Challenges faced by Undergraduate Students in Academic Writing: A Case of Kenyan Students

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Abstract

There has been a growing concern by lecturers of the declining standards of writing being displayed by university students in the recent past. The principles of good writing are no longer adhered to and issues such as grammar, punctuation, choice of vocabulary and sentence structure, are generally not of the required standards. The ability to achieve communicative competence in writing is an essential element in language development and academic success among students at all levels of the education ladder. However, many students at the university have exhibited challenges in their academic writing skills and this is evident in the assignments and terms papers that they write. In this study, the researcher sought to look for empirical data to ascertain the particular challenges that the students are facing in their essay writing by evaluating the students' essays with the aim of identifying the particular types of errors that the students were making. This study attempts to answer two key research questions: First, what linguistic challenges are students facing in their academic writing assignments in English language? Secondly, what are the possible strategies for addressing these challenges? This study is based on a content analysis that was carried out at a Kenyan university to review the Academic Writing essays of 50 first year students. The study used purposive sampling technique to identify the students. The data revealed that students face two main types of challenges in L2 writing. These include content-related and structure-related challenges. The paper concludes with a discussion on suggestions on how to address these challenges and how to help the students to improve on their writing.

Key Words: Academic Writing Challenges, Content Analysis, undergraduate students, Kenyan students

Introduction

Academic writing seems to be one of the most important, yet difficult academic skills for university students to learn. This is particularly evident with foreign or second language (L2) learners (Lee & Tajino 2008, Negari, 2012). Students face challenges in different areas ranging from vocabulary and correct spelling of words to how to develop an argument in one's essay. Calderhead (1987) suggests that in the same way that a doctor diagnoses a patient's illness, so should a lecturer's duty include understanding students' difficulties. This becomes more critical when it is a second language learning situation, since "the difficulties of second language learning are a common sense fact which is universally recognized" (Stern, 1983, p. 400). Having the ability to identify and understand students' difficulties is therefore a necessary condition for becoming the ideal language teacher (Strevens, 1977). This brings to bear the important responsibility that lecturers have to investigate the challenges that students may be facing, for the purpose of helping them to improve in specific areas.

Effective writing requires mastering the grammar of a language. For university students, this mastery is essential because as is evident in research studies that have previously been done, poor grammar affects performance in writing assignments (Myles, 2002). For students in multilingual contexts such as Kenya for example, writing effectively in English requires extra effort as English is a second language (L2), whose acquisition is characterized by challenges that are common with second language learning.

The development of students' L2 writing can be influenced by multiple factors such as L1 writing ability, L2 proficiency, and writing experiences in both languages (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008; Kubota, 1998).

Another contributing factor may be that writers from different L1 backgrounds tend to write differently depending on how they learn writing styles in their L1 culture (Kubota, 1998). While some argue that a writing skill transfer between L1 and L2 is possible (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008; Kubota 1998), others argue that although L1 and L2 writing share some common writing strategies, they are fundamentally different from each other (Grabe, 2001; Petrice & Czarl, 2003). Lee and Tajino (2008) suggest that the development of L2 could perhaps be attributable to a combination of exposures and experiences in L2 rather than to a transfer of culturally preferred rhetorical patterns in L1.

According to Farouq (2012), grammar is the most difficult area for L2 learners. Nyasimi (2014) argues that besides facing challenges in the use of correct sentence structure and paragraph development, students also struggle in creating coherent text. Kleisar (2005) notes that grammar is not just a set of rules, but rather an ever evolving structure of language. For instance, students may know how to construct sentences but may face challenges when applying such knowledge in written expression. Kleisar suggests that the basis of these problems is the traditional way of teaching grammar on the part of lecturers and lack of practice on the part of learners. This study therefore seeks to investigate the linguistic challenges that undergraduate students are facing by analyzing their essays, with the aim of identifying these challenges.

Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following key research questions:-

1) What linguistic challenges are students facing in their academic writing assignments in English language?
2) What are the possible strategies for addressing these challenges?

