Academic writing competence: A study of first- and fourth-year University of Technology students.

ACADEMIC WRITING COMPETENCE: A STUDY OF FIRST- AND FOURTH-YEAR UNIVERSITY-OF-TECHNOLOGY STUDENTS

by

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the dissertation: *Academic essay writing competence: a study of first- and fourth-year university-of-technology students***,** submitted for the degree of M.Tech in the field of Language Practice at a university of technology, is my own original work and has not previously been submitted to any other institution of higher education.

I further declare that the study is my own work and all sources cited or quoted are indicated and acknowledged by means of a comprehensive list of references.

T.I. NKHOBO

DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to the following people:

- My late mother, Maphello Nkhobo, who did not get a chance to see her children develop through to the various stages of life. She will forever be an important part of me;
- My late little brother, Mohau Nkhobo, who looked like me as if we were identical twins, I will forever miss you. Thank you for your influence in my life as it kept me level-headed;
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page(s):

LIST OF TABLES

Page(s):

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

- SLA: Second Language Acquisition
- NLS: New Literacies Studies
- AL: Academic Literacy
- ESL: English Second Language

ABSTRACT

The researcher conducted an investigation of the academic essay writing competence of first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice English Second Language (ESL) students at a University of Technology in Gauteng. The combined New Literacies Studies (NLS) theories underpin the study as theoretical lens. The social context and the influence of teachers have become increasingly important, since they have to adapt educational programmes to meet the needs of the students in a forever-changing and technologically-driven environment. Academic language, as part of literacy development, is also affected by the social and digital context. A mixed-methods approach comprising both quantitative and qualitative methods was used.

This study comprises a population of twenty-four participants. The latter embraced; eight first-year students (three males and five females) and sixteen fourth-year students (five males and eleven females). The participants involved were selected through convenience sampling. In addition, this study used two data elicitation devices to collect data from the participants viz.: document analysis (two academic essay writing tasks), and questionnaires including both open-ended and closed questions. Data collected were analysed as part of error analysis using thematic and content analysis. The research findings indicate that the level of the academic essay writing competence of the majority of the first-year students is low. In contrast, the level of the academic essay writing competence of the fourth-year students is considered to have improved significantly. The study further reveals that new literacies such as technologies impact the writing of students in both a positive as well as negative way.

Keywords: *Academic; writing; literacy; teaching; essay; process; product; approach, models; teaching, error, analysis, technology*

CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

1. Introduction

Engaging in an academic 'journey' at university level is a daunting experience as a student, especially when one is not adequately equipped with the necessary academic literacy skills. These are the skills that should be fully portrayed by students who study Language Practice as their major subject as part of their prescribed curriculum. Students should be proficient in the spoken and written language(s) of their varied fields of specialisation.

However, this can prove to be a challenging task, to a great extent, especially when students who take English as a second language are still struggling to be proficient in the spoken and written genres of English. Most importantly, the academic literacy skills serving as the focal point of this study, embrace writing, but not just any type of writing, but more specifically 'academic essay writing.' The researcher of this study, in this regard, sought to probe the knowledge of the academic essay writing competence of the first-year students upon the 'entrance' level of their 'new' academic endeavour focusing on their pertinent field of study. The researcher then attempted to gain knowledge of the academic essay writing competence of the fourth-year students, since they were at the 'exit' level of their academic venture. This approach could reveal whether the progress of the first-year students was adequate by the time they reached their fourth year of study and to investigate if there was a difference in the level of writing when comparing the essay writing skills of the first- and the fourth-year students. This was done by studying written tasks guided by the lecturer, identifying and analysing errors in their essays and gaining insight by asking closed and open-ended questions.

1.1 Background and rationale to the study

As a language practitioner, the researcher observed that the level of the students' academic essay writing competence was rather alarming, especially bearing in mind the fact that the students were studying at a university where an advanced level of language competence is expected. He, therefore, decided to investigate the level of

language proficiency with regard to academic essay writing, since students were having difficulty to express themselves when writing essays and plagiarism was detected in most of the research tasks given as written assignments done by them, due to a lack of good essay writing skills amongst others. Singh and Remenyi (2016:36) assert that plagiarism in essay writing has influenced academic ethics and is regarded as one of the greatest challenges that undermine the academic integrity of the universities in modern times. Social studies are also navigated through an increasing technological world which involves the use of internet sources that are incorporated in academic work (Fitzsimons, 2014:108).

In the light of the above-mentioned, academic essay writing and the equipment of students to perform ethically and competently are becoming increasingly important and challenging. Students need to be trained to be good writers without resorting to the temptation of merely copying other authors' expressions. The genre of academic writing has been closely connected with academic identity as it conveys a sense of the individual's competences (Castaňo, Badia & Garganté, 2015:719). Academic language as part of essay writing and linguistic competences is regarded as essential for academic success (Kern, Lingnau & Paul, 2015:207).

Heppt, Henschel and Haag (2016:244) observe the tendency to pay more attention to academic language recently. They are of the opinion that academic language can be closely linked with written language which is denser. They also maintain that academic essay writing is an area of neglect as studies on academic language are scarce. This under-researched aspect of academic language is thus regarded as an area of language development that warrants more attention.

Research on language errors has become increasingly important, since teachers face numerous challenges with the advent of technology. Studies investigating errors with specific reference to ways that have practical significance to teachers to help make the practical ways to assist learners in rectifying the errors, are minimal (Fagan, 2015:75). This clarity of focus with regard to the role of teachers is thus an area that needs attention and this is then also the manner in which the researcher would like to apply the knowledge arrived at in this study.

More research has been conducted globally on the academic essay writing competence of first-year tertiary education students than on fourth-year or senior

English Second Language (ESL) students. Much of this body of research reveals that university students encounter academic writing difficulties (Munro, 2003:327-336; Maloney, 2003:664; Knoch, Rouhshad & Storch, 2014:12-13; Sibanda, 2014:1-10). These students lack the necessary academic literacy skills which they often do not acquire during their pre-tertiary schooling years (Murray & Nallaya, 2016:1298; Sebolai, 2016:58).

Maloney (2003:664) argues that under-prepared students tend to face difficulties adjusting to the required form of writing at university level. Students are not sufficiently trained at school level to conform to the academic writing expectations demanded at university level (Hirst, Hendersen, Allan, Bode & Kocatepe, 2004:66-80; Pineteh, 2013:12-14). Similarly, critics (Cliff & Hanslo, 2009:274; Fernsten & Reda, 2011:172) concur with the latter assertion that first-year students who are under-prepared struggle to cope with the high demands and expectations of academic writing at university level.

Fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students were suspected to have a better academic essay writing competence than first-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students, since they have had three years of academic writing experience at a higher institution of learning. The fourth-year performance is in contrast to the first-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students who have had a few months of experience at university level. However, both of these two groups of students were deemed as having some difficulty adjusting to the advanced academic writing expected at a tertiary institution. Reproducing the subject matter in writing, especially for academic writing purposes, requires one to have critical reading abilities.

The current study aimed at investigating the academic essay writing competence of the first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students. The researcher focused on the academic essay writing competence of the above-mentioned students in terms of grammar; spelling, punctuation and sentence construction.

Writing is seen by Connor (1996) and Benesch (2001) as an on-going process that includes writing, re-writing, composing, revising and editing in order to produce an end product. In view of the above-mentioned statement, the researcher argued that

students usually write their assignments within a short time span prior to submitting them. Thus, this makes writing a last-minute, final product activity and not a writing process which requires students to produce a considerable number of drafts before the production of the final piece of writing. As a result, students' academic writing competence continues to be hampered (Connor, 1996; Benesch, 2001). The groups of students involved in this study were 'future' language practitioners and competence in both the verbal and non-verbal discourse was, consequently, of utmost significance.

1.2 Research problem and purpose statement

A vast number of under-prepared first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students at a University of Technology were under immense pressure to improve their academic literacy, particularly, their academic essay writing competence. At the same time, these students' inadequate academic essay writing competence continued to be a challenge that caused a spiral effect characterised by recycled errors and unresolved challenges, hence, the researcher identified the students' lack of the above-mentioned crucial academic literacy aspects pertaining to their grammar competence in essay writing.

The New Literacies theories (both upper and lower types) are incorporated to focus attention on the importance of learning in a social context and the important role the lecturer plays as silent caretaker and teacher assisting with remedial work of errors, focusing on the student (learner) needs (Leu, Forzani, Rhoads, Maykel, Kennedy & Timbrell, 2015:39).

Academic writing as a form of discourse is also more information-dense and concise than colloquial speech (Heppt et al., 2016:245). It is this density and specialised academic words that pose challenges to the students in question. In particular, first-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students are the ones who are likely to have a low level of academic essay writing competence in relation to their level of study due to the limited time and exposure they are afforded to be taught academic essay writing skills in their specific level of study. However, fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students are expected at this level of study to display a high level of academic essay writing competence which matches their level

of study, since they have had three years of exposure to academic writing required at a university.

The academic writing issues highlighted above will not be remedied 'overnight'. For them to be remedied, all the parties involved (e.g., lecturers, students and the department concerned) should work together to try and curb these problems. Given this, the study intended to investigate the level of academic essay writing competence of first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students and the type of difficulties that they experienced regarding academic essay writing.

1.3 Research questions for first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students

1.3.1 The main research question was:

- What is the level of academic essay writing competence of first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students?

1.3.2 Secondary questions

The secondary questions were:

- How are these first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students explicitly taught to write academically by their lecturers?
- What do first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students struggle with in terms of academic essay writing?
- Has the academic essay writing competence of fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students improved when compared to the performance of the first-year students at this level of study or not?
- What are the solutions to these problems first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students experience in writing academic essays?

1.4 Research aims and objectives

The aims and objectives of this study for first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students were to:

- investigate the level of academic essay writing competence of first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students;

- determine whether these first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students are explicitly taught academic essay writing in class by their lecturers;
- discover the academic essay writing problems of the first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students in terms of grammar; spelling, punctuation, sentence construction and the use of technology;
- establish whether the academic essay writing competence of fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students has improved when compared to the performance of the first-year students at this level of study; and
- ascertain the academic essay writing problems of these first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students in terms of grammar; spelling, punctuation and sentence construction and dealing with technology.

1.5 Hypotheses

- First- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students demonstrate a low level of academic essay writing competence;
- First- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students are not explicitly taught how to write academically by their lecturers;
- First- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students struggle with grammar, spelling, punctuation and sentence construction for a number of reasons amongst others the use of technology and
- First-year students' academic level of essay writing competence will improve by the time they reach their fourth year.

1.6 Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was used incorporating both quantitative as well as qualitative methods of research. Bless, Higson-Smith and Sithole (2013:16) define a mixed-methods research approach as being straddled as it covers both the quantitative as well as the qualitative methods. The quantitative method relies on statistics and numbers whereas the qualitative method involves subjective responses

of research participants to open-ended questions. A questionnaire was used to elicit the data which were analysed. Whereas the quantitative research seeks to find relationships between the variables the qualitative method seeks to clarify and understand the choices of the participants. The researcher followed an explanatory mixed-methods design as suggested by Ivankova, Creswell and Plano Clark (2013:266) as he first conducted the quantitative research followed by the qualitative research to explain the quantitative results when dealing with the questionnaire data. Thereafter, in the document analysis, he first dealt with the qualitative questions and then did the quantitative part after that to explore the errors and type of errors committed.

Ivankova, Creswell and Plano Clark (2007:261) defined mixed-methods research as "a procedure for collecting, analyzing and 'mixing' both quantitative and qualitative data at some stage of the research process within a single study to understand a research problem more completely".

1.7 Ethics

Ethical clearance was sought from the university in question and voluntary participation occurred. Students were ensured that they could withdraw at any point should they feel the need to do so. Ethical clearance is also addressed in more detail in Chapter 3.

1.8 Clarification of the key concepts

The following concepts are central to the study and are elucidated next.

1.8.1 Academic writing

Academic writing closely resembles written language and involves specialised language in written form. Academic writing also embraces the use of academic language. Academic writing differs from oral language in that sentences are longer and the register contains more formal and academic vocabulary. An academic text is seen to embed an argumentative structure and contains field specific terminology typical lexical features of academic language are general and specialized academic words (Heppt et al. 2016:245).

1.8.2 Academic language

Academic language vary from conversational or social language used in informal settings and is often decontextualised, more complex, abstract and involves a higher demand of student cognition. The density of language is higher when using academic language, because it involves more morphological complex words with a higher proportion of nouns, prepositions and adjectives (Lindahl & Watkins, 2014:197).

1.8.3 Vocabulary

According to Lindahl and Watkins (2014:197) vocabulary comprises a variety of content words students employ in their endeavour to comprehend and express themselves in academic terms. Vocabulary development may embrace the processes of acquiring new words that represent concepts. It also involves clarification of high register words and abstract high-frequency words. There is also a distinction between content-obligatory (words associated with the lesson content) and content-compatible words (academic words that are used across the curricula).

1.8.4 Grammar

Grammar involves the structure of the language and consists of rules that govern the language. The way words are used differently in sentences and systematic ways words are combined to form phrases, clauses and sentences all form part of the concept grammar (Lindahl & Watkins, 2014:200).

1.8.5 Essay writing

An essay is regarded as a literary composition requiring three phases viz.: pre-construction, construction and reconstruction. The essay is structured according to an introduction, body and conclusion (Shober, 2015:10).

1.8.6 New literacies studies (NLS)

The proponents of NLS see literacy as something people do not just do inside their heads, but inside society. Proponents of NLS argue that literacy is a social and cultural achievement and not a mental achievement per se. Teachers now need to

prepare students with a wider range of higher-level thinking and digital literacy skills important to the new workplace settings that have emerged (Leu et al, 2015:39).

1.8.7 Second language acquisition (SLA)

According to Bock and Mheta (2014:256) second language acquisition refers to the target language and concerns the field of language learning pertaining to the acquisition of a language other than the mother tongue.

1.8.8 Competence

The term competence refers to the implicit and internalised knowledge akin to a language or a language structure that is part of a speaker's repertoire which enables the speaker to produce and understand the language (van der Walt, Evans & Kilfoil, 2010:368).

1.8.9 Error analysis

Researchers and teachers analyse errors of learners' writing efforts to determine the level of writing by studying the mistakes. These mistakes can guide the researchers and teachers to see how they can assist the learners. Error analysis has been revived to become performance analysis as the focus is no longer on elements pertaining to the interference with the mother tongue only, but the focus is on errors in communication (van der Walt et al., 2010:33).

1.8.10 First- and fourth-year students

These students are the participants in this study and are first- year and fourth-year students at a university of technology.

1.8.11 Educators

The term educators or teachers (lecturers) are the persons who steer the learning experience in the classroom. Well-trained content-area teachers know the content and language of the subject areas and provide the instruction in class (Colombo & Furbush, 2009:16).

1.9 Significance of the study

This research proposed recommendations that might assist the students and the department that took part in this study to develop ways to resolve and improve the academic essay writing competence of the students in question. The researcher hopes to contribute to the corpus of literature that addresses the poor academic writing skills and to contribute to possible solutions to upgrade the academic language proficiency at tertiary level, by analysing errors identified in written essays and interpreting responses to open-ended questions. Zafar (2016:697) asserts that effectiveness in English writing can be achieved by focusing on specific types of errors committed by writers and doing remedial work addressing these errors. The remedial work might benefit the students and assist them in their academic writing performance not only in English as a subject, but also other subjects taught through the medium of English. The impact of undertaking this study might be felt in other fields of study as well. Robertson (2016:56) posits that language learners can develop language proficiency by engaging in formative language assessment exercises and providing them with feedback. Analysing the essays of the participating students can thus serve as engagement with students that can benefit them in the long run.

1.10 Scope and limitations of the study

This research project was based specifically on the academic essay writing competence of a few first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students at a university of technology. The researcher acknowledges that the number of participants was small and also took into consideration the fact that the first-year students who participated were fewer than the fourth-year students. Second- and third-year students were thus omitted. The focus was also on the performance in English and other languages were thus excluded. Academic literacy (AL) comprises of different aspects which were not all covered in this study, as this study mainly focused on academic essay writing competence of the students concerned, because they are expected at their respective levels of study to possess academic writing competence required at their various levels of study. Mastering academic writing competence at their different levels of study could prepare the students involved in this study for successful completion of their studies respectively

and eventual success of their postgraduate studies should they further their studies beyond fourth-year level of study, if not, they would be adequately prepared for future jobs as language practitioners.

The application of the findings of the study only applied to first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students in terms of their academic essay writing competence, because it was a case study, precaution was taken against generalisation of the findings of the study to the students of other courses or fields of study. The number of participants who returned the questionnaires was small and qualitative findings cannot be generalised though the information is transferable.

1.11 Outline of the study

Chapter 1 covers the introduction and the rationale providing the background and reasons for doing the study. It briefly introduces the layout of the dissertation, the methods and theoretical lens of the study.

Chapter 2 deals with New Literacies as theoretical underpinning and the literature review on research done concerning academic grammar and essay writing.

Chapter 3 extrapolates the method of research and the mixed-methods approach is explained. The instruments of collecting the research are also incorporated as well as the modus operandi concerning the way the study enfolded.

Chapter 4 includes the data analysis, presentation of the findings and discussions.

Chapter 5 is the final chapter and explains how the research questions were answered. It incorporates recommendations and ideas for future research.

1.12 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the background and rationale, the hypotheses, research questions as well as the aims and objectives of this study. Furthermore, the research problem statement, the significance of the study, scope and the limitations to the study were discussed. Key concepts were clarified in order to facilitate the reader in understanding the main ideas that are embedded in the text. The following chapter will discuss the literature review forming the basis of this study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

There are various methods or strategies to teach academic literacy, especially, in the genre of academic essay writing at the educational institutions of learning. They could prove vital in elevating the academic essay writing competence of students involved in this current study. However, the tendency of choosing certain methods of academic essay teaching as preference to the other, because of the limitation of time and convenience, disadvantaged the students.

The researcher approached the analysis of the students' work through a theoretical lens of modern 'New Literacy Studies' (NLS). The 'mechanics' of language of teaching which in the case of this study was English, were given attention. NLS is discussed next.

2.2 Theoretical framework

2.2.1 New literacy studies (NLS)

The study was underpinned by new academic literacies adopting the perspective of NLS which views 'learning' and 'acquiring' knowledge as a social practice where all the participants involved in the learning environment collaborate in teaching reading and writing. This new way of conceptualising literacy is proposed by Gee (1990) and Street (1995), both of whom view 'literacy' as a social practice.

NLS has received renewed interest and is recently employed especially in the light of the developments of new modern technologies which influence the way modern learners write and express themselves (Leu, Forzani, Burlingame, Kulikowich, Sedransk, Coiro, & Kennedy, 2013:219).

In pursuing the NLS it is important to note the slight difference in emphasis between new literacies studies (NLS) theory which is referred to as the lower case NLS and the uppercase New Literacy. Lower case theories in NLS focus on a disciplinary base, such as the semiotics of multimodality in online media, a conceptual approach or online literacies as manifested in a specific developmental level. Lowercase literacies are seen to keep up with the changing nature of the deictic world due to constant changes that affect our literacies. The lower case type also permits researchers to maximise their lenses and the contexts studied by incorporating multiple points of view in an attempt to fathom the role of various literacies in language development. The role of the teacher is also incorporated as influential factor (Leu et al., 2015:39).

The uppercase type of New Literacies theory focuses on the benefit of internet social practices embracing instant messaging, blogs, social networks, wikis, and e-mail, amongst others. The uppercase type focuses on online research and comprehension assessments (ORCAs) as nested within a social network incorporating some of the new social practices linked with technologies (Leu et al., 2015:39).

Lankshear and Knobel (2006:65) are linked with NLS grounded in social practice as manifested through the use of the digital or pixelated text. They view NLS as recognised ways of generating meaning through engagement with the encoded text within contexts of participation in discourses. They involve the use of technologies as means of producing and sharing content. The texts created are engaged in a participatory culture.

The researcher decided to use both levels of the NLS (both lower and uppercase) to frame this study as essay writing in the sociocultural context of the tertiary institution class (paper texts and the influence of digital texts) and assisted by a teacher cannot be separated from the influence of technologies due to their use when doing assignments. NLS theories have to be involved in order to keep abreast of new developments and the changes in the social contexts. The new capitalist, high-tech, global world is affecting the nature of identities at play in the classroom and their links with literacies and new knowledge (Gee, 2004:109).

Even though essay writing in the paper form, in the class as social context was focused on, technology still had a role to play as students were impacted by the influence of technology on grammar and style and in the qualitative questions, technology surfaced prominently. Gee (2004:108) asserts that students read and write specific kinds of essays or “texts” in specific ways and these pertinent ways are influenced by the values and practices of various social and cultural groups. This points to the social nature of literacies and the perpetual changes that exert an influence on writing. The principles of NLS as viewed by the social and constructivist version (lowercase) are discussed next.

