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Ghanaian university students' entry grades in English and their performance in academic writing

Abstract

Although there is a strong inter-relationship between English proficiency and academic English as evidenced by several studies in the South African educational context, studies that explore the correlation between the standard of English and performance in university first-year interventionist courses in academic English in the Ghanaian university context are virtually non-existent. The level of work elsewhere, especially in South Africa provides a strong motivation for this line of inquiry in another African university. This study attempts to correlate performance of students in English at the point of entry to the University of Ghana and their performance in academic writing. The academic records of a total of 23,806 students, composed of Mature Students (716), Ordinary "O" Level students (2,199), and Senior Secondary School students (20,891), and covering a period of five years were analyzed. The grades students obtained in English were correlated with the grades they obtained in academic writing at the end of a one-semester academic writing course. The analysis indicates a weak relationship between the students' entry grade for English and their final grade in academic writing.

Keywords: Computer supported collaborative work, academic writing, Facebook, perceived self-efficacy, academic acculturation

1.   Introduction

English-medium universities across the globe require a certain minimum standard of proficiency in English from students seeking admission into their institutions (Green, 2005: 45). In European, Australian, and North American universities especially, standard tests of English proficiency such as TOEFL and IELTS are used as determinants of the fate of prospective international students (Cho & Bridgeman, 2012; Yen & Kuzma, 2009; Elder et al., 2007; Woodrow, 2006; Feast, 2002; Kerstjens & Nery, 2000; Black, 1991). African and Asian students especially have to pass these international tests before they are given admission into these universities. In Africa, the importance of English is not confined to English-speaking countries. It is evident in the requirements for "language credentials" (often including an appropriate mark in English) for students who complete high school and who want to enter higher education; and in some cases, English is even a requirement at the level of completion of tertiary education. In West Africa in particular, a pass in English in the West African Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (WASSSCE) is the prerequisite for entering tertiary-level educational institutions in English-speaking countries; in addition to this entrance requirement, a pass is required in English at the level of the Baccalaureate in many of these contexts. These requirements existed in various forms in the past. For example, in Ghana, the previous requirement was a credit in English at the General Certificate Examination (GCE) ordinary level examinations. These prerequisites exist and have existed before because English is the medium of instruction at tertiary level and its mastery is essential to academic success. Therefore, in response to growing concerns that students are entering university with weak language skills, many African universities like their counterparts elsewhere have introduced courses in Communication Skills, Academic English, English for Academic Purposes or English Academic Literacy courses for undergraduate students (Butler, 2013; Jacobs, 2013; Mulaudzi, 2013; Weideman, 2013; Stephen et al., 2004; Adika, 2012.) These courses, which are characterized as bridging programmes, combine remedial English with English for academic purposes; and in terms of structure, substance, and pedagogical approaches, they are designed to help prepare students to meet academic language requirements at university.

Indeed, in English-medium universities, the role language plays in the various disciplines and its status as a defining feature of membership of disciplinary sub-communities (Boughey, 2000; Hyland, 2006) have stimulated substantial correlative studies on English proficiency and general academic performance. A review of studies done in the South African context on the relationship between language proficiency and academic literacy and/or performance not only reveals that substantial work has been done in the area (Van Rooy and Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2015), but also demonstrates the relative complexity of the phenomenon, as well as, particularly, the language backgrounds of entering university students in relation to their academic performance. In the Ghanaian context, however, studies that explore the correlation between standard of English and performance at university are virtually non-existent. This study, therefore, attempts to correlate the performance of students in English at the point of entry to the University of Ghana and their academic writing.

2.   Overview of correlative studies

A review of correlative studies involving the relationship between English proficiency levels and subsequent academic performance shows that attention has been mainly focused on the correlation between performance in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examination and subsequent academic performance (See Cho and Bridgeman, 2012 for a comprehensive overview.). While some studies (Kerstjens and Nery, 2000; Yen and Kuzma, 2009) have found a moderate level of correlation, others (Feast, 2002; Stephen et al., 2004) have established a significant and positive correlation. In the Kerstjens and Nery study, the IELTS scores of 113 first-year international students from The New South Wales Technical and Further Education Commission (TAFE NSW – Australia's leading vocational education and training provider) and higher education sectors of the Faculty of Business of an Australian university were correlated with their first-semester grade point average (GPA).

