguage) plays both a significant and indispensable role. Therefore, activities which do not involve the use of language or in which language is used only incidentally do not constitute communicative events. A communicative event comprises,

not only the discourse itself and its participants, but also the role of that discourse and the environment of its production and reception including its historical and cultural associations (Swales, 1990: 46).

These communicative events need to be turned into a genre by a set of communicative purposes, in other words, "people using language in an agreed way to get something done" (Tribble 1990: 47). This may involve easily identifiable purposes like 'recipe' or a set of instructions in a manual or even more complex and not easy to identify genres.

Let us consider the example provided by Tribble (ibid.) that examines a situation where, say, a company wants to confirm the appointment of a new member of staff. The communicative event here will also have a distinct social purpose. The text that will be written to meet the needs of this event, that is, the letter of appointment, will involve the name of the person to be appointed, and usually specify the starting date of appointment. It may also outline conditions of service and the salary.

The letter will frequently contain phrases such as 'I am pleased to inform you that, ... and ... this appointment will commence with effect from', ... and so on. It will be on paper with company's letterhead and be signed by authorised member of staff" (Tribble, 1996: 47).

Another aspect in Swales' definition of genre is that the members of this class of communicative events comprising a genre *share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognised by the expert members of the parent discourse community and thereby constitute the rationale of the genre.*

By the term "expert members of the parent discourse community", Swales means a group of people who are conversant with the accepted conventions in the field concerned. These are the people with the knowledge of the conventions of a genre. This knowledge according to Swales (op. cit.)

... is likely to be greater in those who routinely or professionally operate within that genre than in those who become involved in it only occasionally. In consequence, active discourse community members tend to have the greatest genre specific expertise.

These are the ones, who tend to assume the authority of giving these genres nomenclatures, because they are most familiar and most professionally involved in them.

This concept is echoed by James, who says that every discipline has a special language which is readily understood by practitioners, though not by laypersons. And the aim of using this special language is not to exclude the outsiders, but rather to make "communication on professional matters more precise" (James, 1984: 109).

It is, therefore, expected that the purposes of, for example, the communicative event in the genre of scientific research reports will be more readily recognised by people who are actively involved in scientific research than those who are less involved or not involved at all. These purposes, therefore, constitute the rationale of the genre.

This rationale, according to Swales definition, *shapes the schemata structure of the discourse and influences and constrains choice of content and style.*

In this respect, Swales discusses the nature of what is called ‘formal schemata’, which make it possible for a writer to produce appropriately worded and organised texts for special social purposes.

It is a combination of formal, procedural, and content schemata which make it possible for us to identify examples of specific genres and to assess their degree of prototypicality (the extent to which an example is seen as being ‘centrally’ typical of any set) (Tribble 1996: 53).

In other words, a phenomenon will have characteristic features which make it identifiable as belonging to a particular class of things and thus determine its membership to that class. As for writing for academic genres, to what extent a given text is seen as an example of a given genre depends on the extent to which that given text contains characteristic features which make it allowable in that genre, and thus determine its nomenclature for the genre.

Scholars who have carried out research on genre analysis have come up with sets of schemata involved in determining form and content which make texts allowable in different genres. Below are two examples of genres with their sets of schemata which make them identifiable as belonging to their respective genres.

The Genre of a Sales Letter

Bhatia (quoted in Flowerdew, 1993: 307) proposes the following moves for the genre of a sales letter:

(i) Establishing credentials, (ii) introducing the offer, (iii) offering incentives, (iv) offering the product/service, (v) essential detailing of the offer, (vi) indicating value of the offer, (vii) referring to enclosed documents, (viii) inviting further communication, (ix) using pressure tactics, (x) ending politely

The Genre of Research Article Introductions

Swales (1990) proposed four main moves:

- i. establishing the field, (ii) describing previous research (iii) preparing for present research, (iv) introducing present research.

The four moves structure was then collapsed into three moves structure termed as ‘creating a research space’ model for research article introductions: The structure includes:

- i. establishing the territory, (ii) establishing a niche, and (iii) occupying a niche.