2.2.2 Tenets of NLS

Leu et al. (2013:219) identify specific characteristics pertaining to NLS. They are as follows:

- The internet plays a major role in influencing technology as part of literacy learning within specific social communities;
- The internet also changes due to new technologies that appear, regularly requiring additional new literacies;
- New literacies are regarded as deictic (meaning is dependent on the context)
- New literacies are multi-modal and multi-faceted;
- Teachers have become increasingly important since they have to adapt educational programmes;
- New social practices are central to NLS; and
- A richer, more complex English language art is central.

When preparing students it is vital that the teachers consider teaching skills and focus on supporting students to deal with errors such as:

- Identifying crucial problems;
- Locating relevant information of relevance to the problems identified;
- Considering information that is located critically,
- Synthesising multiple sources traced online;
- Communicating effectively with peers using digital technologies;
- Monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of decisions; and

- Modifying these as needed as part of adapting to the transition from an industrial to a post-industrial society (Leu et al., 2013:221).

Fitzsimons (2014:18) exacts attention to the contested terrain of how to tackle the issue of teaching in an increasingly technological world in the 21first century classroom. The humanistic nature of social studies contributes to a great extent to this controversial field. Social studies as novel literacies in a global world require a quantum leap with regard to the way the role of the teachers is perceived. The emphasis is on support, teaching critical, inquiry-based skills and to promote synthesis of material accessed which implies that the students must be able to write academically interpreting and evaluating material located either on the internet or from the library or any appropriate source.

2.2.3 NLS and the university students

The first year of study at a university level of study does not only require adequately prepared students to succeed, but it also means that first-year students should be explicitly introduced to the required writing conversations of their varying fields of study and/or discourse community. The fourth year level of study at a university implies that fourth-year students have been explicitly taught required writing conventions and are able to write argumentatively with less assistance by their lecturers. They have to be able to use technology adequately and synthesise what they have accessed via internet too (Fitzsimons, 2014:111). Writing is a collaborative task requiring lecturers and students to work together in order to reach an end-product (Lillis & Scott, 2007:5-32).

The researcher in this instance, following a view of 'literacy' as a social practice as proposed by the lower case proponents of NLS mentioned above and critics such as Gee (1990; 2004) and Street (1995), sought to determine academic essay writing competence of first- and fourth-year university of technology students as embedded in a social context and influenced by technology. He not only aimed to determine the academic essay writing competence of the students involved in his study, but also pointed to determine whether lecturers worked in collaboration with their students and if they taught student's academic grammar to ensure the appropriate use of the

set academic writing conventions. The role of the lecturer as teacher was also involved.

He specifically, in his research questions, sought to determine, their academic essay writing competence levels and their academic essay writing difficulties. In addition, it was his aim to uncover whether students involved in this study were explicitly taught academic essay writing in their respective levels of studies and if they were influenced by technology. Furthermore, he aimed to determine other internal and external factors that might contribute to their varying academic essay writing competence. Lastly, he also explored the reading habits, to find out whether the students, participating in this study had difficulties in reading academic texts critically, which they were expected to portray in writing. Reading and writing are seen as social practices which vary according to situational contexts in which they occur. Reading, and not any general reading, but academic critical reading is said to have a major bearing on and is of special significance towards the academic writing improvement of the students (Lea, 2004:739-756). Further he also incorporated views on using technologies as NLS in all its forms as the students' work is also connected with the incorporation of technologies.

2.3 Defining academic literacy (AL)

This study mainly focused on one aspect of academic literacy, not general writing, but academic writing at the expense of the other unmentioned aspects of academic literacy. Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) define academic writing as any writing that fulfils the purpose of education in a college or university. The researcher agrees with the latter definition by viewing academic writing in context of his study as the type of writing which is required at a university level to portray acquired knowledge of a course content or subject matter through which students, in this case first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students, are assessed. The researcher is fully aware that the students are affected by NLS in its modern and older form, which might affect the students' writing.

The first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students are not only expected to possess the general reading abilities making use of online or hard cover sources, but they are also expected at their respective levels of study to have

critical reading skills to portray critical interpretive and evaluative skills of the written or read texts through their academic writing tasks.

2.3.1 Context of academic literacy (AL)

The United States of America is arguably leading the AL development of their English second language (ESL) students (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996:11). South Africa is thought to be relatively young in this field of the AL development of their ESL students at primary and secondary schools and even at universities. There is extensive research done in the United States of America about their ESL's students writing as opposed to South Africa. Students' academic literacy difficulties are a universal setback to many countries and for higher institutions of learning across the world.

The researcher of this study concurs with other scholars that those students who are taught in English as a second language, who are referred to in this study as ESL students, are likely to have more difficulties with writing in English as they are in most cases presumed to be struggling with English. Thus, they (university students) still need to be taught English at university levels of study although having been taught English both at primary and secondary schools (Rambiritch, 2016:22-23).

Consequently, this might be as a result of the education that the students received at primary and secondary schooling. Alternatively, it might be as a result of students/learners' lacking motivation to learn and improve their academic writing in English language and the attitude they might have towards English. On the other hand, it might be as a result of English language proficiency of students or resources that underprivileged schools receive. Lastly, it might be as a result of how explicitly students/learners are taught academic essay writing at varying stages of their schooling years which is also one of the main foci of research questions in this study.

2.3.2 Academic Literacy (AL) applied

AL in essence comprises the following aspects, namely; academic speaking, listening, reading and writing. The researcher of this study focused on academic essay writing because students learned and acquired knowledge which was often assessed and tested in academic writing. He also focused on the critical reading in

‘passing,’ because he is of the opinion that students should not only be able to read, but to critically read texts. This will therefore enable them to objectively argue their acquired and learned knowledge from different angles through writing proving facts and their opinions in the process.

AL plays a significant role in ensuring the success of students in their schooling years, for instance, at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of study. Higher institutions of learning expect and require students to possess high abilities of academic literacy which a significant number of students lack (Van Rensburg & Weideman, 2002: 152-163: Murray & Nallaya, 2016:1298). AL in essence comprises the following aspects, namely; academic speaking, listening, reading and writing. The researcher of this study focused on academic essay writing because students learned and acquired knowledge which was often assessed and tested in academic writing. He also focused on the critical reading in ‘passing,’ because he is of the opinion that students should not only be able to read, but to critically read texts. This will therefore enable them to objectively argue their acquired and learned knowledge from different angles through writing proving facts and their opinions in the process.

Academic writing is seen to differ considerably from conversational use of language outside the classroom. It places higher demands on students’ thinking skills as the density of the information is much higher. The specialised knowledge of students may vary in the same classroom as they come from diverse cultural groups and speak different first languages at home. Content-area literacy instruction has proven a useful way of teaching vocabulary or genre specific terminology. Learning academic language also involves expanding the vocabulary. This can be achieved by including ways to acquire new words that represent new concepts, explain and enrich the meanings of known words, adding high frequency and abstract words to the word list dealt with in class, and doing explicit vocabulary instruction teaching new words and explaining their meaning (Colombo & Furbush, 2009:94).

Two types of words are identified viz.: content obligatory (Words linked with the topic dealt with) and content compatible words (words that are academic and used across the curricula). Further functional words should be taught as students may need certain words to communicate in certain situations. Grammar is the structure of the

language and students need to understand tenses, passive voice, direct and indirect speech and aspects pertaining to grammar teaching (Lindahl & Watkins, 2014: 198).

Writing is regarded by Torrance et al. (1999:189-199) as a crucial skill that should be possessed by the students. They need to practise regularly in order to improve it academic essay writing). The latter critic concurs with the previous scholarly assertions made in this study regarding writing as a recursive process. Lecturers and students should work together in order to improve the students' academic essay writing competence (Wingate & Tribble, 2012:492). This will ultimately improve their standard and level of academic essay writing and critical reading at various levels of study at university.

Research revealed that ESL students struggle to conform to academic writing competence expected at tertiary level, because they were not adequately prepared during their pre-tertiary schooling years. A significant number of students enter universities in South-Africa lacking AL competence (Weideman, 2006:81-101; Wingate & Tribble, 2012:483). Students should be familiar with the academic writing practices of the discourse communities that they are part of in order to succeed in such set communities of practice (Petersen, 2014:92).

AL has to do with gaining access to, and generating the information for a designated purpose (Weideman, 2003). Johns (1997:15) explains AL as "including ways of knowing a 'subject-specific' content, strategies for understanding, discussing, organizing and production of text" on the other hand, AL consists of different methods of accessing and using information gained (Zamel & Spack, 1998). The researcher of this current study sees AL in the same light as the scholars who defined it above. He regards AL as the ways in which the students use their literacy skills, drawing on their linguistic repertoire, to complete school-related tasks as expected by the set academic standards, either through reading, speaking, listening and writing while simultaneously learning and acquiring knowledge using a specified language of instruction.

Leibowitz (2001) argues that AL "can be summarised as a culturally specific set of linguistic and discourse conventions, influenced by written forms utilised primarily in academic institutions". Each academic course in any higher institution of learning has certain academic writing expectations that they require their students to possess

and master as per set requirements. The latter could be achieved if the expectations and writing conventions of each discipline are made visible to the students from the onset. This will then serve as the 'blue-print' or guidance that each student will be able to rely on when writing their field of study.

2.4 Academic writing

According to Thaiss and Zawacki (2006), academic writing is any writing that fulfils the purpose of education in a college or university. Wilkes, Godwin and Gurney (2015:166) explain that "academic writing is governed by rules and practices that adhere to traditional conventions." This is the type of writing which is required at a university level to display the acquired knowledge of course content or subject matter through which students, in this case first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students, are assessed.

Dong (1997:10) notes, academic writing: involves learning a new set of academic rules and learning how to play by these rules. Often these rules change from discipline to discipline, and the audience and the purpose of writing vary according to each writing context. For non-native students, the mismatch of writing difficulties and expectations operating in their home countries complicate their writing difficulties.

Chomsky and Halle (1965) define linguistic competence as a language knowledge ability portrayed by the native speakers of a certain language enabling them to produce grammatically correct sentences as opposed to ungrammatical written utterances. Although the participating students in this study are not the English native speakers they should strive to improve their linguistic competence of the latter mentioned language. However, it is in most cases quite challenging for second language speakers to reach the linguistic competence level of the native speaker, but in this case, it is imperative for the students involved in this study as they were studying to be Language Practitioners. They were in most cases expected to translate, edit and/or interpret from English language (source language) into their indigenous languages (target languages) or vice versa. The latter requires students to be equally competent in English as in their indigenous languages in order to practise their knowledge and skills in their predetermined fields of study and/or careers (Archer, 2006:451-452).

The researcher of this current study sees 'competence' in relation to his study as an ability that students are expected to write essays in English language according to the required academic essay writing expectations and set standards at tertiary levels of study. However, the majority of the students struggle with academic literacy simply because of 'low' proficiency in subject of learning, which is English (Butler & van Dyk, 2004:1). Definition of competencies is divided into two various functions (Bunda & Sanders, 1979). Firstly, one should be able to form untested assumptions regarding certain educational concepts. Following Bunda and Sanders' (1979) definition of first kind of competence, the students used in this study should be able to write argumentatively and be inferential in their thoughts, with or without tangible facts at hand. Secondly, one should be able to present the implicit and explicit ability in a specific language, in this case, the language of instruction. In relation to the second kind of competence, students involved in this study should not only be able to master the written and/or the spoken English language, but they should also be critical thinkers in the latter language.

The current study aimed to determine academic essay writing competence of the first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students. The researcher of this study specifically focused on the following; grammar; spelling, punctuation and sentence construction. This study hypothesised that the students mentioned above have poor academic essay writing competence and, struggle to write in an expected academic manner required at the specified higher institution of learning. Consequently, it might be as a result of not having had explicit adequate academic writing teaching during their pre-tertiary years of schooling and even at their current university levels of study (Bharuthram & Mckenna, 2012:586; Andrews & Thoms, 2008:278; Zulu, 2008:30).

Learners should be taught how to write academically in primary and secondary schools regardless of whether they attend public or private schools. Furthermore, they should be taught how to read critically which will enable them to write argumentatively. Often, learners and/or students are not explicitly taught how to write argumentatively and logically (Elton, 2010:151-160). They are usually expected to display excellent academic writing competence without any prior and explicit academic writing teaching (van Schalkwyk, Bitzer & van der Walt, 2009:193).

A number of studies indicate that tertiary students struggle with academic writing (Boughey, 2002:295-307; Leibowitz, 2005:661-681; Elton, 2010:436). There is a universal belief that students or learners will inductively learn how to write competently and argumentatively through reading academic and/or non-academic texts. The researcher of this present study does not disagree with an argument stated above, but he strongly argues that students should be given guidance as to how to read and write critically. This will form a steady foundation for their future studies.

Educators or lecturers should make explicit the expected requirements and conventions of writing to learners/students (Cameron, Nairn & Higgins, 2009:271). Learning new techniques of acquiring academic writing skills is challenging to undergraduate students (Lea & Street, 1998:157-171). Students should be given sufficient time as they battle with adapting with new ways of writing at tertiary levels of study (Kalikokha, Strauss & Smedley, 2009:49).

Scholars believe that as students read more academic texts their academic writing competence ultimately improves (Wessels, 2010:46). For the latter reason, the researcher of the current study included a brief review on reading, especially critical reading. However, in his research data collection instruments, he explored reading habits of the students involved in this study and reading difficulties that might possibly contribute to their varying levels of academic essay writing competence at their respective levels of study.

ESL students inadequately match the required academic writing demands at their respective levels of study at universities (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992:33-49; Casanave, 2002). There should be a bridge between primary and secondary schools in terms of how students are taught adequate academic reading and writing.

The latter should also be ultimately passed on between secondary and tertiary levels respectively. This will enable the lecturers to specifically know what their students have been taught pre-tertiary in terms of reading and writing so that they will be able to know what they need to teach them as a "build-up" to the foundation that they already have. A notion of "scaffolding" should be used to encourage lecturers to assist students as they learn how to apply knowledge of the set 'subject-content' critically and academically in writing (Wessels, 2010:4).

If the students are not motivated to improve their academic essay writing competence, the effectiveness of the academic essay writing teaching approaches, strategies and other methods of how to write academically will remain mere methods and strategies of writing. The linguistic incompetence is the major impediment facing ESL students regarding their inadequate academic writing capabilities (Moyo, 1995:168-172).

Recent studies indicate that postgraduate students are prone to the challenge of battling to adjust to the multifaceted academic genres and conventions presented at the higher level of their studies, (Canagarajah, 2002:29-44; Petersen, 2014:93). The fourth-year Language Practice ESL students in particular are expected at this higher level of study to have superior and improved academic essay writing competence.

2.4.1 Teaching academic essay writing

In the light of the above suggestions, it is informative to note that Lea and Street (2000) introduce models/approaches of teaching students academic writing. The first model is study skills which takes a deficit model, whereby writing problems are merely fixed through the correction of grammar. Secondly, academic socialisation which ensures acculturation of students into an academic community of practice and writing as an explicit activity is also regarded as crucial in the academic community. The third model of teaching students writing is academic literacies, which regards writing as a social practice by the academic community members concerned. Additionally, academic literacies form the basis of both the study skills model and academic socialisation.

Lea and Street (1998:157-172) contend that academic writing has been traditionally seen as a student centred problem, this contention indicates that academic writing

traditionally relied heavily on the study skills model. A number of scholars argue that the study skills model of academic writing is still used and favoured by many universities even today. However, this notion changed, because the academic literacies model received favourable reliance in the past decade, because it has been seen as an “effective” approach/model of academic writing teaching. Boughey (2000:279-290) posits that explicit teaching of literacy cannot only be achieved through teaching it, but also through lecturers working together with their students in order to improve their students’ academic literacy skills.

Moreover, Lea and Street (1998:157-172) argue that even though students are regularly provided with approaches/models/ strategies and guidelines of how to write in an expected and accepted academic manner, it is difficult for them to apply them in their respective scholarly writing practices. In the light of the above, students should be guided throughout the writing process and practise more in order to be able to improve their writing abilities and to be able apply the strategies of writing that they were taught.

2.5 Writing approaches

2.5.1 The process approach to writing

The researcher of this current research project is of the opinion that seeing academic essay writing as a ‘process’ will enhance the academic essay writing competence of the students involved in this study. The process approach to writing makes students to generate a series of ideas and information that they use to complete their finished product of academic essay writing (Tribble, 1996). This implies that the students go through a process of drafting ideas, brainstorming, editing, re-editing their written texts and synthesising their argument before producing a final piece of academic writing text. Tribble (1996) provides four series of stages that the writers go through in preparing the production of the final piece of writing, namely; prewriting; composing/drafting; revising; and editing.

Engaging in the process of writing requires students to spend a lot of time on their academic essay writing tasks as they patiently work towards cultivating their final piece of academic essay writing product through repeated writings of a series of ideas, updating, reorganizing and revising their ideas. O’Brien (2004:1-28) defines a

process approach to writing as an “activity in which teachers encourage learners to see writing not as grammar exercises, but as the discovery of meaning and ideas”. The process approach to writing is seen as a way in which students construct ideas, and gather information that will be used in the completed product of writing (Tribble, 1996).

The process approach is concerned with how the text is produced and/or written and the way in which it can be improved (Fageeh, 2011). According to Grabe and Kaplan (1996:87) a process approach to writing encourages the following:

- self-discovery and an authorial ‘voice’;
- the need to plan out writing as a goal-oriented, contextualised activity;
- invention and pre-writing tasks, and multiple drafting with feedback between drafts;
- a variety of feedback options from real audiences, whether from peers, small groups, and/or the teacher, through conferencing, or through other formative evaluation;
- free writing and journal writing as alternative means of generating writing and developing written expression, overcoming writer’s block;
- content information and personal expression as more important than final product grammar usage;
- the idea that writing is multiply recursive rather than linear as a process – tasks are repeated alternatively as often as necessary; and
- Students’ awareness of the writing process and of notions such as audience, voice, plans, etc.

2.5.2 The product approach to writing

Many higher institutions of learning still use the ‘product’ approach to writing which they regard as a ‘traditional’ approach (Furneaux, 1995). This type of an approach, according to the researcher of this current study, is closely linked to the study skills model to teaching writing as it also mainly focuses on the linguistic knowledge of a specific language displayed by the students and/or learners. Furthermore, he deduces that product approach to writing is also concerned with the correct usage of the language of instruction.

The product approach to writing is concerned with the end result of the written piece of writing. In this instance students are given marks according to the way they used language in that particular piece of writing. Tribble (1990:37-44) sees a product approach to writing as a direct method of teaching concerned with the end product of 'written-text'. The students are not given a chance to improve their written pieces of writing through re-submitting a series of written texts. This type of writing approach is not mainly concerned with the content and creativity of a written text. The researcher of this present study regards the product approach and study skills model as sharing common characteristics and features.

According to Steele (2004) the product approach model comprises of four stages. They are:

- Stage one: Students study model texts and then the features of the genre are highlighted. For example, if studying a formal letter, students' attention may be drawn to the importance of paragraphing and the language used to make formal requests. If a student reads a story, the focus may be on the techniques used to make the story interesting, and students focus on where and how the writer employs these techniques;
- Stage two: This stage consists of controlled practise of the highlighted features, usually in isolation. So if students are studying a formal letter, they may be asked to practise the language used to make formal requests, for example, practising the 'I would be grateful if you would...' structure;
- Stage three: This is the most important stage where the ideas are organized. Those who favour this approach believe that the organization of ideas is more important than the ideas themselves and as important as the control of language; and
- Stage four: This is the end product of the learning process. Students choose from the choice of comparable writing tasks. To show that they can be as fluent and competent users of the language, students individually use the skills, structures and vocabulary they have been taught to produce the product.

The students are taught to follow a specific pattern of writing and language use thereby allowing less creativity from the students. The students are expected to

follow a rigid and/or concrete structure of writing. They are not assisted to enhance the content quality of their written pieces of writing.

2.6 The influence of the teacher (lecturer) on essay writing

Wessels (2010:31) provides activities a good, constructivist teachers should follow. They are:

- Prepare sufficiently what should be done in class so that every student should know what is expected and what to do;
- Accept that they are sometimes the centre of attention when explaining;
- Keep students actively involved and encourage peer interaction and support;
- Help students to achieve their goals;
- Choose activities that are simple to explain;
- Provide step-by-step instructions;
- Know the abilities of the students;
- Decide on the amount of report back;
- Introduce new work a step ahead of learners; and
- Allow students to work without unnecessary interference.

Robertson (2016:56) observes the value of assessment and functional feedback to the students. She identifies the importance of the students' various levels of ability. It is vital to take note of the levels of entering, beginning, developing and expanding. At the entry level it is important to provide help in the form of pictorial or graphic presentation. At the developing level specific and general vocabulary must be provided related to the study area. At the expanding level specialised terminology should be provided to support the student to perform well.