Related to this study is the investigation by Yen and Kuzma (2009), whose focus was on Chinese students in an Australian University. In both studies, the moderate levels of correlation persuaded the investigators to concede that there are other possible factors influencing the performance of the students, namely, area of study, cultural background, country of origin, whether graduate or undergraduate, personality and attitude, age, gender, financial difficulties, family pressure to perform well, amount of preparation before a course, and many other factors. They concede further that such factors are not only impossible to control but can also restrict the extent to which generalizations and comparisons can be made. On the other hand, Stephen et al. (2004) and Ardasheva et al. (2012), on the strength of the positive correlation they established between English proficiency levels and academic performance, argue very forcefully that high levels of English language proficiency are a critical factor in achieving academic success.

In the South African context, and as noted earlier in this paper, studies on the relationship between language proficiency and academic literacy and/or performance reveal the relative complexity of the phenomenon (Van Rooy and Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2015). In their comprehensive investigation of this relationship at a South African University, Van Rooy and Coetzee-Van Rooy (2015) indicate among other findings that language measures, for example, matric language marks are not good predictors of academic success at university even though scores achieved in academic literacy modules are good predictors of academic success. They explain further, that the "degree to which the school language curriculum prepares students adequately for higher education is unclear." (Van Rooy and Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2015: 34).

In what could be regarded as an extension to this "uncertainty", Weideman (2013) attributes the language proficiency problem to the low status of African languages in the psyche of Africans themselves, which in turn is exacerbated by the lack of reading materials in the local languages at the basic level.   Weideman (2013: 12) summarises the problem as follows:

> Often as a result of the deliberate choice of their parents, many of them [the children] are exposed to their additional language, English, before they have a settled competence in their first, against the conventional wisdom over many decades regarding mother tongue education. If the results of internationally benchmarked tests are to be believed, substantial numbers of children at primary school never learn to read properly in their first language. They therefore do not have an adequate, generic reading proficiency to transfer to an additional language, which in most cases is English, and which also happens to be the language of instruction. In short: they start out either wrong, or not so well, but certainly not right.

Some attempts have also been made to investigate the relationship between language proficiency and academic performance using European-based models like Cummins' well-known framework: Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). According to Van Dyk and Van de Poel (2013: 53), Coetzee-Van Rooy (2010) investigated the applicability of Cummins' two theories of language proficiency to the South African Higher Education sector in order to explore the link between language proficiency and academic success in a multilingual higher education context. She discovered that the framework was more applicable to bilingual or monolingual settings than to the largely multilingual South African linguistic situation.

That pre-university general English proficiency courses incorporate elements of academic English into their content is an expected requirement of the curriculum. Some of these elements are skills related to extracting relevant information from texts; mapping information relationships within and across paragraphs; summarizing; and developing content for expository or argumentative texts. Therefore, in essence, by the time students complete their secondary or high school education they would have acquired some preparatory academic language skills before entering university, and their entry grades in English would supposedly index their level of language preparation for university-level academic work. On the basis of this inter-relationship, this study investigates the correlation between students' entry grades in English (when they arrive at university) and their performance in an academic English course taught in the first year at university. The research question is – What is the relationship between Ghanaian students' English language grade and their performance in academic writing?

3.   English Proficiency and Academic English

The premise of this study is that academic English encompasses and builds upon knowledge of the linguistic components of general English. Therefore, a high level of proficiency in general English should lead to better mastery of academic English. In a second language context like Ghana, general Standard English is acquired in the classroom, and it also entails preparing students to write academically (cf. Llosa et al.

2011). In the Ghanaian education system, for example, students learn English from Primary 1 through Junior High School (JHS) to Senior High School (SHS). The English curriculum becomes increasingly academic as students move from one level to the other, with the later stages of students' work involving more reading and writing tasks related to interpretation of information, summarizing, and composing argumentative texts. Pre-university English language teaching then should be understood as offering the preparatory language skills that can be built upon at university-level (Gopee & Deane, 2013). This prior experiential knowledge "can serve as a bridge to academic writing" (Wolsey et al. 2012: 720).

