Using a Language-Literature Approach to Teaching Reading and Writing in First-Year English Classes at the University of Botswana

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Abstract
The paper contributes to the discussion on how to improve university students' reading and writing skills. Thirty-nine University of Botswana (UB) first-year English language students were taught English language description and usage and. subsequently, how to read and write literary and non-literacy genres. It was hoped that the grammar component would make them more aware of their language use and that this would, in addition to the issues discussed in the literary and non-literary genres classes, enable them to improve on their reading and writing skills beyond what traditionally obtains in first year classes. In particular, the class of thirty-nine co-taught by the researchers was sufficiently small to enable the lecturers teach better and the students learn more. The project produced limited results, as there was no significant improvement in the students' reading and writing abilities. Nevertheless, the results were instructive in that they reconfirmed existing problems in students' writing, especially vagueness and an unwillingness to apply learnt skills across disciplines, and revealed the students" love for the narrative genre which many of them imposed on their writing, regardless of the genre they were supposed to write.

Background
This paper was first presented at the 3rd Pan-African Reading for All Conference: "Literacy across Borders", held in Kampala, Uganda, from 18–22 August, 2003. We had been working on a general project over the course of two years, in which we were trying to figure out ways to turn our students into more active readers (Arua and Lederer, 2003). We began by finding out what they liked to read—if in fact they liked to read at all—and then devising ways to build on what they liked so that we could begin to foster productive reading habits during their first year at the University of Botswana.

The paper we presented in Kampala received a mixed reaction, one that seemed to be divided fairly clearly according to geographical regions. We were a little dismayed by the verbal reactions to the paper and to the problems we identified:

audience members from West and East Africa seemed to think that we were not teaching very well. "You should" preface a number of comments about the benefits of group work, student-teacher conferences, peer editing, and so forth. We ought to try a more student-centered approach, suggested our helpful critics.

The audience members from Southern Africa, South Africa in particular, were quiet but seemed to register sympathy. There was much nodding from South African participants during the presentation, and although they refrained from commenting during the discussion, many of them came up afterwards to express their relief that they were not the only ones facing these problems and if we discovered anything that worked, would we please let them know: they were also having extreme difficulty with the student-centered methods so enthusiastically recommended. We asked ourselves "What are we doing wrong? How are our students different from students in other parts of the continent?"

As we prepared this paper for publication, we received many helpful comments from readers who suggested a more thorough empirical approach. However, we began to wonder if our (Southern African) situation did not require something completely different. Most of our students, for example, do not complete A-levels before entering university. The students with the highest aggregates from their high-school leaving exams are sent overseas, where they impress with their exceptional abilities. Our students come from overcrowded and often under-resourced high schools in rural areas, and they find themselves in even more overcrowded classrooms (first-year humanities classes in both language and literature average 100 and 50 students respectively), being taught by lecturers who are burdened with countless administrative tasks and strident demands for research output. The students are required to register (at first year) for six courses, but they are being asked to do more and better work than they did in high school.

What began as a more conventional empirical study has therefore metamorphosed into a less empirical consideration of the problems that we face, a consideration meant to begin discussion among Southern Africans, with our unique problems, who are extremely committed to solving them, but who are rather at a loss as to how to begin. Teacher training often assumes a certain kind of student. We have a different kind of student.

Reading and writing well in the university require students to effectively construct and reconstruct text and to compose and interpret meaning from written language. The certain kind of student of so many studies is assumed to have some desire to learn to read and write well, and so can reasonably be expected to show some improvement over the course of his/her university studies. However, many of our students, including English language majors, do not read and write well. At the end of their academic careers, they often have not overcome many of the reading and writing problems they brought to the university, nor have they acquired the ability to read sophisticated texts and to write coherently on a wide variety of issues.

The question of why many students perform poorly in their reading and writing tasks throughout their academic careers in tertiary institutions, especially the university, has been the subject of some sustained research in the humanities and sciences. The main concern has been to discover the primary causes of students' inability to read and write well and to suggest remedies for the problem. The problem is not confined to students of English as a second language, but it also affects students in native-English-speaking tertiary institutions, as Mathes and Stevenson's (1981) discussion of the poor communication skills of engineering graduates shows. So acute has been the poor use of English that it is now customary in both first- and second-language situations for M.A. and Ph.D. students to pay editors to clean up the English in their dissertations.