All approaches to teaching academic language overlap with register. The students should be able to use the register in context and apply the knowledge by interacting. The advised action to take when teaching students is to ensure that they use the register or vocabulary appropriately in a context and apply it by communicating it in the social setting of a classroom. Classroom interactions with peers and the teacher are vital to the promotion of apt grammar (Kern, Lingau & Paul, 2015:209). It can thus be gathered that the use of academic language or register should be done with

the help of the teacher at times. Pre-writing is thus important in essay writing as it will be during this phase that interaction can highlight certain words and specific problems can be addressed before the actual engagement with the writing process.

Focusing on the teacher as helper highlights the importance of the teachers' pedagogical and subject knowledge as a prerequisite for successful interaction and learning in the classroom. Professional development and quality training of teachers are thus crucial. The above-mentioned authors also underscore the value of collaboration among colleagues to ensure quality teaching and learning as good collaboration can benefit the lecturers as teachers, since they then also learn from one another and quality teaching can take place. They are responsible for the teaching of their students and need to be sure they can indeed assist the students in their academic essay writing.

All educators have the responsibility to ensure they are informed with regard to academic requirements and the academic curriculum. They should adapt with regard to cultural challenges in the environment they find themselves working in and should also constantly put in an effort to reinvent themselves to be in a position to act confidently in class when engaging with the students (Percy, 2016:882).

2.7 Academic reading

Reading and writing are both important skills that facilitate the mastery of academic language. Academic essay writing cannot be separated from academic reading and therefore the researcher found it necessary to include a brief paragraph on how academic reading interlinks with academic writing. Reading plays a crucial role in impacting academic vocabulary used in writing. Reading is said to improve students' immediate grasp of the content. It also helps the student to have background knowledge to tap into when trying to understand a certain topic. Background knowledge (pre-reading) helps students to make predictions about the reading text. This background knowledge forms part of the top-down strategy of reading. The bottom-up processes where single words are understood can also help. Both bottom-up and top-down reading strategies can help the student in their understanding of texts. The students transfer their first language knowledge to the bottom-up abilities to interpret the text. An awareness in writing systems can help the

teachers to assist the students to grasp the essence of a text. As soon as the students have grasped the know-how of reading strategies they can begin with knowledge-telling when writing. As writers progress their writing becomes more author-evacuated and they commence sharing opinions and doing analyses when engaged with the writing of texts. Sociolinguistic aspects such as age, ethnicity, culture and economic status e.g. can also exert an influence on students' writing progress (Colombo & Furbush, 2009:94).

2.8 The influence of technology on academic essay writing

Writing essays, making use of a computer, allows the writers to use internet and access sources online. This use of internet sources and their availability online have caused a new way of writing incorporating information accessed through the internet. It has also caused a crisis in modern writing as using digital sources bring the temptation of work ready to be copied and pasted to communicate a certain topic. Even paraphrasing without acknowledging sources is still regarded as plagiarism. Ethical reasons why plagiarism is wrong should be taught and students should be taught to credit their sources (Lovett, 2016:39).

Singh and Remenyi (2016:37) list four reasons why plagiarism is unacceptable. They are:

- Plagiarism is seen as an act of deceit or fraud;
- The plagiarists deny themselves the opportunity to learn to integrate information in their own writing;
- Honest feedback is not possible as the assessor reflects on work taken verbatim from other sources; and
- The plagiarists open themselves to future enquiry into their work.

The internet as a common tool for academic research has caused plagiarism to flourish. Turnitin.com has become a popular plagiarism detection method. The plagiarism detection methods are, however, compared to a band aid whereas serious intervention is actually required. Launching a plagiarism case is also very time-consuming (Singh & Remenyi, 2016:37).

It remains a challenge to teach academic essay writing and help students not to plagiarise. Doing practical essay writing incorporating journal articles to elucidate a

topic can be a starting point as the students can be shown step-by-step how to integrate secondary sources in an essay. All technologies can be extremely helpful tools in accessing information and enriching the academic essay, as online dictionaries that can be accessed via cell phones are also valuable tools in building core vocabulary. Ragsdale and Hoover (2016:59) are of the opinion that the cell phones can be used functionally outside the classroom to help to enrich writing by accessing sources. Even though the downside to having cell phones are taken cognisance of it was found by these critics that instead of fighting the use of cell phones it can be advantageous to try and educate students to use the cell phones effectively to their advantage.

There are also however those who strongly oppose the use of cell phones as they claim that cell phones have in fact impacted academic learning negatively causing a lower academic score. It is also asserted that students cannot divert their attention focusing on two aspects simultaneously which makes the use of the cell phone in class a challenge apart from all the other negative perceptions (Bjornsen, 2015; Kibona & Magaya, 2015:783). Kibona and Magaya (2015:777) conducted research in Tanzania on the use of the cell phones and found this popular smartphone that is a mini computer as a possible source of addiction.

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter provided the theoretical framework underpinning this study, and the context of academic literacies. Moreover, literature pertaining to academic essay writing, academic literacy, academic writing, models of teaching academic essay writing, processes and the product approach to writing were discussed. The emphasis was on the structure and preparation of teaching academic essay writing to benefit the students to be able to write academically. The role of the teacher as student support on the social context of the classroom was also emphasised. Digital literacies were briefly touched on as they also form part of the theoretical underpinning of the New Literacies studies. The subsequent chapter will discuss the research methodology used in this study.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter deals with the research methods used to collect data from the participants in this study. Moreover, it describes the type of research approach. paradigm and design adopted in this study. It also briefly discusses the sample population, the data analysis techniques used and the ethical considerations of the study.

3.2 Research paradigm

Paradigms are regarded as worldviews or all-encompassing ways of experiencing and perceiving the world, including perceptions about beliefs, morals, values, and aesthetics. Pragmatism sees our belief system as perpetually changing and adapting to new experiences. Pragmatist researchers concentrate on the 'what' and 'how' of the research problem and it is deemed as the paradigm that forms the underlying framework for mixed-methods research. A pragmatist research paradigm focuses on consequences of certain actions, is problem-centered and real-world practice oriented. Instruments from both positivist and interpretivist paradigms e.g. interviews (open-ended questions), observations, testing and experiments may be incorporated in this particular research paradigm (Mckenzie & Knipe, 2006:197-198). The researcher, therefore, incorporated the pragmatist research paradigm.

3.3 Research approach

The researcher decided on the mixed-methods approach. According to Ivankova *et al.* (2013:257) the combination of the quantitative and qualitative approaches forms the mixed-methods approach. The goal of the quantitative approach is to describe the trends and the relationship between certain variables. Bless et al. (2013:17) maintain that the quantitative research design is often big, seeks to generalise findings and is representative of a population. They also assert that quantitative research uses numbers and statistics to express the impact of the data analysis and qualitative research is linked with responses to open-ended questions which lead to answers which are described using themes

According to Remenyi and Bannister (2012) “qualitative data rely on forms of words and pictures, they could be used to describe a phenomenon and numbers in the form of tables and graphs may also be used in this approach”. By contrast, quantitative data according to Remenyi et. al (2012) “use numbers as a description, which represent the dimensions of a phenomenon or the number of times an occurrence happens.”

3.4 Research design and strategy: a case study and explanatory design

Ivankova *et al.* (2013:266) asserts that the explanatory design is the most straightforward type of research design. The qualitative findings are used to help to clarify the quantitative research findings. First the quantitative data are collected and then the qualitative data. This type of research is also said to be ideal for studies that focus on students’ achievements. This type of research takes place in two phases. Note that for the questionnaires the explanatory design is used (first quantitative then qualitative) and for the document analysis the exploratory design is used where students first respond to the structure of the essay in open-ended questions and then they do essay writing on a topic given. The errors are then analysed. Creswell (2007:73) defines a case study as a “bounded system” (bounded by time, context, and/or place), or a single or multiple case, over a period of time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources.

A case study is defined by Yin (1984:23) “as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used.” Eisenhardt (2002) explains a case study as a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings.

Nieuwenhuis (2013:75) maintain that a case study is used to describe a specific unit of analysis. Case studies offer the researcher the opportunity to do a multi-perspective analysis considering the views of various relevant individuals within the group. A key strength of a case study is the incorporation of multiple sources and techniques. It is aimed at gaining greater insight and understanding into the specific dynamics of a group.

The researcher in this study investigated the level of academic essay writing competence of first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students. The researcher concurs with other researchers and prominent scholars who regard academic writing as an important aspect of AL. Thus, students' knowledge of a subject matter or course content, is mainly evaluated and tested explicitly and implicitly through academic writing. According to Johns (1997:15) AL "encompasses ways of knowing a particular content and strategies for understanding, discussing, organizing and producing text."

3.5 Selection of participants and sampling

The appropriate number suitable for a quantitative research study remains a contentious issue as Niles (2006) asserts that 100 participants is an ideal number to conduct quantitative research. Nielsen (2006), however, is of the opinion that 20 participants are also in order. The researcher intended to use a large number of participants, but questionnaires were not all returned. In the end twenty-four participants responded. The latter comprised eight first-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students (three and five females) and sixteen fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students (five males and eleven females). The type of a sampling strategy used for this study was a convenience sampling whereby the researcher selected participants that took part in his study from a university of technology, specifically, first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students (Richards, 2012:332-333).

The students who participated in this study were from different socio-cultural, socio-economic and educational backgrounds, as well as different age groups. The sampled students in this study were requested to complete two academic essay writing tasks (academic essays) that provided the researcher with a qualitative data that he used to determine the academic essay writing levels of first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students, as well as discovering the type of academic essay writing problems that these students struggled with. The questionnaires left room for the open-ended qualitative part.

3.6 Data collection

3.6.1 Questionnaires

A questionnaire is a printed list of questions that respondents are asked to answer, semi-structured or open (unstructured) questions require respondents to answer questions in their own words (Wayne & Stuart, 2001).

Bless et al. (2013:216) assert that the advantages of using the questionnaire as instruments are that they are easily standardised, cost and time effective and little training of the researchers are necessary. There are, however, a few disadvantages. They are the challenges in interpreting the respondents' answers in case of open-ended questions, sometimes challenging for the respondents to answer with a low response rate and a tendency to be biased. The researcher took note of all these challenges and endeavoured to achieve a low level of bias.

The students were requested to fill in questionnaires that consisted of both open-ended and closed-ended questions that enabled the researcher to gather qualitative and quantitative data regarding the academic essay writing competence of these students, as well as, other contributing factors towards their academic essay writing competence. The data that were gathered from the survey questionnaires, and the two academic essay writing tasks that the students were requested to complete, did not only provide the researcher with in-depth descriptive knowledge obtained from the qualitative data (open-ended questions), but they also provided the researcher with numerical or statistical evidence obtained from the quantitative data.

3.6.2 Document analysis

When the researchers use documents as part of the data gathering techniques they prepare the material carefully. The students who responded in this study were requested to complete two academic essay writing tasks which enabled the researcher to determine their academic essay writing competence. The researcher should focus on written types of communication that can shed light on the phenomena under study. Original sources or documents are studied. The information obtained from the documents are carefully scrutinised to relate them to the study (Nieuwenhuis, 2013:82).

3.7 Data analysis

Content analysis as proposed by Niewenhuis (2013:101) was followed. This type of analysis refers to the analysis of written documents, and it was also used to analyse open-ended questions. Content analysis is seen as an iterative approach identifying keys within the text that can help with the interpretation of the data. The questionnaire containing the closed-ended questions provided the students with three options viz.: yes or no. The open-ended questions left room for personal views and students could elaborate on their answers.

Merging and converging were also used. The researcher brings data from both sets together, merging them either at the analysis stage (by consolidating the data or transforming one data type into the other type) or at the interpretation stage after the analysis. Connecting and linking also occurred. One set builds onto another. The connection occurs when one type of data leads to the need for a different type and it may take different forms (for instance, one form of connection would be selecting participants for qualitative interviews on the basis of survey results). The two academic essay writing tasks, and questionnaire responses of the students in question were analysed using content analysis (Creswell & Piano Clark, 2007:59-79)

Bryman (2001) defines content analysis as “an approach to the analysis of documents and texts (which may be printed or visual) that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories and in a systemic and replicable manner.” The data gathered were also analysed using thematic analysis, according to Richards (2012:350) thematic analysis implies a system of analysis centred on the identification of themes in a text at different levels. It includes unifying themes in order to disclose fundamental patterns and then using these to find universal themes.

A rubric was created to assess/score the academic essay writing competence of first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students. Independent English language specialists (data coders) were appointed to assist with assessing and analysing the data gathered.

3.8 Trustworthiness

The concept of trustworthiness embraces the following aspects viz.: credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability. The findings should be credible and appropriate to the logic of the research questions. The researcher should ensure dependability in that he should describe how he was going to approach the study. Transferability is involved as the qualitative findings can be transferred to other environments though only the quantitative findings could be generalised (Bless et al., 2013:236-237). Yet, the researcher acknowledges that the quantitative findings might not be generalisable as the sample size was too small. Concerning confirmability, it can be claimed that other researchers would also have arrived at similar findings would they have followed the same research approach (Bless et al., 2013:236-237).

3.9 Ethical issues

According to Bless et al. (2013:29-31) the following principles of ethical research are incremental to conducting research. They are:

- Non-maleficence: Participants should not suffer any harm;
- Beneficence: The study should not be detrimental to any group;
- Autonomy: Voluntary participation should be considered at all times;
- Justice: Participants should be treated equally; and
- Fidelity: Promises should be kept and participants should not be tricked into participating under false pretences.

The Departmental and Faculty Committees of Research and Innovation (DCRI and FCRI) and the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the Tshwane University of Technology formally approved the research proposal upon submission. The researcher requested permission from the Department of Applied Languages to conduct research using first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students to participate in his study.

The participants' safety was guaranteed, anonymity of the participants was kept confidential and instead of using their real names, they were referred to using

different codes which will be illustrated in Chapter 4 .The participants were assured that should they wish to withdraw their participation in the study they would not be prevented to do so without providing a reason and without any penalty whatsoever. The participants were also made aware that this study was entirely voluntary and no remuneration or any form of compensation was to be given to the participants. This study was not discriminatory and bias towards the participants of the chosen academic course.

3.10 Conclusion

This chapter provided and explained the research methods used to collect data from the participants in this study. Moreover, it described the type of research approach and design adopted in this study. It also briefly discussed the sample population, the research instruments, the data analysis procedures and the ethical considerations of the study. The following chapter will discuss the data analysis, presentation of the findings and discussion of the findings.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS, PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the data analysis, provides the interpretation thereof and shares the research findings as well as the discussion of the findings. The research instruments used to collect data from the participants/respondents were questionnaires embracing open-ended and close-ended questions. Documents including two academic essay writing tasks and content analysis to discuss and interpret the qualitative data gathered were used. The closed-ended and open-ended questions as embedded in the questionnaires were to obtain both the qualitative and quantitative research data in two phases. First the quantitative data were elicited and then the qualitative data.

The data were grouped according to quantitative information embracing the biographical information. The quantitative data were also done by studying the responses to the closed-ended questions. The qualitative data were analysed followed by the document analysis. It should be noted that the quantitative data came after the qualitative data in the first section where the general responses to academic essay writing is done. Yet note that for the document analysis the design is exploratory as the student's first answered the open-ended questions and then it was further explored if they applied what they said they understood as academic essay writing. The actual error analysis followed thus after the open-ended questions on the actual writing of the essay according to introduction, body and conclusion. The first- and the fourth-year students' responses were compared to track their development and progression of their academic essay writing competence and to establish an idea of their levels of competence.

4.2 Quantitative data collected from the questionnaires (First-year students)

4.2.1 Demographic information

This section of the questionnaire revealed the respondents' profiles. The overall number of the respondents/participants involved in the study was twenty-four in total,

that is, eight first- and sixteen fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students. The questionnaires administered to the participants were thirty-two in total, sixteen to the first- and sixteen to the fourth-year students, but the former returned eight while the latter returned sixteen (all of them). All the returned questionnaires and academic essay writing tasks were deemed appropriate by the researcher as they contributed to the interesting research findings.

The researcher held a meeting with the respondents/participants whereby they were given the questionnaires and academic essay writing tasks to complete and a date was set to collect the finished tasks from them. The researcher of the study analysed the data collected from the first-year students and thereafter analysed those of the fourth-year students separately.

4.2.2 Questionnaire data analysis (Quantitative data): First-year students

The Table 4.1 below indicates the first-year students' profiles of those who took part in the study.

Table 4.1: First-year students' profiles (*N*=08)

Variables	Classifications	Number	Percentages
Name of Course	Language Practice	08	100
Faculty	Humanities	08	100
Gender	Female	05	62
	Male	03	38
Age (in years)	18-22 years	08	100
Home language(s)	Sepedi	05	62
	IsiZulu	03	38
Ethnic Group Affiliation	Black	08	100

Table 4.1 above indicates that all the first-year students were doing Language Practice as their main course of study (100%). They were all enrolled in the faculty of Humanities (100%). The highest number of respondents in terms of gender was females (62%). In contrast, 38% of the respondents were males. The females were more interested in taking part in the study than their male counterparts. The age of all the respondents ranged from 18-22 years.

The highest number of the respondents indicated Sepedi as their home language (62%), while 38% of the respondents indicated IsiZulu as their home language(s). All the respondents were Black in terms of their ethnic group affiliation (100%).

Table 4.2 below indicates the coding used to refer to the first-year students who took part in the study and to indicate their varied responses:

Table 4.2: First-year students' questionnaire data coding responses

Number of Participants	Gender	Age Ranges (in years)	Home Language(s)	Ethnic Group Affiliation	Questionnaire codes (For participants)
1.	Female	18-22 years	Sepedi	Black	FRS1fy
2.	Female	18-22 years	Sepedi	Black	FRS2fy
3.	Female	18-22 years	Sepedi	Black	FRS3fy
4.	Female	18-22 years	IsiZulu	Black	FRS4fy
5.	Female	18-22 years	Sepedi	Black	FRS5fy
6.	Male	18-22 years	Isizulu	Black	MRS6fy
7.	Male	18-22 years	Isizulu	Black	MRS7fy
8.	Male	18-22 years	IsiZulu	Black	MRS8fy

Please note: Below are some of the examples of the codes appearing in Table 4.2 above to refer to some of the first-year students involved in the study for confidentiality reasons.

- FRS1fy refers to: Female respondent number one in their first year.
- MRS6fy refers to: Male respondent number six in their first year.

Below is the representation of the first-year students' responses from Section B of the questionnaire for the closed-ended and open-ended questions.

Table 4.3: Responses for the closed-ended and open-ended questions of section B (Phase 1) of the questionnaire

Closed-ended questions	First-year students		
7. Have your academic essay writing skills improved at this level?	Yes: 62.5%	No: 25%	No response/ Uncertain: 12.5%
8. Are you able to critically analyse the text at this level of study?	75%	12.5%	12.5%
9. Do you often read academic texts online or outside the classroom?	50%	37.5%	12.5%
10. Are you explicitly taught academic essay writing skills at this level?	50%	37.5%	12.5%
11 Do you know how to acknowledge sources when writing an academic essay?	87.5%	12.5%	0%
12. Do you enjoy reading academic texts at this level?	100%	0%	0%

Section B, Item 7 (Closed-ended question): Have your academic essay writing skills improved at this level of study? (First-year students)

The highest number of the first-year students (62.5%) responded that their academic essay writing skills improved during their first year of study. Twenty-five percent of the first-year students responded that their academic essay writing skills had not improved during their first year of study. Interestingly, the smallest number (12.5%) of the respondents did not respond to the 'Item 1', thus making the researcher to conclude that the respondents concerned either were not sure or could not tell whether or not their academic essay writing skills had improved.

Section B, Item 8 (Closed-ended question): Are you able to critically analyse and evaluate academic texts at this level of study? (First-year students)

The majority of the first-year students (75%) responded that they were able to critically analyse and evaluate academic texts at this level of study. In contrast, 12.5% of them responded that they were unable to critically analyse and evaluate academic texts at this level of study. Meanwhile, 12.5% of the first-year students did not respond to the question which indicated that they were either not sure or could not tell whether or not they could critically analyse and evaluate academic texts.

Section B, Item 9 (Closed-ended question): Do you often read academic texts online or outside the classroom? (First-year students)

Half of the first-year students (50%) responded that they often read academic texts online and outside the classroom. However, 37.5% of the first-year students responded that they did not often read academic texts outside of the classroom. Twelve comma five percent of the respondents did not respond to this question indicating that they did not often read the academic texts online or outside the classroom.