As Scarcella (2003) explains, at the phonological, lexical, grammatical, sociolinguistic, and discoursal levels, there are parallels between acquisition of knowledge in ordinary English and in academic English. The knowledge and skills acquired in ordinary English are built upon in academic English. For example, at the level of lexis, general English proficiency involves knowledge of the situational use of vocabulary and the grammatical restrictions governing words. In the same way, in academic English learners must know the general words used across disciplines as well as the technical words specific to the disciplines. As regards the grammatical component, while ordinary English involves the correct use of basic English grammar, in academic English grammatical structures with varying degrees of complexity have to be acquired. The sociolinguistic component entails using language relevant to the context and topic of the discourse. Just as in ordinary language use, the learner must be able to modify the tone, expression, and topic in relation to the socio-cultural context of the discourse, in academic writing this is also done in varying degrees of complexity. It involves the ability to recognize and align one's language to suit disciplinary conventions. The last facet is the discourse component. In ordinary English, learners use basic discourse devices to communicate coherently, that is, initiating a conversation, starting a piece of writing, and identifying how others have used these devices to structure the content of their message. The knowledge of these discourse devices is built upon in academic English which requires that a student should be conversant with strategies for composing introductions and achieving unity and coherence within and across the constitutive paragraphs of an essay. The students must also be able to follow these discourse devices as they are used by other writers to structure the content of their writing and signpost information relationships.

In this study, we use the term "academic writing" since conceptually it constitutes an essential derivative component of "academic English", involving the mastery of the English language at the levels of grammar and vocabulary, along with the disciplinary conventions related to writing for academic purposes as opposed to academic listening and speaking. Equally important is the fact that "academic writing" is the official name of the writing course which we are investigating.

4. Academic Writing in the University of Ghana

The University of Ghana's Academic Writing programme has evolved over time. It started in the early 1970s, as a language and study skills programme, which was optional for students. In those days, it was designed as an essentially remedial English programme for the few students who felt they needed it. Later, due mainly to complaints from within and outside the university that students were entering university with very weak language skills (Hyde, 1991; Dakubu, 1988), a phenomenon which is not peculiar to Ghana (see for example, Murray, 2012; Butler, 2013), the programme was made compulsory for students taking a subject in the Faculty of Arts, made up of Classics, Linguistics, English, Study of Religions, Performing Arts (Music, Dance, and Theatre Arts), Modern Languages (French, Russian, Swahili, Spanish, and Arabic), and Philosophy. In the late 1990s when the University introduced the course credit semester system with a four-year degree programme, the name of the course was changed from Language and Study Skills to Academic Writing to reflect greater emphasis on writing rather than on study skills. It also became compulsory for all entering students.

The duration of class sessions is two contact hours per week, and with the course running over a twelve-week period, the total number of contact hours for the semester is 24. The total number of students registered for Academic Writing for each semester is about 3000, and students are taught in class sizes pegged at a maximum of 60 students. Assessment involves giving students two major examinations – a mid-semester one-hour examination that tests students' understanding of basic issues in academic writing, and a question involving an extended written response that would provide the material and the context for assessing the language and writing skills of students. The mark allocated for this is 30%. At the end of the semester, there is a three-hour paper that students write. This paper covers reading skills, summarizing, and writing from multiple sources. The core objective is to assess students' capacity to write academic English with minimal or no grammatical errors, and their understanding of the formality of academic writing and the features that characterize it. In addition, students are required to demonstrate their awareness of the communicative practices or norms governing writing from multiple sources and avoiding plagiarism. The mark awarded for this main examination is 70%. This mark is then added to the mid-semester examination mark of 30% for a total of 100%. Besides these two assessments, lecturers are required to give in-class and take-home assignments to students, but these are not normally added to the final examination mark.

The course is taught and assessed by a team of lecturers, who are trained language teachers, with a minimum qualification of a master's degree in English, Applied linguistics or TESL.

5. Data and Methodology

The data for the study was collected from the official electronic students' database of the University of Ghana, spanning from 2003 to 2011. This was a transitional period for student

intake in the University of Ghana since there was the imminent phasing out of the GCE Ordinary level intake track and the University was experiencing the initial phase of the introduction and implementation of the course credit system. To protect the identity of the students involved, an identifier (that is, a unique serial number), which could not be used in any way to detect the identity of the students involved, was created to match individual students with their grades for the purposes of the data analysis. In addition, the aggregated data upon which the statistics for the analysis was based could also not be used to link any record to the name of a student.

