

# Some of the problems in first year students' academic writing in some SADC Universities

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*There are many problems that confront English as a Second Language (ESL) learners in academic writing in some Southern African Development Community (SADC) universities. Some observers and commentators have noted that most graduates from Historically Black Universities (HBUs) exhibit poor performance in English when compared to neighbouring countries like Lesotho and Swaziland. One of these problems is the low proficiency which manifests itself in numerous syntactic errors and inappropriate lexical selection in their use of the target language. The forms or varieties are simply mistakes or errors which can be eradicated by teaching. The learners need to learn and understand the structure and nature of the English language. The deviations and innovations arise owing to a number of processes which are sketched out in the paper. This article also argues that the problem stems from the fact that the burden has been placed on departments of English which seem not to want to abandon the literary tradition. It presents some of the problems that African learners of English in HBUs seem to exhibit in academic writing when they enter university education. It discusses what is done and what needs to be done for first-year students when they enter university in HBUs. In HBUs English language programmes are not mandatory or do not exist, as is the case with most SADC universities and some Historically White Universities (HWUs). The conclusion suggests that it becomes necessary to mount similar English language programmes at first year level in institutions which do not have these programmes. It is hoped that this would improve learners' language proficiency and hopefully competence as well as the way students acquire their education.*

**Keywords:** Students; academic writing; universities, SADC

## Introduction

A serious and honest inquiry into our students' poor standard and performance in English, though not a new call or observation, is desperately needed. There are many reasons the situation should obtain. Graduates from departments of English are and should be looked up to as standard-bearers in the use of the language. They should be able to draft or edit scripts, letters, reports, memoranda, speeches, etc. and make decisions on ambiguous usage. They are expected to answer without hesitation 'which is right: X or Y?' from which an obvious follow-up question comes: 'Why?' The knowledge being sought here is not that of a linguist or a language practitioner.

## Background

Discussions with language teaching colleagues in the SADC region indicate that a disappointing state of affairs seems to exist, particularly in respect of students and graduates of former Historically Black Universities (HBUs) in South Africa. There is a great deal of general discontentment out there. Language practitioners in the departments of English from school to higher institutions of learning should shoulder the blame to a large extent. The major problem is the lack of learning or under-preparedness of learners in Historically Black Universities (HBUs), and the responsibility of teaching or developing the English proficiency is shifted to departments of English, where in most cases there is no capacity or programme to deal with the task. It is an indictment of these departments that the burden of teaching the language placed on them has not produced desired results.

## Some of the problems

There seems to be a wide disparity in English proficiency among graduates within the SADC region. In South Africa the situation is serious and needs more urgent practical attention than the lip-service it sometimes receives. Those from HBUs are said to be very weak in English proficiency when compared to those from HWUs, such as University of Pretoria, University of Cape Town and the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Learners from countries like Lesotho and Swaziland are reported by Bloom (2008) to perform better than their South African counterparts on basic literacy and numeracy. The situation could be worse in under-resourced schools from where HBUs draw their students. Barkhuizen (1992) has made the point that "most high school teachers have had very little or no training at all in the structure of language." The background of Black learners of English is that of ill-trained or unqualified teachers (see also Buthelezi, 1995). Therefore, most first year students in HBUs are weak or under-prepared and the situation continues during their university education. Apartheid could still be a factor, in that students' segregated parents could not acquire enough skills in English to pass on to the immediate post-apartheid generations.

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Graduates are reported to be very weak, if not lacking the most basic language skills, in this important official language. For example, they are reported to be unable to read and write competently, yet some of them have been awarded a degree which reports that they studied English at university level. Third year students or students in their final year of university study cannot write sentences, paragraphs, essays and dissertations, yet the expectation is that they have this skill.

Students feel that they need or are encouraged to register for English modules or courses to improve their English. More often than not, the students are disappointed to find that little if anything is achieved, however. The main weaknesses of twelve years of education are expected to be remedied in one term or a year's teaching in the Department of English.

It cannot be an exaggeration to state that the contact period between the lecturers and students at university is too short to make a major impact on the students' competency. It is an unrealistic expectation to expect lecturers, who are in most cases not trained language teachers, to remedy the problems the students bring to their university education.