The Genre of Research Reports: Some Issues

Having defined what a genre is, we can now turn our attention to the genre of research reports. To start with, we need to point out that writers of scientific research reports are often members of the academic discourse community. Therefore, they are supposed to have the expertise of not only handling the content of their specialised subjects but also in handling the language and the jargon of the particular discipline or profession.

In so far as the study sample is concerned, the expertise of writing research reports is provided to student writers in the subject called Research Methodology, which in the surveyed institution is coded as Pub 220. This is then followed by students’ fieldwork when they go out into various organisations to collect data, which is then analysed and presented in the form of research reports. It is this last aspect i.e. textual presentation of findings, in the form of reports that is the focus of this paper.

As a member of the academic discourse community, a student writer is expected to know that there are sets of conventions which determine form and content that make texts allowable in the genre of research reports. These sets of conventions also involve the use of jargon which

“draws not only on the vocabulary of the host discipline or profession but also on the structure and style of the language to which it clings” (Duff quoted in James, 1984: 109-110).

The experience of a brief survey of past undergraduates’ research reports in the study sample has shown that students tend to commit serious mistakes in writing research reports. Very often, in terms of form and content, the texts of most reports (as shall be shown shortly), do not constitute sets of schemata which warrant such texts to belong in the genre of research reports in the opinion of an expert in academic report writing.

The following section of the paper intends, firstly, to highlight the general problems observed, and secondly, to dwell on only a few selected aspects of the problem. Also, though sparingly, the paper provides some tips on sets of conventions needed to handle some of these aspects. Lastly, the paper discusses ways in which some of the highlighted problems could be addressed.

Summary of Findings

The survey was conducted on 90 research reports. The sample reports involved six (6) Advanced diploma programmes which currently run in the Department of Administrative Studies (DAS) and the Department of Business Studies (DBS). The sample selection was not based on any particular academic year, though the majority of the reports selected were from the academic year 1997/98.

It also needs to be mentioned that the problems noted in this study were common in all the six programmes. In other words, there is no evidence of a particular type of writing difficulty being a characteristic feature of students following a particular programme. The amazing thing, however, is that some of the sample problematic reports included those that were placed in the library; which means they were allowed to ‘pass’ with an average of A grade, despite their problems. Though these were considered as model reports, the evidence showed, however, that most of them were no better than those not considered as model reports.

There are two explanations to this paradox. The first, somehow contentious, is that perhaps some subject experts tend to pay less attention to language than they do to content, and, therefore allow to 'pass' even those essays with grievous presentation errors. Indeed, some of the subject experts do argue that paying equal attention to language as they do to concepts (while assessing students work) may result in mass failures, as many of our students are rather weak in self-expression.

The second explanation is that in the evaluation process of research reports, different examiners are involved, and thus the level of exigency or leniency would obviously not be the same. (Although, of course, this may not warrant the existence of the extreme cases observed in the study)

Having said so, we need now to turn our attention to the general picture of the problems exhibited in the reports surveyed. To start with, sixty-eight (i.e. 76%) of the research reports surveyed exhibit problems with the organisation of information into chapters. In regard to this, it is not a straightforward matter which report format is right or wrong. Experience across programmes did not provide any evidence of there being a format of how information should be organised into chapters. In consequence, chapter divisions seemed to have been done arbitrarily by individual student writers. As such, any chapter could literally consist of any kind of information.

Forty-six (i.e. 51%) of the research reports surveyed exhibit problems with structuring of sentences, ranging from inappropriate wording to inappropriate use of signposts, prepositions, the article, and punctuation. Such mistakes contributed greatly to comprehension problems.

Fifty-nine (i.e. 65%) of the research reports surveyed exhibit problems with presenting references and acknowledging sources. Problems include direct plagiarism, where students present a series of quotations (with no acknowledgement or elaboration whatsoever) as part of their own argument. Also evident in students' reports were instances of adulterated plagiarism, where students fail to integrate referred

information into the texts, and fail to critically comment or evaluate other writer's views.