The data was categorized by the type of English entry grade, by which we are referring to the English language results of the Mature Students Examination, the General Certificate of Examination Ordinary Level, and the West African Examination Council Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination. Pearson correlation tests were then carried out to determine the significance of the relationship between entry level grades in English and students' performance in academic writing.

The academic records of a total of 23,806 students obtained from the electronic database of the University of Ghana were studied. As indicated above, the students were grouped into three categories: (a) Mature students, numbering 716; (b) GCE "O" Level students, 2199; and (c) Senior Secondary School students, 20,891. Each group was analysed separately because the University entry preparations were measured differently for them. Mature students (in terms of University of Ghana's definition) are adult students from the age of 30 who have not had full time education for a number of years. These students write an entrance examination, which includes an English language paper, set by the University. The second group is the General Certificate of Examination "O" level students who would normally have done five years of high school education at the end of which they would have written the English language paper. During the period under consideration, most of the "O" level students were private candidates since the system had been replaced with the West African Examination Council Senior Secondary School Certificate Examination (WASSSCE). WASSSCE students would typically have had three years of senior high school education prior to which they would also have had three years of junior high school education.

The entry grades for students who entered the University with "O" Level English were classified as grade 1 through grade 9. Those who entered with Senior Secondary School (SSS) English were graded A through F. The mature students were given raw scores (ranging from 40 to 100) which were later grouped into 7 categories using the grading system of the University for purposes of analysis. For the mature students, since they had raw scores for both their entry grades and the final grade in academic writing, the raw scores were used for the correlation and the regression analysis. For the "O" Level and the SSS students weights assigned to the grades were used for their correlation and the regression analysis.

Scaling and Weighting of Grades

The entry English grades were weighted as shown in the table below to ensure that we had a common reference scale, and furthermore, that the spread of English proficiency levels correlates effectively with the spread of academic writing results.

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Table 1. Grading System

University Grading System (also used for grouping mature students' marks)								
Percentage score (%)	0-29	30-39	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64	65-69	70+
Letter grade	F	D	C	C+	B-	B	B+	A-	A
Weighting	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

"O" level weighting system								
"O" level grade	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
Weighting	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

SSS weighting system						
Letter grade	F	E	D	C	B	A
Weighting	1	2	3	4	5	6

Descriptive statistics (frequencies and cross-tabulations) were employed to describe the data. Correlations and regression methods were also employed to establish if there was any statistical difference between the two grades. For the correlation analysis, the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient was used and a regression model was fitted utilizing the final academic writing grades as the dependent and the English entry grades as the independent from which the variance was selected. Significance of the change in F-statistics greater than 0.05 is considered as not significant while those below 0.05 are taken as significant.

6.   Findings

6.1   Mature Students

Table 2 below shows the distribution of admitted mature students by their entry grades in English and their final marks in academic writing. The table indicates that a total of 716 mature students were admitted, out of which 383 (53.5 %) students entered with their English marks ranging from 40 to 44. Those whose English entry marks ranged between 45 and 49 formed 28 percent. About 13.5 entered with English marks ranging between 50 and 54. Only 0.1 percent entered the university with their English marks of 70 and above. A close look at the table will reveal that irrespective of the entry grade, the general performance was between grades B- and B+, representing 68.4%.

Table 2. Distribution of admitted mature students by their entry grades in English and their final marks in academic writing

Mature Student Entry Grade in English		Academic Writing Grades									Total
		A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	D	F	
40-44	Frequency	14	20	83	97	83	48	35	3	0	383 (53.5%)
	Percent	3.7%	5.2%	21.7%	25.3%	21.7%	12.5%	9.1%	0.8%	0.0%	100.00%
45-49	Frequency	11	12	39	59	47	18	14	0	1	201 (28.1%)
	Percent	5.5%	5.9%	19.4%	29.4%	23.3%	9.0%	7.0%	0.0%	0.5%	100.00%
50 –54	Frequency	11	11	19	18	22	9	7	0	0	97 (13.5%)
	Percent	11.3%	11.3%	19.6%	18.6%	22.7%	9.3%	7.2%	0.0%	0.0%	100.00%
55-59	Frequency	1	5	6	6	3	2	2	0	0	25 (3.5%)
	Percent	4.0%	20.0%	24.0%	24.0%	12.0%	8.0%	8.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.00%
60-64	Frequency	0	0	1	4	0	2	0	0	0	7 (1%)
	Percent	0.0%	0.0%	14.3%	57.1%	0.0%	28.6%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.00%
65-69	Frequency	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2 (0.3%)
	Percent	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.00%
70-74	Frequency	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1 (0.1%)
	Percent	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.00%
Total	Frequency	37	48	151	184	155	79	58	3	1	716
	Percent	5.2%	6.7%	21.1%	25.7%	21.6%	11.0%	8.1%	0.4%	0.1%	100.00%

