**Conflicting Expectations by Lecturers and Students Regarding the Production of Good Academic Writing: A Case Study at the University of Rwanda**

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**Abstract**:

In the academic context, lecturers often describe students' academic writing as very poor whereas the students themselves affirm not to understand the lecturers' expectations with regard to 'good writing skills'. This is a report on a study conducted in Rwanda to explore students and lecturers' expectations of good academic writing. The investigation is underpinned by recent developments in academic writing theories. Based on a qualitative approach and a case study methodology, data were collected by analysing key teaching materials, visiting classes and interviewing academics and students. The findings revealed that lecturers' conception of teaching and learning academic writing is underpinned by an autonomous view - based on discrete skills. It is recommended that the lecturers' understanding of the academic literacies approach should be properly developed to meet the expected literacy competence goals.

**Key words: ESL, Writing skills, Academic writing, Literacies, Conceptualisation**

## 1. Introduction and background

The present article reports on a research study carried out in the University of Rwanda (henceforth UR). The research was aimed at exploring lecturers and students' understanding and expectations of academic writing. Interest in this study was triggered by an initial investigation carried out by the lead author in 2007 into the ways in which writing is taught in Rwandan schools. The investigation concluded that writing activities were inadequately conducted. The rare attempts to establish instructional activities on writing were primarily based on a linear teaching process with priority given to surface language correction. Priority to this approach was likely to divert attention from aspects that are key to construction of meaning in novice writers' scripts such as coherence and logic, presentation of arguments, etc. (Twagilimana, 2007). The impact of such a situation on the learners' competence seems actually to be reflected in the poor learning outcomes - as evidenced in the scripts analysed and the constant complaints expressed by teachers.

As similar problems about students' writing abilities have been reported in Rwanda's higher education institutions (Rosendal, 2010; NCHE, 2007b)[i] and elsewhere (Lillis & Turner, 2001; Angelil-Carter, 1998), decision was taken to investigate lecturers and students' expectations regarding academic writing in one of the higher education institutions in Rwanda, which is the University of Rwanda. The research focused on a particular academic writing module, Written English I, taught to first year university students. The rationale of the study was mainly founded on both different statements about students' literacy abilities in the

Rwandan education system and the confusion that exists globally about what is required in academic writing (Lillis & Turner, 2001).

In the academic context, lecturers generally describe students' writing as very poor (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis & Turner, 2001) whereas students themselves affirm not to understand what lecturers' expectations are with regard to 'good writing' (Lillis & Turner, 2001). According to Lillis and Turner (ibid.), confusion exists about what is required in academic writing, as academic writing conventions are innumerable and various suggestions are at the same time provided to novice writers regarding, for example, the way of writing introductory paragraphs, drafting of a conclusion, how to write in one's own words, etc. First sessions of writing class at university are characterised, for example, by instructions calling for avoiding plagiarism, emphasizing the necessity to cite authorities and sources, etc.

Yet, writing skill is critical for successful results of educational activities. Langer & Applebee (2007) state the following:

> Written language does indeed make a contribution to content learning and it can support the more complex kind of reasoning that is increasingly necessary for successful performance in our complex technological and information-based culture. It becomes essential, then, to make clear and effective writing, in all school subjects a central objective of the school curriculum. p. 151

So, for students entering university to be afforded academic writing skills, hence, to be able to learn adequately from different programmes they are involved in, they need lecturers with a relevant understanding of what "proper academic writing" means. This study is an effort to make clear UR's lecturers and students' conceptualizations regarding academic writing. It is also an opportunity to elucidate some of the challenges encountered in any process of learning and teaching English as Second Language (ESL) as it is the case for UR students. The findings of the study could also inform the initiatives carried out in other contexts similar to that of UR.

## 2. Theoretical perspectives

The role of writing in Higher Education (HE) is two-fold. This type of activity is regarded as a tool that helps students strengthen their grasp of the learning content; it is also a means that allows lecturers to gauge the level of understanding of individual students (Lillis, 2001). Besides, academic writing can also be viewed as fulfilling the function of gate-keeping in HE in the sense that students' success or failure in university courses is determined by "the ways in which they respond to, and engage in, academic writing tasks" (Lillis, ibid., p. 20).