46 (i.e. 51%) of the research reports surveyed exhibit problems in the choice of vocabulary, particularly introducing expressions to direct quotations or paraphrased information. In this case, student writers were poorly equipped with the appropriate verbs to report the literature and argue a case from it. There is also a problem with the use of verb forms, especially the use of the future tense in place of the past tense for reporting.

88 (i.e. 98%) of the research reports surveyed have problems in presenting the bibliography or the list of references at the end of the report. The problems noted range from arranging items in the lists of references to organising information of individual items in the bibliography. The problems also include the amount of detail needed and how to present it for each type of source reference.

Specific Aspects

Since students' writing problems are many and diverse in nature, this paper discusses only a few aspects of these problems, namely:

- i. problems which affect comprehension; two aspects will be considered here, namely:
 - a) structuring of sentences, and
 - b) choice of vocabulary - specifically, verb forms, and introductory expressions to quotations and paraphrased information,
- ii. problems in presenting references and acknowledging sources

Specific examples of students' extracts will be drawn from a few selected texts.

Problems Affecting Comprehension

Structuring of Sentences

Below are two example paragraphs taken from students' research reports. The first paragraph comes from a third year accountancy student whom we shall call Antonio, and the second paragraph comes from a third year Materials Management student, whom we shall call Fernandes.²

Paragraph 1

One will so often hear from our news media, e.g. Radio or reading through newspaper and weekly magazines like Sunday News, of many losses and theft in these institutions (e.g. Banks) where profits of such organisations have been rising arithematically (sic.) but in actual fact the losses were rising

Student of ADCA course: 1997/98: 1 (Antonio)

Paragraph 2

The Tanzania economy has been characterised by As a result the performance of materials management in several sector (sic.) has been poor due to ignorance and non-recognition by the organisation managements (sic.) of the importance of the function and that materials management professional has among other factors resulted in shortages spoilage and untimely availability of materials, implements and inputs.

Student of ADMA course: 1997/98: 8) (Fernandes)

Anyone reading either of these paragraphs will likely be at a loss at the end of the paragraph. What are the problems in these paragraphs? Let us start with the first paragraph. The first thing to strike the reader is the conglomeration of phrases which are conjoined, mostly by prepositions (i.e. from, of, in) and inappropriate co-ordinators - e.g. like,

² Code names have been used throughout the paper to conceal the identities of actual authors for ethical reasons.

‘like Sunday News’. Such a pile of phrases in this one sentence paragraph causes a lack of symmetry or structural parallelism in the sentence. For example, one may not know which exactly is the predicate of the sentence and where the subject ends.

There is also a problem of tautology where the student mentions the media, and thereafter gives examples which are unwarranted here because the media is understood, unless the student wanted to specify particular media, something which he does not seem to be doing because he ends listing all the media.

Also, the paragraph lacks a definitive main verb. This paragraph consists of only one sentence with two verbs, one at the beginning of the sentence, ‘will so often hear’ and the other at the end, ‘were rising’. Neither of these verbs plays the role of main verb. This aspect poses difficulties in locating the predicate leaving the reader to wonder what exactly is the central message of the paragraph.

These problems, as can be noted, are likely to delay readers or affect comprehension. Efforts to repair the first paragraph ended in the following:

The media often carry reports of losses suffered by financial institutions due to theft. Though it is reported that the profits of such institutions keep on rising, in actual fact the opposite is the case.

Turning to Fernandes’s paragraph, this sentence can only serve as a good example of crocodile sentences, i.e. sentences which go on and on “through floating participles, and tenuously related clauses with regard to neither appropriate grammar or logic” (Hobsbaum 1984: 64). The sentence contains run-on clauses which are poorly co-ordinated, with the overuse of the prepositions ‘by’ and ‘of’.

The paragraph is sparingly punctuated because of these prepositional phrases connecting the clauses.

Another weakness in Fernandes’ paragraph is inability to present information, in a way that clearly indicates the distinctions between facts and opinions. For instance, Fernandes does not provide any

evidence to support his argument that, ‘... *the performance of materials management in several factors has been poor due to ignorance and non-recognition by the organisation managements (sic) of the importance of ...*’. Neither in this section nor anywhere else has Fernandes taken any initiatives to validate his statement, no matter how contentious it sounds.