6.2   GCE "O" Level Students

The distribution grades of admitted "O" Level students and their final marks in academic writing are as shown in Table 3 below. Table 3 indicates that the majority of students with "O" Level entry English (46.6 %) were admitted with grade 6 in English. Those with grade 5 followed, forming 17.9 percent. Those who entered with grade 3 followed with a proportion of 17 percent. Only 1 percent entered with grade 1. An analysis of Table 3 also suggests strongly that regardless of the entry grades the majority (65.5%) had grades of B-, B, B+ in academic writing.

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Table 3. Distribution of "O" level students by their entry grades in English and their final marks in academic writing

"O" Level Student Entry Grade in English		Academic Writing Grades									Total
		A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	D	F	
1	Frequency	0	5	8	6	2	2	0	0	0	23 (1%)
	Percent	0.0%	21.7%	34.8%	26.1%	8.7%	8.7%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100.00%
2	Frequency	6	10	16	12	4	4	2	1	0	55 (2.5%)
	Percent	10.9%	18.2%	29.1%	21.8%	7.3%	7.3%	3.6%	1.8%	0.0%	100.00%
3	Frequency	26	48	98	75	75	27	24	1	0	374 (17%)
	Percent	6.9%	12.8%	26.2%	20.1%	20.1%	7.2%	6.4%	0.3%	0.0%	100.00%
4	Frequency	17	41	75	80	62	32	20	2	0	329 (15%)
	Percent	5.2%	12.5%	22.8%	24.3%	18.8%	9.7%	6.1%	0.6%	0.0%	100.00%
5	Frequency	25	41	88	100	73	42	23	2	0	394 (17.9%)
	Percent	6.3%	10.4%	22.3%	25.4%	18.5%	10.7%	5.8%	0.5%	0.0%	100.00%
6	Frequency	40	92	210	253	216	109	101	2	1	1024 (46.6%)
	Percent	3.9%	9.0%	20.5%	24.7%	21.1%	10.6%	9.9%	0.2%	0.1%	100.00%
Total	**Frequency**	**114**	**237**	**495**	**526**	**432**	**216**	**170**	**8**	**1**	**2199**
	Percent	**5.2%**	**10.8%**	**22.5%**	**24.0%**	**19.6%**	**9.8%**	**7.7%**	**0.4%**	**0.0%**	**100.0%**

6.3   Senior Secondary School Students

The distribution of students by their Senior Secondary School (SSS) English entry grades is as shown in Table 4 below. The majority (39.9 %) entered with grade B. About 29.1 percent entered with grade C while another 18.1 percent entered with grade D. Only 5.6 percent entered the University with SSS English grade A. The distribution pattern of academic writing grades vis-à-vis the entry grades of SSSCE students indicates that the general performance in academic writing was between grades B- and B+, representing 67.4%.

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Table 4. Distribution of admitted Senior Secondary School students by their entry grades in English and their final marks in academic writing