Regarding the form(s) of writing privileged in academic writing, this may vary according to the kind of task required of students: essay writing, laboratory reports, project reports, case study, reflective journals, etc. However, essay writing being the dominant type of writing that students produce (Coffin et al., 2003; Lillis, 2001; Lillis & Turner, 2001), the literacy practice of HE is often associated with what is termed 'essayist literacy' whose features are portrayed by Lillis (2001)[ii]as follows:

> Such writing (or talking based on similar practices) is linear, it values a particular type of explicitness, it has one central point, theme, character or event at any one time, it is in the standard version of a language. It is a type of writing which aims to inform rather than to entertain. Important relationships are those between sentence and sentence, not between speakers, nor between sentence and speaker. The reader has to constantly monitor grammatical and lexical information and, as such, there is a need for the writer to be explicit about logical implications (…)". (p. 38)

Thus, as suggested by critiques of the overarching literacy practice of HE (Lillis, 2001; Lillis & Turner, 2001, Lea & Street, 1998), the evaluative meta-language as described in the quotation above reflects the transparency discourse through which writing conventions are "treated as if they were 'common sense' and communicated through wordings as if these were transparently meaningful" (Lillis & Turner, 2001, p. 58).

Indeed, this type of discourse foregrounded in the academic writing of HE appears to find its origin in a certain period of history. That is, the one of the Enlightenment Age where 'socio-rhetorical norms' based on the value "of universality, of certainty, and rational and epistemic clarity" (Lillis &Turner, 2001, p. 65) present a great aspiration for the scholarly community of the time. It would then be of relevance to locate such a practice within a broader historical and epistemological framework.

Regarding the theoretical perspective underpinning the current study, pedagogic and academic literacy theories have been brought together to understand expectations characterizing the concerned lecturers and students. In fact, the study was underpinned by recent theories questioning the dominant pedagogical practices that focus on a number of discrete skills that have to be taught to students. The present study was guided by a view suggesting that writing problems experienced by students can be explained by their respective linguistic background and/or the sociolinguistic environment in which they have lived. Research carried out in the New Literacy Studies (NLS) perspective contests the idea that literacy development is about imparting skills as this has often been the case. Reading and writing are rather envisioned as cultural and social praxes whose variations are determined by contexts (Lea & Street, 1998; Street, 1984). As pointed out by Street (2003), NLS promotes the "recognition of multiple literacies, varying according to time and space, but also contested in relations of power" (p. 77). Research in the field of Academic Literacies – mainly based on qualitative and ethnographic methods – suggests "to move students from reproductive, static approaches to ones that enable them to engage meaningfully with texts, within the contexts in which those texts are produced and interpreted, and to negotiate successful identities for themselves as writers" (Starfield, 2007, p. 884).

## 3. Methodology

The study was conducted using a case study method. The attention was on comprehension of the phenomenon under study in its specific context based on analysis of authentic indications of the participants' experience (Lacono, Brown, &Holtham, 2009).

### 3.1. Sampling

Selective sampling was employed. The latter, in contrast to probabilistic sampling such as simple random or stratified sampling, deals with cases recognised as likely to provide the required information that can be analysed in depth (Patton, 2002). So, this type of sampling was used for choosing the site and students who participated in the study. Regarding academics, all the three lecturers involved in the module, alongside with the Director of the university Academic Quality Unit, were included in the study. An extended time period used by the researcher ultimately compensated the small number of academics. With regard to students, the criteria relating to the language or educational background, as well as the acceptance to take part in the study, were considered in selecting participants.

### 3.2. Data collection methods and instruments

In this study, analysis of documents, interviews and direct observations were used as methods of data collection. The interactive process required by qualitative research lasted an entire trimester (from January to April 2012) – a three-month period during which the investigated instructional setting was run for the concerned academic year.