The writer also seems to be referring to things which are merely implied, i.e. things which are in his mind but are not explicitly stated or recorded on his page. For example, when he says ‘... *materials management professional has among other factors resulted in shortages spoilage and untimely availability of materials, implements and inputs...*’. The writer here does not make explicit where do these things happen, who are the affected parties, or generally why this information is significant.

The repair of this paragraph would only be possible after discussion with the writer to find out what he was actually intending to say.

Choice of vocabulary: Verb forms and introductory expressions to quotations and paraphrased information. Choice of vocabulary is another area that is examined in this paper. However, since this is a vast area, we will focus on only two aspects: verb forms and introductory expressions to paraphrases and quotations.

The first aspect is very brief. Let us begin by considering the following three extracts, taken from students’ research reports, reproduced below. The first extract comes from a third year student of a Health Administration course whom we shall call Banana. The second extract comes from a third year Public Administration student whom we shall call Mariana.

Extract 1

Data Collection Method

The method of data collection to be used are

Questionnaire

Questionnaires will be used to obtain data for FP providers. Here FP provider will be able to express their problems concerning to (sic) their duties and overall FP methods that are provided to clients.

Interview

Interview will be used to collect data from users and mon (sic) users of the services, The interviewer will be able to manage to get information of views, opinions and feelings concerning the services provided by the staff.

Documentation

Documentation will be important in data collection the researcher will uses (sic) book, Newspapers computer and clinical annual reports to support the exercise of data collection.
Student of ADHA Course: 1997/98: 11 (Banana)

Extract 2

CHAPTER TWO

STUDY AREA

The study will take place of (sic.) the Audio-visual Institute (AVI) of Dar es Salaam, a parastatal government-service organ established by ACT of Parliament No.26 of 1974.

UNITS OF INQUIRY

Employees from all the seven departments ... will be the major units of inquiry. They will provide the sample of the data from which data will be collected.

... heads of departments and the top managers will give the information on how they give feedback to their employees, ...

From a total of 42 employees of AVI 30 will be selected as a sample of the study ...

Student of ADPA Course: 1996/97: 10. (Mariana)

The obvious problem in the two extracts is the choice of verb forms. These extracts (and many others which could not be reproduced here) contain future tense, which is not appropriate in the reporting of research results. Whoever reads these extracts will be made to believe that the writers are, in fact, making a promise of what they are going to do in the field, instead of giving an account of what they actually did and discovered in the field. And so, the wrong tense makes these extracts unacceptable in the genre of reporting. Something else to be noted here is that sectioning in the two extracts leaves a lot to be desired.

It is appropriate now to focus attention on introductory expressions to paraphrases and quotations. Since this relates to the integration of information from other sources into our texts, two main aspects were noted. The first aspect relates to the use of wrong verbs or expressions. The second aspect relates to the use of expressions or verbs which do not provide any evaluation of the information that is being presented, i.e. the writer's critical comments of how he or she feels about the paraphrased information or quotation. The following are sets of extracts taken from students' research reports to illustrate both aspects of the problem. First is the set of extracts that reflect wrong choice of introductory verbs or expressions to quotations and paraphrases. Extract set 4 is from a student whom we shall call Masika. Extract set 5 is from a student whom we shall call Danda.

Extract 3

This is as per Sr. Imelda V. V. and Mr. Musa J. A (1994), ...

*As per Killagane, Y.S.M, (***) , ... [stars mean there is no date provided]*

*The term acceleration as per Meig, W. P et-la (sic) (***) ,*

*Value by estimated units of outputs as per Meig, W. P. et-la (sic.) (***) , ...*

Student of ADCA Course: 1997/98: 11 (Masika)

Extract 4

Kotler, P. et al (1991: 469) stipulates out the meaning of sales promotion ...

Strang P. et al (1997; Chapter 5) and ... generalise that ...