It should not be forgotten that lecturers in departments of English are people who, in most cases, are not trained or certified language teachers, but individuals who have distinguished themselves in their respective fields of specialisation in literary studies and not in language studies *per se*.

The extreme end of the sad state of affairs is where disciplines that have nothing to do with language have been known to mount courses and label them *language* courses as long as they deal with writing skills or logical thinking. Philosophy, for instance, which requires the skills of writing and thinking, has been offered as a *language* module at the University of Zululand.

It is from this pool of graduates that teachers of English are drawn who prepare the first-year students that come to universities after passing matriculation, or O level examinations in some SADC countries. This seems to be a perpetually recycled problem as little or nothing appears to be done about it even at university level.

The challenge of English teaching arguably lies more decidedly in developing and improving the literacy and communicative competence of the learners rather than solely exposing them to the literary tradition. The learners need to understand the structure and nature of the language to be able to handle its literature with greater efficiency. Departments of English should deal with both language and literature and should take explicit responsibility for addressing language-related problems throughout the university.

These issues need to be raised within departments of English and should involve more knowledge about the structure of the language than is the case in the traditional context of English teaching where lecturers are steeped in the literary tradition. Young (1988:325) aptly points out the following:

English graduates clearly know a great deal about English literature and literary criticism and are able to apply this knowledge well in their own teaching of school based literature. But there are obviously many other facets to 'English' in the school curriculum ... These additional components of 'English' are embedded more in linguistic and sociolinguistic frames of knowledge than they are in literary ones. It is in these later two areas of understanding about language that we find graduates in English to be lacking in knowledge much needed in the classrooms, especially in the TESOL context.

Moyo (1995) has reported that the main problem which confronts second language learners (ESL) in academic writing is their low proficiency, which manifests itself in numerous syntactical and inappropriate lexical selections in the use of English: the Target Language (TL).

Forson (1992:48) observes that when degree courses in English were first introduced in South Africa's universities, almost all the students were native speakers of the language and the departments could afford to teach literature, justifiably assuming that there would be no language problems in the learners' way. Non-native speakers had attained a relatively higher proficiency in the language before being admitted to university. He further records that:

now ... things have changed: the majority of the students in ... possibly all English departments in the country, are users of English as a second language: Indians, speakers of African indigenous languages and Afrikaans – who need to understand the structure and nature of the language to be able to handle its literature with greater efficiency.

According to Forson (*ibid.*:48)

Student numbers in the departments of English at that time were relatively small, and lecturers in English literature, most of whom were native speakers, could at least perceive and "correct" errors in expression while marking exercises (even if they didn't, wouldn't, or most probably, couldn't assign reasons for the "correction" beyond the feeling that it "doesn't sound right ...")

English language teachers expect that their students will write in fully formed sentences, with cohesive paragraphs, with a variety of lexical items, with tensed verbs and numbered nouns. Accordingly, they generally tend to correct the absence of tense or number markings on verbs and of determiners on nouns. The use of *phrases* or *fragments* instead of *complete sentences* and a lack of *paragraph development* are characteristic of students' work.

The Historically White Institutions (HBIs) may not have needed language programmes because their learners had the required competence when they entered university. In fact, these learners had studied the structure of the English language. Now the situation has changed. Native English speakers are in the minority among students in the English departments. There are more Black learners with weak proficiency in HWUs and also in HBUs. Most of these learners might not have studied the structure of the English language. However, it is ironical that Academic Development (AD) appears to have collapsed in HBUs, while it has remained at the University of Witwatersrand, the University of Cape Town and at Rhodes University.

The HBUs which previously admitted students without matriculation symbols have decided to close the doors to these and only admit student with a pass in English. The HBUs are no longer places where students who fail can get a chance for university education, but are competing with the best in terms of student admission. The unfortunate situation is that in these institutions the need for proficiency among the students has been recognised, but there are no practical measures in place other than lip-service and memorandum circulation.

Forson (1992:49) has pointed out that "most high school teachers have had very little or no training at all in the structure of language." The background of Black learners of English is that of ill-trained or unqualified teachers (see also Buthelezi, 1995). Therefore, ill-formed structures are passed on or taught to learners and become fossilised. Undoubtedly, these learners' competence is bound to be weak when they enter university education. Students exhibit deficiencies in academic writing owing to a lack of linguistic competence in terms of use of appropriate vocabulary and a lack of familiarity with the writing modes and skills concerned with effective conventions for written work.

