

Avasha Rambiritch

University of Pretoria

Student perceptions on writing support

Abstract

The value of peer-tutoring has been highlighted in a number of studies. But often the value of such support is lost on, especially, first year students, who perceive such support as an indication that they may be 'lacking' in some way. It is not uncommon to find that attendance at tutorial classes is often low, or not at all, especially if attendance is not mandatory. Worse still is the reality that should students not 'buy into' the idea of such support, or be convinced that such support is valuable, they may not benefit. This particular study looks at one such 'compulsory' tutorial programme, with a view to determining student perceptions to the tutorial programme, as well as

to the role of the tutor in helping them improve their (academic) writing. The article highlights the type of writing support provided to students during the tutorials and by their tutors through the use of checklists, feedback and one-on-one consultations. The study is particularly significant, as it allows us the opportunity to evaluate our offerings, not in isolation, but by giving a voice to those most affected by the implementation of such interventions.

Key words: academic writing, academic literacy, tutorial programme, tutor, writing process, writing support, peer-tutoring

1. Introduction

Universities across South Africa have, for a number of years, offered a range of academic literacy modules aimed at developing the academic literacy abilities of undergraduate and postgraduate students. These interventions are necessary in light of the fact that tertiary institutions (in South Africa) today have to deal with the issue of accepting students whose language proficiency may be at levels that would place them at risk, leading to low pass rates and poor performance. In the past, at one such institution, all first year students were expected to write the TALL (Test of Academic Literacy Levels) to determine their placement in specific academic literacy modules. Should the results of this placement test show students to be at risk in terms of their academic literacy levels they were expected to enrol for the compulsory generic academic literacy modules offered over two semesters. The first semester module was aimed at developing students' speaking and listening skills, encouraged students to reflect critically on their language learning strategies, as well as introducing students to ways to build on and improve their academic vocabulary (Weideman, 2009). The second semester module focused specifically on introducing students to academic reading and writing. Students who were not 'at risk' were expected to enrol for modules as stipulated by their respective faculties. In 2013, the old offerings were phased out and new subject-specific modules were introduced in a number of different faculties across the campus.

This study, however, is focused on the writing intervention offered to students who enrolled for the second semester module in 2012. The study is part of a bigger research project which focuses on the effectiveness of a tutorial programme in improving the academic writing of first year university students who were shown to be 'at risk' by a compulsory measure of academic literacy. The first main deliverable of the project used a pretest-posttest design (Carstens & Fletcher, 2009) to draw a comparison of the marks students received for the two assignments they were expected to write, as well as the marks students received for the two main dimensions of the scoring rubric used by the lecturer in both written assignments. This part of the study has been completed and the findings highlighted in a separate article (Rambiritch, under review). Very briefly here, however, the study indicates that the writing support provided to students who were a part of the intervention had positive effects and showed a 19% improvement between the first unassisted assignment and the second assignment written after the intervention had taken place. The second aim of the project is to determine the perception of students regarding the role of the tutors in their learning by taking a detailed look at the data gathered from two questionnaires administered to students, one administered before the writing intervention and one after. The purpose of this exercise was to elicit information, comments, questions and reactions from students about the role of the tutor in their learning. Understanding the nature of personal reflection by students is integral to this study – for while the 19% improvement is meaningful for lecturers and researchers, students themselves need to believe in the support provided. Importantly it allows researchers to evaluate critically the support we provide, and, of course, to use such feedback to improve our offerings.

2. The tutorial programme

The tutorial programme for students attending the compulsory Academic Literacy modules referred to earlier has been in place since 2005. The aim of the programme has been to provide further assistance to the students whose academic literacy ability levels clearly placed them at risk. In a mass education setting like we have at this particular institution, as at other universities in the country, large classes often impact negatively on teaching and learning. Tutorials, therefore, allow (or should allow) students the opportunity to learn in smaller groups, with the hope that issues/problems/concerns that cannot be addressed in a large class, may be handled more effectively and efficiently in these smaller tutorial classes (see Maxwell, 1990; Longfellow, May, Burke & Marks-Maran, 2008). In the past the main focus of the tutorial programme offered by the Unit for Academic Literacy (UAL) was to provide a platform to reinforce what was done in the lectures. It sometimes also provided an opportunity for tutors to deal with sections/topics which lecturers may not have had time (or enough time) to teach. All tutorial lessons were tied in closely to the textbook used by lecturers in the module. Tutors were provided with a specially designed Tutorial Workbook from which they 'taught'. Each tutor gave three tutorial lessons a week which often took the form of a lecture as a result of the large numbers of students attending. Tutors were also expected to be available for two hours of consultation a week should students have queries related to the tutorial or the module in general.