The poor communicative ability of many university graduates reflects badly on the institutions that train them. It may be argued, as Mathes and Stevenson (ibid.) have done, that teachers in tertiary institutions train their students to communicate poorly. Leibowitz (1994:19), however, cites "inadequate tuition at the high school level" as the main reason why university students are not able to write well. Arua (1999:51) is of the view that "Fossilization of language may account for the widely differing and, sometimes, grossly inadequate, language abilities which students bring into the university, and which they more or less maintain throughout their studies". This situation is further exacerbated by the recent spread of "hip" language such as the SMS-speak. Magura (2005) at the 3rd International Conference on Language and Literature held in Gaborone in June 2005 discussed the negative effects of SMS-speak across primary, secondary and tertiary levels. He concluded that the SMS-speak was likely to worsen considerably the writing skills of students at all educational levels.

Love (1990:70) cites imprecision, which she defines as "a mismatch between the lexico-grammatical items used and the proposition being expressed," as the main problem bedeviling science students' writing. In other words (p.71), the science student "simply does not know precisely what he/she wants to say, and attempts to obscure this by vagueness." Her characterization of the students' imprecision seems to imply, contradictorily, that its root cause is located in the students' thought processes rather than in the verbal representation of their thoughts. As an example of this kind of confusion, we offer the case of a second-year student who wrote the following on a test about Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*: "The other point which catches the eye is this male dominance over females. This is emphasized by Elizabeth's statement which says there is only one God, and his name is man and Elizabeth is his property." This misquotation is telling because the student's understanding of the problems of patriarchy is intuited but confused. Nevertheless, Love implies through this characterization that science students would write much better if they were able to use the appropriate degrees of absoluteness and definiteness. The same can be said of humanities students, and we consider this problem later in the essay.

It is generally agreed that reading aids the development of writing skills. It therefore follows that poor reading abilities affect the writing abilities of university

students, impacting the interpretation problems mentioned above. As Stromso and Braten (2002:208) put it, "normal reading in higher education involves 'the construction of meaning from multiple sources'." Spivey and King (1989) highlight the relationship between using multiple texts and writing. According to them, the use of multiple sources (a consequence of reading) focuses on discourse synthesis, that is, on the task of composing a new text by selecting, organizing, and connecting content from more than one source text. Many of our students find it difficult to construct new texts orally or in writing. One of the reasons for this phenomenon, as a Year II Humanities representative indicated in a recent UB English Department Board meeting, is that the students are scared of expressing an opinion when the class is large. It would therefore be necessary in the students' view for large classes to be divided into much smaller groups. A culture of silence exists in many UB classes, and getting students to express an opinion is very difficult. In other words, students are unwilling or afraid to express their opinion, or even to distill and present opinions already expressed in different texts.

An additional interpretation problem mentioned in Hartley and Chesworth (1999) is plagiarism. Recently, Robinson and Mooko (1999) discussed this problem at UB. Their results from a survey of nineteen heads of departments and units indicate that plagiarism is a serious issue which is prevalent in year one, decreases slightly in years two and three, and surges again in year four. The most probable cause of this phenomenon at UB, according to 95% of the respondents in their study, is lack of training in critical reading and writing. Because plagiarism is such a widespread problem at UB, we will devote some of our discussion to it later in the essay.

Our own previous research indicates that students do enjoy reading, particularly newspapers and English-language novels (Danielle Steel, etc.), but they find reading for their classes generally boring. We are aware of the current discussions about the effect of television (especially soap operas), video games, and other technological entertainment on the attention span of young people, and we have considered the possibility that this problem also affects our students at first year. Although we recognize that it is difficult to "make" reading less boring, we had hoped to be able to build on the fact that students do read other materials, and we devised the project with the hope of forcing students to read more than just what is required on the reading list. We proceeded on the assumption that a coordinated effort between language and literature studies would encourage students to read more and that exposure would in turn lead to improved writing. As research, this project had very limited success and rather mixed results, and we have given our situation a great deal of consideration and thought. This essay reflects our thoughts and conclusions.