### Some examples of errors and mistakes

According to Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982:138:139) researchers have found that like L1 learners' errors, most of the errors L2 learners make indicate they are gradually building an L2 rule system. The most common are:

1. **Omitting grammatical morphemes**, which are the items that do not contribute much to the meaning of sentences, as in *He buy goat*.
2. **Double marking** is a semantic feature (e.g. past tense) when only one marker is required, as in *She didn't went back*.
3. **Regularising rules**, as in *womans* for women.
4. **Using wrong pronouns**, use one form in place of other, such as the use of **her** for both *she* and *her*, as in *I see her yesterday. Her dance with my sister*.
5. **Using two or more forms in random alteration**, even though the language requires the use of each only under certain conditions, as in the random use of *he* and *she* regardless of the gender of the person in question.
6. **Misordering**, items in constructions that require a reversal of word-order rules that had been previously acquired, as in *What you are doing?* Or misplacing items that may be correctly placed in more than one place in the sentence, as in *They are all the time late*.

### The distinction between error and mistake

Sometimes researchers distinguish between errors caused by conditions such as fatigue and inattention (what Chomsky, 1965, calls "performance" conditions), and errors resulting from lack of knowledge of the rules of the language (what Chomsky, 1965, calls "competence"). In some of the language literature, performance errors have been called "mistakes" while the term "errors" has been reserved for the systematic deviations. It is claimed that the learner is still developing knowledge of the L2 rule system (Corder, 1967).

The distinction between performance and competence errors is extremely important. However, for our purposes we use **error** to refer to any deviation from a selected educated norm of language performance, no matter what the characteristics or causes of the deviation might be.

It is interesting to note that preliminary research has been carried out on some of the deviations and innovations of English in southern Africa. Studies such as those by Buthelezi (1995), Chisanga (1997) and Magura (1985) seem to suggest the existence of local varieties of English. However, Chishimba (1991) and Mpepo (2000), from a pedagogical point of view, argue that these forms within varieties of English are simply mistakes or errors which can be dealt with by teaching, even if it involves drilling. In fact, every speaker of any language would like to use the correct forms to be considered to be competent in the language.

Among the most common deviations and innovations in Southern Africa are:

**Bugged** (broken down or out of order) **lekker** (nice, good), **braai** (barbecue), **baas** (boss), **robots** (traffic lights), **lobola/ed** (brideprice), **offed** (switched off), **oned** (switched on). **moveous** (not staying in one place), **now now** (very soon, shortly), **costive** (expensive), **gate crash** (enter without authority), **discuss about** (talk about), **too good** (very good), **emphasise on** (elaborate on), **cope up with** (cope with), **demand for** (asked for/demanded), **requested for** (requested/asked for /called for), **somehow useless** (somewhat useless), **picked him to his house** (took him to his house), **putting on jeans** (wearing jeans), **borrow me** (lend me).

These deviations and innovations arise owing to a number of processes:

1. **Lexical transfer:** there is no distinction made between the verbs **lend** and **borrow** in Bantu languages. Bantu languages have only one for both verbs. Consequently sentences such as these abound:

- i. *Can you borrow me your car?* (lend)
- ii. *I can borrow you my pen.* (lend)
- iii. *Please borrow me some money.* (lend)
- iv. *Why did you borrow her so much money.* (lend)

In fact the verb **lend** is hardly used in the colloquial Local Forms of English (LFE).

## 2. Subject copying

In Bantu languages in general, and in the indigenous languages spoken in Southern Africa in particular, a subject noun phrase must agree with the verb by means of an agreement prefix. This feature, which corresponds to a subject pronoun in English, is carried over into the LFE, as illustrated below.

- i. *Sipho he is going to town.* (Sipho is going to town.)
- ii. *These people they cheat a lot.* (These people cheat a lot.)
- iii. *Children these days they misbehave.* (Children these days misbehave)

## 3. Question formation

The following structures illustrate a general pattern of question word which is kept in conformity with the syntactic structures of the Bantu languages.