There was however increasing concern on the part of lecturers who taught on this module about the poor academic writing ability of these students. Towards the end of the second semester students were expected to write an argumentative assignment (4 pages) on a given topic. Students complete/submit this assignment once the lecturer had covered in detail the importance of the writing process/steps in the writing process as outlined below (Table1):

Table 1: *The writing process applied*

STEP	TASKS
<i>Step 1: Identifying a research problem (+ pre-writing)</i>	Students are given a topic by the lecturer. Tasks here focus on pre-writing activities where students are asked to write down everything they know about the topic/theme. They are asked to write down questions they have about the topic and these are discussed in groups.
<i>Step 2: Gathering information (+ pre-writing)</i>	Research skills. Structuring a bibliography.
<i>Step 3: Synthesising and structuring information</i>	In-text referencing. Integration of information using mind maps. Developing criteria for quality academic writing.

STEP	TASKS
Step 4: Writing the assignment	Students write first draft. Revise and edit own draft. Final assignment written and submitted.

(Butler, Pretorius & Van Dyk, 2009)

The poor marks obtained by students for this written assignment meant that further measures needed to be put in place to deal with this. While it is highly possible that the poor marks obtained by these students could be due to a number of other factors, we nevertheless decided at this point to involve the tutors directly in the writing process by providing additional support and learning opportunities through the use of checklists (peer-evaluation and tutor-evaluation), detailed editing advice from tutors, feedback from peers and tutors and one-on-one consultations with tutors. The process followed is outlined briefly below:

Step 1: Draft 1 – peer-evaluation in class by a peer using a rubric.

Step 2: Draft 2 – marked by a tutor using a rubric. Tutors allocated a mark out of 10. Students had a one-on-one consultation with their tutor to discuss the assessed draft.

Step 3: Final Assignment – marked by lecturer using a rubric. The lecturer allocated a mark out of 20 which was added to the tutor mark out of 10. Students received a final mark out of 30 for the assignment.

As indicated earlier, this study is focused specifically on **Step 2** of this process, with the discussion centring on an analysis of the data gathered from the two questionnaires administered to students.

3. The value of tutor-assisted learning

Tutor-assisted learning or peer-assisted learning can be understood as the learning process that sees a senior student or a more experienced learner support or guide a student who is less 'experienced', less 'expert' or 'less knowledgeable'. The idea of such interaction between peers or students is not new or novel. Within the family unit older siblings have almost always mentored younger siblings, in the classroom smarter pupils have often been called on by the teacher to assist 'slower' pupils and at university it is not unusual for students themselves to form study groups led by a more knowledgeable senior. Close to 36 years ago Grant and Hoerber (1978) pointed out that beginning students, particularly those who are educationally and economically disadvantaged, feel more relaxed with peers and relate to them in a different way than

they do with professional helpers. Twelve years later Maxwell (1990: 3) points out that a well-trained tutor can serve a vital role in helping fellow students attain their academic goals. Similar views are echoed by Brindley and Scoffield (1998) who found that peer assessment enabled students to better understand the assessment process; Fouche (2007) whose study determined that attending academic literacy tutorials had an influence on students' writing ability; Longfellow et al. (2008) whose findings suggest that peer-assisted learning enables students to become better learners and Shrestha and Coffin (2012) who conclude that tutor mediation is an effective way to support students academic writing development. These and other studies highlight the value of tutor or peer-assisted learning. This value becomes especially significant in the context of this study, for language teachers at South African institutions know first-hand about the educationally and economically disadvantaged students that Grant and Hoeber (1978) make reference to.