We designed coordinated assignments what would require students to read outside the set reading list and to apply what they learned in one course to the work they did in another (something lecturers in the our faculty do not normally see). At UB, first-year students must enroll for an introduction to literature course and an introduction to language course (each of the courses carries two credits). There is

normally no coordination between the two courses; however, we were able to arrange that both courses enrolled the same students in the same section so that we both would be able to teach them. In the standard set-up, students are assigned to write one take-home essay and one in-class essay test in each course. These assignments give students a choice of four questions, and they must choose one question to answer. We taught thirty-nine year-one students—the class was small by UB standards; thirty-nine is almost the normal class size for literature, but is considerably fewer than the 100 to 120 students in language classes. These students had completed secondary school (versus mature-age entry students, who enroll at university after working for a number of years); their average age was nineteen. In the first semester, students were taught to recognize sentences and clauses as well as other basic grammatical elements (ENG 121: Introduction to English Language Description and Usage), and they practised these elements for that semester. Because of the relatively small class size, the teaching was more interactive and the students received more attention from the researchers to see what rate of improvement would occur before the end of the year. One of the assumptions made for this study was that spending more time with the students coupled with the design of the project (to have more assignments and assignments that would be based on work for both courses) would enable them to achieve results better than what traditionally obtains in similar classes. (In other words, we hoped that the combined style of assignment would offer the inducement of looking like two grades for one assignment).

The performance of the students in the study is indistinguishable from that of the students we taught in the last two years. The pass rates (of between 70% and 95% of the students in the class) disguise the fact that the performance of the students is either low or merely average-their scores cluster between 50 and 69 (C- to B-, a range which corresponds to our experience in other universities). As our effort was not successful in getting students to perform better than they had done in the past, we then examined factors based on our teaching and the students' performance that might account for the generally low performance of students in English.

We discovered, not surprisingly, that the students have a more favourable assessment of their writing abilities than we do. While we consider their performance average, they consider it fairly good. Some of the students' views regarding their writing abilities recall the views of students in other places who thought they could write, until they got to the university (Lea, 1994). Heath (1983) and Taylor (1988) report a mismatch between students' and lecturers' academic discourse. In other words, students and their teachers do not start on the same page. So it would have been surprising had our assessment matched that of our students.

The students are not entirely wrong in assessing their writing abilities as good: only good high school students are admitted into the university. Nevertheless, it is clear that for beginning students to perform well in college, their academic discourse must begin early to approximate their lecturers' expectations of what their academic discourse should resemble. Students at UB are warned about this

gap when they first enter, and we certainly warn our own students about it again during the first week of classes. It is necessary to teach them as soon as they enter the university *exactly* what is expected of them—as Bartholomew (1986) put it, the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding and arguing that define discourse in the humanities—as we tried to do in this study. Failure to make them aware of this discrepancy is, apparently, one of the causes of the unending friction between students and lecturers regarding their performance as they pursue their English careers in the university.

Because of the structure of the secondary school syllabus, many students come to literature studies at UB lacking formal instruction in the terms of literary analysis, a fact which does not necessarily indicate poor reading habits or skills. Also, students fear literature; it is, oddly, simultaneously a "soft" subject requiring too much hard work.

Overall, our experience with first-year literature students suggests two characteristics of the literary reading habits and skills of first-year students: first, they read literally, for "information," and cannot make imaginative connections that are supported by the images and language of the text; second, they guess or respond vaguely even to questions that ask for "facts." These characteristics, in turn, suggest that they have not learned how to read more than one kind of text (informational) and that they have been rewarded in the past for being able to "bullshit." They seem to be accustomed to answering in a vague, unfocused way, a pattern that perhaps corresponds with vague and unfocused reading habits. They are unable to see the details of a passage that they are reading, even when those details are spelled out.[4[1]]

One problem that we have observed when marking tests and essays is that very few students leave an answer blank, suggesting that perhaps they expect that for "non-factual" questions (questions that do not ask them to define specific terms), vague answers are easier or more appropriate, or that they can get away with vagueness.