- i. *People are how?* (How are people?)
- ii. *You want to go with who?* (Whom do you want to go with?)
- iii. *You are leaving when?* (When are you leaving?)
- iv. *You are going where?* (Where are you going?)

## 4. Overgeneralisation of the –ING form

Here, the progressive form is often extended to stative verbs, as shown below.

- i. *“He goes about condemning corrupt practices when his own back yard is stinking (stinks) (Schmied, 1996:312).*
- ii. *I am loving this person (I love this person).*
- iii. *She is having a problem (She has a problem).*
- iv. *They are having an examination (They have an examination).*
- v. *I am having a new friend, Nkosi (I have a new friend, Nkosi).*
- vi. *This is stemming from lack of news. (This stems from lack of news).*
- vii. *You are having my dictionary. (You have my dictionary)*

## 5. Number and gender

The distinction between the pronouns *he* and *she* does not exist nor inflect verbs for the third person singular. This is because Bantu languages, which mark the syntax of the students, do not have these features. This feature is, therefore frequent, as can be seen in the following sentences, where *she* and *her* refer to masculine nouns, *my father* and the *man*, respectively.

- i. *My father is going to the States and she (he) will come back next year.*
- ii. *The man stays (lives) with a girlfriend who is not her (his) wife.*

Number is sometimes marked where it is not needed, and vice versa, as illustrated below.

- i. *Otherwise, why is the President (of Malawi) and his ministers waste (wasting) their time preaching what they do not practice.* (Schmied. 1996:312).
- ii. *He talk (speaks) English all the time.*
- iii. *Everyday he play (plays) soccer.*
- iv. *My feets (feet) hurt.*

## 6. Phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs such as **apply to/for**, **look for**, **look after**, and similar others are commonly used without their respective particles; while ordinary verbs such as **reverse**, **return**, **seek request** and **discuss** are often used with a particle, e.g. **back**, **for** and **about**. Platt et al. (1984) observe that such usage may be influenced by verbs such as 'talk' and 'ask' which take the preposition 'about' and 'for'. Thus it is not unusual to find structures such as the following:

- i. *We discussed about the performance of the team in the World Cup.*
- ii. *The farmer requested for more money at the bank to buy cattle.*

## 7. Adjectives and adverbs

In the English of the student under discussion, there seems to be no distinction between some types of adjectives, such as **long** and **tall**, **alone** and **single**, **good** and **well**, as illustrated below.

- i. *When I met her she told me she was **alone** (single). Now I've discovered she is a married woman.*
- ii. *Vusi is **moving with** your sister. (dating)*
- iii. *She is **moving** with bad boys. (socialising)*
- iv. *Will you please **escort** me to Durban. (accompany)*
- v. *They **bounced** at your room. (They went to your room but you weren't there.)*
- vi. *My father is **late**. (dead)*
- vii. *Listen here my friend and listen **good**. (well)*

The above example could also indicate the inability to distinguish between American and British English.

The expression a **tall person**, for instance, is sometimes rendered as a **long person**. Again, this is because in most Bantu languages no distinction is made between these two adjectives, **long** and **tall**.

## What is done and what needs to be done?

Students entering university are expected to be at an advanced level in English. They should have passed with a credit in English (see Schmied.1991). In countries like Botswana, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Swaziland students would rather fail in their mother tongues though they speak them fluently than fail to pass English with credit. The importance of English worldwide is obvious and a lot of literature has dealt with this matter.

In South Africa, however, it is not uncommon to find people, particularly students, who think that the knowledge of English is not that important as they consider it not to be their mother tongue. This is a very weak excuse and would be very hard to defend. It would be interesting to investigate the competence levels in people's and students' mother tongues before issues of bilingualism or multilingualism are considered. Nevertheless, the demand for a good command of English, particularly at university level of study, is inescapable.

The question of *mother tongue* or *native speaker* is controversial as it raises concerns of ownership of the language. At the same time, there has to be concern and desire to liberate the non-native speaker from the dominance of the native speaker. No one owns a language not even a *mother tongue* or *native speaker*, as what matters is the question of competence or expertise in a language.

Writing about the English usage, Roberts (1956:1-2) maintains that people differ in the use of the language not only in speech, but also in the words and the forms that words have. It is obvious that Americans differ in their usage of English from the British English.