The idea of peer or tutor- assisted learning has its roots in the work of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT) and his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978; Van der Stuyf, 2002; Bodrova & Leong, 1998; Shrestha & Coffin, 2012). In SCT human cognition and learning do not take place in isolation, but rather occur "through participation in social or culturally embedded experiences" (Raymond, 2000:176). Social interaction, with a knowledgeable other, is thus an important part of the learning process. The ZPD can be defined as "the space between the child's level of independent performance and the child's level of maximally assisted performance" (Bodrova & Leong, 1998) or as "the distance between what children can do by themselves and the next learning that they can be helped to achieve with competent assistance" (Raymond, 2000:176 quoted in Van der Stuyf, 2002:2). If learning is best achieved through social interaction, and the aim in teaching and learning is to develop independent learners, what does Vygotsky offer to achieve these aims? The answer lies in the teaching strategy of scaffolding that his theory offers. According to Raymond (2000:176) Vygotsky defined scaffolding instruction as the role of teachers and others in supporting the learner's development and providing support structures to get to that next level. Important, however, is that the support provided is temporary and the scaffolds progressively withdrawn as the learner becomes more independent (Chang, Sung & Chen, 2002:7). The views proposed by Vygotsky of the importance of social interaction for learning and the need for 'knowledgeable others' to support and guide learners with the hope of developing independent learners, resonate strongly with the view outlined by Bruffee (1984). Social interaction is a social exchange between two or more individuals, a process by which we act and react to those around us (Moffitt, n.d.:1). Social interaction is the basis on which society and culture are formed. By interacting with one another, people design rules, institutions and systems within which they seek to live (Boundless, n.d.:4). In the world of the (language) teacher this social interaction (with the knowledgeable other) takes place between peers/tutors and students and is also referred to by Bruffee (1984) as collaborative learning. In putting forward his argument for collaborative learning he highlights a problem many institutions today struggle with – underprepared students who perform poorly. Support for these students, as at many institutions in South Africa today as well, take the form of peer-tutoring. An important

realisation on the part of lecturers teaching these students, according to Bruffee (1984: 637), was that the help these students needed should not be an extension of but an alternative to traditional classroom teaching. The alternative, it seems, was peer-tutoring or collaborative learning.

According to Bruffee (1984:638):

What distinguished collaborative learning in each of its several types from traditional classroom practice was that it did not seem to change what people learned so much as it changed the social context in which they learned it. Students' work tended to improve when they got help from peers; peers offering help, furthermore, learned from the students they helped and from the activity of helping itself.

However, what is particularly significant in the ideas that Bruffee puts forward is his observation that collaborative learning provides a social context in which students can experience and practice the kinds of conversation valued by (college) teachers (1984:642). For Bruffee (1984) engaging students in collaborative learning, and the conversation that forms the basis of this collaborative learning, can have positive effects on students writing:

What students do when working collaboratively on their writing is not write or edit, or least of all, proofread. What they do is converse. They talk about the subject and about the assignment. They talk about the writer's understanding of the subject. Most of all they converse about and as a part of writing (Bruffee, 1984:645).

The value of the contribution of tutoring, peer-assisted learning or collaborative learning to students cannot be denied – especially in a country like South Africa where most tertiary institutions need measures in place to assist under- or poorly- prepared students. Even in cases where students may be adequately prepared to cope with their studies, large classes mean that students do not often get the individual attention that is necessary, especially in modules which focus on the development of specific abilities that cannot be learned in traditional ways such as, academic literacy, and in the case of this study, academic writing.

4. Research Methodology

The methodology adopted for the study is quantitative in nature. Approximately 56 students participated in the project. However, this number was reduced for the second part of the study – students who did not complete both questionnaires were eliminated i.e. students who had completed only the first or second questionnaire were left out. This left us with a total of 37 questionnaires – while this number is not ideal it was necessary to do so, so as to ensure the validity of the results and the claims the findings of this

study will allow us to make. Participants were not randomly selected – the selection was made to allow the researcher easy access to students. Despite the participants not being randomly selected, the students participating in this study is a true representation of the student population at this institution in terms of age, gender and race.