[4[1]]For example, students were asked to comment on the stage directions for the role-play in the following passage about two prostitutes (Zakes Mda, *And the Girls in their Sunday Dresses* [Johannesburg: Witwatersrand UP, 1993], 21):

> WOMAN: I am sure she is the same person I saw the other day. They told me she used to be a call girl, then she got married in Europe and got saved.
>
> LADY: She must be the one, sister woman. She goes to the Victoria Hotel and preaches to the ladies of the night.
>
> WOMAN [*preaching*]: My sisters, my sisters in the Lord. Isn't it a wonderful feeling to know that someone's blood did flow?
>
> THE LADY *is now the preacher's audience. She sits down on the ground. Sometimes she will stand up as the spirit moves her. Lights dim, for it is now night.*
>
> LADY: Yes. It is our blood. Very inconveniencing when one is on duty.

They wrote such things as *"It tells that in this scene there is a congregational with the sermon being delivered by the preacher who was being used by the holy spirit."*

Anecdotal evidence from an ENG213 (Prose Literature of Southern Africa) assignment in the first semester of the 2002/2003 academic year shows that students earn higher marks when they look at specific examples from the texts they are writing about (Lederer and Tumedi, 2003). In that assignment, the questions were designed to get second-year students to look at the particular characteristics of a text (novel, short story, or essay). We will summarize and discuss this project in more detail later in the essay.

First-year English students at UB find it difficult to use (or to apply) productively the linguistic and literary knowledge they acquire. More than 80% of the students in our project were not able to abstract information from various sources for their essays. They were expected to read assigned materials in language and literature to abstract the necessary information. For example, students were explicitly instructed, in the language exercises, to use not less than three texts, and in the literature exercises even more than that. They were taught how to acknowledge their sources. In order to force them to adhere to the instructions, separate marks were assigned to content and to the acknowledgment of their sources. They were then given ample time (not less than two weeks for each assignment) to write their essays, to ask questions and to consult with the researchers if they needed help. We went out of our way to break the conventional mode in large classes of allowing students carry on as best as they can and to learn the needed skills gradually.

The result of the entire exercise was disappointing. Hardly any of the students consulted us, and we wondered whether we should have assigned marks for consultations as well. Some of them did not read any texts other than the primary ones. They relied mainly on their knowledge of the world to write the essays. They did not cite any supporting evidence from the assigned secondary texts in their essays, and therefore the quality of their essays was poor. Many of them scored low grades for content and even lower grades for not acknowledging their sources.

In addition, their essays contained lexical and grammatical errors they should have outgrown. The previous semester, the students had taken "Introduction to Descriptive Grammar and Usage" (ENG121, described earlier), a course specifically designed to make them more aware of their language use. One semester later, in spite of a good pass rate for that class, there was hardly any improvement in their writing. Perhaps they assumed that the course was "closed" and over, and therefore they did not need that information any more.

The students' inability or unwillingness to perform assigned tasks (efficiently) raises two pedagogical questions. First, how long should lecturers wait in order for students to be able to apply productively the concepts they have learnt? This question is important because we need also to consider how we teach, leading to the second question, what teaching style should be used to teach students to read and write well? This question is important, even in this study, considering that different approaches were tried with the students. In addition, a student-centred approach was adopted—the student population was small, the students were made to work individually and in groups and they were afforded the opportunity to

further explore the assigned tasks with their lecturers. Yet the results were disappointing. The foregoing seems to suggest that the lecturers' teaching styles and the students' intellectual abilities may not be the main issues here. The issue may be mainly attitudinal, as has been noted by other researchers such as Shay and Hughes (1996).

Students have similar difficulties applying knowledge creatively to new texts in literature. The poetry component of the literature course tried to address the problem of students rigidly applying a single "formula" to any and all poems they encounter. Class time was spent going over detailed analyses of the set poems in an effort to get students to read more carefully for detail and to show them how the process of analysis works—looking at details to make reasonable and supportable assertions about meaning and themes. Different types of poems were used to show that interpretation requires more than applying a model to a text: some poems do not rhyme, some use imagery in different ways, etc.