Section B, Item 10 (Closed-ended question): Are you explicitly taught academic essay writing at this level of study? (First-year students)

Fifty percent of the first-year students responded that they were explicitly taught academic essay writing at this level of study, while 37.5% of the first-year students responded that they were not explicitly taught academic essay writing at this level of study. About 12.5% of the respondents did not respond to this question.

Section B, Item 11 (Closed-ended question): Do you know how to acknowledge sources, when writing assignments? (First-year students)

The majority of the first-year students (87.5%) responded that they knew how to acknowledge sources when writing assignments. The smallest number of the respondents (12.5%) indicated that they did not know how to acknowledge sources when writing assignments.

Section B, Item 12 (Closed-ended question): Do you enjoy reading academic texts at this level of your study? (First-year students)

All the first-year students (100%) responded that they enjoyed reading academic texts at this level of study.

4.2.3 Qualitative data collected from the questionnaires: (First-year students)

Section B (Phase 2): Open-ended questions and themes (transcribed)

The responses to the open-ended questions were analysed and themes were identified. The responses are therefore, discussed according to themes as part of the qualitative research.

Section B, Item 13 (Open-ended question): What do you think academic essay is?

Theme 1: Perceptions on academic essays (First-year students)

The majority (6) of the first-year students responded by indicating that an academic essay was linked with the aspect of writing in a specific genre, functioned within a set of norms and was a text of a longer length than the usual comprehension passages consisting of one page only. They also acknowledged that the text would display academic characteristics such as high register words and longer sentences.

The following remarks from FRS2fy and FRS3fy:

> *Academic essays should show a certain standard of language use as if there are no high register words and formal language, it would point to an informal text. The academic text is also normally longer than your informal texts and sources are also acknowledged if it is an essay that required research (FRS2fy).*
>
> *I know that the moment I take longer to be able to understand a text that I am dealing with an academic text as I need to think and try and explain some of the words (FRS3fy).*

The smallest number of participants (2) thought that academic essay involved a lot of reading and of any length that required little or no practical application.

It is a short piece of writing by a student involving a lot of reading and study rather than practical application (FRS1fy).

Academic essay writing is to review critically or to evaluate and to give an opinion. One should develop an idea or discuss a point of view. Yes, one needs to explain one's ideas clearly and refer to relevant example (FRS2fy).

Section B, Item 14 (Open-ended question): What aspects of academic essay writing do you struggle with?

Theme 2: Problem areas in academic essay writing (First-year students)

The highest number (5) of first-year students indicated that the aspects of academic essay writing that they struggled with involved the part where the writer has to make a start. Beginning the essay posed quite a number of problems to them as they did not know exactly how to open the conversation to follow in the text. It also posed problems to provide density of description and to find the appropriate vocabulary to use to communicate in an academic and effective manner. It was also very informative to note that the use of technology also posed a problem. Not all had laptops and some did not have smartphones. Finding sources was also a problem as students could sometimes access the titles, but were excluded from the journals and were not members of the journals which then denied them access to the journals. Further they found it very hard to do the referencing within the text and even in the bibliography as it seemed to be such a specialised thing to do. They felt that they needed a lot more practice to get used to the finer nuances of quoting from sources. Technology was indeed very helpful as they also mentioned that they could write their academic essays by using their smartphones sometimes when they could not get to the library to use the internet there. Data were also expensive and sometimes when doing an assignment they would run out of data and it would be very hard to try and improvise what to do. It was clear that they were battling with the new literacies and how to incorporate the work legally within a text.

FRS5fy said:

I do not live on campus and have to travel far to get to the campus. The internet is not always fast enough which takes much time to access the

sources. Once I have found my internet sources, they are not always available as I am not subscribed to all the journals.

MRS6fy said:

Finding information is quite a mission. I always thought it was a matter of pushing a few buttons, but it is really quite challenging. By the time I have the information, I need to go to class again. The fastest way is to copy and paste a few ideas with the intention of reworking the sources later so that they are not plagiarised. It is, however, not so easy as I do not always know the right words to use to string the sentences and share the correct information. I lack the words to use.

MRS7fy exclaimed:

I have recently started looking up words on my cell phone on the online dictionary, but in class we may not use cell phones so I sometimes go slower when we do group work. It would help if I could use the cell phone in class as the online dictionary is very helpful. I once completed my entire assignment by just using my smartphone.

Section B, Item 15 (Open-ended question): What do you think critical reading is?

Theme 3: Linking critical reading with academic essay writing (First-year students)

The first-year students (3) did not all fully understand what critical reading was, though they had a vague idea. Below is how some of them responded:

According to FRS1fy it was:

It is when someone reads a text and involves fairness and judgement about the good and bad qualities regarding that text.

When reading to find specific information one needs to have mastered reading strategies. Reading to have an overview of a text requires different strategies, because your main purpose here is to have a general idea of what is contained in that text.

FRS2fy said:

> *Critical reading is the type of reading which readers use to read and understand various texts. It is when you ask questions about aspects in the text and when you try and find synonyms for words. It also implies that the writer edits the work after the writing process to correct all errors.*

Most of the first-year students (5) defined reading as to include reading beyond the text, careful consideration of the text, understanding what you have read, a form of critical analysis, a process that involves more than the mere recognition of words on a page. Reading also involves the sending of a message by a writer. This perception was in line with the definitions of reading as provided by Colombo and Furbush (2010:86). They both focus on the reader of the text. A message or text is prepared bearing in mind a specific reader.

FRS4fy said*:*

> *Reading is more than merely running your eyes across a page. It involves thinking about the topic and making connections with your own background knowledge so that you can link ideas that can help you to understand even words that are unknown to you.*

FRS5fy postulates:

> *Reading forces your brain to think and process the information and you are forced to try and follow the main ideas in order to make sense of what the writer has shared.*

Section B, Item 16 (Open-ended question): What aspects of critical reading do you struggle with?

Theme 4: Problem areas in approaching reading (First-year students)

The majority (4) of the first-year students had different responses about the aspects of critical reading they struggled with. They indicated the following:

According to FRS1fy:

It is when I have to judge the good and the bad qualities of the given essay or text. I often do not know the meaning of all the vocabulary used. That then makes it hard for me to understand the message.

*Reading for study purposes. In extreme cases panic may set in and you are no longer able to think clearly and are unable to concentrate on the reading. It might end up in you stressing being unable to read, identifying something that is not even relevant (*FRS2fy).

*Contextual meaning – I tend to interpret what I think the text is talking about, not the real meaning. I am busy identifying parts of speech used – the reason is that I confuse most parts of speech which makes it difficult for me to follow the subject and the verb. If you do not know who is doing what it is very hard to understand (*FRS4fy).

However, some of the participants (2) did not respond to this item, giving the impression that they either did not understand the question or they did not know what aspects of critical reading they struggled with. The other participants (2) had similar aspects of critical reading they struggled with. They indicated that they struggled with the following:

Reading beyond the text. I can't read beyond the text and I have a problem of taking time to understand things. I take much longer than others to read a paragraph and to follow what is being said. It is very discouraging and causes me to dislike my subject as I feel I do not perform well (FRS3fy).

Evaluating the importance of certain aspects, things like the whole meaning of the text, are sometimes obscure as I do not understand many words that are just above my level of understanding. I always look for a visual that can guide me as pictures in the text help (MRS8fy).

Section B, Item 17 (Open-ended question): Do you think the academic essay writing teaching you receive at this level prepares you for postgraduate studies?

Theme 5: The effectiveness of academic essay writing teaching at tertiary level (First-year students)

All the first-year students (8) responded by replying in the affirmative and claimed that, academic essay writing they received at this level prepared them for postgraduate studies. However, they stated different reasons as indicated below:

> *Yes…they test my weak and strong points… (*FRS1fy*).*
>
> *Yes…an academic essay is an essential tool to support the achievement of academic goals… (*FRS2fy).
>
> *Yes…at this stage they are grooming us on how to write and train us to write in different genres… (*FRS3fy).
>
> *Yes…because I now know what to consider when writing an academic essay… (*FRS4fy).
>
> *Yes…because knowing how to write makes me a better reader and a better writer*… (FRS5fy).
> *Yes…because each an everyday I will be writing that essay to improve my writing skills…* (MRS6fy).
>
> *Yes…because I will understand that essay writing is a process*… (MRS7fy).
>
> *Yes…this is the type of creative writing and…it is vital when it comes postgraduate studies* (MRS8fy).

Section B, Item 18 (Open-ended question): How does the use of technology influence your academic essay writing?

Theme 6: The influence of technology on academic essay writing (First-year students)

The majority of the first-year students (5) agreed that the use of internet sources influenced their writing. The first-year students admitted to plagiarise often not only because of a lack of the needed vocabulary, but also because of a lack of time, as they had to work at a fast pace to complete the vast number of tasks given by all the lecturers. They also cut and pasted from the internet sources because they were so unsure about how to integrate the material in their own essays. They lacked the necessary skills to produce the same ideas in their own words. See the following remarks:

FRS4fy answered:

> *It is just so much easier to go online to get sources. First if all it is immediate. You merely type in a topic and you can obtain information. It can, however, still be difficult to get a source with all the detail that you can use in your essays as sometimes the author is missing or the date. That discourages you to use that source. It is easy to cut and paste material and when you have loads of work you sometimes cut and paste and forget to acknowledge. It causes much unhappiness if you get a poor mark though.*

FRS5fy said:

> *Technology is really amazing. I use the online dictionary daily and I have in fact learn many new words as the online dictionary gives the explanations by providing the word used in various sentences so that I can get a clear idea of what should be included. I cannot imagine myself without my cell phone as I sometimes just google to check facts and it is just so easy to get more information on whatever topic. Facebook groups are also an answer as a study group as we can communicate and see the comments by others. Whenever I am unsure I just go to my WhatsApp group and then I know what and when something is happening. I just focus not to use the.*

MRS9fy said:

I am totally lost or isolated when my battery of my phone is flat. It is like my emotional line of support. Technology is wonderful and I do think we can reference properly. We just need to learn how to do it and practise doing it.

Section B, Item 19 (Open-ended question): What is the influence of your peers and the lecturers as teachers on your academic essay writing?

Theme 7: The role of peers and the lecturer on the students' academic essay writing (First-year students)

Students (5) unanimously agreed that a hardworking lecturer sets an example to everyone and that a motivated lecturer could make a huge difference in influencing the students to try harder. They also were of the opinion that even though the lecturer might not have an appealing personality the hardworking leaders were respected as they could see they could learn from them, though a few said social skills were crucial and a lecturer that could not communicate successfully was very discouraging to all. Some even took other subjects to avoid certain lecturers. The academic knowledge of the lecturers was also important. They wished to learn from them. Peer work helped a lot as they felt free to say when they were unsure and they could help each other a lot. They had study groups where problems were discussed and sources shared. They also reminded each other of important dates and stayed in contact via WhatsApp.

FRS1fy said:

I decided to change subjects because I do not follow the lecturer's way of teaching. It is a very sensitive business, but I would rather learn from a person who is more understanding and fair.

MRS8fy said:

The lecturer's personality and work ethics are really crucial in influencing us to approach our work ad more specifically our writing. Social skills are important. My friends are very important to me as it is my support system and we just help each other so much.

4.2.4 Document analysis: First-year students' academic essay writing tasks analysed

Section B (Phase 2): Qualitative data: First-year students' academic essay writing tasks

The first-year students were requested to complete two academic essay writing tasks. The researcher used those essays to gather qualitative data.

Task 1: Academic essay writing (transcribed): (First-year students)

The participants were required in this task to write an academic essay consisting of five (5) paragraphs on the following topic: "**An academic essay is divided into various parts."** The participants were required to name and explain what each part contains, providing relevant examples in each case.

Introduction

The majority of the participants (5) named 'Introduction' as the first part of academic essay and a certain number of participants briefly explained it in the following ways:

> *The introduction makes clear to the reader what is contained in the body of the essay. You also need to indicate somewhere in the introduction how your essay is organised*… (FRS2fy).

> *The introduction consists of two parts: It should include a few general statements about the subject to provide a background to your essay…It should also include a statement of specific subdivisions of the topic* (FRS3fy).

> *It provides necessary background information…a specific and debatable thesis statement (FRS4fy).*

The smallest number of the participants thought that an 'Introduction' included the following:

According to MRS7fy

An essay is a relatively short piece of writing dealing with anyone subject, but what the subject is and the way it is done varies greatly…The introduction is where the whole topic is introduced and displayed in short.

One of the participants did not do the given task. This gave the researcher an indication that the participants were either unable to name and explain what is contained under the various parts of the academic essay or they did not understand the question.

Body

There were two participants who did not name and explain what is contained under the section of the 'Body' of an academic essay. The researcher thought that those two participants either did not have knowledge of what should be contained under the 'Body' of an academic essay or they did not understand the question. However, four of the participants displayed a common understanding of what is usually contained under the aspect of the 'Body' of an academic essay. Below is what some of the participants stated about it (the 'Body' of an academic essay):

The main body consists of one or more paragraphs with ideas and arguments (FRS3fy).

It helps you to prove your thesis as part of a topic statement/sentence that states the main idea of the body paragraph (FRS4fy).

You should be able to bring out the argument and points, analyse these and provide the evidence of what you are writing about (FRS5fy).

The participants (2) who had a different view of what is contained under the 'Body' section of an academic essay had the following opinions:

In this main body, the reader understands fully what information is displayed by the writer (MRS8fy).

Essays and exams are the main means used to assess or measure the academic progress of a student (MRS7fy).

Conclusion

The majority of the participants (5) shared the common understanding of what is contained under the 'Conclusion' section of an academic essay. Below is what some of the participants thought about what a conclusion is:

> *The conclusion signals to the reader that you are now bringing your argument to a conclusion. It contains a brief reference to the thesis statement* (FRS2fy).
>
> *All you have to do is to restate all your main points especially if you've made a long argument* (FRS4fy).
>
> *The conclusion is designed to bring together your essay's main points and to reassert or describe/emphasise the strength of the thesis or argument* (MRS6fy).
>
> *The conclusion concludes final points* (FRS3fy).

One of the participants did not do the given task giving the researcher the impression that they either did not know what a conclusion to an academic essay was. From the responses above, it can be gathered that the most of the students understood that an academic essay needed a conclusion and that it embraced a brief summary of the main points bringing together the ideas and making a final statement.

Task 2: Academic essay writing (Unedited): (First-year students)

This task required intensive participation on the actual writing of the various parts of the essay viz.: the introduction, the body and conclusion. The researcher then did a brief investigation to see if the respondents indeed understood what they were doing and also to have a look at the academic language and use of grammar in general. A rubric was then used to assess the work to arrive at a score for the academic essay.

The first-year students were required in this task to write an academic essay consisting of five paragraphs on the following topic: **"What are your views on the xenophobic attacks that recently took place in South Africa."**

Below is the analysis of the responses of the participants regarding their different views of xenophobic attacks that recently took place in South Africa (unedited):

Introduction

The highest number (7) of the first-year students wrote an introduction of this task by introducing their topic to the reader and also stating their thesis statement. Below is how some of them started their introduction:

> *It is of no use for us to fight against our own Africans. Violence should not be used in any form reason being it does not solve problems history can tell* (FRS2fy).

> *The xenophobic attacks here in South africa have a bad impact on me, because nobody has a right to take the life of another person (*FRS3fy).

> *In this essay I am writting I would like to share my views on the xenophobic attack that recently took place in South-Africa. Before I go furthure i would like to come clean that I am anti-xenophobic attacks. I am gonna try and would to define what is meant by xenophobic attack. I hope we can reach a covenant about it in this multicoloured world* (MRS6fy).

> *It is very unfortunate by our brothers and sisters of this country to attack foreigners but in this world, why would such a thing happen?* (MRS8fy).

One of the participants did not start the introduction with the way in which she had indicated she would start her introduction in "Task1". Below is how they started their introduction:

> *Xenophobia are the fear that is perceived to be foreign or strange. Xenophobia can manifest itself in many ways involving the relations and perceptions of an in-group towards an out-group* (FRS4fy).

Table 4.4 below indicates some of the common grammatical and punctuation mistakes under the 'Introduction' section of the academic essay by the first-year

students involved in the study. All essays were rated according to the score, but only some of the mistakes are shared in the academic essays.

Table 4.4: Errors analysed in the introductions of the academic essays done by first-year students

Errors analysed in the introductions of the academic essays done by first-year students					
Grammar errors	**Correction**	**Type of error**	**Punctuation errors**	**Correction**	**Type of error**
Covenent	Covenant	Incorrect spelling	multicoloured	multi-coloured	Add hyphen
bouast	Boast	Incorrect spelling	non racial	Non-racial	Add hyphen
gonna	Going to	Slang language	Rainbow Nation -	Rainbow nation	Incorrect punctuation
wich	Which	Incorrect Spelling	africa	Africa	Incorrect punctuation
writting	Writing	Incorrect spelling	…..to attack foreigners but in this world…	…..to attack foreigners, but in this world…	Incorrect punctuation: student should add comma
conclussion	Conclusion	Incorrect spelling	i	I	Incorrect punctuation
Xenophobia are	Is	Concord	…*attacks i would* ….	….attacks. I would ….	Full stop not used
biase	Bias	Incorrect spelling	(,)		Comma not used
Furthure	Future	Incorrect spelling			
serveral	Several	Incorrect			

		spelling			
Lead	Led	Incorrect tense			
i would to define	I would like to	Word left out			

Body

Six of the first-year students included the following under the 'Body' section of an academic essay for this given task. What some of them included below complemented what they indicated should be included under the 'Body' section of an academic essay in 'Task1' (unedited):

> *According to The xenophobia attack does affect tourism badly, because around the world, headlines like "foreigners attacked in South africa" and violence erupts against foreigners are often misinterpreted by the tourist and potential visitors as being directed against anyone from outside africa* (FRS3fy)
>
> *Xenophobic attacks lead to negative economy. Other countries were against the xenophobic attacks in South africa especially those who were trading (importing and exporting of goods and services)* (FRS4fy).
>
> *Xenophobia in South Africa, at least 67 people died in what were identified as xenophobic attacks. A series of riots left 62 people dead, although 21 of those killed were South African citizen* (MRS7fy).
>
> *Moreover, the reason why the South africans attack the blacks they say it's because they ravage their job opportunities… The other reason is that the shop owners who are the foreigners (xenophobic Attack victims) when they opened their mini markets their products are always at lower prices. But i*

don't think that could be a good reason to take the soul, which is never right., (MRS6fy).

The smallest number (2) of the first-year students did not have the 'Body' section of an academic essay for the given task. It is, therefore, possible that such participants either might not have known what to include under the 'Body' section of an academic essay or they did not understand the set question or were too scared to expose themselves should they make mistakes.

Table 4.5 below indicates some of the common grammatical and punctuation mistakes under the 'Body' section of an academic essay done by the participants used in this study.

Table 4.5: Errors analysed in the body of the academic essays done by first-year students

Errors analysed in the body of the academic essays done by first-year students					
Grammar	**Correction**	**Type of mistake**	**Punctuation**	**Correction**	**Type of mistake**
uggly	Ugly	Incorrect spelling			
virious	Various	Incorrect spelling	african	African	Incorrect punctuation
opened	Open	Incorrect tense	childrens	Children's	Incorrect punctuation
woorth	Worth	Incorrect spelling	south africa	South Africa	Incorrect punctuation
succed	Succeed	Incorrect spelling	*xenophobic Attack victims*	Attack	Incorrect punctuation
foreemple	Example	Incorrect spelling	i	I	Incorrect punctuation
writter	Writer	Incorrect	()	.	Full stop not

		spelling			used
conclussion	Conclusion	Incorrect spelling	(,)	,	Comma omitted before conjunctions
serveral	Several	Incorrect spelling			
percieved	Perceived	Incorrect tense			
Ravage job opportunities	Steal	Incorrect word choice			

Conclusion

The majority of the participants (5) did not follow what they have indicated in 'Task1' when concluding an academic essay given for 'Task 2'. Below is how some of them concluded their academic essays (unedited):

> *And where is the voice of the ruling African National Congress in all this? This is the party that received solid moral and financial support from the continent during the apartheid days* (FRS2fy).

> *The unemployed local sees foreign immigrants as as threat. They open up shops and carve out the life for themselves here and it upsets these locals* (FRS3fy).
> *Causes of this xenophobic attacks namely to be relative deprivation, specifically intense…* (MRS7fy).

The smallest number of the participants (2) followed what they have indicated should be concluded with in 'Task1'. Below is how they have concluded 'Task 2' (unedited):

> *In my own understanding and how I view xenophobia attacks in South Africa I think they are very unreasonable and people who supports are the lazy one's who cant stand up and make a living of their own* (FRS5fy).

In conclussion, the view of mine on this attack is that it's not right and i will never see any good reason of killing my brother (black killing black) for a reason that he/she is located in my country and they are winning (MRS6fy).