### 3.3. Data analysis

Data gathered through the above-mentioned methods were transcribed, analysed and categorised according to general patterns or dominant features. Results were analysed based on the theoretical framework developed for the study. Thus, students and lecturers' understandings and expectations of what is involved in academic writing were analysed with reference to the theoretical perspectives focusing on the way

rhetorical conventions of academic discourse are perceived and interpreted by lecturers and, at a certain degree, by students (Lillis, 2001; Lea & Street, 1998).

## 4. Findings

The current section presents the findings of the study on participants 'expectations regarding academic writing. That is, the section examines what the position of the main protagonists with regard to teaching and learning of academic writing as a practice often characterised by conflicting views by lecturers and students (Lea & Street, 1998). The main themes identified are actually related to (a) the view that learning of academic writing is likely to occur in an implicit way, (b) with emphasis on the form aspects of language, and (c) views of the lecturers about first-year university students based on deficit assumption.

### 4.1. Implicit Learning of academic writing

To the question "what skills do you privilege in your academic writing teaching?" the lecturers provided answers that can be grouped into two categories: (a) conceptualisation of language and literacy competences as a result of creativity and imagination, and (b) conceptualisation of language and literacy competence as a result of exposure to models of language and literacy products.

By presenting literacy competences as a result of creativity and imagination, the lecturers tend to suggest that teaching of writing is a process that "leaves the bulk of the writing to be figured out by the student" (Immerman, 2010, p. 14). For example, lecturer A[iii]says:

> I think the skill that I have to develop in my students is (…) creativity, because writing is an act of creation. I have to make sure that my students develop their imagination in such a way... (Lecturer A, 08/04/2012)

Lecturer A reaffirmed his conviction in another interview where he underlines that his primary aim is to help his students develop their creativity. He stated the following:

> In my student writing assignment, the primary aim is to help my students acquire the capacity to work independently in terms of creating their own product, because, as I said, writing is an act of creation whereby the student learns how to conduct his own project. (Lecturer A, 08/04/2012)

Throughout interviews with him, lecturer A referred at least four times to 'creativity' and 'imagination' as the skills to be privileged when teaching literacy to students at university. Thus, by emphasising the importance of getting his students "create their own products" during their writing activities, lecturer A seemed to restrict teaching of academic writing to the art of creativity and imagination.

Regarding the view of writing competences as a result of exposure to models of language and literacy products, it was expressed by Lecturer C who suggested that learners were to be exposed to models of good academic texts. His answer to the above-mentioned question is stated as follows:

> For the students invited to develop scholarship in different fields, in different scientific domains, they have to prepare themselves in analysing documents of any kind, especially those related to academic work like […] academic journal articles and different books published. […] Because, you know, students need to be exposed to models of language, to different works from different authors… This is what I do. (Lecturer C, 09/04/2012)

The statement above reveals the view of a lecturer emphasising the importance of using samples of academic writing to help students develop their writing abilities. In what seems to be a contradiction[iv] with his previous emphasis on creativity and imagination in academic writing, Lectures A also acknowledges resorting to model texts to help his students to master codes and conventions of academic writing. He states the following:

…I show them books that contain all those rules, and I try to explain to them what they don't understand (…). (Lecturer A, 08/04/2012)

Lecturer C also evoked the idea of model texts where he stated:

…We are also assisting them with texts which serve as an inspiration to them. In all that process, we are putting a special emphasis on the necessity of working independently through personal research which I think can help students become academically literate. (Lecturer C, 31/03/2012)

The implication of the above-described views is that the actual teaching of academic writing, or development of abilities for meaning construction in real communication, is given minimal importance as learning to write academically is supposed to occur in an implicit way. It is also worth noting that consequences of this conceptualisation of literacy as a neutral ability likely to be conveyed from an individual to another, and therefore not necessarily an object of explicit teaching, are confirmed by students who were interviewed. One of the students stated the following:

(…) the system in which they teach us is not clear (…). He [the lecturer] just wants to finish and he runs quickly, we don't have time to ask questions, he does not give clear examples; he gives only theories and through theory you can't know how to practice… (Student Nr 2, 09/04/2012)

In an ESL environment, an emphasis on models of good writing (or model texts) also implies an emphasis on 'Standard English'[v], rules of which are sometimes hard to be accessed by a certain category of social groups whose language background does not make them familiar with Standard English at an early stage of their life[vi].