Adendorff and Savini-Beck (1992: 242) recognise that variation is inevitable among speakers of English, because people "desire to signal information about their group and individual identity, and where their loyalties lie."

Some writers, for example Loveday (1982), have expressed the view that the phenomenon of intermixing linguistic codes, and perhaps sociocultural patterns, indicates inadequacy or incompetence in any single communicative system. Contrary to this view, Chinua Achebe (1975:61-62) states that:

- If ... you as: can [an African speaker of English as a second language] ever learn to use it [English] like a native speaker? I should say, I hope not. It is neither necessary, nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price of a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use ... I have been given

this language [English] and I intend to use it ... I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.

The need to liberate speakers of English as a second language seems to have been underplayed if not sacrificed on the altar of "Anglo" or American varieties of English.

KirkPatrick (2000:2) records the following:

... As Tommy Koh, a senior minister in the Singapore government, put it ... "When I speak English I want the world to know I'm a Singaporean."... Japan's ... teaching goals are that learners should become American English speakers. This is unrealistic and damaging to the cause of ELT. Students are fearful of speaking because they falsely consider themselves to be poor speakers unless they sound like Americans.

As noted earlier, there has been some research in the development of varieties of English (see Buthelezi (1995), Chisanga (1997) and Magura (1985)). However, what is urgently needed is to know what cultural and discourse conventions are being exhibited in the new varieties.

That varieties of language can be used creatively and effectively and the conclusion that there has to be the acceptance of language varieties is by no means new in contexts where the purpose of teaching and learning is to enable learners to communicate successfully in English for personal, social and educational purposes.

In this regard, it becomes clear why radical steps have been taken by some universities in some SADC countries and some universities in South Africa to recognise the importance of English and to support the improvement of English proficiency in students.

Even if students obtain a credit in English, for most SADC countries, such as Botswana, Lesotho, Swaziland, they still have a programme of English at university level, which students need to pass or they do not graduate.

In South Africa, Historically HWUs, such as the University of Pretoria, the University of Cape Town and the University of KwaZulu-Natal each have a programme for a first year English course to deal with second language speakers of English.

First year students in HBUs exhibit serious problems in English language. Admittedly, this is to be expected as most of them come from a very weak background academically. They have been taught mostly by untrained English language teachers and may arrive at university without any matriculation exemption. Knowledge of the structure of language is not there, which leads to the use of inappropriate lexical items. Logical development of points in the written work is hampered e.g. lack of cohesive devices, such as **nevertheless**, **therefore** and **however**. The result is weak or poor incoherence in written work, apart from the problems of language proficiency highlighted in this paper.

The problems raised in this paper are not incurable. The extent to which the departments in Historically Black Universities (HBUs) will address these problems will depend on the extent to which the teaching staff will transform. The English programmes will need to be redesigned to focus more on speaking, the structure of English or grammar and writing.

Other skills such as asserting and negotiating will also need to be covered. Young (1988:324) argues as follows:

... the teaching of English at school level can no longer be understood in its traditional sense of transmitting a culture of literature, aesthetic sensibilities and English values to a predominantly white elite [sic]. The immediate future and challenge of English teaching arguably lies more decidedly in improving the literacy and communicative competence in English of over seven million black [sic] children who have English as a medium of instruction in their daily schooling.

Definitely, the redesigned English programmes will better serve the weak and under-prepared students by turning them into a confident and effective useful work force for the development of South Africa.

## Conclusion

This article has presented some of the problems that confront *English as a Second Language* (ESL) learners in academic writing in some SADC universities. One of these problems is the low proficiency which manifests itself in numerous syntactic errors and inappropriate lexical selection in their use of the target language. It has argued that the major problem is the lack of or under-preparedness of learners in HBUs and the responsibility of teaching or developing the English proficiency is shifted to departments of English, where in most cases there is no capacity or programme to deal with the task. The article has discussed some of the problems that African learners of English seem to exhibit in academic writing when they enter university education. These problems are not incurable. It has presented what is done and what needs to be done for first year-students when they enter university. The suggestion is that what is done in most of the

SADC countries and HWUs be implemented. They can be dealt with by effecting similar English languages programmes in universities such as the University of Fort Hare, the University of Limpopo, the University of Venda and the University of Zululand.

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