Kotler P. et al (1991; 460) narrates that ...

Student of ADCA Course: 1996/97: 11-13 (Danda)

The problem in these extracts is manifested in the introductory expressions which in this case sound inappropriate in integrating borrowed information in writing for academic genres. The expression ‘as per’ is not the appropriate expression³ for other authors’ arguments, statements, etc. And the expression ‘stipulates’ is not the appropriate word for introducing definitions.

The extract by Danda contains verbs such as ‘narrate’, and ‘generalise’, but when we went through the quoted materials it was noted that the referred author was, in fact, not narrating or generalising anything. Instead, he was stating a point and arguing a case. Thus, the use of ‘narrate’ and ‘generalise’ by the students was considered inappropriate.

There is also the use of titles, such as ‘Sr.’ (for Sister), and ‘Mr’. (for Mister) as shown in the extract by Masika. Titles in academic citation are not appropriate.

The following extracts are examples of introductory expressions that do not provide any critical comments on the paraphrased information or quotations. Extract set 6 is from a student of an Advanced Diploma in Health Administration (ADHA) whom we shall call Monica, and extract set 7 is from Danda op. cit.

³ Vocabulary selection according to the subject matter.

Extract 5

Mascarenhas (1989: 66) had this to say ...
Morley and Worland (1979: 141) notes ...
Cameon and Hofvanel (19883: 7) remarks (sic), ...
For instance King (1966:131) has written this ...
Students of ADHA 1997/98: 12

Extract 6

Stanton W. J. (1981, 425) says that sales promotion are those marketing activities other than personal selling, advertising and dealer effectiveness such as...
Rusell, J. I etal (sic.) (1990, 383 -86) says that advertising specialities can be very effective in regard to sale promotion...
Kessler F. (1986, 83) says that promotion dollars are directed to retailers and wholesalers (55%) then to consumers (45%) ...
'Danda', op cit: pp 9, 12, 13

As can be noted from the extract sets above, the expressions which introduce paraphrased information or quotations are all very ineffective in proving the writers' point of view with regard to the referred information. For one thing, these quotations are not just making plain statements as the student-writers would like us to believe. They convey stronger views which the writers need to evaluate critically and state what status they accord them. At times the general preference for such opaque verbs as 'say', 'remark', 'note', etc. seemed to indicate a lack of confidence, or an uncertainty among the student writers of whether the authors' arguments merited any authority.

Problems with Presenting References and Acknowledging Sources

As for the aspect of presenting references and acknowledging sources, the problems or difficulties that seem evident in the research reports

surveyed were among those pointed out by Brookes and Grundy (1990: 38), which are:

- how much to quote;
- how long the quotations should be;
- how they are integrated into the text;
- how they are acknowledged;
- how the thoughts of the writer are summarised where he or she is not being directly quoted.

These problems are manifested where students lift information word for word from other writers. In most cases there is little or no attempt at all to summarise such information and present it in the student's own words. Worse still, when such information is presented no attempt is made to show that it is in fact taken directly from other writers, by either enclosing it in inverted commas or indenting it.

Furthermore, in cases where information is presented as another author's, it is not properly acknowledged. In some cases students fail to provide the date, page, or both. The following text illustrates some of these aspects. It is an extract from a section on literature review by a student of Material Management whom we shall call Leo:

Extract 7

RELATED LITERATURE.

Before looking what stock recording is let briefly define record and system.

A record or document is any written evidence or device by means of which information is stored. In materials management and warehouse management records are very important a part from storage information they greatly contribution (sic.) to the movement from supplier through warehouse to the ultimate user

A system is a combination of two more elements which perform interrelated functions with the extension of achieving the desired goals.

Therefore stock recording systems are means by which informations (sic.) are captured stored analysed and used. The main target is to acceralate (sic.) efficient performance of stores functions and control of the stocks.

Inventories are said to be the biggest spender of the organisation fund, which consume more than sixty percent (60%) of cost of production in the organisation. Due to this fact stock Recording is given a greater weight to assure the cost minimization.

PURPOSE OF STOCK RECORDING.