SSSCE Student Entry Grade in English		Academic Writing Grades									Total
		A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	D	F	
A	Frequency	141	229	325	242	147	47	41	0	0	1172 (5.6%)
	Percent	12.0%	19.5%	27.9%	20.6%	12.5%	4.0%	3.5%	0.0%	0.0%	100.00%
B	Frequency	662	1114	2192	2029	1315	550	462	5	3	8332 (39.9%)
	Percent	7.9%	13.4%	26.3%	24.4%	15.8%	6.6%	5.5%	0.1%	0.0%	100.00%
C	Frequency	251	571	1437	1590	1215	537	474	8	2	6085 (29.1%)
	Percent	4.1%	9.4%	23.6%	26.1%	20.0%	8.8%	7.9%	0.1%	0.0%	100.00%
D	Frequency	104	279	799	977	820	404	385	6	1	3775 (18.1%)
	Percent	2.8%	7.4%	21.2%	25.8%	21.7%	10.7%	10.2%	0.2%	0.0%	100.00%
E	Frequency	40	88	244	369	348	215	212	8	3	1527 (7.3%)
	Percent	2.6%	5.8%	16.0%	24.2%	22.7%	14.1%	13.9%	0.5%	0.2%	100.00%
Total	**Frequency**	**114**	**237**	**495**	**526**	**432**	**216**	**170**	**8**	**1**	**20891**
	Percent	**5.2%**	**10.8%**	**22.5%**	**24.0%**	**19.6%**	**9.8%**	**7.7%**	**0.4%**	**0.0%**	**100.0%**

6.4 Tests of Significance

Hypothesis

H_o: There is no statistically significant difference between students' entry grades and students' final grades in academic writing

H_1: There is statistically significant difference between students' entry grades and students' final grades in academic writing

Table 5: Correlation coefficients and percentage of variance for the various categories of students

Student Category	Number of students	Correlation coefficient (r)	Percentage of Explained Variance	Significance of variance
Mature Students	717	0.122	1.5	0.001
O Level Students	2200	0.121	1.5	0
S S S Students	20891	0.211	4.5	0

Table 5 shows a weak relationship between the students' entry grades for English and their final grades in academic writing. All the correlation coefficients recorded very low values. They all fall below 0.3, giving rise to a weak variance for all three categories. As regards the mature students, only 1.5 percent of the variation in their final academic writing grades can be explained by their English entry grade. With respect to the "O" Level students, only 1.5 percent variation in their academic writing grade was due to their English entry grades while only 4.5 percent of the variation in the final academic writing grades for the SSS students was accounted for by their English entry grades.

The significance of the variances is below 0.05 indicating that the hypothesis that there is no difference between the English entry marks of the students and their final grades in academic writing has not been supported. It can thus be concluded that for this data, the English entry grades for the students poorly predict their final grades in academic writing.

7.   Discussion

The main findings for this study can be summarised as follows:

a)   The Mature Students come from a very low base in English (the majority – 53.5% – achieve a mark between 40 and 44% in the entrance test of English).

b)   The "O level" and "Senior secondary school students" come from a high base in terms of their English proficiency – the majority of them achieve the highest grade or the highest 3 grades in the entrance tests.

c)   All groups achieve a B-, B, or B+ in the course for academic writing.

Overall, the grades in English proficiency at entry of the students were only marginally correlated with the final marks in Academic Writing. This was seen in all three groups of entry students – Mature, "O" Level and SSS students (see Fig. 1 below). Despite the fact that all three groups appeared to have performed well in academic writing in relation to their entry English grades, their performance in the course over the years has actually been deteriorating (see Fig. 2 below). This trend might have contributed to the minimal improvement seen in the performance of the "O" level and SSS students. The widest variation was also seen in the performance of the Mature Students. Even though they enter university with a low base in English, in comparison with the "O" level and SSS students, they perform creditably in academic writing. These two observations – (a) the good performance of the mature students and (b) the deteriorating performance over time of all three groups – could be attributed to several factors related to social and cultural contextual issues, the content and mode of delivery of the course, and the quality and mode of assessment. In discussing the above-mentioned parameters, we are mindful of Ingram and Bayliss' (2007:4) general acknowledgement that there are "variable and complex reasons for student success or failure at University", some of

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which are – the attitude of students, individual learning styles, teaching methodology, and assessment methods.