## 4.2. Focus on the form aspects of language

To the question "What are the features of a good piece of students writing in your opinion?", the answers given were much resonant with features related to form and structure, including 'correct grammar', coherence, clarity, and even 'Standard English'. Lecturer A asserts the following:

…As far as language is concerned, the respect of form is very important. To make sure that you master your English, you have to make sure that the form is correct, also the content yes, but when the form is very poor, you cannot even remember [sic] the content. (Lecturer A, 08/04/2012)

Lecturer C has also a similar understanding. He stated the following:

In order to suitably convey what the text is supposed to communicate as message, the text will need to use correct wording, to use a language that meets grammar rules related to Standard English. Also, the student must use a precise language in his text. He must avoid redundant language and use a formal language which is characterised by words without ambiguity or words that are likely to undermine a good understanding by the reader. (Lecturer C, 10/04/2012)

The above statement reflects a particular attention of lecturers to the linguistic accuracy of students' written text. On observation of the concepts emphasised by the statement, issues related to "clarity", "correct wording", "grammar rules", "Standard English", etc. are presented as aspects of writing that should dominate teaching to the detriment of the aspects pertaining to meaning and content.

A misunderstanding between lecturers and students seems reflected in an answer to the probing question seeking to know under which condition students can easily access the requirements of Standard English and formal language. Lecturer C, who asserted his attachment to the form aspects in academic writing, manifested an "us" versus "them' attitude (Lillis, 2001, p. 2) where any struggle students are facing is regarded as 'their' problem. He stated the following:

> Our students generally don't know how to write in good English. They are always writing as they used to do in secondary school where there were no strict requirements in terms of clarity, coherence and precision. (Lecturer C, 10/04/2012)

In view of the statement above, the lecturer appears to limit what he terms 'strict requirements' of writing to some form aspects of a text such as clarity, coherence, and precision.

The above perception is in a way consistent with the type of feedback provided on copies of the tasks assigned to students where much importance was given to surface language features and relationships between sentence and sentence. This is shown by a sample of sixteen copies of student assignments where at least a comment related to syntactic problem was made on every copy. Further, when feedback is directed to more concrete issues like the appropriate treatment of the content, it is given in a very generic (and subjective) manner, and issues related to the treatment of content and the writing context (i.e. disciplinary, textual…) are often forgotten. The fact of the matter is that a particular way of meaning construction based on a rigid formalism is privileged.

## 4.3. Lecturers viewing first year students' difficulties as a sign of deficit

As suggested by the statements made during interviews with them, the lecturers depicted their year one students' problems in academic texts as somehow a sign of deficiency. The students were often represented as unable to adapt to the requirements of academia. Lecturer A for example, who was asked to give his opinion about what it means to be an academically literate student, said the following:

> An academically literate student is one who has no problem in respecting rules and regulations of academic writing. An academically literate student is also one who is able to work very hard to catch up with the requirements of the academic activities in the academic environment. (Lecturer A, 17/03/2012)

Although the above-presented opinion emphasises the necessity of commitment on the part of the student who wants to be successful, it also tends to present the development of academic writing as a matter of swift adaptation to the academic environment. The idea of inability of first year university students to adapt to the requirements of academia is also suggested by Lecturer C. The latter was of the view that the students engaged with Written English I do not show capacity to adapt to the conventions of academic writing and commitment to a work well done. For Lecturer C, these students' work is too much characterised by plagiarism and poor respect for academic writing conventions. He states the following:

> You know, maybe I'd say that there is still a long way to go as our students are still struggling in terms of what is expected of an academic work or the academic literacy in general. And I think much has to be done in terms of their preparation to get them to be mature academically because, you know, when you look at their papers, the style is always narrative, much plagiarism, all those habits... (Lecturer C, 10/04/2012)

In fact, the lecturers investigated seem to blame students for their incapacity to get rid of their habits which, as suggested, are an obstacle to their personal development in terms of academic literacy. These lecturers actually advocate an abrupt discontinuity between students' habits of meaning-making and university literacy practices, which however, according to research on the subject (see Pahl & Rowsell, 2005), must be realised progressively as students get used to the practices of their new academic environment.