Reasons for keeping stock recordings according to Morrison, A. are: -

- i). To indicate the amount of stock of any item without it being necessary of the stock to be counted physically.*
- ii). To establish a link between the physical stock and the store account. ...*

Source: Student of ADMA 1997/98: 6 (Leo)

As can be observed, most of Leo's statements are presumably direct quotations because they involve definitions of terms and concepts, and presentation of statistics. And none of this information, with a minor exception, has been acknowledged. Clearly, this is straightforward plagiarism. Leo fails to acknowledge the sources for his ideas.

In some other instances, however, not a single source has been acknowledged in the entire research report. Yet, in other instances, student-writers provide full details of source material in the text, i.e. more information than is required in acknowledging sources in the text. This includes information such as author, date, title, publisher, etc. Consider the following extract below, which is from a Health Administration student whom we shall call Figo:

Extract 8

The Article by McGinley and Dance “Managing the Cost of Health Care, International Hospital management 1989 state that ...

*Also according to Oscar and Gish **Planning the Health Sector. The Tanzanian Experiences** London Groon, Helon, 1978. Acknowledges that ...*

Source: student of ADHA, 1998: 6-7 (Figo)

Figo in the above extracts does acknowledge sources, but fails to make proper citations of the sources he acknowledges.

Measures to Address Students’ Writing Problems

The following section looks at some of the ways instructors may use to improve students writing skills. The following approaches are suggested in this paper: team teaching of writing for academic genres, giving students graduated writing assignments, and last but by no means least, using existing texts as models.

Team Teaching of Writing for Academic Genres

Team teaching may involve working together between the language instructor and the subject instructor to meet students’ needs on specific language areas. It is understood that the student’s inability to cope with his/her subject may not result from his/her lack of knowledge of the subject, or from his/her lack of ability to communicate. The problem may result from students’ lack of full knowledge of their potential, and how this can fully be realised. The team teaching can help students achieve this goal.

Currently, English for academic purposes and other subjects seem to be operating quite independently of each other. Thus, tackling students’ writing problems effectively becomes difficult. The team teaching of higher intellectual skills, in particular academic writing skills, requires a

triangle of feedback involving the language instructor, the subject instructor and the student.

The subject instructors, who need to know how effectively they are communicating with their students, have the knowledge of the specialist subjects, including the required jargon (that dictates vocabulary, structure and style) of the host discipline which they would expect their students to master. They also need to understand “whether his assumptions about the level at which to present a particular topic are justified or not.” (Dudley-Evans, 1984:132). The language instructor, “needs to understand something of the conceptual framework of the subjects his students are studying, and to observe at first hand where students encounter difficulties with their subject course” (Ibid.). The language instructor has the knowledge of the application of the language skills to communicate concepts in these specialised subjects. And, lastly, the student, who needs to know how well he/she is meeting the demands of the course, and where exactly he/she needs assistance with difficulties regarding his/her communication ability.

There are cases where students in language tests score better than they would in other subjects. This is not surprising because in language tests students concentrate on things pertaining to the rules of the language or principles for the demonstration of certain skills of communication. When called upon to write extended essays, however, students make frequent language and presentation errors. They fail to make the necessary association between the skills they acquire from language sessions and the application of such skills in their specialised subjects.

Establishing a triangle of feedback between the language instructor, the subject instructor and the student would make students realise the relevance of language skills to other subjects, and that language skills are not studied for their own sake. How can this triangle be established? The subject instructor could invite the language instructor and work in the same classroom with students in discussing, for example, the requirements of real essay questions. Students could work out a plan for the answer and invite their subject instructor to comment on whether or

not they have met his/her expectations. The language instructor may guide students in the presentation part and let the students write the essay individually. At the end of the session students' essays (a selected few) may be marked by both the language instructor and the subject instructor each one giving his/her comments. Students' common writing problems would be identified, and basing on the prognosis of the two instructors, feedback would be provided to students, who would then be advised on how to improve their future work.