One of the participants did not conclude this given task which indicated to the researcher that they either might not have known what to conclude it with as part of this academic essay writing task.

Table 4.6 below shows some of the common grammatical and punctuation mistakes under the 'Conclusion' section of an academic essay done by the participants used in this study.

Table 4.6: Errors analysed in the conclusions of the academic essays done by first-year students

Errors analysed in the conclusions of the academic essays done by first-year students					
Grammar	**Correction**	**Type of error**	**Punctuation**	**Correction**	**Type of error**
steamrolled		incorrect word choice	lets	Let's	Incorrect punctuation: apostrophe
Who supports are	Whose supporters	Incorrect words used	cant	Can't	Incorrect punctuation apostrophe
carve	Care	Incorrect spelling			
conclussion – incorrect spelling			i	I	Incorrect punctuation
to be relative deprivation	To be relatively Deprived	Incorrect parts of speech used			

immigrants as as threat	As	Delete as It should be as a threat			

Table 4.7 below provides the ratings of the first-year students' academic essays in terms of the following: grammar; spelling, punctuation and sentence structure.

Table 4.7: Academic essays' ratings for task 2: First-year students (*N*=08)

Poor	**Fair**	**Good**	**Very good**
Score: 1/6	**Score: 2/6**	**Score: 4/6**	**Score: 6/6**
Rating Criteria: • 5 or more errors in grammar; spelling, punctuation and sentence construction	**Rating Criteria:** • 4 or more errors in grammar; spelling, punctuation and sentence construction	**Rating Criteria:** • 2 or less errors in grammar; spelling, punctuation and sentence construction	**Rating Criteria:** • 1 or no errors in grammar; spelling, punctuation and sentence construction
62.5%	25%	12.5%	0%

Table 4.7 above provides the scores that the eight participating first-year students (in this section) obtained in terms of grammar; spelling, punctuation and sentence construction. Sixty-two comma five percent of the participants were rated as "Poor" and 25% of the participants were rated as "Fair" while 12.5% of the participants were rated as "Good". Even though the researcher is aware that such a small sample cannot be fully reliable as representative of the entire group of first-year students who are almost 200, it can give an idea of what can be expected of the group's performance.

4.3 Questionnaire data analysis (Quantitative data): Fourth-year students

Table 4.8: Fourth-year students' profiles (*N*=16)

Fourth-year students' profiles			
Variables	**Classifications**	**Number**	**Percentages**
Name of course	Language Practice	16	100
Faculty	Humanities	16	100
Gender	Female	11	69
	Male	05	31
Age (in years)	18-22 years	07	44
	23-26 years	07	44
	27-31 years	02	12
Home Language(s)	Sepedi	09	56
	IsiZulu	03	19
	TshiVenda	01	6
	Afrikaans	01	6
	Siswati	02	13
Ethnic Group affiliation	Black	15	94
	Coloured	01	6

Table 4.8 above reveals that all the fourth-year students (100%) were studying Language Practice as their main course of study. They were all enrolled in the Faculty of Humanities (100%). The highest number of respondents in terms of gender was females (69%). The smallest number of respondents was males (31%). The females were more interested to take part in the study than their male counterpart. The first group of the age ranges of the respondents were from 18-22 years (44%). The second group of the age ranges of the respondents were from 23-

26 years (44%). However, the third group of the age ranges of the respondents were from 27-31 years (12%).

The first highest number of the respondents indicated Sepedi as their home language (56%), the second highest number of the respondents (19%) indicated IsiZulu as their home language. There were, however, three (3) smallest numbers of the respondents in terms of home language(s) classification, firstly, Tshivenda with 6%, secondly, Afrikaans with 6% and then, thirdly, Siswati with 13%. The majority of the respondents (94%) were Black in terms of their ethnic group affiliation. The smallest number of the participants (6%) were Coloured in terms of their ethnic group affiliation. Table 4.9 below shows the coding used to refer to the fourth-year students who took part in the study and to indicate their varied responses:

Table 4.9: Fourth-year students' questionnaire data coding responses

Number of Participants	Gender	Age (in years)	Home language(s)	Ethnic group Affiliation	Questionnaire codes (For participants)
1.	Female	18-22 years	Sepedi	Black	FRS12fty
2.	Female	18-22 years	Sepedi	Black	FRS17fty
3.	Female	18-22 years	Sepedi	Black	FRS14fty
4.	Female	18-22 years	TshiVenda	Black	FRS13fty
5.	Female	18-22 years	Isizulu	Black	FRS11fty
6.	Female	18-22 years	Sepedi	Black	FRS18fty
7.	Female	23-26 years	Isizulu	Black	FRS10fty
8.	Female	23-26 years	Siswati	Black	FRS15fty
9.	Female	23-26 Years	Sepedi	Black	FRS16fty
10.	Female	23-26 Years	Afrikaans	Coloured	FRS19fty
11.	Female	27-31 years	Sepedi	Black	FRS20fty
12.	Male	18-22 years	Sepedi	Black	MRS21fty

13.	Male	23-26 years	Sepedi	Black	MRS22fty
14.	Male	23-26 years	IsiZulu	Black	MRS23fty
15.	Male	23-26 years	Sepedi	Black	MRS24fty
16.	Male	27-31 years	Siswati	Black	MRS20fty

Please note: Below are some of the examples of the codes indicated on table 4.9 above to refer to some of the participants involved in the study for confidentiality reasons.

- **FRS9fty** refers to: Female Respondent number nine in their fourth year.
- **MRS24fty** refers to: Male Respondent number twenty-four in their fourth year.

Table 4.10 below indicates the representation of the participants' responses from Section B of the questionnaire for the closed-ended and open-ended questions respectively.

Table 4.10: Responses for the closed-ended questions of section B (Phase 1) of the questionnaire

Closed-ended questions	Fourth-year students		
7. Have your academic essay writing skills improved at this level?	Yes 100%	No 0%	No response/ uncertain 0%
8. Are you able to critically analyse the text at this level of study?	93.8%	6.2%	0%
9. Do you often read academic texts online or outside the classroom?	62.5%	37.5%	0%
10. Are you explicitly taught academic essay writing skills at this level?	56.2%	43.8%	0%
11. Do you know how to acknowledge sources when writing an academic essay?	93.8%	6.2%	0%
12. Do you enjoy reading academic texts at this level?	62.5%	37.5%	0%

Section B, Item 7 (Closed-ended question): Have your academic essay writing skills improved at this level of study? (Fourth-year students)

The overall number of the fourth-year students which was 100% responded that their academic essay writing skills had improved by their fourth year of study. They were all in agreement that the exposure to academic essay writing and high register words as part of their vocabulary they mastered, helped a lot and that the regular writing of essays helped them to up their level of performance.

Section B, Item 8 (Closed-ended question): Are you able to critically analyse and evaluate academic texts at this level of study? (Fourth-year students)

The majority of the fourth-year students (93.8%) responded that they were able to critically analyse and evaluate academic texts at this level of study. The smallest number of the respondents (6.2%) responded that they were unable to critically analyse and evaluate academic texts at this level of study. It was clear that the majority of the students were confident about their perceptions and their abilities to analyse academic texts critically.

Section B, Item 9 (Closed-ended question): Do you often read academic texts online or outside the classroom? (Fourth-year students)

The highest number of the fourth-year students (62.5%) responded that they often read academic texts online or outside the classroom. The smallest number of the fourth-year students (37.5%) responded that they did not often read academic texts online or outside the classroom.

Section B, Item 10 (Closed-ended question): Are you explicitly taught academic essay writing at this level of study? (Fourth-year students)

Fifty-six comma two percent of the fourth-year students responded that they were explicitly taught academic essay writing at this level of study, while 43.8% of them responded that they were not explicitly taught academic essay writing at this level of study.

Section B, Item 11 (Closed-ended question): Do you know how to acknowledge sources, when writing assignments? (Fourth-year students)

The majority of the fourth-year students (93.8%) responded that they knew how to acknowledge sources when writing assignments. The smallest number of the fourth-year students (6.2%) indicated that they did not know how to acknowledge sources when writing assignments.

Section B, Item 12 (Closed-ended question): Do you enjoy reading academic texts at this level of your study? (Fourth-year students)

The highest number of the fourth-year students (62.5%) responded that they enjoyed reading academic texts at this level of study. The smallest number of the participants (37.5%) responded that they did not enjoy reading academic texts at this level of study.

4.3.1 Qualitative data collected from the questionnaires: (Fourth-year students)

Section B (Phase 2): Qualitative data: Open-ended questions and themes (transcribed)

Section B, Item 13 (Open-ended question): What do you think academic essay is?

Theme 1: Perceptions of academic essays (Fourth-year students)

The fourth-year students (7) shared the common understanding of what an academic essay is. They seemed to have grasped that it involved a particular structure, covering a basic theme and that it was formal. Below are a few examples of their varied responses regarding academic essay:

> *An Academic essay is a piece of writing that entails information that is written in an orderly way using academic language embracing high register words* (FRS9fty).

> *It is usually divided into introduction, body and conclusion* FRS18fty.

A formal academic writing on a particular topic. It consist of the following headings; Introduction, body and the conclusion (MRS23fty).

It is an academic form of writing which is governed by certain rules e.g., It consists of three major parts – namely: introduction, body and conclusion (MRS22fty).

Some of the participants (6) had different opinions of what an academic essay is. Below were some of their opinions regarding what is an academic essay:

*An academic essay is an essay for the academic purpose of education. (*FRS13fty)
*I think it is writing for academic purposes (*FRS15fty).

It occurs when writing an essay about academics (FRS19fty).

Academic is an essay that is educational, formal, and informative and enlightens a lot about academic studies (FRS14fty).

Two of the participants thought academic essay meant the following:

An academic essay in any form of written text with a specific topic. In academic essay is what you express yourself in writing in an accurate way (FRS11fty).
I think it's a well-structured and usually long written text which the ideas, views and the thoughts which the writer wishes to express, bearing in mind a specific audience (MRS24fty).

Section B, Item 14 (Open-ended question): What aspects of academic essay writing do you struggle with?

Theme 2: Problem areas in academic essay writing (Fourth-year students)

The fourth-year students (11) shared similar aspects of academic essay writing that they struggled with. Below were some of the aspects of academic essay that some of them struggled with. The problems varied from being able to structure the essays, to a lack of vocabulary and battling to incorporate sources within an essay:

I often struggle with introducing the piece of writing and conclusion (FRS9fty).

The conclusion, because sometimes I do not understand if I have to write my point of view or to conclude based on points that I have stated in my body. I battle to use the secondary sources I found online (FRS17fty).

Restating main ideas…. I often cannot find the right words to express myself. Adding ideas from the online sources when using internet can also be a problem. Drawing a final conclusion (MRS21fty).

Validating ideas. Drawing a final conclusion (MRS22fty).

A smaller group of the participants (3) indicated different aspects of academic essay writing that they struggled with. They indicated some of the following aspects:

I find it hard to write a bibliography and references because I really do not know the difference between the two (FRS14fty).

I mainly struggle in developing the body when it comes to academic essay writing (MRS20fty).

I struggle with the aspect of referencing. Sometimes it becomes complicated to differentiate between bibliography and list of reference. I also struggle to refer to sources in my text (MRS24fty).

The fourth-year students (2) stated that they struggled with grammatical aspects pertaining to essay writing. It ranged from spelling to finding the apt words, problems with punctuation, sentence construction, syntax and using various languages. They had the following to say:

I usually struggle with the spelling of words, at times I use wrong punctuation and I also find it difficult to construct sentences as I use Black South African English to think (FRS11fty).

Grammar and syntax. I struggle with grammar, especially punctuation, due to code-switching. Sentence structure is often a problem to me, because I tend to think most things in my home language (FRS12fty).

Section B, Item 15 (Open-ended question): What do you think critical reading is?

Theme 3: Linking critical reading with academic essay writing (Fourth-year students)

All the fourth-year participants (16) shared similar opinions of what critical reading is. Their opinions embraced the recognition of being able to make meaning of the text interpreting grammatical aspects. The following are some of their opinions about what critical reading is:

It is an intense reading when you aim to read with understanding (FRS11fty).

It is a type of reading that needs you to be fully focused and be extra carefully when you reading or studying (FRS12fty).

Reading for understanding and to get knowledge (FRS13fty).

Critical reading has to do with checking grammar and understanding the context (FRS14).

Critical reading is when one reads to understand everything (MRS20fty).

Critical reading entails reading intensively and slowly with the aim of recalling the information for future purposes (MRS22fty).
Critical reading refers to the process in which one reads with understanding (MRS24fty).

Section B, Item 16 (Open-ended question): What aspects of critical reading do you struggle with?

Theme 4: Problem areas in approaching reading (Fourth-year students)

The majority of the fourth-year students (6) had similar responses about the aspects of critical reading they struggled with. They, on the whole, battled to interpret the text due to a lack of the necessary vocabulary. Vocabulary also caused them to struggle to express themselves concerning the main idea and corroborating details of the text. They indicated the following:

> *I sometimes fail to understand what the writer means* (FRS9fty).
>
> *Analysis of a text; getting the main idea and the hidden meaning* (FRS10fty).
>
> *When I come across words I don't understand them becomes they are difficult for me to analyse* (FRS13fty).
>
> *I struggle with how to form questions as I read* (FRS15fty).
>
> *When I read to analyse and give feedback or interpret what I have read* (FRS17fty).
>
> *When I engage in critical reading I get my own analysis or understanding* (MRS22fty).

A few of the participants (2) stated that they did not struggle with any aspects of critical reading.

Four of the participants shared the common view of critical reading aspects that they struggled with. The students admitted to being unable to incorporate internet sources as they did not understand the difficult vocabulary. The strong opinion of experiencing a problem with vocabulary surfaced prominently in their responses. They stated the following:

I usually struggle with memorising when I have to apply what I have read…new concepts that I am struggling with (FRS11fty).

I struggle with terms that are not understandable (FRS16fty).

There are other texts which consists of many difficult terms and concepts which make it difficult for me to identify them (FRS18fty).

Recalling what I have read because I am not good at memorising (MRS21fty).

The smallest number of the fourth-year students (4) had different aspects of critical reading that they struggled with. Such aspects are quoted below:

*I struggle with being focused when I read (*FRS12fty).

I struggle mostly with the conclusion because I don't know if it should be a short or long or should I mention something new in the conclusion or not (FRS14fty).

Reading to find errors is a problem (FRS19fty).

The summary aspect. Usually I struggle to be precise in summarising whatever the text that I would have read (MRS24fty).

Section B, Item 17 (Open-ended question): Do you think the academic essay writing teaching you receive at this level prepares you for postgraduate studies?

Theme 5: The effectiveness of academic essay writing at tertiary level (Fourth-year students)

The majority of the fourth-year students (12) responded by replying in the affirmative stating that the training in academic essay writing they received at this level prepared them for postgraduate studies. However, they stated different reasons. They follow below:

It does…it helps us on how to go about conducting research in the near future (FRS9fty).

A little…I still need more practice in academic essay writing (FRS11fty).
Yes it does…I have learned a lot about academic writings, including some lessons from my lecturers about research (FRS12fty).

Yes…because at postgraduate studies I will be expected to know how to write an academic essay (FRS15fty).

*Yes…because I now have an idea on how to present an academic essay depending on structure and style (*FRS17fty).

Yes…because we are taught how to do research (FRS19fty).

Yes…because I am being taught everything about good academic writing in class and I do practise it on my own (MRS20fty).

*Yes…because the content we are being offered at this level seems as an introduction to the postgraduate studies; this level gives us some foundations of some sort to the postgraduate studies (*MRS21fty).

Few of the fourth-year students (3) thought that academic essay writing they received at this level did not prepare them for postgraduate studies. The general perception was that they needed creative tasks that would also involve their critical thinking skills instead of merely rehashing what they found in the sources online. They stated the following:

No, we often do not write essays and our grammar and syntax do not improve because we are required to produce the exact information we find in texts books (FRS10fty).

No…we most focus on the same topics that we have been doing from first year and we are not given a chance to write something of our own to see how far we have come with studying Language Practice (FRS13fty).

Not really. Some of the essays are too easy that it can even be understood by level one students. Some of them (essays) are too difficult that they require more knowledge than we have and are able to produce (FRS16fty).

A small number (1) of the fourth-year students were not sure whether the academic essay writing they received at this level prepared them or not for postgraduate studies. Below is what they stated:

To tell the truth I'm not sure if I'm well prepared for postgraduate studies and I am honestly still relying a lot on merely repeating sources without really changing the information much. I also feel I lack essay writing skills (FRS14fty).

Section B, Item 18 (Open-ended question): How does the use of technology influence your academic essay writing?

Theme 6: The influence of technology on academic essay writing (Fourth-year students)

The fourth-year students (10) were all in agreement that technology influenced them especially when it came to doing research as part of their academic essays. They felt that online research made it easier to access sources without having to visit the university library physically. They were also aware of the online library and the e-books that could be accessed. Integrating sources within their essays, however, was still a problem. They felt that they still lacked adequate vocabulary to express themselves accurately and with ease. It still took them a long time to string the words and to make proper sentences referenced in the acceptable way. The online spell checker helped to identify the spelling errors, but it did not identify all grammatical errors. Certain errors are not recognised by the online spell checker.
Strong arguments for the use of the dictionary came to the fore.

> *We as a younger generation are really advantaged to have the use of technology, but my friends and I still use our dictionaries a lot. All mistakes are not identified by the online spellchecker* (FRS20fty).

And:

> *Typing essays on the computer and using online sources are such a help. Nobody wants to hand I hand-written essays anymore and lecturers say that the more we use technology the better our computer-skills will become. The problem is time. When I am swamped by all my work I just cut and paste pieces that I intend re-working later, but then I do not get down to do the integration of the material properly due to time. It is then that one tends to slip in a few lines from the original source text* (MRS21fty).

As far as the other new literacy types were concerned it was clear that the use of WhatsApp exerted a great influence on the students. Those who were using the app regularly admitted that they felt completely isolated and emotionally lost when they could not communicate via Whatsapp. They also had WhatsApp study groups which helped so much especially when exams and tests were nearing. WhatsApp was a great help and was even more used than Facebook groups. Facebook groups were less popular as it carried a negative connotation due to the cyberbullying phenomenon. WhatsApp was more private and therefore more readily used.

> *I cannot imagine myself without my cell phone. Smartphones are here to stay. We all cannot wait until the next opportunity to upgrade and those who do not have phones are in the line to get the other fortunate ones' old phones. We are daily connected with our peers and loved ones on WhatsApp. As far as our academic work is concerned Whatsapp has definitely advantaged us. I use my smartphone to look up information and use the online dictionary very often. We are, however, discouraged to use our phones in class as it caused so much problems in the past* (FRS9fty).

Section B, Item 19 (Open-ended question): What is the influence of your peers and the lecturers as teachers on your academic essay writing?

Theme 7: The role of peers and lecturers in upgrading their level of academic language (Fourth-year students)

The fourth-year students (8) were keen to group work and when working with a stronger peer it helped them a lot to write academic essays. There were also the two odd ones out who preferred to work on their own due to their more introverted nature. Lecturers were definitely a popular topic as it was almost as if the fourth-year students were reflecting on their academic careers of the past with nostalgia. They mentioned how grateful they were for support and proper academic training. Some even admitted being encouraged to do postgraduate studies by their lecturers. Patience was also a characteristic mentioned and appreciated. There was also a request for more lessons in teaching high register words.

> *I enjoy learning from my friends as no man is an island and the more friends the more ideas you get. Sometimes our friends can solve even more than academic problems* (MRS22fty).

> *The lecturer is indispensable in class. We will never reach the stage where technology can replace the lecturer as the human element is just so important. A machine cannot appreciate even though it can help you to learn new words* (MRS23fty).

4.3.2 Document analysis: Fourth-year students' academic essay writing tasks analysed

Section B (Phase 2): Qualitative data: Fourth-year students' academic essay writing tasks:

The fourth-year students were requested to complete two academic essay writing tasks. The researcher used this academic essay writing tasks to gather qualitative data.

Task 1: Academic essay writing (transcribed): (Fourth-year students)

The participants were required in this task to write a five paragraph essay on the following topic; "**An academic essay is divided into various parts."** The participants were required to name and explain what each part contains, providing relevant examples in each case.

Introduction

The majority (15) of the fourth-year students named the 'Introduction' as the first part of academic essays and some of the participants briefly explained it in the following ways:

> *In the introduction the topic and background of the study are mentioned* (FRS9fty).
>
> *The introduction tells us what the essay is about* (FRS10fty).
>
> *In the introduction you give the background knowledge on your topic* (FRS11fty).
>
> *The introduction gives the overview of what the content is mainly to cover* (MRS20fty).
>
> *Tell the reader what the essay is about* (MRS21fty).

The smallest number of the participants (1) thought that the 'Introduction' included the following:

> *The reader should make it a point that he/she grabs the readers' attention so that the reader may be interested to read* (MRS22fty).