In spite of the time spent analyzing poetic devices and meaning, the poetry assignments revealed that students do not move beyond set patterns for analysis. Instead of looking at the details that are present in the poem in front of them, they relied on the patterns that they had learned (and possibly memorized) when discussing other poems that they considered easier. They seemed to have very great difficulty applying what they had learned to new, and possibly unfamiliar, texts. Any fourteen-line poem became a sonnet; rhyme scheme was always identified, even if there were no rhyming words at all in the poem; genres of poetry were misidentified. Further problems included an inability to move beyond simply identifying poetic technique: students could identify a metaphor but could not say anything about how that metaphor revealed thematic meaning.

This inability to creatively apply what they have learned (and they had learned; nearly all students could define and identify a metaphor by the end of the semester) is worrying and suggests that they cannot break the habits learned in secondary school of reading for "information" alone. While it is important to know correctly the facts of poems or other literary texts (one has to know what the story line is),[5[2]] they cannot or will not cross over into interpretation of those facts.

When writing their own essays, not on literary topics, our first-year students prefer the narrative to other kinds of genre. This preference is clearly evident in all the assignments the students did in the second semester. As the students progressed through the semester, the preference for the narrative genre became more marked. In some of the assignments, some of the students who wrote essays related to other genres nevertheless imposed the narrative structure on their essays, with disastrous consequences for them. The preference for the narrative genre can perhaps be traced to the culture of story-telling in the traditions of the Batswana and also in the educational system. The nature of school English texts has hardly changed: basically, they consist of selected stories on which comprehension questions are

[5[2]] And they often do *not* know the facts correctly!

based; the selected passages then become the basis for teaching various aspects of the English language curriculum.

One solution to the problem of the imposition of the narrative structure on other genres is to de-emphasize, at least initially, the narrative in the teaching of the non-literary genre. Such an approach might jerk the students' attention away from this kind of text to others such as the descriptive, the explanatory and the argumentative. This suggestion is made bearing in mind that any one text might be a composite of various genres including the narrative one. There would be no great loss in de-emphasizing the narrative structure as it can easily be accommodated in literature courses later on. However, this approach does not guarantee that the problem would be effectively dealt with, as experiences in the literature classes demonstrated.

Again, preference for narrative in literature is noticeable. The most common problem for students working on literary analysis is that they narrate the plot of the text, whether novel, play, or even poem.[6[3]] As indicated earlier, this tendency may have been carried over from secondary school, where students do more comprehension exercises than interpretive ones. In any case, it is extremely difficult to wean them from this very counter-productive habit and to get them to analyze the structure of the text using specific examples.

Assignment results often suggest that many students are confused about what is expected. For this group, we explained the instructions several times, and we encouraged them frequently to see us about any questions they had. However, two issues are connected with the question of instructions: first, as we noted earlier, very few students came to see us for any reason at all. Second, many students do not read or follow instructions in any case. The most recent exam for first-year literature produced a high number of students who failed to follow instructions and thus failed the exam (and in many cases the course), despite the fact that the literature lecturers spent two class periods going over the exam instructions and format, and many administered mock exams using the set-up of the actual examination.

The use of language by most of the students (more than 70%) was inconsistent, imprecise and vague. One of the most frustrating aspects of their writing was that they either did not specify what they were writing about or they abandoned the aims that they stated at the beginning of their essays or paragraphs. Apparently, the

[6[3]]Re-telling what happens in the poem, or re-wording it; for example, when asked to analyze the imagery of the first stanza of Heinrich Heine's poem,

> The maid looked over the ocean
> And sighed with a worried frown
> She sighed with deep emotion
> As the fiery sun went down.

one student wrote *"The ocean was so deep and the sunset was over the ocean. The sun was moving down to the other side of the ocean."*

students thought the procedures for writing the different genres were either too rigid or too mechanical. They would not follow the instructions. Instead, they reverted to the way they had always written their essays in high school. The result is that many of the essays were formless, incoherent jumbles of words.