Literature Review

A number of scholars have carried out research in English as Second Language (ESL) writing. Research in this area has mainly focused on teaching approaches that enhance students' proficiency in L2 writing and on challenges that students face in their writing. The focus of this study is mainly on the challenges that Kenyan students face in their academic writing at university level.

The Context of Higher Education in Kenya

University education in Kenya dates back to 1963 with 571 students enrolled in Nairobi University College (Weidman, 1995). Since then, the system has undergone considerable growth and expansion, a fact that is clearly evident in the number of universities that have already been established. By 2015, there were 22 public universities and 17 chartered private universities, with many having constituent colleges located in many parts of the country (MOEST, 2015). In the Economic Survey 2015, it was estimated that there were 443,783 university students in the country in 2014, of which 81% were in public universities (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, 2015). This compares to the students enrolled in 2013 who numbered 361,379 students. This was twice the number enrolled in 2012.

A paper by Nyangau (2014), "Higher education as an instrument of economic growth in Kenya" identifies the challenges facing higher education in Kenya as being among others, massification, insufficient/declining public funding, and declining quality and curricula that are not responsive to the modern day needs of the labour market.

Of these, he identifies massification as the most fundamental challenge which he defines as "the transformation of previously elite systems of higher education to mass systems of higher education as participation in post-secondary education expands dramatically". As seen in the figures above, there has been exponential growth in the number of students enrolling at university every year, a phenomenon that the public universities do not seem to have been prepared for. The demand for university education in Kenya has consequently led to the establishment of various private universities which have accommodated students who may not have found placement in public universities.

The unprecedented growth in higher education in Kenya has led to a new challenge. ICEF Monitor (2015) states that with growth, the quality of education has been compromised and allocation of funding to research and innovation has been reduced, especially in public universities.

Challenges in Second Language Academic Writing in Higher Education

Research on student writing in higher education has generated a considerable amount of interest (Tuck, 2012; Lillis & Scott, 2007). This is because academic writing is at the centre of scholarship of teaching and learning in universities, affecting both students and faculty members. Chouliaki and Fairclough (1999, p. 21) considers academic writing as a literacy practice and suggest that writing is linked "with what individuals as socially situated actors do, both at the level of context of a specific situation and at the level of context of culture". The same view has been represented by Pineteh (2014) and by this study as well.

New Literacy Studies such as Lee and Street (1998) and Street (2004) discuss student writing as academic literacies, that play a critical role in the success or failures of students, as they negotiate the complex demands of their degree journeys (Tuck 2012, p. 210).

In this case, student writing in higher education may be considered as social and cultural practices that are ideological in nature. Academic writing as a literacy practice is not simply about conforming to a set of conventions or disciplinary rules but it is also a cultural and social practice, which involves using different cognitive abilities to negotiate power, authority and identity within the landscape of universities (Beard, Clegg & Smith, 2007; Street 2004). It is a practice that is highly dependent on the context, on power relations and on the social relationships that human beings construct when they write (Archer, 2010; Lillis, 2010; Kelder, 1996). It can also be identified as the discursive space which establishes "the link between students' entry into disciplinary communities and their acquisition of the formal conventions associated with the academy" (Leibowitz, Goodman, Hannon & Parkerson, 1997, p. 5).

Many lecturers would attest to the fact that many undergraduate students find academic writing challenging. They lack a mastery of academic writing conventions and a good grasp of English grammar. Consequently, their performance is negatively affected. According to Myles (2002), errors in L2 writing can be caused by two main factors: Cognitive factors and social factors. According to the Cognitive theory, communicating orally or in writing is an active process of skill development and a gradual elimination of errors as the learner internalizes the language. While McLaughlin (1988) argues that Academic writing is cognitively complex, with the acquisition of academic vocabulary and discourse style being particularly difficult, he asserts that it is possible to achieve degrees of mastery in L2 with practice.

Myles summarizes the social factors affecting L2 writing by stating that learners may continue to exhibit errors in their writing due to: negative attitudes towards the target language, an extended period of lack of progress in the L2, a wide social and psychological distance between them and the target culture, and a lack of integrative and instrumental motivation for learning.