Body

The majority of the participants (15) had the common understanding of what the 'Body' section of an academic essay contained. Below is what some of the participants stated about it ('Body' section of an academic essay):

The body is where you explain your topic in detail. You include the consequences, the solutions and in any ways that explain the topic further (FRS11fty).

The body of an essay has more information, because it includes all the aspects of what an essay is about. It explains the heading and aspects in more detail (FRS13fty).

The argument should show in the body by means of valid points and facts (FRS14fty).
The overall goal of this part is to develop analysis and defend your argument (MRS21fty).

All aspects of the topic are being introduced and discussed with thorough details (MRS23fty).

One of the participants did not do the given task giving the researcher the impression that he/she either did not know what is contained under 'Body' section of an academic essay or they did not understand the question.

Conclusion

The majority of the participants (15) shared the common understanding of what the 'Conclusion' section of an academic essay was. They seemed to have had a good idea of what it was supposed to contain and mentioned the fact that the essence of the essay was expressed in the conclusion as a way of having a final say. Their remarks follow next:

The conclusion sums up the topic and sometimes the writers must state their point of view regarding the topic (FRS10fty).

You finally tie up everything concerning your conclusion. New ideas are not allowed to be added in your conclusion. In the conclusion you add/include your personal views (FRS11fty).

It summarises the points and statements you have mentioned. It is also an opinion that is formed after a period of study or thought (FRS14fty).

The conclusion ties up loose ends together. It should restate the central idea (MRS22fty).

One of the participants did not do the given task giving the impression that he/she either did not know what is contained under the 'Conclusion' section of an academic essay or they did not understand the given question. It is informative to see that only one student did not know what the conclusion was all about. It implied that most of the students grasped the essentials of what should be written in the conclusion.

Task 2: Academic essay writing (unedited): Fourth-year students

The participants were required in this task to write a five paragraph essay on the following topic; **"What are your views on the xenophobic attacks that recently took place in South Africa".**

Below is the analysis of the responses of the participants regarding their different views of xenophobic attacks that recently took place in South Africa:

Introduction

Eight of the fourth-year students involved in this study started this task with a similar style of writing an introduction. Below were how some of them started their introduction about the topic given complementing what they had indicated should be included in the 'Introduction' in Task 1: (Unedited)

In this essay I will be writing about my views on the recent attack of people who come from other countries (FRS10fty).

I personally agains xenophobia that took place in South Africa (FRS11fty).

I am going to write about the xenophobic views on xenophobic attacks that took place in South Africa recently (FRS13fty).

I am not in support of xenophobic attacks at all. The attack of xenophobia/foreigners have waxed from bad to worse because this time around not only were they attacked but some were even killed (MRS22fty).

Five of the participants did not start the introduction as they indicated in Task1. Below is how some of them started their introduction:

The recent xenophobic attack in South Africa were towards people who came from other African countries…They were beaten, burnt, killed and destroyed their homes as well as businesses that they were doing (FRS15fty).

Xenophobia is a process whereby native residents/citizens of a certain country fight with foreigners in their country that they should go out of their country (FRS16fty).

Xenophobia is a strong dislike of foreiners. Xenophobic attack is where the people of the country/citizens dicides to attack foreiners or chase them from their country (FRS17fty).

*Xenophobia is basically the hatred that people have on other people from foreign countries (*MRS21fty).

In my views, xenophobic attacks refers to the acts of violence and hatred towards foreign nationals (MRS24fty).

A smallest number of the participants (3) did not do the given task giving the researcher an impression that they didn't know what to write about.

Table 4.11 below shows some of the common grammatical and punctuation mistakes under the 'Introduction' section of an academic essay done by the participants involved in this study.

Table 4.11: Errors analysed in introductions done by fourth-year students

Errors analysed in introductions done by fourth-year students					
Grammar	**Correction**	**Type of error**	**Punctuation**	**Correction**	**Type of error**
dived	Divided	Incorrect spelling	*…..bad to worse because….*	…..from bad to worse, because	Comma omitted before the conjunction
distrimination	discrimination	Incorrect spelling			
compeling incorrect spelling	Compelling	Incorrect spelling			
permatently	Permanently	incorrect spelling			
xenophobia	Xenophobia	incorrect spelling			
Zimbabeans	Zimbabweans	incorrect spelling			
agains	Against	incorrect spelling			
foreiners	Foreigners	incorrect spelling			
dicides	Decides	incorrect spelling			
citezens	Citizens	incorrect spelling			
voolent	Violent	incorrect spelling			

espeacially	Especially	incorrect spelling			
hatrad	Hatred	incorrect spelling			
nighbouring	neighbouring	incorrect spelling			
Mzambique	Mozambique	incorrect spelling			
I personally	I am personally	Words left out			
…hatred that people have on other people..	Hatred on should be hatred towards	Incorrect preposition	I		

Body

The majority of the fourth-year students (10) included the following under the 'Body' section of an academic essay for this given task. What some of them included below complemented what they had indicated should be included under the 'Body' section of an academic essay in Task1 (unedited):

> *The claims that were made by the South Africans are at some point true. That they take their jobs because they require less wages* (FRS10fty).
>
> *The cause of xenophobic attacks its because the foreigners have many businesses in South Africa and the South Africans claims that this is the cause of high rate employment* (FRS13fty).
>
> *South Africans were said to have a fear of losing their jobs to foreign nationals due to South African citizens who demand an increase in salary* (FRS18fty).
>
> *The idea that foreigners come to our country and steal jobs and wealth from us is only bogus* (MRS21fty).

However, three of the participants did not write the 'Body' section of the given academic essay writing task. The researcher concluded that such participants might not have known what to include in it (the 'Body' section of an academic essay). The smallest number of the participants had different ways of writing 'Body' section of an academic essay. Below were some of the ways in which they went about writing the 'Body' section of their academic essay:

> *I think if you not happy where you are you can always move to another place where you think you will live a better live* (FRS17fty).

> *I think the government should implement laws that will protect foreigners because foreigners really do play a big role in advancing the country's economy because they create job opportunities and that also play a role in reducing a high rate of crime* (MRS22fty).

> *Xenophobic attacks should be condemned at all cost because it threatens or break the relationships of the affected countries. They also undermine the agenda of African unity* (MRS24fty).

Table 4.12 below indicates some of the common grammatical and punctuation mistakes under the 'Body' section of an academic essay done by the participants involved in this study.

Table 4.12: Errors analysed in the body of the academic essays done by fourth-year students

Grammar	Correction	Type of error	Punctuation	Correction	Type of error
…they create job opportunities and that also play a role	Plays	Concord error	dont – incorrect punctuation	Don't	Apostrophe should be inserted and students should be alerted that no contractions should be done in academic essays
exil	Exile	Incorrect spelling	…economy, because they…	….economy, because they…	Comma must be used before the conjunction because
lazey	Lazy	Incorrect spelling			
…if you not happy…	If you are not happy	Word left out			
…it threatens or break the relationships.	It threatens or breaks	Concord error and a better word could be used e.g. destroys			
blomed	Bloomed	Incorrect spelling			
lead	Led	Incorrect tense used			
find	Found	Incorrect tense used			
suppose	supposed	Incorrect			

		tense used			
emmigrants	Emigrants	Wrong spelling			
bussiness	Business	Wrong spelling			
partneship	partnership	Incorrect spelling			
suprising	Surprising	Incorrect spelling			
anothe	Another	Incorrect spelling			
….xenophobic attacks its because…	Xenophobic attacks is because	Use is not its: pronoun interference of the mother tongue			

Conclusion

The majority of the participants (10) concluded their academic essays in a common manner complementing that which they had already indicated should be concluded with in 'Task 1'. Below were how some of them concluded their academic essays:

> *This was not fair because there are many South African citizens who were in other countries and they were not killed and chased out of those countries…We should also allow people from other countries to come and live or work here* (FRS15fty).

> *Xenophobic attack is not a solution to the problems we have in South Africa. Citizens should stop attacking foreigners* (FRS14fty).

In my opinion, as I am concluding xenophobia should be a thing of the past, especially in a country like ours that has seen just how hate on one another can tear us apart as a nation (MRS21fty).

In conclusion, xenophobic attack is wrong and it gives South Africa a bad name even to other countries (MRS22fty).

Some of the participants (5) did not conclude this given task which indicated to the researcher that they might not have known what to conclude with or include in conclusion of this given academic essay writing task. A smallest number of the participants concluded in the following way:

Why do they not chase away Americans and only do so to Africans? They are stupid that's why. They think low of Africans and the world of Americans (FRS19fty).

Table 4.13 below reveals some of the common grammatical and punctuation mistakes under the 'Conclusion' section of an academic essay done by the participants used in this study.

Table 4.13: Errors analysed in conclusion of the academic essays done by fourth-year students

Errors analysed in conclusion of the academic essays done by fourth-year students					
Grammar	**Correction**	**Type of error**	**Punctuation**	**Correction**	**Type of error**
Xenophobic attack is not a	Xenophobic attacks are not a	Concord error	opinion, as I am concluding xenophobia	…opinion, as I am concluding, …	Parenthetical use of information requires both the commas
humenity	humanity	Incorrect spelling			
govament	government	Incorrect			

		spelling			
held	Hold	Incorrect tense used			
whethe	whether	Incorrect spelling			
condluding	concluding	Incorrect spelling			

Table 4.14 below indicates the ratings of the fourth-year students' academic essays in terms of the following; grammar; spelling, punctuation and sentence structure.

Table 4.14: Academic essays' ratings for Task 2: Fourth-year students (*N*=16)

Poor:	**Fair:**	**Good:**	**Very good:**
Score: 1/6	**Score: 2/6**	**Score: 4/6**	**Score: 6/6**
Rating Criteria: • 5 or more errors in grammar; spelling, punctuation and sentence construction	**Rating Criteria:** • 4 or more errors in grammar; spelling, punctuation and sentence construction	**Rating Criteria:** • 2 or less errors in grammar; spelling, punctuation and sentence construction	**Rating Criteria:** • 1 or no errors in grammar; spelling, punctuation and sentence construction
37.5%	37.5%	12.5%	12.5%

Table 4.14 above indicates the scores that the fourth-year students obtained in terms of grammar; spelling, punctuation and sentence construction. Thirty- seven comma five percent of the participants were rated as "Poor" and 37.5% of the participants were rated as "Fair" while 12.5% of the participants were rated as "Good" and 12.5% of the participants were rated as "Very good" respectively.

4.4 Comparing the first- and fourth-year students' responses and progress with regard to academic essay writing (Quantitative data)

In order to track the competence and progress of the students involved it seemed viable to use a table to indicate the progress from first to fourth year to decide if the students' academic essay writing knowledge and ability to do academic essays improved from the first to the fourth year. This was also done in order to answer the main research question on the level of competence and the secondary questions to establish whether there was any progress from the first to the fourth year of study.

Table 4.15: Comparison of first- and fourth-year students' responses for the closed-ended questions of section B (Phase 1) for item 7 of the questionnaire

Quantitative data extracted from questionnaire						
Closed-ended questions	**First-year students**			**Fourth-year students**		
7. Have your academic essay writing skills improved at this level?	Yes	No	No response/ Uncertain	Yes	No	No response/ uncertain
	62.5%	25%	12.5%	100%	0%	0%

Discussion:

According to the Table 4.15 above, it was clear that the fourth-year students maintained that their academic essay writing skills improved since they were exposed to academic essay writing for a longer period than the first-year students who voted for 62.5% as compared to the fourth-year students who voted for 100%. It is also clear that there is less uncertainty at a fourth year level on what their capabilities were. They have learnt what an academic essay entailed and felt confident about their abilities

Table 4.16: Comparison of first- and fourth-year students' responses for the closed-ended questions of section B (Phase 1) for item 8 of the questionnaire

Quantitative data extracted from questionnaire						
Closed-ended questions	**First-year students**			**Fourth-year students**		
8. Are you able to critically analyse the text at this level of study?	Yes	No	No response/ Uncertain	Yes	No	No response/ uncertain
	75%	12.5%	12.5%	93.8%	6.2%	0%

Discussion:

Table 4.16 above indicates that when comparing the perception about students' abilities, the fourth-year students regarded themselves as competent and a larger number of students (93.8%) agreed that they were competent in comparison with the unsure first-year students who had a score of 75%.

Table 4.17: Comparison of first- and fourth-year students' responses for the closed-ended questions of section B (Phase 1) for item 9 of the questionnaire

Quantitative data extracted from questionnaire						
Closed-ended questions	**First-year students**			**Fourth-year students**		
9. Do you often read academic texts online or outside the classroom?	Yes	No	No response/ Uncertain	Yes	No	No response/ uncertain
	50%	37.5%	12.5%	62.5%	37.5%	0%

Discussion:

Table 4.17 above shows that the number of students reading academic texts online or outside the classroom increased considerably. Students tend to read academic texts online more when they are in their fourth year. The fourth-year students are also more certain about their choices as they did not indicate any uncertainty whereas the first-year students indicated uncertainty of 12.5%. Alarming is the fact that such a large number of students both first- and fourth- year students indicated that they did not make an effort to do additional reading online or outside the classroom.

Table 4.18: Comparison of first- and fourth-year students' responses for the closed-ended questions of section B (Phase 1) for item 10 of the questionnaire

Quantitative data extracted from questionnaire						
Closed-ended questions	**First-year students**			**Fourth-year students**		
10. Are you explicitly taught academic essay writing skills at this level?	Yes	No	No response/ Uncertain	Yes	No	No response/ uncertain
	50%	37.5%	12.5%	56.2%	43.8%	0%

Discussion:

Table 4.18 above indicates that the perception that academic essay writing skills teaching decreased as far as the fourth-year students were concerned can be ascribed to the fact that they did not need the extensive teaching anymore as they were informed and had the opportunity to practise academic essay writing for three extra years in comparison with the first-year students who had only one year of tertiary exposure.

Table 4.19: Comparison of first- and fourth-year students' responses for the closed-ended questions of section B (Phase 1) for item 11 of the questionnaire

Quantitative data extracted from questionnaire						
Closed-ended questions	**First-year students**			**Fourth-year students**		
11. Do you know how to acknowledge sources when writing an academic essay?	Yes	No	No response/ Uncertain	Yes	No	No response/ uncertain
	87.5%	12.5%	0%	93.8%	6.2%	0%

Discussion:

Table 4.19 above indicates that 87.5% of the first-year students in comparison to the 93.8% of fourth-year students maintained they knew how to quote and/or cite. This still left the burning question as to why so many students still plagiarised in their essays as the researcher as tertiary lecturer was confronted with many plagiarised essays when given the task of academic essay writing as was confirmed in the open-ended responses to the questions. If they then knew what to do, why plagiarise? The answer to this is then further explained in the qualitative section.

Table 4.20: Comparison of first- and fourth-year students' responses for the closed-ended questions of section B (Phase 1) for item 12 of the questionnaire

Quantitative data extracted from questionnaires						
Closed-ended questions	**First-year students**			**Fourth-year students**		
12. Do you enjoy reading academic texts at this level?	Yes	No	No response/ Uncertain	Yes	No	No response/ uncertain
	100%	0%	0%	62.5%	37.5%	0%

Discussion:

Table 4.20 above reveals surprising statistics that the fourth-year students did not enjoy the reading of academic texts as much as the first-year students. Reading academic texts is also of necessity involved in the academic writing as the reading and research part was done with essay writing in mind. This could be because of the fact that they were dealing with more volumes of work and saw it as effort to prepare for exams and tests.

4.5 Comparing the first- and fourth-year students' responses and progress with regard to academic essay writing (Qualitative data)

Table 4.21: Comparison of first- and fourth-year students' responses for the open ended questions of section B (Phase 2) of the questionnaire in terms of themes

Themes		First-year opinions summarised	Fourth-year opinions summarised
Theme1	Perceptions on what an academic essay is	Academic essays were formal and comprehensions had high register words following a specific structure	Academic essays followed a specific structure embracing in introduction, body and conclusion It was formal and involved writing about a topic It involved academic grammar

Discussion:

According to table 4.21 above it was clear that the fourth-year students had a broader perspective of what academic essays were all about. They could elaborate and add that the topic or theme should also be considered when writing and that writing was done for a specific audience.

Table 4.22: Comparison of first- and fourth-year students' responses for the open ended questions of section B (Phase 2) of the questionnaire in terms of themes

Themes		First-year opinions summarised	Fourth-year opinions summarised
Theme 2	Problems in essay writing	Many of the first-year students were lacking equipment and not all had computers or cell phones. Students reported that they had problems in accessing sources and integrating these in their academic essays. They had problems with basic writing and reading tasks	The fourth-year students had fewer problems with access to technology. They centred on integrating sources within the text, compiling the reference list and quite a few mentioned the conclusion as a problem area. Their other challenges also involved interference of their mother tongue.

Discussion:

Table 4.22 above indicates that the fourth-year students had better access to technology to help them to type their essays and to do research online. Both the two groups said that they were having problems with referencing. This was surprising as they formerly in the closed-ended questions claimed they knew how to cite. In this respect it surfaced that though they claimed they knew what to do they actually did not know exactly how to do referencing and this was thus an area where the lecturer could do remedial work. A lack of vocabulary was also still a problem with the first-year students. This lack of vocabulary affected their competence.

Table 4.23: Comparison of first- and fourth-year students' responses for the open ended questions of section B (Phase 2) of the questionnaire in terms of themes

Themes		First-year opinions summarised	Fourth-year opinions summarised
Theme 3	Critical reading and academic writing	The first-year students showed a keen awareness on the identity of the reader and the role of the reader in interpreting the text	The fourth-year students expressed their concern about the high register words and regarded vocabulary as central to the interpretation or successful reading of the text.

Discussion:

Table 4.23 above shows that the fourth-year students were more focused on the role of vocabulary and the first-year students were very much aware of the audience and understanding parts of speech. Their needs were more basic as compared to the fourth-year students who had the need of using dense, academic language. The fourth-year students still made many spelling errors.

Table 4.24: Comparison of first- and fourth-year students' responses for the open ended questions of section B (Phase 2) of the questionnaire in terms of themes

Themes		First-year opinions summarised	Fourth-year opinions summarised
Theme 4	Problems with reading	First-year students had problems with basic parts of speech and to understand the functions of the words in the text. They were also battling with a certain amount of fear and stress due to their inability to understand the words and the meaning of the text. They experienced a serious problem with reading and interpretation of the text which of necessity	The fourth-year problems with reading centred on the meaning of high register words and memorising content. Summarising where they had to write using their own words was also problematic.

		impacted their writing.	

Discussion:

Table 4.24 above indicates that the first-year students were battling with fear of feeling incompetent. The fourth-year students did not display similar fears, but also battled with high register words.

Table 4.25: Comparison of first- and fourth-year students' responses for the open ended questions of section B (Phase 2) of the questionnaire in terms of themes

Themes		First-year opinions summarised	Fourth-year opinions summarised
Theme 5	Effectiveness of the teaching of academic writing at tertiary level	They were all aware that they were being taught to write in order to develop They were battling with basic aspects of writing such as writing coherent sentences. The first-year students were also more dependent on the lecturer and expressed and for an approachable and understanding lecturer.	The fourth-year students were also fully aware that they were being prepared for postgraduate studies and they were very keen to develop. They displayed greater independence and were not so centred on the role of the lecturer. They were more confident.

Discussion:

Table 4.25 above reveals that the fourth-year students were more confident to write than the first-year students. They experienced a higher level of academic essay writing competence. Fourth-year students requested exercises in doing creative exercises instead of merely consulting secondary sources to write about a topic.

Table 4.26: Comparison of first- and fourth-year students' responses for the open ended questions of section B (Phase 2) of the questionnaire in terms of themes

Themes		First-year opinions summarised	Fourth-year opinions summarised
Theme 6	The influence of technology	They used internet to access sources and admitted to plagiarism partly due to the novelty of learning to do research and partly because of a lack of time. They enjoyed WhatsApp groups. They used the online-dictionary. They lacked computers. Many did not have computers.	The fourth years also brought up the topic of using WhatsApp to communicate work and test dates. They had study groups. They also mentioned that they plagiarised due to a lack of time and a lack of vocabulary. The workload is also sometimes too much. They used the online dictionary. They preferred WhatsApp to Facebook as many friends experienced negative moments due to cyberbullying.

Discussion:

According to table 4.26 above it was deduced from the first- and fourth-year students that plagiarism occurred due to the time factor, academic overload and a matter of a lack of knowing how to integrate sources within a text.

Table 4.27: Comparison of first- and fourth-year students' responses for the open ended questions of section B (Phase 2) of the questionnaire in terms of themes

Themes		First-year opinions summarised	Fourth-year opinions summarised
Theme 7	The role of the lecturer and peers in academic essay writing.	The students wished to change subjects due to some lecturers. They were more uncertain about their way of communicating. The first- year	The fourth-year students were more confident and a better adapted to work with the lecturers. They were more independent.

		students still needed a lot of help from their lecturers.	