Questionnaire 1 was administered to students before the intervention and Questionnaire 2 after the intervention. A Likert scale (Likert, 1961) was used in both questionnaires to measure student responses. In explaining the workings of a Likert scale, McIver and Carmines (1981: 22-23) state that:

A set of items, composed of approximately an equal number of favourable and unfavourable statements concerning the attitude object, is given to a group of subjects. They are asked to respond to each statement in terms of their own degree of agreement or disagreement. Typically, they are instructed to select one of five responses: strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree, or strongly disagree. The specific responses to the items are combined so that individuals with the most favourable attitudes will have the highest scores while individuals with the least favourable (or unfavourable) attitudes will have the lowest scores.

The Likert scale uses either numerical (1-5) or alphabetical (A-E) values. In the case of both questionnaires numerical values were used:

- 1 – Completely Disagree
- 2 – Disagree
- 3 – Agree
- 4 – Completely Agree

The researcher chose to leave out a 'Neutral' option so as to force students to make a choice. The first page of the questionnaire outlines for students the purpose of the questionnaire and the aim of the research. There is a letter of consent informing students that participation is voluntary, confidentiality is guaranteed and that ethical clearance for the research has been obtained from the university. Full contact details of the researcher were available. The researcher was available at all sessions where the questionnaire was administered so as to assist students with questions or queries.

While the questionnaire used a 4 point scale, in analysing and interpreting the results of the questionnaire the numerical values 1 and 2 (Completely Disagree and Disagree) were combined and 3 and 4 (Agree and Completely Agree) were combined. Graphs therefore indicate 2 or 3 columns: Disagree and Agree; or Disagree, Agree and Missing (where students did not answer the question).

5. The questionnaires

Both questionnaires were designed to elicit responses from students to determine their views on the writing process they engaged in (if at all), the role of the tutor and the tutorial programme in their learning. Questions in the two questionnaires can be grouped into three main constructs (the underlying theme within the questionnaires):

1. The writing process;
2. The role of the tutor; and
3. The tutorial programme.

In the case of the first questionnaire administered before the intervention, in addition to questions related to the three constructs above, further questions posed related to students' views on being shown to be 'at risk' by a compulsory measure of academic literacy, the need for academic literacy support, the importance of being aware of whether one's academic literacy skills will affect one's academic performance as well as the difference between academic language and general language ability. The second questionnaire was designed to determine specifically whether the intervention had changed students' views, positively or negatively. In this questionnaire questions related to the academic literacy test students had to undertake as well as questions related to academic literacy in general, were eliminated. Instead, the second questionnaire included two questions related to the transfer of the skills/abilities developed: *I will apply what I have learnt here to written assignments in my other subjects* and *I believe that I am now better equipped to handle written assignments in my other subjects*. It goes without saying, in support programmes such as these, that students' transfer of such skills and abilities to their other written assessments is a crucial part of students' academic success. It must be noted however that this study focuses on the perception of these students and not their actual behaviour. Should one choose to investigate whether these skills have truly been transferred, one would need a research methodology that implies some form of direct observation.

The data collected from both questionnaires were analysed using SAS 9.2 (Frequency Procedure). In light of the fact that the questionnaires included a number of distinct constructs, we tested for consistent answering within these constructs, rather than an overall Cronbach. The questionnaire was self-designed and used for the first time here. While we were willing to work with lower reliability measures because of this (explained below as well), we are hoping that this process of analysis would help to improve the questionnaire's reliability for future use for future.

However, before diving deep into discussions of reliability (or not) there are a few issues that need mentioning. Cronbach's alpha measures for consistency in the responses of students, therefore, the more consistent the responses, the higher the reliability. Clearly then, questions within a particular construct, which elicit responses that are inconsistent

with other responses within that construct, will negatively affect the reliability measures. The example below reflects responses to questions with the construct that focuses on Academic Literacy – with a view to determine whether students understand what it is and the difference between academic literacy and general language ability.