Assessment of students' writing skills

Assessment is a crucial part of the learning process because it determines a student's progress (Nyasimi, 2014). Kroll (2003) argues that assessment provides guidance for revision and feedback to both the student and the teachers and they can use it to improve teaching and learning of writing skills. Isaacson (1996) identifies five aspects of students' writing that a balanced assessment should consider. The first aspect is fluency which involves the ability to translate one's thoughts into written expression by using a variety of sentence structures and appropriate vocabulary. Secondly, there is the issue of content which relates to the ability to organize ideas and write coherently. It also includes the ability to write creatively through logical argument. The third aspect involves the ability to use the standard conventions of written English language such as correct spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar and readable handwriting. Isaacson identifies vocabulary use as the fourth aspect. This involves the ability to express precise meaning in a variety of writing contexts. The fifth aspect is syntax, which involves the ability to use a variety of sentence patterns and constructions.

Students' assessment of writing assignment should therefore be done holistically, while taking into account the various aspects to be considered. Isaacson further notes that for assessment to be effective, the teacher must take into consideration the purpose, the process and the product of the writing assignment.

Theoretical framework

This study is framed around the model of language production proposed by Anderson (1985), that applies to both speaking and writing in a second language. It can be divided into three stages: construction, in which the writer plans what he or she is going to write by brainstorming, using a mind-map or outline; transformation, in which language rules are applied to transform intended meanings into the form of the message when the writer is composing or revising; and execution, which corresponds to the physical process of producing the text. The first two stages have been described as "setting goals and searching memory for information, then using production systems to generate language in phrases or constituents (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 42).

Writers oscillate between these processes as they actively develop the meaning they want to express in writing. Anderson's learning theory supports teaching approaches that make use of a combination of the development of language and content-knowledge, practice in using this knowledge and strategy training to encourage independent learning (Snow 2001). For students to succeed at university, it is critical that they develop their writing skills in order to cope with university course work in different disciplines (Bacha, 2006). It is notable that Archer (2010, p.496) argues that the language of academia is such a specialized discourse that it may present a problem for all learners whether they are first or second language speakers of English.

Data collection

Methods of data collection

This study was based upon content analysis of first year students' academic writing essays. The analysis involved various parameters such as spellings, sentence development, choice of vocabulary, argument development, paragraph development, among others.

Purposive sampling was used to identify 50 first year day students of St. Paul's University, Nairobi Campus. These students were drawn from different faculties and were all taking Academic Writing which is a compulsory unit for all first year students at the university. The sample for the research therefore only consisted of those students who were taking Academic Writing in that particular semester.

Procedure

The data was collected through a content analysis of the students' academic writing essays. An essay writing test was administered to these students and they were required to do it in the classroom. The focus was to identify the most common errors that students make in their writing assignments. The researcher asked 50 first year students to write an essay on the topic: *Are we becoming overly dependent on technology?* This assignment was carried out as a class assignment and students were not required to refer to any material during their writing. This was done to ensure that what the students wrote was entirely theirs with no external assistance, whether in terms of content or language use. The time allocated for this exercise was one hour, after which the researcher collected all the essays for assessment. Assessment of the essay included an evaluation of both the structure and the content. The basic elements under review were: the introduction, the main body and the conclusion of the essay while laying emphasis on the content as well as the grammar/language use.

Results

Data from the study showed that the students had clearly understood the topic as they appeared to interpret it well. This shows that the students have a certain level of competence in English as they were able to read and make meaning of what was required of them.

However, from their writing, it was clear that most of the students were experiencing challenges in second language (L2) writing. Several students spelt words incorrectly, gave the wrong plural forms of nouns, wrote poorly constructed sentences or seemed to ignore the basic tenets of grammar such as capitalization and punctuation. Paragraph and argument development were also part of the challenges that the students experienced. The types of challenges identified by this study have been summarized in Table 1 below.