Discussion

Table 4.27 above shows that the first-year students were more critical of the lecturers and still had problems adjusting to the university environment. The fourth-year students were more independent and did not take the lecturers' remarks seriously.

4.6 Comparison of document analysis of first- and fourth-year students

Section B (Phase 2): Qualitative data: First- and fourth-year students' academic essay writing tasks

Table 4.28: Comparison of qualitative open-ended questions on essay writing sections: introduction, body and conclusion

Perceptions on the structure of the essay	First-year students	Fourth-year students
Introduction	The majority of the first-year students knew what an introduction was	There was no problem with this part of the essay.
Body	The students were aware of what the body of the essay was and that it involved various paragraphs to develop the main idea.	The fourth year-students had no problem with the body of the essay. They understood the structure of the body as the development of the topic and providing additional facts.
Conclusion	The first-year students recognised that it was a form of a summary and tying the knots.	They realised that it was the final paragraph tying the lose ends together and adding the personal voice

Discussion:

According to table 4.28 above it was obvious that both first- and fourth-year students had a very good idea of the structure and the various aspects of the introduction,

body and conclusion. It came to the fore that the major problem experienced was with the temptation of copying and pasting from internet and a lack of vocabulary.

Table 4.29: Comparison of error analysis of examples of the introduction, body and conclusion for the first- and fourth-year students

	First-year students essays	Fourth-year students essays
Observations About basic vocabulary and writing competence	When studying the error analysis it is also interesting to note that if one compares the dominant types of errors, the first-year students committed more errors in punctuation and they also lacked the high register words used by the fourth years e.g. 'writing', 'gonna' and furthure (unedited).	The fourth-years' students errors involved word order and this can maybe also be attributed to the interference of the mother tongue as they admitted this in the qualitative responses. It was obvious that the level of vocabulary was more advanced as used by the fourth-year students e.g. 'bogus,' 'undermined' 'condemned', 'demand' and 'require.' They, however, still battled with spelling.

Table 4.30: Comparison of results of scores after marking assessment of the essays of the first- and fourth-year students: (quantitative)

Academic essay writing scores	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good
First-year students' scores	62.5%	25%	12.5%	0
Fourth-year students' scores	37.5%	37.5%	12.5%	12.5%

Discussion

According to the table 4.30 above, when studying the assessment of the few paragraphs of the participating students it was obvious that the fourth-year students had a slightly higher level of competence (12.5% at the level of 'very good'). The expectation would be to see a marked difference of greater impact. Alarming was the few 'good' scores at 12.5% for both the groups.

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter presented the data analysis and the interpretation of the research findings as well as the discussions of the research findings. The research methods used to collect data from the participants were questionnaires and document analysis embracing two academic essay writing tasks. Open-ended questions as well as two academic essay writing tasks were used to extract the qualitative data for content analysis and thematic discussions. The academic essay writing tasks were also rated in terms of the scores given. It was obvious that the fourth-year students displayed a higher level of academic essay writing competence than the first-year students. The research questions will be answered and recommendations will be made in the final chapter (Chapter 5) as well as the conclusion. The latter follows next.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS, CONCLUSION, LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter highlights the significance of the research findings and conclusions of the study. Moreover, it indicates the limitations and recommendations based on the analysis and interpretations of the data gathered in Chapter 4 of the study. The researcher involved two groups of students viz.: the first- and fourth-year students, studying at a University of Technology, as his research participants. The aim of the study was to investigate the level of academic essay writing competence of the latter students. It was investigated through the questionnaires, using closed-ended and open-ended questions and academic essay writing tasks given to the participants.

5.2 Summary of the findings:

5.2.1 The quantitative data (Questionnaires)

All the fourth-year students asserted that their academic essay writing skills have improved since they were taught explicit academic essay writing skills. The first-year students voted for 62.5% as compared to the fourth-year students who opted for 100%. Less uncertainty was experienced at a fourth year level on what their capabilities were. They knew what an academic essay involved and felt confident about their abilities.

The fourth-year students viewed themselves as competent in terms of the academic essay writing and a larger number (100%) of the students agreed that they were competent in comparison with the unsure first-year students (62.5%). Students (62.5%) tended to read academic texts online or outside the classroom more frequently when they were in their fourth year. The fourth-year students were also more certain about their choices as they did not reveal any uncertainty whereas the first-year students indicated uncertainty of 50%. Alarming is the fact that an increased number of the remaining students both first- and fourth-year indicated that they did not read much online or outside of class reading.

The perception that academic essay writing teaching has decreased as far as the fourth-year students (7) are concerned can probably be explained by the fact that they did not need the extensive academic essay writing teaching anymore as they were informed and had the opportunity to practise academic essay writing for three years in comparison with the first-year students who had only one year of tertiary exposure. It can, however, also be interpreted that the lecturers of the fourth-year students were not so focused on teaching the student's academic essay writing, since they might have had the idea that the students had the exposure in the previous years.

The majority (87.5%) of the first-year students in comparison to the 93.8% of first-year students posited that they knew how to quote (acknowledge sources). It was, however, the researcher's observation that citations were not handled sufficiently during their academic essays and in the qualitative part the students said almost just the opposite in their open-ended answers when admitting that they were battling a lot with referencing. So they knew how to, but did not apply the knowledge. There was a definite gap between knowing how to do it and succeeding in doing it.

Fourth-year students (37.5%) did not enjoy the reading of academic texts as much as the first-year students (100%). A possible explanation could be that they were swamped by the volumes of academic work in their fourth year.

5.2.2 The qualitative data (Questionnaires)

The qualitative data (open-ended questions: questionnaires) comparing the first- and fourth-year students' academic essay writing competence revealed that both the first- and fourth-year students had a good idea of what academic essay writing entailed. It was clear that the fourth-year students had a more advanced knowledge of the concept although the first-year students also responded well and they also knew what it was. They were thus competent in that they had a good idea of what academic essay writing was. The students included crucial concepts in their responses and were very informed as they even focused on the audience involved. The fourth-year students had better access to technology which enabled them to do online research. Both the groups were experiencing problems with referencing even though they admitted that they knew how to cite. That alerted the researcher to the fact that there should also be other causes of plagiarism. A lack of the needed

vocabulary was still a problem and time was also a factor as students admitted that due to the academic overload they reverted to copying and pasting passages from online sources. The first-year students especially did not have the same depth of academic vocabulary and the fourth-year students also wished to be able to have a more expanded repertoire to draw on. They also needed more assistance and creative exercises that would give them the opportunity to expand their vocabulary. The first-year students' needs were more basic and they wished to overcome the fear of academic essay writing. Fear caused some not to try at all, causing them to feel very incompetent and to revert to plagiarism.

The fourth-year students displayed a greater level of independence than the first-year students. All fourth-year students were very reliant on new literacies such as the use of their smartphones and WhatsApp. Some admitted feeling completely emotionally cut off from their peers if their phones were not at hand. They needed to use their smartphones to do research and to make use of the online dictionary was also mentioned.

5.2.3 The qualitative data - Document analysis (Academic essay writing tasks)

Document analysis and qualitative responses revealed that it was obvious that both first- and fourth-year students had a very good idea of the structure and the various aspects of the introduction, body and conclusion. Plagiarism was, however, a problem.

The error analysis revealed that first-year students had more difficulty with grammar and punctuation whereas the fourth-year students were struggling to spell the high register words they used in the essays attempted. In the open-ended questions they stated that they lacked the needed vocabulary to engage successfully in academic writing. There was thus a definite problem with academic vocabulary competence.

The results of the scores after assessment revealed that the academic level of grammatical competence of the fourth-year students was higher than that of the first-year students (12.5% at the level of 'good') although there was not such a huge difference between the marks. The fourth-year students had a slightly higher level of competence (12.5% at the level of 'very good'). It would be expected to see a higher mark. It can thus be maintained that their (first-year students) level of academic

essay writing competence still needed a lot of attention. The level was unexpectedly low.

5.2.4 The main research question was:

- What is the level of academic essay writing competence of first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students?

The evidence gained from the qualitative data collected and the quantitative data both support the notion that the first-year students had a lower level of academic grammar competence than the fourth-year students and that the exposure to the extra three years gave the fourth-year students a definite advantage. The qualitative data revealed that the first-year students still needed assistance with regard to referencing sources, expanding their vocabulary and applying critical thinking skills. They all grasped what the structure of an academic essay was.

But, having all (8) the first-year students indicating that academic essay writing teaching at the first year level of study prepared them for postgraduate studies. This means that they are aware that their academic essay writing competence will improve as they move to the higher level of their respective studies.

5.2.5 Secondary questions

The secondary questions were:

- How are these first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students explicitly taught to write academically by their lecturers?

It was clear that the lecturers managed to teach both the first- and fourth- year group of students how to do the structure of academic essays, but that they needed to put in more effort with regard to the vocabulary aspect. They also needed additional attention to be paid to referencing and how to integrate sources from secondary material.

- What do first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students struggle with in terms of academic essay writing?

First- and fourth-year students were not having problems with the structure of the academic essay writing. It was evident that they were also battling with the fear of failure. Many mentioned that they felt isolated and too scared to attempt anything on their own and therefore they started plagiarising. They also battled to cope with the volumes of work. They also reported that they did not do much reading online or outside of the classroom.

The latter percentages (refer to 5.2.1 above) give a clear indication that these groups of students have been taught how to write academic essays since they knew the various parts of an academic essay and what to write about under each part. In addition, the majority (6) of the first-year students knew what an academic essay was. This meant that they have dealt with academic essays before and during their first year of study at a university level. As a result, academic essay writing was not a new 'concept' to them since the majority of them were aware of the aspects of academic essay writing they struggled with.

- Has the academic essay writing competence of fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students improved when compared to the performance of the first-year students at this level of study or not?

This question was best illustrated by the practical test to expose first-year students to academic essay writing. The first-year students had a definite lower score for their academic essays and it can be concluded that there was a difference in the performance between the first- and fourth-year students' academic essay writing in that the fourth-year students had higher scores. The difference was, however, not so significant. This was rather alarming as one would expect a fourth-year student to have a higher and more significant score.

A significant portion of the fourth-year students (37.5% for 'fair', 12.5% for 'good' and 12.5% for 'very good') indicated the significant improvements in their academic essay writing competence as compared to the other struggling fellow students (37.5% for 'poor') at the same level of study. The academic essay writing competence of most of the fourth-year students could be considered as having been significantly improved considering the task 2 ratings of their

academic essays and their advanced level of study. They scored the following for the latter ratings (37.5% for 'fair', 12.5% for 'good' and 12.5% for 'very good'). The majority of the fourth-year students (12) indicated that the academic essay writing teaching that they received at the fourth year level of study prepared them for postgraduate studies. This meant that it would allow a 'smooth' integration of these students into the postgraduate studies should they further their studies beyond fourth year of study.

- What are the solutions to these problems the first- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students experience in writing academic essays?

More attention should be paid to technology as a new form of literacy. Fear of failing should be dealt with and students should receive moral support and a course in self-efficacy to assist them in believing in their own efforts. The younger students who grew up with technology as opposed to the older generation of lecturers who had to learn technology should communicate often on new literacies. It can be predicted that new literacies will have an even more remarkable influence on academic essay writing in the future.

The level of the academic essay writing competence of first-year students is considered as low. The academic essay writing task that was given to the students, that was, 'Task 2', revealed that the majority of the first-year students (62.5%) were rated as "Poor", (25%) scored "Fair" rating while (12.5%) having been rated as "Good" in terms of grammar; spelling, punctuation and sentence construction. Hence, the former conclusion is reached because of the latter ratings. But, having majority of the first-year students (5) indicating that the academic essay writing teaching at the first year level of study prepared them for postgraduate studies. This means that they are aware that their academic essay writing competence will improve as they move to the higher level of their respective studies.

5.2.6 Hypotheses:

- First- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students demonstrate a low level of academic essay writing competence.

The first-year students proved to be at a lower level of academic essay writing competence. The fourth-year students were at a higher level of academic essay writing competence, yet they did not perform as well as one would expect. This hypothesis proved to be true.

- First- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students are not explicitly taught how to write academically by their lecturers.

It surfaced as evident from the data that they were taught academic writing skills, but that students still lacked adequate vocabulary and skills to do referencing. Lecturers should therefore pay more attention to this area. This hypothesis was false, but more attention has to be paid to certain aspects.

- First- and fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice ESL students struggle with grammar, spelling, punctuation and sentence construction for a number of reasons amongst others the use of technology.

This was true as students battled to produce their own original work and they also sometimes plagiarised. They also lacked especially vocabulary to communicate at a high level.

- First-year students' academic level of essay writing competence will improve by the time they reach their fourth year.

This was true as the fourth-year students performed better than the first-year students.

5.3 Recommendations for first- and fourth-year students

The findings and the conclusions of this study for these particular groups of students (first- and fourth-year students) led the researcher of this study to the following recommendations:

- The academic essay writing competence of the first-year students should be assessed prior enrolling for the Language Practice course.
- There should be a specific subject that is aimed at improving the academic essay writing competence and guiding the students through the process of academic essay writing.
- Reading academic texts on a weekly basis should be made part of the curriculum whereby first-year students would be expected to write a report of

what they have read. This would help to improve their reading skills, more especially their critical reading skill which is a significant requirement at a university level.

- They should be encouraged to make 'academic essay writing' a habit even if for 'non-study' purposes.
- Lecturers should upgrade their knowledge on technology to keep up with the new millennia's that have become digital natives in order to understand their integration of technology.
- There should be an integration of various types of writing that will not only prepare fourth-year students for their academic work related essays, but also for the corporate world, i.e., Research proposal writing for the former and Report writing for the latter.
- Special interventions should be planned and implemented to ensure that a fraction of the fourth-year students who still struggle with academic essay writing are assisted.
- They should continue being encouraged to practise their academic essay writing skills not just during their lecture times, but also outside their lecture times.
- They should be given a chance to choose the field of specialisation they would like to be part of at this level of study should they wish to further their studies beyond fourth year of study, i.e., Academic Literacy, Sociolinguistics, or Language Planning.
- They should be encouraged to read more about what they will be required to do in the corporate world regarding their career field(s) in order to start improving such areas and skills that still needs to be refined.
- The fourth-year students should serve as tutors of academic essay writing to those students who are at the lower levels of their studies, in this case the first-year students.

5.4 Limitations to the study

The study used the qualitative and quantitative paradigm in a form of a 'Case Study'. As a result, the participants involved in this study was of a smallest number and the findings will, however, not be generalised to the other "uninvolved" students at these

various levels of study. Furthermore, this will also deprive the researcher of this study to generalise the findings to the students doing other courses at the same university.

5.5 Future research

A number of topics came up when doing the study. Suggestions for future research follow next.

- There should be an extensive longitudinal study conducted that will investigate the academic essay writing competence of the first-year students until they get to the fourth year level of study at a university of technology. The latter should be done through the introduction of the academic essay writing teaching methods. This will then be used to gauge the academic competence development of these students through the various levels of study.
- The influence of new literacies should be explored in order to gain more information on how plagiarism can be avoided instead of merely using turnitin measures;
- The use of WhatsApp as form of communication in academic learning should also be researched; and
- Student communication in their academic journey as such should be explored.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter highlighted the summary of the research findings, conclusions, limitations and recommendations. It can be concluded that there was indeed considerable progress in the academic essay writing competence from the first year to the fourth year. New literacies are important as students in modern times function via their use of technology and it impacted the respondents without a doubt.

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ADDENDUM A: QUESTIONNAIRE AND ACADEMIC ESSAY WRITING TASKS FOR FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS

Questionnaire (First-year students)

Instructions:

- Only first-year undergraduate Language Practice students are allowed to fill in this questionnaire.
- Kindly fill in the spaces, and insert an X, where applicable.
- Kindly respond to all questions.
- Please, write legibly.
- This task will take you 30 minutes to complete.

Section A: Demographic information

Kindly fill in the spaces, and insert an X, where applicable.

1. Name of course: Language Practice
2. Faculty: Humanities
3. Gender: Female ☐ Male ☐
4. Age range: 18-22 years ☐ 23-26 years ☐ 27-31 years ☐
5. Home Language(s): …….
6. Ethnic group affiliation: …….

Section B:

Kindly fill in the spaces, and insert an X in the box that corresponds to your response, where applicable.

7. Have your academic essay writing skills improved at this level of study?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

8. Are you able to critically analyse and evaluate academic texts at this level of study?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

9. Do you often read academic texts online or outside the classroom?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

10. Are you explicitly taught academic essay writing at this level of study?

    Yes ☐ No ☐

11. Do you know how to acknowledge sources, when writing assignments?

    Yes ☐ No ☐

12. Do you enjoy reading academic texts at this level of your study?

    Yes ☐ No ☐

13. What do you think academic essay is? (Explain)

    ……
    ……
    ……
    ……

14. What aspects of academic essay writing do you struggle with? (Give reasons)

    ……
    ……
    ……
    ……

15. What do you think critical reading is? (Explain)

    ……
    ……
    ……
    ……

16. What aspects of critical reading do you struggle with? (Give reasons)

    ……
    ……
    ……
    ……

17. Do you think the academic essay writing teaching you receive at this level prepares you for postgraduate studies? (Give reasons)

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18. How does the use of technology influence your academic essay writing?

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19. What is the influence of the lecturers as teachers on your academic essay writing?

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Academic Writing Tasks (First-year students)

Task 1: Academic Essay Writing

Write a five-paragraph essay on the following topic:

An academic essay is divided into various parts.

Name and explain what each part contains, providing relevant examples in each case.

NB: The time to complete this task will be 35 minutes.

Task 2: Academic Essay Writing

Write a five-paragraph essay on the following topic:

What are your views on the xenophobic attacks that recently took place in South Africa?

Provide relevant reasons in your response.

NB: The time to complete this task will be 35 minutes.

ADDENDUM B: QUESTIONNAIRE AND ACADEMIC ESSAY WRITING TASKS FOR FOURTH-YEAR STUDENTS

Questionnaire (Fourth-year students)

Instructions:

- Only fourth-year undergraduate Language Practice students are allowed to fill in this questionnaire.
- Kindly fill in the spaces, and insert an X, where applicable.
- Kindly respond to all questions.
- Please, write legibly.
- This task will take you 30 minutes to complete.

Section A: Demographic information

Kindly fill in the spaces, and insert an X, where applicable.

1. Name of course: Language Practice
2. Faculty: Humanities
3. Gender: Female ☐ Male ☐
4. Age range: 18-22 years ☐ 23-26 years ☐ 27-31 years ☐
5. Home Language(s): …….
6. Ethnic group affiliation: …….

Section B:

Kindly fill in the spaces, and insert an X in the box that corresponds to your response, where applicable.

7. Have your academic essay writing skills improved at this level of study?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

8. Are you able to critically analyse and evaluate academic texts at this level of study?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

9. Do you often read academic texts online or outside the classroom?

   Yes ☐ No ☐

10. Are you explicitly taught academic essay writing at this level of study?

    Yes ☐ No ☐

11. Do you know how to acknowledge sources, when writing assignments?

    Yes ☐ No ☐

12. Do you enjoy reading academic texts at this level of your study?

    Yes ☐ No ☐

13. What do you think academic essay is? (Explain)

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14. What aspects of academic essay writing do you struggle with? (Give reasons)

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15. What do you think critical reading is? (Explain)

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16. What aspects of critical reading do you struggle with? (Give reasons)

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17. Do you think the academic essay writing teaching you receive at this level prepares you for postgraduate studies? (Give reasons)

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18. How does the use of technology influence your academic essay writing?

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19. What is the influence of the lecturers as teachers on your academic essay writing?

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Academic Writing Tasks (Fourth-year students)

Task 1: Academic Essay Writing

Write a five-paragraph essay on the following topic:

An academic essay is divided into various parts.

Name and explain what each part contains, providing relevant examples in each case.

NB: The time to complete this task will be 35 minutes.

Task 2: Academic Essay Writing

Write a five-paragraph essay on the following topic:

What are your views on the xenophobic attacks that recently took place in South Africa?

Provide relevant reasons in your response.

NB: The time to complete this task will be 35 minutes.