Table 2: Example of inconsistent responses that may affect reliability (Questionnaire 1)

	Completely Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Completely Agree
2. I think that it is important to know whether my academic literacy skills will affect my academic performance.				x
3. I think that a programme designed to improve my academic literacy skills is useful.				x
4. I think 'academic literacy' is more than or different from general language ability.				x
5. I think that 'academic literacy' is more or less the same as general language ability.	x			
6. If one is good at languages, one should have no problems coping with academic language.	x			
7. Being good at languages is no guarantee of being successful in using academic language.				x

In order to determine accurate reliability measures, questions that elicited inconsistent responses within a particular construct were reverse coded. In the case of the two questionnaires administered during this study there were two question types that may have elicited inconsistent responses. The first related to questions that were designed as couplets. These 'couplets' are questions designed to test the honesty of student responses with one question requiring a positive (Agree or Completely Agree) response while the other requires a negative (Disagree or Completely Disagree) response. This may, however, sometimes confuse students, and/or negatively affect the reliability (see Questions 4 and 5 in Table 2 above). The second instance relates to questions that focus specifically on student attitudes/feelings about their academic performance: *In general my final results in the first semester (for all) subjects are a good indication of my academic ability or I am satisfied with the marks I receive for written assignments (in all subjects)*. Clearly, responses to these questions will be very varied and inconsistent.

While leaving out such questions in the final analyses to secure a higher reliability is always an option, these personal responses of the students are relevant to this study and have not been excluded or removed.

Table 3: *Questionnaire 1: Cronbach's alpha*

Construct	Alpha
1. Academic Literacy	0.26*
2. Role of the tutor	0.83
3. Writing Process	0.62*
4. Tutorial Programme	0.64*

Table 4: *Questionnaire 2: Cronbach's alpha*

Construct	Alpha
1. Transfer of skills	0.66
2. Role of the tutor	0.86*
3. Writing Process	0.79
4. Tutorial Programme	0.79*

In attempting to determine acceptable reliability measures we turned to Santos (1999:1) who, in explaining that Cronbach's alpha determines the internal consistency or average correlation of items in a survey instrument to gauge its reliability, points out also that a Cronbach's alpha of 0.7 is an acceptable reliability coefficient and that "lower thresholds are sometimes used" (Santos, 1999: 1). The reliability measures for the constructs in both questionnaires range between low reliability (0.26) and high reliability (0.86). In the case of the construct with the lowest reliability it must also be pointed out that should Question 17 (*In general my final results in the first semester (for all subjects) are a good indication of my academic ability*) been removed the alpha would go up to 0.36. While that is still a low measure, it is believed that students' responses to these (personal) questions are relevant here. All questions within this construct also use the term 'academic literacy' – on the assumption that students are familiar with what it means. The inconsistent responses could indicate to us that (first year) students may not fully understand the skills and abilities that encompass academic literacy. It might be more prudent to observe their understanding directly than to test their "academic" understanding of these meta-linguistic concepts. The reliability measure for the Writing Process construct in

the first questionnaire would have increased to 0.71 if Question 19 were removed (*I am satisfied with the marks I receive for written assignments (in all subjects)*). The construct focusing specifically on the Tutorial Programme (Questionnaire 1) would increase to 0.73 if Question 9 were deleted (*I feel more confident to ask questions in my tutorial class than in my lecture*). In the case of Questionnaire 2, two measures would increase if particular questions were deleted:

Table 5: Questionnaire 2: Cronbach's alpha if items are deleted

Role of the tutor	0.86 to 0.89 if Question 6 were deleted (<i>My tutor provided opportunities for me to ask questions</i>)
Tutorial Programme	0.79 to 0.84 if Question 5 were deleted (<i>I felt more confident to ask questions in my tutorial class than in my lecture</i>)