TYPE OF ERROR	**EXPLANATION**
Spelling	writting (writing) losse (loss) caltivation (cultivation) vehical (vehicle) aerolpains (aeroplanes)
Informal spelling/expressions (sometimes based on social media use)	Btw (by the way/between) Pls (please)
Poorly written expressions	People in the world Compared to year back According to my own argument
Mother-tongue interference	*Has* year goes by (as) Dependen*t* (dependeded)

Comparative adjective	Lazyer (lazier)
Paragraphing	Having too many ideas in one paragraph Not explaining each idea conclusively
Compound words	Day today (day –to-day) Over come (overcome)
Non-factual information/unsupported statistics	About 90% of people living in an urban centres use mobile phones.
Capitalization (and lack thereof)	Writing a proper noun without beginning with a capital letter. For example, kenya. Using capitalization for common nouns within the sentence. For example, Televisions, Radios and Internet … Beginning a sentence with a small letter
Inappropriate use of the definite article 'the'	'The technology' when referring to technology in general terms
Inappropriate use of the indefinite article 'a'	A solutions
Inappropriate affixes	Unlogic Technologized

Punctuation issues	In the business sector technology (comma missing) Their song's (wrong use of apostrophe) Well that is not going to be the case. (no comma)
Use of slang/colloquial language	Kids (children) I so greatly believe … (I believe that …)
Tense	Technology has … lead to increased terrorism …
Wrong preposition	Dependency *in* technology (on) With the coming *in* of technology a lot has changed (omit in)
Use of abbreviations and symbols rather than writing in full	i.e., eg, &, etc,
Plural/singular forms	*These* will enhance (this) A lot of *companys* … (companies)
Subject-verb agreement	It *make* them interact globally (makes) Unlike some countries which *doesn't* have technology (don't)
Wrong vocabulary	People in the filing department are being *faced* out … (phased) To pack the berries in *sucks* … (sacks)
Subject omitted	Am a student at the university (the subject "I" is missing.

Their/there/they're	A lot of students are becoming lazy in *there* studies (their) … in doing *there* research… (their) They close early because *they* is nothing they can do. (there)
Poorly constructed sentences (without punctuation marks)	In today's world students do not use dictionary one needs to go to the internet and the meaning of the word comes out.
Use of passive sentences	Technology *has been depended* on in the recent years … (It is not clear who is depending on technology)
Redundancy (due to repetition)	Future predictions … (Predictions are always future) Young children … (Children are usually young) The youths and young teens … (These are synonymous terms)
Sentences that are too long and include too many clauses and ideas.	In hospitals there are life machines which can support life compared in the time of our grandmothers there were not there and also invention of medicine like for malaria which used to be a killer disease before it was discovered and this has reduced the death rate among young children.
Construction of paragraphs	Having too many ideas in one single paragraph. Not knowing when to end a paragraph and when to begin a new one.

	Lack of transition words between one paragraph and another. Beginning paragraphs in a repetitive manner …eg. In another institution ….
Extremely generalized terms	According to authors of different books ….
Arguments Evaluation of an argument for soundness, depth and evidence of higher order thinking skills	Students' arguments were generally found to be weak and unconvincing. Most of them lacked focus and were not well articulated. There was a general lack evidence with which to support their ideas.
Writing large numbers in words	In the year two thousand and six (in 2006)

Table 1: A summary of the types of errors in students' Academic Writing essays

Discussion of Findings

This study sought to answer the following research questions:

1) What linguistic challenges are students facing in their academic writing assignments in English language?
2) What are the possible strategies for addressing these challenges?

From the data, it is possible to categorize the challenges that students face in their writing assignments into two main areas:

Language-related challenges

These are challenges associated with the use of English as a second language (L2) in writing. These include spelling, use of correct vocabulary, formation of tenses and plural forms of words, proper punctuation, among others. These are competencies that require a good mastery of the English language for one to use the grammar correctly. The students appeared to know what they wanted to say in their essays but most of them were held back by poor language skills because they were unable to express themselves and to clearly articulate their ideas. There was a general lack of a mastery in English grammar rules.