Overall, on consideration of the above-presented views, a deficit-oriented discourse with regard students' difficulties in academic writing is in dominance.

## 5. Discussion of Findings

This section discusses key findings with respect to different themes presented in the previous section:

### 5.1. Implicit teaching of academic writing

The view that learning of academic writing is supposed to occur in an implicit way has been highlighted by lecturer-participants who acknowledge resorting to model texts to help their students to master codes and conventions of academic writing. This means that, in some cases, lecturers base their teaching by presenting models of good literacy products (without necessarily having to organise actual 'lessons'). This view evokes the "informant method" consisting of imitation by ESL students of the language produced by a native speaker, which was popular around the time of World War II but did not prove successful in conventional language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, pp. 50-52). So, whatever the quality of these model texts, the relevance of the procedure depends on the learning objective and the place of the activity in the whole teaching/learning process as various and complementary activities are to be involved in any teaching unit. But according to the lecturers' statements as displayed in the findings, the reliance on model texts seems to be fore-grounded as the appropriate strategy to help students to master codes and conventions related to academic texts.

In ESL context where learners experience particular difficulties in academic writing, it would rather appear problematic to envisage learning of academic writing as likely to occur through exposure and imitation of model texts. Lecturer-participants holding such a view seem uninformed that every single instance of writing is unique and requires a certain level of creativity for adaptation to the specific context of communication. Further, as demonstrated by a study carried out by Cumming and Riazi (2000), teaching academic writing on basis of an "Input-oriented" approach involving reading of good writing, learning grammar and lexical items does not seem to lead students to improvement of "the communicative aspects of their writing" (pp. 65-66).

In fact, the above-presented view representing language and literacy competence as result of an exposure to models of language and literacy products is matching up with the view of language as universal and neutral medium. That is, since language and literacy competences can be 'acquired' through observation of 'good' models of language products, language and literacy are viewed as based on some universal skills which are expected to be transferred from one person or one context to another. Such a view may be understood as consonant with the pervasive view representing instances and contexts of communication as fixed and homogeneous (see Lillis, 2001). The lecturers advocating this view uphold the 'given' status of academic literacy which supposes 'acquisition' of academic literacy abilities through observation of models of literacy products or by osmosis through interactions with members of academia.

So, student-writers' habits of meaning construction have no chance to be taken into consideration as a basis for desired improvements. As demonstrated through interviews with students, the latter resort to a form of self-censorship by switching their working 'tactics' according to every individual lecturer and what is

assumed to be his/her demands regarding students' written texts. They are likely to be frustrated over the kind of writer's identity privileged by the lecturers which does not correspond to what they perceive as their own identity. Their recognition as real participants of the academic discourse practices appears actually impeded.

## 5.2. *Academic writing as a bunch of autonomous skills*

By inference from their different statements, the lecturers' views reflect a "structures conceptualisation"[vii]of academic writing emphasising abilities related to form and structure of a written text. They also show a perspective of what Lea and Street (1998) described as "a transparent medium of representation" (p. 159) of meaning.

In fact, the emphasis on "text functions or structure" has an important underlying assumption that academic writing is based on a series of monolithic and transferable skills (see Toh & Hocking, 2010). This is the case for the investigated module whereby, according to what was suggested in lecturers' statements, students are supposed to quickly adapt to the literacy routines of the university. The issue with such a view is that a "unilateral socialisation" (see Starfield, 2007) of novice-writers ignoring the existing discourses students may bring with them at university is not likely to effectively help them make meaning in their writing (See Ivanič, 1998; Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001). With regard to lecturers' "structures conceptualisation", any analyst would share the view expressed by Penaflorida (1998) who remarks: «If success in learning to write is understood as mastering form aspects, good teaching would be seen as direct skills transfer, as well as the ability to explain the meaning of phrasal verbs such as 'make up to' or 'wake up to' or the fact that 'wake 'collocates with 'up' and not 'on'" (p. 173). Thus, as the author infers, "diligent grading would be seen as red pencilling all over the papers which signals that form rather than substance is given (...) attention" (p. 173).