The team teaching approach was once carried out at the University of Birmingham with overseas postgraduate students taking the English course for occupational purposes. The approach involved the language instructor and the subject instructor working together in the same classroom to meet students' needs in the area of lecture comprehension and writing examination answers (See Johns and Dudley-Evans 1990, for a full description of the work). This work proved quite successful and very useful to the target group students.

Similar work involving lecture comprehension and essay writing is reported to have been carried out at Ngee Ann Polytechnic in Singapore (Dudley-Evans 1984: 127). This course was designed to prepare students for as many as possible of the writing tasks that students may have to carry out in their future jobs. A number of useful insights were obtained from this approach and they have been used and proved successful in many other places.

Giving Graduated Writing Assignments

Giving graduated writing assignments is another way instructors can deal with students' writing difficulties. Often, students are called upon to write extended essays requiring high intellectual skills before they are exposed to enough writing practice. As such, broad-based writing competence across disciplines is not well established right from the time a new student joins a higher learning institution. As a result, students do not get time to practice the skills they learn in their language lessons before they find themselves in a situation requiring them to use these skills in answering real essay questions.

It is suggested, therefore, that subject instructors should make efforts to give students trial writing tasks, which need not be recorded. These writing tasks may serve as diagnosis assignments to identify areas of difficulties which need to be brought to the attention of language instructors. Such tasks need to be simple and given at the beginning of the term or semester, and (if time allows) may be repeated later in the term or semester at reasonable intervals, but making them more complex each time. This is to say, they should be given in a graduated manner, i.e. starting from something easy to something more difficult.

When students' writing or comprehension difficulties are identified and dealt with, perhaps students will have the opportunity of improving and developing their writing and comprehension ability to the level of the expectation of their subject instructors.

Using Model Written Texts

Using existing texts is another way in which instructors could deal with students' difficulties. This approach requires the instructors to expose students to two sets of sample written texts of a given genre, e.g. research report, essay, etc. One set should consist of well-written texts and the other set should consist of badly written texts of the same kind. Students should study the two sets, and then, through group discussions they should identify common features of well-written texts and those of badly written texts. Students can then be asked to make suggestions of improving the badly written texts.

Alternatively, students may be allowed to use other texts as models for their own writing. They should examine model texts to identify typical lexico-grammatical and discourse features which are characteristic of a given genre, e.g. a research article, an argumentative essay, etc. Then they should be asked to write their own similar articles or essays on different topics, using formats and features of the model texts. This approach is quite similar to what Flowerdew calls using 'on-line' genre analysis. He makes the point that "When faced with writing a business letter in a foreign language, a sensible reaction is to examine other business letters to see how they are written" (1993: 312).

This approach is also similar to another of Flowerdew's approaches called, '*acknowledging modelling*'. According to Flowerdew, "Many native speakers make use of others' writing or speech to model their own work in their native language, where the genre is unfamiliar one". He argues that, "It is time that this skill was brought out of the closet, and exploited as an aid to learning, instead of remaining a secret activity not acknowledged by teachers." (Flowerdew 1993: 313).

It is deemed appropriate for instructors to adopt this approach in helping our students improve their own writing. Instructors could select a few well-written essays from students' own assignments and discuss with them why such essays merited higher marks and what kind of responses the students were expected to give.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to argue that academic and/or professional success presupposes the possession of good writing skills. And that more than anybody else, students in higher education need these skills the most as their academic life is inextricably intertwined with extensive writing activities.

The results of a brief survey done among IDM undergraduate students research reports have, however, indicated that our students in higher education (let alone lower levels) need more help in writing skills. One of the ways in which this help can be offered is through team teaching. This approach involves all the players (i.e. the language instructor, the subject instructor, and the student) working together and giving each other feedback on the existing difficulties and how to approach them. Other remedial measures that might prove useful are giving students graduated writing assignments and using model written texts.

Students writing difficulties are many, and so are the possible solutions. Unfortunately, not many of these difficulties could be looked at in this small paper. It is hoped that the paper will provide the necessary impetus for anyone interested in the area, to do similar studies

and provide more solutions to the writing problems faced by our students in higher education today.

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