Imprecision and vagueness in the language essays manifested in two ways: long sentences over which students had no control and the improper use of sentences containing wh-words. Long sentences are all too familiar to language teachers. Vagueness or imprecision that is linguistically marked by the presence of the wh-word was widespread. A good example of this kind of imprecision is found in the following sentence: *"He reported how he died."* The sentence is grammatically correct, but the content is not specified. The question of how death occurred is not answered as it is in the following example: *"He reported that he died of fever."*

Vague expression is also a problem when students write about literature. Not only do they use vague words, but they do not give specific examples from the text they are supposed to analyze. Frequently, students only refer in general terms to events of the plot (*"when Oedipus learns this he runs away from Corinth"*), and as the essay progresses, this reliance on general reference to plot leads them almost inevitably to plot summary. "This" and "these" are also used to cover for lack of specificity: a common example is the use of "this" and "these" which do not refer either anaphorically or cataphorically to any nouns or subjects in their essays. Students frequently use these words to refer generally to "something" in the text, without identifying what that "something" is.

This inability to discuss specific examples from a text seems in some way a consequence or cause of their inability to read a text carefully and specifically. Language might be a problem, but high school often creates it by reinforcing the idea that one reads for information, as opposed to anything else. The problem thus takes on the "chicken or egg" characteristic: the cause is that they learn only one thing; the consequence is that they cannot learn anything else.

Plagiarism, already identified as a problem at UB by Robinson and Mooko (1999), was widespread in the students' essays. Nearly all the students copied, some more extensively than others, from a single text or from several sources. The result is that in the essays, it was extremely difficult to ascertain students' use of language as their voices were completely missing from them. They had been warned that they would be severely penalized if they plagiarized. However, this warning did not deter them from doing so. Consequently, some of the students scored either a zero or fail grade (1-49%), depending on the severity of the plagiarism.

Some students genuinely wanted to acknowledge their sources, but did not know how to do so. This situation is difficult to explain. The argument that students did not have enough preparation to learn the skills does not seem valid. Apart from explicitly teaching the skills involved, the lecturers also asked students to copy the procedure taught from already existing bibliographies and to consult them if they needed help. They did neither.

Plagiarism generally is an enormous problem at UB. The culture of plagiarism is widespread, as demonstrated by a study by Alimi and Arua (2006), who discovered an extensive vocabulary to define nearly every sort and aspect of copying (*driving*, *go kgweetsa*, *drive A*, *copy and paste*, etc.). Two factors appear to be responsible for the entrenchment of plagiarism in the school. The first is the belief that it is acceptable for people to seek help when they are in difficulty, no matter the form of that help. This notion is supported by two Setswana words: *mopako* (aid or help that somebody takes when they embark on a journey) and *namola leuba* (aid or help that is provided during a drought season), both of which appeared in Alimi and Arua's study. Apparently, students conceive of their school life either as a journey in which they will experience periods of difficulty (notably, during exams or tests) or as one which would involve periods of drought (when students will not be able to perform well academically for diverse reasons), both of which they can overcome with the help of 'drives,' which stand for the aids mentioned earlier. When viewed in this way, cheating in exams becomes less represhensible, unfortunately. The second factor which aids plagiarism is that there is little punishment for students who copy: on the first offence, if students are caught, they are usually simply told not to do it again. If they are caught a second time, the response is similar. Given the relatively mild consequences for, the widespread practice of, and the potential benefits from copying and plagiarism, it is no wonder that students will try to get away with it. They seem to believe that it is not wrong to copy or plagiarize, but it is wrong to get caught.