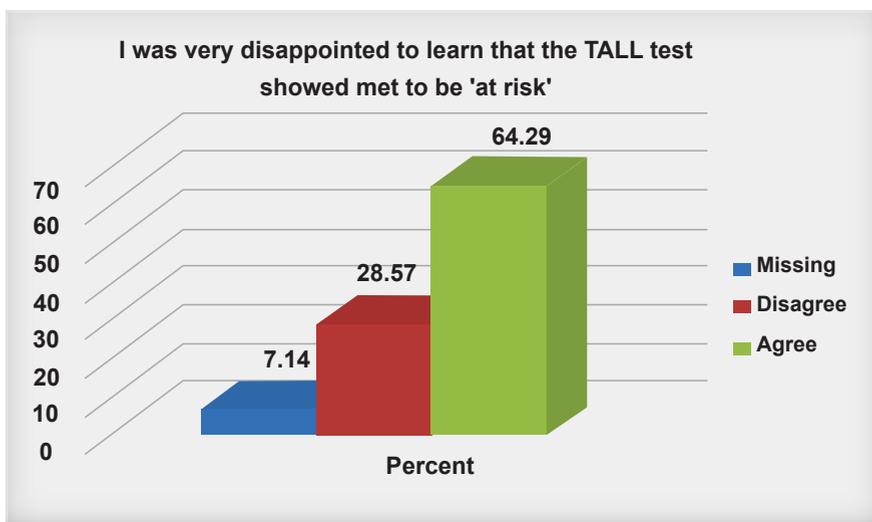
In light of the fact that the reliability measures (with the exception of the questions related to academic literacy) are acceptable and are not being used to make high stakes decisions about students these questions have not been excluded – instead I believe that they will add value to the discussion here as well as to decisions that we may make about student support arising out of this study. Based on the reliability measures obtained during the use of the self-designed questionnaire in this study, the questionnaire might change when used in future to improve reliability.

6. An analysis and interpretation of the results of the questionnaires

6.1 Academic Literacy

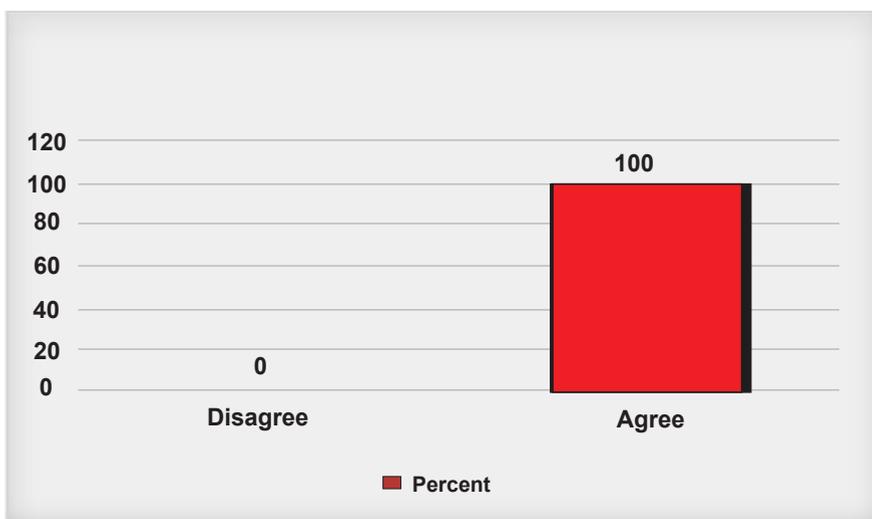
The first question in Questionnaire 1 relates to students' feeling towards being shown to be 'at risk' by the academic literacy test administered to all first-year students during that period. Students identified as being 'at risk', either see themselves as lacking in some way or believe that they have been incorrectly identified (by the test) as being at risk. Both of these views will lead to students having a negative attitude to the test and to the intervention. The response of students to this particular question was surprising – one would assume that the majority of students would have agreed with the statement: *I was very disappointed to learn that the TALL test showed me to be 'at risk'*.

Figure 1: *I was very disappointed to learn that the TALL test showed me to be 'at risk'*



Clearly, then, while 64% of students do indicate they were disappointed, about 29% indicated that they were not. The 7% of students who did not answer the question could be those students who arrived too late to take the test and thus were forced to enrol for the module or they could be students who were not deemed to be 'at risk' but opted to do the module for a number of other reasons. Interesting as well was that when students were asked: *I think that it is important to know whether my academic literacy skills will affect my academic performance* 100% of students agreed with this.