Thus, with such a conceptualisation of academic writing, dominance of a teaching approach based on what is seen as "universal conventions" (Ivanič, 1998) and decontextualized skills is far from over in educational contexts such as UR.

As for the lecturers' attitude of shifting responsibility to students, it may be seen as a revelation of unawareness, on the part of lecturers, of their own role as facilitators in charge of helping students negotiate their access to the discourse practices privileged by the complex interdisciplinary context of HE. A divide then persists between lecturers' expectations of student writing and students' interpretations of what is required of their texts. Lecturers' misconception about their real role together with their skills-based view of the academic writing ability also appears as a hindrance to any form of awareness of the "heterogeneity and struggle view" (Ivanič, 1998) of language variety which would rather foster a teaching process taking account of every student's needs and/or difficulties.

## 5.3. Students cast in a deficit mould

Lecturers tend to perceive their students' lack of writing experience as a deficit in the knowledge which should be expected of them. In addition to the relatively low level of general communicative capacities in English[viii], new students entering Rwanda's HE institutions generally have no writing experience as writing is not emphasised or even taught at all at school level (Twagilimana, 2002). So, in the face of students' inexperience, lecturers involved in the investigated setting seem persuaded that they are remediating their students' knowledge deficit with basic skills and writing conventions they need for their academic literacy. The apparent low level of students' writing abilities, together with the lively interest they manifest in discovering the new knowledge (Twagilimana, 2012), also contributes to justify the lecturers' current position as they stick to the "correctness" of "sentence structure" as "the basis for writing".

It should be noted that this deficit assumption consisting in explaining students' writing problems in terms of defect of their mind which is "slow to adapt to the university practices" is not unique to lecturers involved in the Written English I module. As stated by Hull et al. (1991), "We are primed by [our] history, by our background and our educations to speak of students as deficient, even as we attempt to devise curricula we call forward-looking..." (p. 315). The fact that students are faced with difficulties regarding codes and conventions of academic literacy may rather be associated with their little experience of the practices of higher education. But, a view of students' struggle in terms of deficit is likely to maintain, and even broaden, the existing tension between lecturers' understanding of academic writing as transparent and structure-oriented, and students' expectations of academic writing as complex and undefined[ix]. These differing understandings and expectations have consequences on students' learning as they raise the issue of fairness in assessment and accuracy of guidance on student writing tasks.

## 6. Conclusion

The analysis made across the sections above suggests lecturers' expectations of student writing as mainly based on an autonomous view[x]. That is, without awareness of an ideological thrust regarding literacy as a social act which necessarily reflects the socio-contextual characteristics involved. This kind of expectations is likely to have a significant impact on the form of practice used to develop students' ability in the concerned activity. So, the findings of the study implicitly call for a new type of view considering literacy as social practice, hence a problematisation of the textual bias dominant in the investigated setting. This perspective appears indicated for helping apprentice-writers find their own ways for effectively adapting to academic writing conventions and, eventually, acquiring a deserved place in the university community.

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[i]This is also corroborated by statements in the press and informal lecturers' talk.

[ii]On basis of what is presented by Gee (1990) as "a model of literacy, based on the value of essayist prose style, that is highly compatible with modern consciousness" (p. 63).

[iii]Naming of participants is based on letters and numbers to preserve the anonymity principle.

[iv]Viewing writing as an act of creativity and imagination seems incompatible with proposing to develop writing ability through imitation of model texts.

[v]Essentially responding to the "quality of clear communication and standards of intelligibility" (Widdowson, 1994, p. 379).

[vi]In Rwanda, this category is made of a majority of students who live in a Kinyarwanda-dominated sociolinguistic environment and are not exposed to Standard English on a regular basis.

[vii] See Cumming (2003) for a detailed definition of this approach.

[viii]Mainly for the reasons linked to the uniqueness of the sociolinguistic situation of Rwanda.

[ix] Given the fact that conventions governing academic writing are not made explicit enough, and lecturers' expectations of the written tasks remain hardly predictable.

[xx] Considering student academic writing abilities on basis of surface textual features and decontextualized skills