Lederer and Tumedi (2003) note the problem of plagiarism in another context. The lecturers concerned were dismayed at the level of both copying (from other students) and plagiarism (of secondary sources) that took place among second-year students in their course, and they designed an assignment (based on a similar assignment created by a history colleague) for which each student would answer his/her own question. This kind of assignment requires a great deal of work for the lecturers at the outset: for this class, nearly 200 questions had to be written about a very limited number of texts, and the questions had to be more or less equal in the effort required of the students. Their assignment was originally designed to circumvent the problems of copying and plagiarism by forcing students to write their own work; i.e., students were unable to copy from others, and the questions were written so as not to cover material that was available to them in the library. Not only were the students prevented from plagiarizing and copying, but they seemed to be forced to abandon other bad habits that they rely on (such as working too closely with other students, regurgitating lecture notes, and summarizing the plot) for other assignments. The problem in that class appeared to be one of lazy, counterproductive habits: the marks for that assignment were well above the norm, including one student who scored a 92% (practically unheard of at second year). Only one student failed, because she failed to address the question. Students did not leave writing their essays until the night before the assignment was due, evidenced by the high number of students who early on brought drafts to the lecturers. Only one student plagiarized, but he did not understand how to cite, and the problem was intercepted when he brought his draft in, and finally, students

seemed able to cite, to write their essays in the proper tense, and to use sufficient examples without being reminded more than what had been written on the question paper. In other words, they demonstrated that they had learned something in their first-year writing and literature courses. Possibly similar tactics could be implemented at first year to attack some writing problems, although they would not necessarily address the problem of insufficient reading.

Four points emerge from our consideration of these issues. First, many students believe that they can write well. They therefore have difficulty bridging the gap between high school and advanced level reading and writing in their first year in the university. In consequence, they grapple, in subsequent years, with concepts and skills they should have acquired in the first year. This situation probably accounts for why students of English do not successfully overcome their reading and writing problems during their four-year study in the university. It is therefore necessary to make students meaningfully aware, very early on, that the academic discourse they need is much more sophisticated than the one they brought to the university. Perhaps lecturers should present their own writing as a model of precise writing, thus showing and/or involving the students through a product or process approach (or both) on how to proceed with their own writing. Of course, the problem then arises of students who copy and plagiarize from their own lecturers.[7[4]]

Second, students prefer to be vague. They are unable or unwilling (perhaps because it is more difficult) to give the degree of specificity required in any question, relying instead on summarizing the plot (particularly if the text is perceived as difficult, such as *King Oedipus*) or on general discussion of theme (*"false prophets are bad"* in *The Trials of Brother Jero*), rather than examining the details of the text. This problem can also be linked with a difficulty in focusing on the topic they are to write about; one of the problems with the essays was that they frequently lost track of their topic, despite having set out for themselves a perfectly workable plan.

Third, students expect to be pampered to a degree, and to a degree they are. They want easier texts, and we assume (perhaps erroneously) that first-year students need easier texts to study before they move to more difficult works. In the second-year special essay assignment for ENG213 (discussed above), students were deliberately not pampered: if they complained that the question was too hard, it was pointed out to them that all questions were equally difficult and that they were free to discuss drafts and specific questions with the lecturer. The results of that assignment were very encouraging. We think that perhaps first-year students ought to have more demanded of them and that they should be coddled less.

7[4] We know of one lecturer who discovered that a student had plagiarized one of the lecturer's own articles for an essay assignment.

Fourth, students learn various skills but do not apply those skills to other classes. We have anecdotal evidence for this problem from other staff members in other departments. Students probably do have the knowledge they need to do an assignment correctly and well, but they do not apply it unless they are forced to (Lederer and Tumedi, 2003). They rely on lazy and counterproductive habits that probably appear easier to them, and we as lecturers do not penalize them for falling back on these habits—a fact the students are undoubtedly well aware of.

Finally, we feel we should reiterate that the results we obtained were not entirely what we expected. We had expected that our students would learn more than they did about the relationship between reading and writing and how to use that relationship to their advantage in the first year. We expected that our students would become much more aware of their use of language and that this awareness would enable them to overcome recurrent writing problems such as vagueness in writing and excessive reliance on narrative modes. We also expected that our teaching would generally have a more rewarding effect than had been the case in the past. Our expectations were defeated, possibly due to factors unrelated to our students' intellectual capabilities (inadequate preparation at the high school level, poor attitude to study, lack of time as a result of taking too many classes, etc.) or our teaching. In view of the foregoing, perhaps we need to redirect our research efforts to some of these mainly non-academic factors and to the effect that the changes in the university environment have on what we do—to offer evidence of the deterioration of tertiary education and support efforts to reverse this situation.

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