ADDENDUM C: QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTED FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRES (OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS): (FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS)

Responses:

Item 13: What do you think academic essay is? (Explain)

- It is a short piece of writing by a student involving a lot of reading and study rather than practical application **(FRS1FY).**

- Academic essay writing is to review critically or to evaluate and to give an opinion. One should develop an idea or discuss a point of view. Yes, one needs to explain one's ideas clearly and refer to relevant example **(FRS2FY).**

- I know that the moment I take longer to be able to understand a text that I am dealing with an academic text as I need to think and try and explain some of the words. Specific writing genre. Functions within a set of norms, rules and conventions **(FRS3FY).**

- Specific writing genre; as in newspapers editorial or pop-fiction **(FRS4FY).**

- Specific writing; as in a letter, newspaper editorial. Make clear and understanding of topic **(FRS5FY).**

- Specific writing e.g., a love letter. Expressing your thought and feelings about the things happening around **(MRS6FY).**

- Specific writing; as in love letter, newspaper editorial or pop-fiction. Functions within a set of norms, rules and conventions **(MRS7FY).**

- Long written text which is academic **(MRS8FY).**

Item 14: What aspects of academic essay writing do you struggle with? (Give reasons)

- (No response) **(FRS1FY).**

- (No response) **(FRS2FY).**

- Getting started with an essay. Run out of words. Mind becomes blank **(FRS3FY).**

- Analysis. Difficult to get full idea when writing **(FRS4FY).**

- I do not live on campus and have to travel far to get to the campus. The internet is not always fast enough which takes much time to access the sources. Once I have found my internet sources, they are not always available as I am not subscribed to all the journals **(FRS5FY).**

- Finding information is quite a mission. I always thought it was a matter of pushing a few buttons, but it is really quite challenging. By the time I have the information, I need to go to class again. The fastest way is to copy and paste a few ideas with the intention of reworking the sources later so that they are not plagiarised. It is, however, not so easy as I do not always know the right words to use to string the sentences and share the correct information. I lack the words to use. Beginning the paragraphs. I don't want to start them with "by" or "and" **(MRS6FY).**

- I have recently started looking up words on my cell phone on the online dictionary, but in class we may not use cell phones so I sometimes go slower when we do group work. It would help if I could use the cell phone in class as the online dictionary is very helpful. I once completed my entire assignment by just using my smartphone. Correctly citing sources. Writing a thesis statement and elaborating on ideas **(MRS7FY).**

- Structuring brainstorm, or mind map. It is challenging to label out important aspects **(MRS8FY).**

Item 15: What do you think critical reading is? (Explain)

- It is when someone reads a text and involves fairness and judgement about the good and bad qualities regarding that text **(FRS1FY).**

- Reading to find specific information. Reading to have an overview of a general idea of a text. Critical reading is the type of reading which readers use to read and understand various texts. It is when you ask questions about aspects in the text and when you try and find synonyms for words. It also implies that the writer edits the work after the writing process to correct all errors **(FRS2FY).**

- Reading beyond a text. Carefully considering and evaluating the text **(FRS3FY).**

- Reading is more than merely running your eyes across a page. It involves thinking about the topic and making connections with your own background knowledge so that you can link ideas that can help you to understand even words that are unknown to you. Reading beyond just understanding a text. Carefully considering and evaluating the text **(FRS4FY).**

- Reading forces your brain to think and process the information and you are forced to try and follow the main ideas in order to make sense of what the writer has shared. Engage yourself with what you are reading. Understanding and analysing what you are reading **(FRS5FY).**

- Form of language analysis, does not have a given text at face value. Deeper examination, supporting points etc. **(MRS6FY).**

- Process that goes beyond just understanding a text. Carefully considering and evaluating reading **(MRS7FY).**

- Type of reading used by readers to read and understand various texts **(MRS8FY).**

Item 16: What aspects of critical reading do you struggle with? (Give reasons)

- It is when I have to judge the good and the bad qualities of the given essay or text. I often do not know the meaning of all the vocabulary used. That then makes it hard for me to understand the message **(FRS1FY).**

- Reading for study purposes. Not thinking clearly because of pressure. Reading for study purposes. In extreme cases panic may set in and you are no longer able to think clearly and are unable to concentrate on the reading. It might end up in you stressing being unable to read, identifying something that is not even relevant **(FRS2FY).**

- Reading beyond a text. I take time to understand. Reading beyond the text. I can't read beyond the text and I have a problem of taking time to understand things. I take much longer than others to read a paragraph and to follow what is being said. It is very discouraging and causes me to dislike my subject as I feel I do not perform well **(FRS3FY).**

- Contextual meaning. I tend to interpret what I think the text is talking about, not the real meaning. I am busy identifying parts of speech used – the reason is that I

confuse most parts of speech which makes it difficult for me to follow the subject and the verb. If you do not know who is doing what it is very hard to understand. Identifying parts of speech **(FRS4FY).**

- (No response) **(FRS5FY).**

- I don't struggle with any, I just become lazy to summarize, outline etc. **(MRS6FY).**

- (No response) **(MRS7FY).**

- Evaluating whole meaning of the text.

- Evaluating the importance of certain aspects, things like the whole meaning of the text, are sometimes obscure as I do not understand many words that are just above my level of understanding. I always look for a visual that can guide me as pictures in the text help **(MRS8FY).**

Item 17: Do you think the academic essay writing you receive at this level prepares you for postgraduate studies (Give reasons)

- Yes…they test my weak and strong points. Improve where there is weakness **(FRS1FY).**

- Yes…an academic essay is an essential tool to support the achievement of academic goals… **(FRS2FY).**

- Yes…at this stage they are grooming us on how to write and train us to write in different genres… **(FRS3FY).**

- Yes…because I now know what to consider when writing an academic essay… **(FRS4FY).**

- Yes…because knowing how to write makes me a better reader and a better writer… **(FRS5FY).**

- Yes…because each an everyday I will be writing that essay to improve my writing skills… **(MRS6FY).**

- Yes…because I will understand that essay writing is a process… **(MRS7FY).**

- Yes…this is the type of creative writing and…it is vital when it comes postgraduate studies **(MRS8FY).**

Item 18: How does the use of technology influence your academic writing?

- I am careful when using secondary sources from the internet **(FRS1FY).**

- When doing research an being under pressure due to time, I sometimes cut and paste information and later try to change it if I have time **(FRS2FY).**

- We all are guilty of plagiarising a bit as I think it is effort to prove plagiarism **(FRS3FY).**

- It is just so much easier to go online to get sources. First if all it is immediate. You merely type in a topic and you can obtain information. It can, however, still be difficult to get a source with all the detail that you can use in your essays as sometimes the author is missing or the date. That discourages you to use that source. It is easy to cut and paste material and when you have loads of work you sometimes cut and paste and forget to acknowledge. It causes much unhappiness if you get a poor mark though **(FRS4FY).**

- Technology is really amazing. I use the online dictionary daily and I have in fact learn many new words as the online dictionary gives the explanations by providing the word used in various sentences so that I can get a clear idea of what should be included. I cannot imagine myself without my cell phone as I sometimes just google to check facts and it is just so easy to get more information on whatever topic. Facebook groups are also an answer as a study group as we can communicate and see the comments by others. Whenever I am unsure I just go to my WhatsApp group and then I know what and when something is happening. I just focus not to use the **(FRS5FY).**

- I am careful and I do not know what to use when I google as it is so difficult to say it in my own words **(MRS6FY).**

- I still find it difficult to use technology since I was not exposed to it in primary and high school **(MRS7FY).**

- I am totally lost or isolated when my battery of my phone is flat. It is like my emotional line of support. Technology is wonderful and I do think we can reference properly. We just need to learn how to do it and practise doing it **(MRS8FY).**

Item 19: What is the influence of the lecturers as teachers on your academic essay writing?

- I decided to change subjects because I do not follow the lecturer's way of teaching. It is a very sensitive business, but I would rather learn from a person who is more understanding and fair **(FRS1FY).**

- Sometimes it is challenging to write academic essays as we do not go through the process of writing it in detail. But because we have knowledgeable lecturers, we at least understand what to do at times **(FRS2FY).**

- If the lecturer is patient and supportive it helps a lot **(FRS3FY).**

- The lecturer must understand our problems with our work and how difficult it is to include work from the internet. We are struggling with the difficult words **(FRS4FY).**

- The lecturer must be friendly and willing to help us beyond the time allocated for lecturing. Working with our peers in groups makes it easy for us to learn since we are able to assist each other if we don't understand something **(FRS5FY).**

- (No response) **(MRS6FY).**

- The lecturer must know his or field and be informed about the subject matter **(MRS7FY).**

- The lecturer's personality and work ethics are really crucial in influencing us to approach our work ad more specifically our writing. Social skills are important. My friends are very important to me as it is my support system and we just help each other so much **(MRS8FY).**

ADDENDUM D: QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTED FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRES (OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS): (FOURTH-YEAR STUDENTS)

Responses:

Item 13: What do you think academic essay is? (Explain)

- An Academic essay is a piece of writing that entails information that is written in an orderly way using academic language embracing high register words **(FRS9FTY).**

- Writing essay for academic purpose, i.e during exams **(FRS10FTY).**

- An academic essay in any form of written text with a specific topic. In academic essay is what you express yourself in writing in an accurate way **(FRS11FTY).**

- Focus is on grammar, vocabulary, syntax etc. There are rules to follow when writing **(FRS12FTY).**

- An academic essay is an essay for the academic purpose of education. Learn from to understand our studies **(FRS13FTY).**

- Academic is an essay that is educational, formal, and informative and enlightens a lot about academic studies **(FRS14FTY).**

- I think it is writing for academic purposes. Follow certain pattern or logic **(FRS15FTY).**

- Essay that explain school work e.g., An essay prepared for a lecture **(FRS16FTY).**

- Formal piece of writing, divided into various parts **(FRS17FTY).**

- Any written story, e.g., composition of a topic in a formal manner. It is usually divided into introduction, body and conclusion **(FRS18FTY).**

- It occurs when writing an essay about academics, e.g., writing essay about sociolinguistics **(FRS19FTY).**

- Any form of writing including, introduction, body and conclusion. Information linked cohesively and coherently **(MRS20FTY).**

- Specific writing genre, functions within a set of norms, rules and conventions **(MRS21FTY).**

- It is an academic form of writing which is governed by certain rules e.g., it consists of three major parts – namely: introduction, body and conclusion **(MRS22FTY).**

- A formal academic writing on a particular topic. It consists of the following headings; Introduction, body and the conclusion **(MRS23FTY).**

- I think it's a well-structured and usually long written text which the ideas, views and the thoughts which the writer wishes to express, bearing in mind a specific audience **(MRS24FTY).**

Item 14: What aspects of academic essay writing do you struggle with? (Give reasons)

- I often struggle with introducing the piece of writing and conclusion. Not knowing what to write **(FRS9FTY).**

- Introduction and grammar **(FRS10FTY).**

- I usually struggle with the spelling of words, at times I use wrong punctuation and I also find it difficult to construct sentences as I use Black South African English to think **(FRS11FTY).**

- Grammar and syntax. I struggle with grammar, especially punctuation, due to code-switching. Sentence structure is often a problem to me, because I tend to think most things in my home language **(FRS12FTY).**

- Conclusion. Not sure what to include in conclusion **(FRS13FTY).**

- I find it hard to write a bibliography and references. I don't know the difference between the two **(FRS14FTY).**

- Introduction and conclusion **(FRS15FTY).**

- Introduction and conclusion **(FRS16FTY).**

- The conclusion, because sometimes I do not understand if I have to write my point of view or to conclude based on points that I have stated in my body. I battle to use the secondary sources I found online **(FRS17FTY).**

- Conclusion. Struggle to know which aspects to conclude with **(FRS18FTY).**

- Planning and structure, and terminology. Conclusion, not sure what is expected **(FRS19FTY).**

- I mainly struggle in developing the body when it comes to academic essay writing **(MRS20FTY).**

- Restating main ideas. I often cannot find the right words to express myself. Adding ideas from the online sources when using internet can also be a problem. Drawing a final conclusion **(MRS21FTY).**

- Validating ideas, and drawing a final conclusion **(MRS22FTY).**

- Introduction because I am unable to differentiate it from the abstract **(MRS23FTY).**

- I struggle with the aspect of referencing. Sometimes it becomes complicated to differentiate between bibliography and list of reference. I also struggle to refer to sources in my text **(MRS24FTY).**

Item 15: What do you think critical reading is? (Explain)

- Deeper level of reading. Reading to gain something **(FRS9FTY).**

- Reading to gain knowledge. Using it for academic purposes **(FRS10FTY).**

- It is an intense reading when you aim to read with understanding. Studying for exams and reading attentively **(FRS11FTY).**

- It is a type of reading that needs you to be fully focused and be extra carefully when you reading or studying **(FRS12FTY).**

- Making own time to read. Reading for understanding and to get knowledge **(FRS13FTY).**

- Checking grammar and understanding context. Conclusion **(FRS14FTY).**

- Reading while asking questions. Be able to answer those questions when done **(FRS15FTY).**

- Reading with understanding **(FRS16FTY).**

- Careful reading with understanding and analysing what you reading **(FRS17FTY).**

- Engaging with a text in order to criticize it. Involves thorough understanding **(FRS18FTY).**

- Reading to analyse text **(FRS19FTY).**

- Critical reading is when one reads to understand everything. Using dictionary to understand difficult words **(MRS20FTY).**

- Not different from intensive reading. Information stored for future reference or reading **(MRS21FTY).**

- Critical reading entails reading intensively and slowly with the aim of recalling the information for future purposes. Slow reading, unlike skimming and scanning **(MRS22FTY).**

- Reading with understanding. Analysing and interpreting content comprehensively **(MRS23FTY).**

- Critical reading refers to the process in which one reads with understanding. Engaging with a text in order to understand it **(MRS24FTY).**

Item 16: What aspects of critical reading do you struggle with? (Give reasons)

- I sometimes fail to understand what the writer means **(FRS9FTY).**

- Analysis of a text; getting the main idea and the hidden meaning **(FRS10FTY).**

- I usually struggle with memorising when I have to apply what I have read…new concepts that I am struggling with **(FRS11FTY).**

- I struggle with being focused when I read **(FRS12FTY).**

- When I come across words I don't understand them becomes they are difficult for me to analyse **(FRS13FTY).**

- I struggle mostly with the conclusion because I don't know if it should be a short or long or should I mention something new in the conclusion or not **(FRS14FTY).**

- I struggle with how to form questions as I read **(FRS15FTY).**

- I struggle with terms that are not understandable. Unfamiliar terms **(FRS16FTY).**

- When I read to analyse and give feedback or interpret what I have read **(FRS17FTY).**

- There are other texts which consists of many difficult terms and concepts which make it difficult for me to identify them. Difficult concepts/terms **(FRS18FTY).**

- Reading to find errors is a problem **(FRS19FTY).**

- None, I use a dictionary where I don't understand **(MRS20FTY).**

- Recalling what I have read because I am not good at memorising **(MRS21FTY).**

- Recalling word for word. When I engage in critical reading I get my own analysis or understanding **(MRS22FTY).**

- None **(MRS23FTY).**

- The summary aspect. Usually I struggle to be precise in summarising whatever the text that I would have read **(MRS24FTY).**

Item 17: Do you think the academic essay writing you receive at this level prepares you for postgraduate studies (Give reasons)

- It does…it helps us on how to go about conducting research in the near future. Learn how to categorise information **(FRS9FTY).**

- No, we often do not write essays and our grammar and syntax do not improve because we are required to produce the exact information we find in texts books **(FRS10FTY).**

- Yes it does…I have learned a lot about academic writings, including some lessons from my lecturers about research **(FRS11FTY).**

- A little…I still need more practice in academic essay writing **(FRS12FTY).**

- No…we most focus on the same topics that we have been doing from first year and we are not given a chance to write something of our own to see how far we have come with studying Language Practice **(FRS13FTY).**

- To tell the truth I'm not sure if I'm well prepared for postgraduate studies and I am honestly still relying a lot on merely repeating sources without really changing the information much. I also feel I lack essay writing skills **(FRS14FTY).**

- Yes…because at postgraduate studies I will be expected to know how to write an academic essay **(FRS15FTY).**

- Not really. Some of the essays are too easy that it can even be understood by level one students. Some of them (essays) are too difficult that they require more knowledge than we have and are able to produce **(FRS16FTY).**

- Yes…because I now have an idea on how to present an academic essay depending on structure and style **(FRS17FTY).**

- Yes, we are taught how to do research **(FRS18FTY).**

- Yes…because we are taught how to do research **(FRS19FTY).**

- Yes…because I am being taught everything about good academic writing in class and I do practise it on my own **(MRS20FTY).**

- Yes…because the content we are being offered at this level seems as an introduction to the postgraduate studies; this level gives us some foundations of some sort to the postgraduate studies **(MRS21FTY).**

- Yes, provides us with insight needed at postgraduate level **(MRS22FTY).**

- Yes, expected to be experts in this subject hence we are challenged with essay writings **(MRS23FTY).**

- Yes, at this level we have better understanding of what academic writing entails **(MRS24FTY).**

Item 18: How does the use of technology influence your academic writing?

- I cannot imagine myself without my cell phone. Smartphones are here to stay. We all cannot wait until the next opportunity to upgrade and those who do not have phones are in the line to get the other fortunate ones' old phones. We are daily connected with our peers and loved ones on WhatsApp. As far as our academic work is concerned Whatsapp has definitely advantaged us. I use my smartphone to look up information and use the online dictionary very often. We are, however, discouraged to use our phones in class as it caused so much problems in the past **(FRS9FTY).**

- *(No response)* **(FRS10FTY).**

- *Technology allows us to communicate with our lecturers via mytutor if there are urgent announcement or if we have to write a test or assignment. We don't have to be in class always as we can do most of the things remotely* **(FRS11FTY).**

- *(No response)* **(FRS12FTY).**

- *Technology makes it easy for one to pass information quickly easier to fellow classmates through group chats on social media* **(FRS13FTY).**

- *Technology updates us with the recent articles and books and one do not need to wait longer to access any information* **(FRS14FTY).**

- *(No response)* **(FRS15FTY).**

- *(No response)* **(FRS16FTY).**

- *(No response)* **(FRS17FTY).**

- *(No response)* **(FRS18FTY).**

- *Because technology offers one an arrear of information. It gets very challenging to pick which information over the other* **(FRS19FTY).**

- *We as a younger generation are really advantaged to have the use of technology, but my friends and I still use our dictionaries a lot. All mistakes are not identified by the online spellchecker* **(MRS20FTY).**

- *Typing essays on the computer and using online sources are such a help. Nobody wants to hand I hand-written essays anymore and lecturers say that the more we use technology the better our computer-skills will become. The problem is time. When I am swamped by all my work I just cut and paste pieces that I intend re-working later, but then I do not get down to do the integration of the material properly due to time. It is then that one tends to slip in a few lines from the original source text* **(MRS21FTY).**

- *Using internet to get information online is much easier but we tend to use internet ineffectively* **(MRS22FTY).**

- Technology helps us to learn in a fun way. One can access a whole lot of information just by a click of a button **(MRS23FTY).**

- Typing essays using computers is helpful since we can correct spelling and sentence structure **(MRS24FTY).**

Item 19: What is the influence of the lecturers as teachers on your academic essay writing?

- (No response) **(FRS9FTY).**

- (No response) **(FRS10FTY).**

- (No response) **(FRS11FTY).**

- If I struggle with something I seek assistance from my lecturers who are always open to put aside their workload to help us **(FRS12FTY).**

- We are now at a stage whereby we know what is expected of us when writing essays. We work together with our classmates when undertaking essay writing tasks **(FRS13FTY).**

- (No response) **(FRS14FTY).**

- We do no longer require intense assistance from our lecturers at this level because we are now at an advanced stage and we know what to do **(FRS15FTY).**

- (No response) **(FRS16FTY).**

- Working together with our classmates is fun and effective and engaging with our lecturers allows us to have full grasp of subject matter - (No response) **(FRS17FTY).**

- (No response) **(FRS18FTY).**

- (No response) **(FRS19FTY).**

- (No response) **(MRS20FTY).**

- Our lecturers motivate us to learn further as we draw inspiration from them because they have higher qualification than we do. One always wants to perform well in class since we set higher standards of pass rates among our peers **(MRS21FTY).**

- I enjoy learning from my friends as no man is an island and the more friends the more ideas you get. Sometimes our friends can solve even more than academic problems **(MRS22FTY).**

- The lecturer is indispensable in class. We will never reach the stage where technology can replace the lecturer as the human element is just so important. A machine cannot appreciate even though it can help you to learn new words **(MRS23FTY).**

- We learn a lot from our lecturers. My classmates help me if I do not understand a certain concept **(MRS24FTY).**

ADDENDUM E: CERTIFICATE OF EDITING

Certificate of editing

I hereby testify that I edited the language of the following dissertation:

ACADEMIC WRITING COMPETENCE: A STUDY OF FIRST- AND FOURTH-YEAR UNIVERSITY-OF-TECHNOLOGY STUDENTS

by

TLATSO ISHMAEL NKHOBO

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree

MAGISTER TECHNOLOGIAE: LANGUAGE PRACTICE

Dr. C. Smith (Ph.D. English (NWU)