Ahmed (2010) argues that producing a coherent and well-organized piece of writing is usually a challenging task, which is further magnified by the fact that rhetorical conventions of English texts such as structure, organization, lexis and grammar differ from those of other languages. Ouma (2005) notes that lack of adequate vocabulary leads to strained expression in L2 which further compounds the challenge in L2 writing. The challenge of inadequate vocabulary presents itself when a student is unable to coherently and correctly express his ideas as precisely as he should.

Social media use by students may be a contributing factor in the way students spelt some of the words and the structure of their sentences. Students spend large amounts of time on social media where they mostly use the instant messaging style to pass on messages to one another. This was evident in the way that some of the words were shortened or constructed.

The increasing access to the writing genre of social media in higher education today has largely contributed to the writing challenges of undergraduate students. The type of writing used in Facebook, Twitter and Whatsapp has impacted on the quality of students' writing in this context.

When writing academic papers, the students often struggle to switch from informal social media writing style that they now use often to the more restricted formal academic style (Williams, 1989). This was clearly evident in some of the essays analyzed in this study.

Structure/content-related challenges

These are challenges that were evident in the students' sentence structures, paragraph structures, development of an argument, and the general structure of the essay. The students demonstrated poor critical thinking skills by the quality of their arguments. Some of them lacked a thesis statement which shows the focus of one's essay and hence it was difficult to ascertain the direction that the argument was taking. Developing an argument to a conclusive end proved to be a challenge to many as did constructing well-structured sentences. Many students did not know where a new paragraph should begin and when it should end, neither did they seem to understand the basic components of a paragraph.

Proposed strategies for addressing academic writing challenges of undergraduate students

Two major components that are essential for improving students' writing skills in any writing task include: provision of feedback on students' written assignments (Kroll, 2003) and provision of teaching and learning resources that enhance the learning process (Omulando, 2009). Feedback is necessary because it enables the students to improve on their writing proficiency to the point where they recognize what is expected of them as writers.

Kroll points out that for learning to be more effective, learners should be encouraged to analyse and evaluate the feedback given, for themselves. Additionally, Myles (2002) states that feedback to students is a very important component of the writing process.

He notes that in order for students to improve in their writing, individual attention and sufficient feedback on errors needs to be given. Lecturers need to assist learners to develop strategies for self-correction and regulation.

Feedback may be classified in two main categories according to Williams (2005). These include feedback on form and on content, with the former targeting surface errors that may be highlighted by the teacher but without any correction while the latter consists of comments by the teacher and suggestions for correction. Nyasimi (2014) suggests that some of the most commonly used correction codes include: sp – spelling; gm – grammar; hw – handwriting; p – punctuation; rp – repeatition; ?m – meaning; wv – wrong vocabulary; wo – wrong word order and t – tense among others. Students need to be aware of these codes as they work towards correcting their errors.

Another intervention would be to enhance the teaching and learning resources. This is essential because the availability of such resources has been seen to facilitate and motivate students to learn (Minae, 2004). These can take various forms and as Nyasimi (2014) suggests, they may include audio-visual resources and printed materials. With creativity, a lecturer can make use of available resources, including technology to enhance learning in the classroom and to motivate the students to learn.

Research has shown that learners with positive attitudes and motivation towards writing for academic purposes experience success unlike those with negative attitudes (Myles, 2002; McGroarty,1996). Further, Myles suggests that teachers can motivate students to write for academic purposes by encouraging them to read academic texts and to work with other students who are more acquainted with the discourse.

Lecturers can use various ways to motivate students in L2 writing by giving positive comments about their writing and acknowledging exemplary work by students (Jarvis, 2005). The aim is to help build a learner's self-esteem and morale towards L2 learning (Nyasimi, 2014). Hence, the feedback to students should include both positive and negative remarks for the sake of improvement.

Another strategy that can be adopted to enhance students' writing skills would be to establish a writing centre, where students can be encouraged and guided in the writing process. In this way, the concern by lecturers over the communicative incompetence by students can be addressed. It is expected that university students are able to express themselves well in writing. However, the reality is that many are struggling alone with various aspects of academic writing assignments. The result is that they end up presenting substandard work and consequently get frustrated over the poor grades they get.