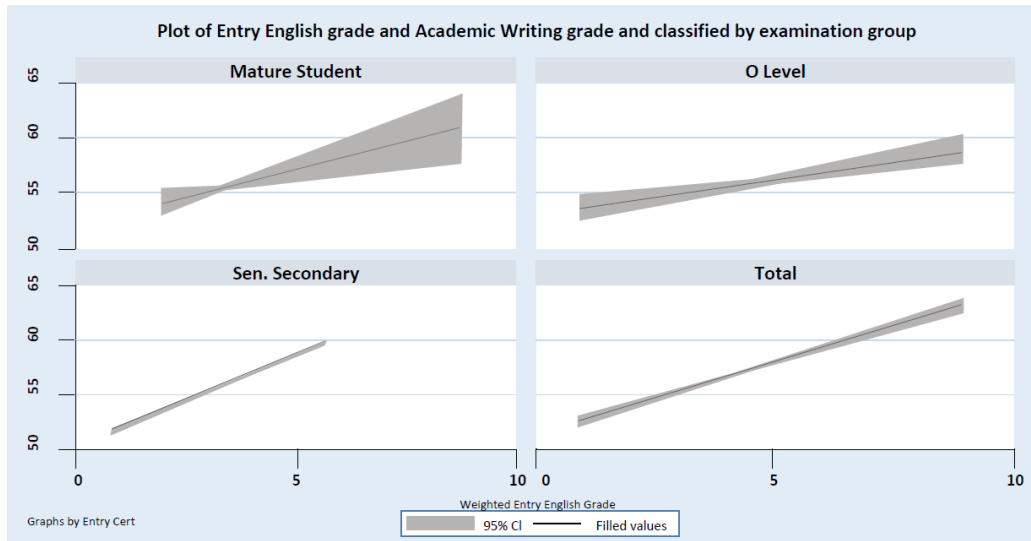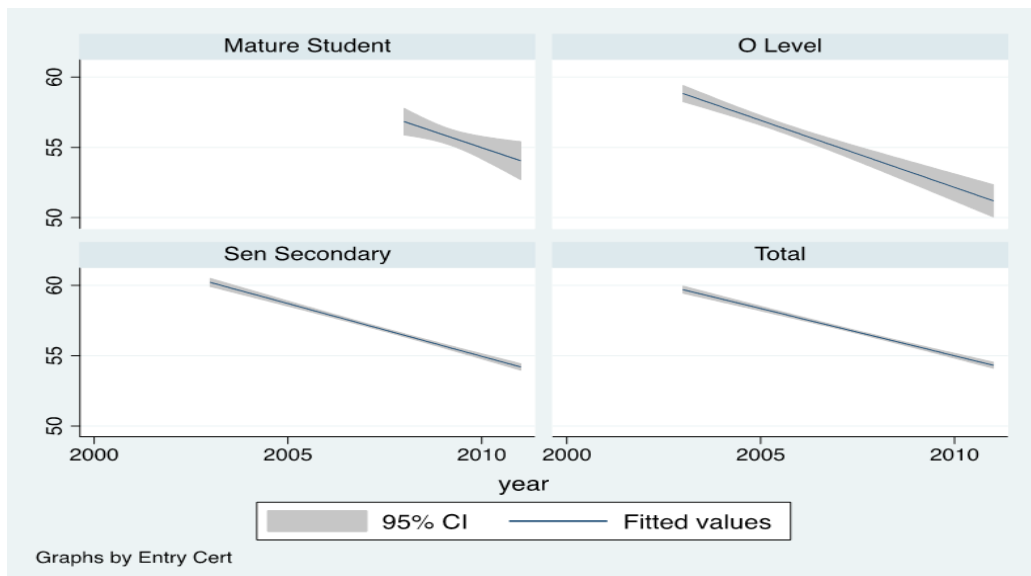**Fig. 1.   Entry Grades in English and Final Grade in Academic Writing (All Groups)**

Fig. 2. Final Marks in Academic Writing (All groups)

The perceptible improvement of the mature students may be due to their positive attitude towards the course. Over the years, students have had different responses to the academic writing course in the University of Ghana (Adika, 2012; Adam, 1997). While some, especially the mature students who tend to be older and more focused, have regarded it as a positive intervention measure requiring therefore the needed attention, others (especially the SSS students who are young and distractible) perceive it as a distraction from their regular university work and therefore pay scant regard to it. Negative attitudes lead naturally to lack of commitment to the programme and flaccid receptiveness to the skills and strategies being imparted.

One of the reasons for the deteriorating performance across all groups over the years is the phenomenon of large classes. For a skills development and practical-oriented course, large classes hinder effective student evaluation and feedback. Lecturers are unable to give regular exercises, and where they are given it is not unlikely that effective evaluation suffers. Compounding this problem is the demographic composition of the classes. As mentioned earlier, classes hover around 60 per group, and each group is made up of students brought together not because of commonality of disciplinary interests but on the basis of free time on the general university time table for academic writing. Many students select their slots based on times their friends find convenient. Thus, the academic writing class becomes an extension of their social group solidarity time, and this could affect performance.