Figure 2: *I think that it is important to know whether my academic literacy skills will affect my academic performance*



The positive response of students here is mirrored in their response to the third statement: *I think that a programme designed to improve my academic literacy skills is useful.* An overwhelming 97% of students agree with this statement. It is not strange that 2% of students disagreed with this statement. Students often see support modules such as these as burdensome, despite knowing, and acknowledging, that such support is needed and beneficial. The problematic responses to statements (within this construct) can be seen in Questions 4/5 and 6/7 – these are the ‘couplets’ mentioned above. Questions 4 and 5 are designed to test whether students understand clearly enough the difference between academic language and general language ability:

Question 4: *I think ‘academic literacy’ is more than or different from general language ability.*

Question 5: *I think ‘academic literacy’ is more or less the same as general language ability.*

One would assume that the same students, who agreed with the first statement, would disagree with the second. However in this case while 88% of students agreed with the first statement, only 41% of students disagreed with the second. Our assumption is that students either do not understand the question clearly enough, or do not understand the difference between academic language and general language ability. This same confusing response can be seen with the next two statements, and could be a possible indication that students do not understand “academic” definitions of meta-linguistic concepts:

Question 6: *If one is good at languages, one should have no problems coping with academic language.*

Question 7: *Being good at languages is no guarantee of being successful in using academic language.*

Here, one would expect the majority of students to disagree with the first statement and agree with the second. Instead we see 45% of students disagreeing with the first statement while 83% agree with the second. One can assume then that students possibly do not understand the difference between academic language and general language ability. As indicated earlier on, these questions are important to the discussion here. One of the things lecturers teaching such (academic literacy) modules should do is ensure that students understand clearly what academic literacy is, and the abilities that encompass academic literacy. I have alluded, earlier on, to the sometimes negative attitudes students have to support modules – not understanding how and why such support is essential will, more than likely, lead to further stigmatisation. It is important for students to realise as well that academic language is different to general language ability and that a distinction in a language during your schooling career may not guarantee that you can cope with the reading and writing encountered at university level.

6.2 The writing process

An important part of this study was to determine perceptions of students towards the writing practises that they are engaged in. Important as well was the need to determine whether students' perceptions towards writing practices had changed as a result of the intervention. The relevant questions in Questionnaire 1 and 2 relate to whether students plan and revise their essays before submission, think that it necessary to do a draft of the text before submission as well as whether they believe that it is necessary to get help to edit their essays. In terms of whether students always plan and revise their essays before submitting it to their lecturer, in the pre-intervention questionnaire 83% of students responded positively to this statement. In the post-intervention questionnaire this went up to 86%. When asked pre-intervention whether they think that it is always necessary to do a draft of the essay before submission 83% responded positively, while in the post-intervention questionnaires an overwhelming 98% of students indicate that they agree with this statement: *It is always necessary to do a draft of an essay before submission*. When presented with the statement: *I think it is important to get help to edit my essay*, 95% of students responded positively to the question in both questionnaires.

Clearly, students were aware of the benefits of planning, revising, drafting and editing their writing as evidenced by the pre-intervention answers to the questionnaire. There is no statistical evidence that their attitudes changed significantly when their answers to the post-intervention questionnaire are compared with those in the pre-intervention questionnaire. However, based on the increased percentages for some answers to questions in the post-intervention questionnaire, more students seem to see the value of following a planning, drafting and editing approach to writing. The majority of students acknowledge the importance of editing their texts. Many of the students in this module are second or third language speakers of English – they are very aware of the (language and grammar) problems that they struggle with and therefore see the value of having someone read through, identify and make corrections to their text. What is worrying about an intervention such as this is that while (in this instance) students do have the opportunity to work closely with a knowledgeable other in improving their writing, this type of support is not always possible. Interventions like this one should focus also on helping students to develop the skill of editing their own texts, as the luxury of having someone else do it for them is simply not always available (see Rambiritch, 2015, on providing the right writing support, forthcoming for a detailed explanation of the support provided to these students). Overall however, responses here indicate that:

- the majority of students (pre- and post-intervention) do perceive that planning and revising their essays before submission are important activities;
- more students (post-intervention) agree that it is always necessary to do a draft of an essay before submission; and
- A vast majority of students (pre- and post-intervention) see value in getting help to edit their essays.