A writing centre at a university helps students cope with various writing assignments that they are expected to accomplish at the university. This includes writing essays, term papers, research projects and dissertations. A student is guided through the writing process, from formulating a topic, developing an argument, structuring one's sentences and paragraphs to editing and proofreading one's paper before submission.

The writing centre should be a place that is open to all students, whether undergraduate or graduate students, and one that offers refuge to students with writing difficulties. Besides providing individualized attention to each student, the centre should also organize for trainings, writing workshops, essay writing competitions and conferences.

Forming a Book Club is another strategy that can be adopted to motivate students to read and consequently write for academic purposes. The idea behind a book club is to try and encourage students to read for leisure during their free time. Many students read only when they have to and that is mainly for their assignments and for exams. For them, reading is not a pleasurable activity that they undertake willingly. Rather, many view reading as something they do only when they must. During their free time, they would rather undertake other activities such as surfing the internet, chatting with friends on social media or watching television.

More contact hours per week for English and Academic Writing classes, to allow for more writing and rewriting exercises is another consideration that can be made. The more students are given opportunity to write, the more they will improve. Kleisar (2005) puts emphasis on the need for practice on the part of the learners for them to improve their L2 writing skills.

Students with extremely poor writing skills should be encouraged to attend remedial classes where they can be given more individualized attention or to join a reading club where they can have more opportunity to read in order to improve on their vocabulary and general reading and writing skills.

Finally, students should be orientated to take ownership of their own learning process, ensuring that they prepare adequately for academic tasks and understand the role of academic writing in their success (Pineteh, 2014). Students should learn to take responsibility of their shortcomings, including their poor writing skills and their lack of competency in English. Academic writing is a process that requires commitment and effort and students need to be guided by their lecturers to appreciate this fact.

On its part, the university should ensure that students' mastery of English is given consideration when admitting students. Those found not to have attained the desired level of competence can be encouraged to take remedial classes.

Conclusion

As noted in this study, an understanding of students' writing difficulties is important for lecturers to guide the students into improving their writing skills in L2. The results show that students experience various types of challenges when undertaking their writing assignments. Students may lack confidence in writing in L2 based on previous experiences with their L1 and L2 learning or on their own negative attitudes towards the target language. Language transfer is one of the cognitive factors that influence L2 writing.

Ellis (2003) notes that when writing or speaking in a second language situation, L2 learners tend to rely on their L1 structures to provide responses. He explains that if the structures of the two languages are different, then one could expect a high frequency of errors to occur in L2, thus indicating an interference of L1 on L2 writing.

A student may lack a mastery of the English language which ultimately results in poor choice of vocabulary, structure of sentences, and a general lack of communicative competence. A language lecturer ought to be concerned about the challenges being portrayed in students' writing and seek to identify them, with an objective of assisting the students to overcome these challenges.

Students need to be given feedback for their written assignments and should be guided on the areas in which they have portrayed weakness. Feedback is essential because the student is not likely to repeat the errors that have been pointed out. Lecturers should also give students opportunity to write more often by giving them more writing assignments.

The importance of individual attention and regular constructive feedback cannot be understated in the development of academic writing skills (Pineteh, 2014). Based on the model of language production proposed by Anderson (1985) therefore, unless L2 writers are able to navigate through the three stages prescribed by the model, that is, construction, transformation and execution, they will be limited in their ability to express themselves correctly and coherently in L2 writing. Though the model applies to both speaking and writing in a second language, this study confined itself to second language writing. Therefore, students need to be grounded in the basics (or the grammar) of the language for them to be proficient in its use.

Suggestions for further study

This study focused on the academic writing challenges facing undergraduate students. Data collection was based on content analysis to identify the most common types of errors in students' writing. Other studies may focus on using a different methodology such as the use of questionnaires to ascertain students' attitudes towards academic writing in L2.

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