Another reason is that in the University of Ghana the academic writing programme is team taught, and although there are pre-semester workshops for lecturers designed to ensure uniformity in the standard of teaching and assessment processes, lecturer idiosyncrasy and pedagogical approaches and assessment modes could affect the quality and therefore the impact of the programme. Indeed, about 90% of the lecturers who teach academic writing in the University of Ghana are on part-time appointments with their major teaching commitments elsewhere. While not dismissing their efforts, it is not unlikely that levels of commitment are compromised as they carry the burden of shuttling between their main place of work and their part-time engagement. Additionally, there could be possible disparities in marking (in spite of moderation or vetting of marking schemes) as a function of multiplicity of lecturers or instructors.

From the foregoing discussion a number of recommendations could be made. Concerning large class sizes, an obvious solution is to reduce class sizes and engage more staff to teach the course. Unquestionably, this would have enormous financial implications especially for a University that depends largely on government subsidies to run. Nonetheless, the pedagogical merits of small and manageable class sizes should compel the University authorities to explore creative ways of funding the programme. Otherwise we would only be paying lip service to issues of quality assurance.

Institutions that run academic writing programmes similar to that of the Language Centre of the University of Ghana could increase the effectiveness of their programmes through the establishment of placement tests. This is standard practice among some

universities in Africa. For example, several universities in South Africa have a Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL); the Sokoine University of Agriculture in Tanzania also administers a placement test to its students before they register for the university's English Communication Skills courses. It is our contention that properly designed placement tests considered alongside entry level grades in English should help in the design and delivery of academic writing.

Another proposal is to incorporate IT-based teaching materials into the programme. In this regard, we fully endorse the suggestion by November (2010) that since the twenty-first century student possesses a very high-level digital literacy this skill can be exploited in order to improve students' writing especially where large groups are involved. She advocates the use of online group work and online writing tools. The benefits of this approach include students' and teachers' access to the diversity and range of resources available online. Three years ago, this suggestion would have been alien to a Ghanaian university; however, in the past two years with the rapid technological advances especially in the provision of Internet access in the University of Ghana and other public universities in Ghana, online intervention measures can be made a part of the solution. The University of Ghana has an e-learning platform – KEWL Nextgen, but it is not fully exploited for the improvement of the writing skills of the students. The academic writing course could be woven around available technologies in response to students' current level of digital literacy and English proficiency. In this way, we can be sure that we are not ignoring an essential aspect of the intervention process: recognition of student language profiles jointly with the use of pedagogy that incorporates technological advances aimed at ensuring learner participation and teacher effectiveness.

8.   Conclusion

The study set out to investigate the correlation between level of proficiency in English at entry point into university and performance in a one-semester course in academic writing. The main finding was that the grades in English proficiency at entry of the students were only marginally correlated with the final grades in academic writing. The fairly uniform performance of students in academic writing across groups is indicative of underlying problems related to the content, mode of delivery, and assessment methods of the course. The broad implication is that the one-semester academic writing programme may make greater impact if inhibitive factors especially those related to its organization and content as well as attitude of students are addressed. For example, placement tests would have to be introduced so that the profiles of the student would be better understood and pedagogically exploited. This would help in the proper structuring and alignment of the content of the course to suit students' needs. It would also help institutional decisions concerning the pedagogical approaches to use for greater effectiveness. In short, a better structured programme that is better aligned in terms of the profiling of the students may produce better results.

In English-speaking Africa, for example in Ghana, English proficiency level requirements are based on the West African Examination Council (or similar national level) criteria. Therefore, the entire body of literature on correlative studies may not be of direct relevance to the continent. Undoubtedly, correlative studies are important since they produce empirical evidence for the stipulation of entry English proficiency levels, and constitute a common reference point or baseline for determining the proficiency levels of prospective or enrolled students. Our study, then, should be regarded as contributing to empirical evidence for the predictive validity of English level entry requirements in Africa, south of the Sahara. Future research could focus on aspects of regional or continental English language examinations such as those of the West African Examinations Council, and how they correlate with aspects of academic English, including listening, reading, and speaking.

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