6.3 The tutorial programme

The main aim of this research focused on the effectiveness of a tutorial programme in improving the academic writing of first-year university students. Students involved in this research had been part of a year-long academic literacy programme – students had to attend two lectures a week and one compulsory tutorial. As indicated in the introduction, the tutors and lecturers worked hand in hand in providing support to students. The integrated support provided is illustrated in the figure below:

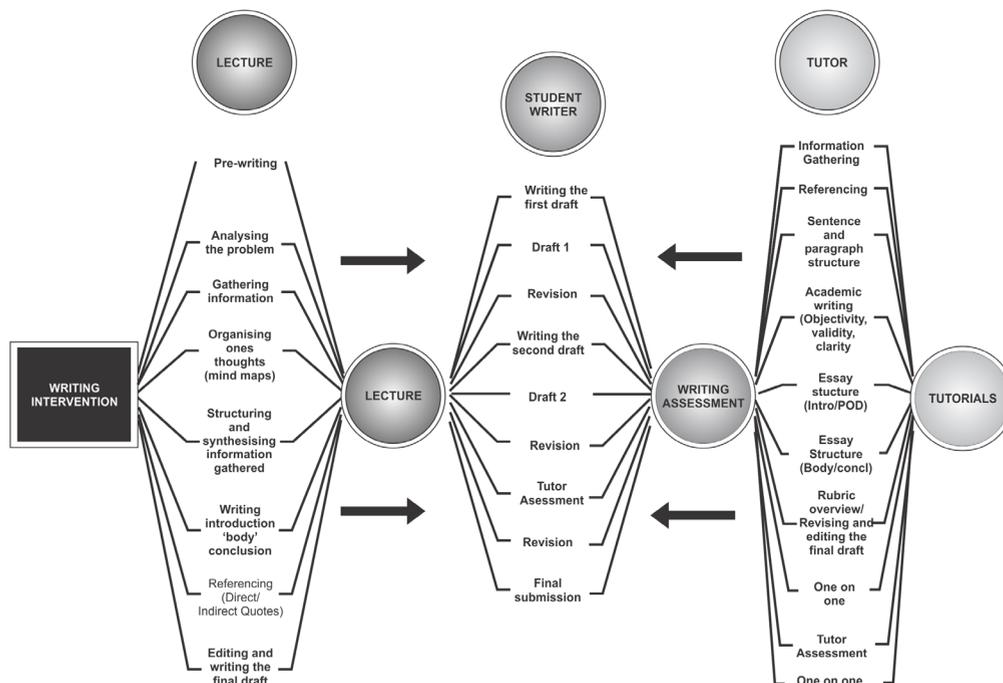


Figure 3: Integrated writing support provided to students (Rambiritch, under review)

The question, then, is what were student responses to this intervention? This research is particularly important for me. Having been the tutor co-ordinator for a number of years, it was also important for me to be able to evaluate the effectiveness of the model/ intervention. Important, as well, was the need to determine if and how we could improve our offerings, and as a result further support our students. The intervention focused on in this study saw the direct involvement of the tutor in the writing process students had to follow through the use of checklists and one-on-one consultations. The findings of the first part of this study, which shows (empirically) that the intervention had positive effects, indicates the success of the intervention but does not, by any means, suggest that no further improvement can be made. As a researcher, and as someone directly

involved in the teaching of academic writing, my concern now is to ensure that the same kind of (writing) support offered to students in this module, be offered to all students in the faculty. If improvement can be seen in this intervention there should be no doubt that longer, more intensive interventions can see more positive outcomes. The pre-intervention questionnaire saw 91% of students acknowledge that *I think that the tutorial programme is beneficial to me* and 88% of students agreeing that *Themes and Topics covered in tutorials are beneficial to me*.

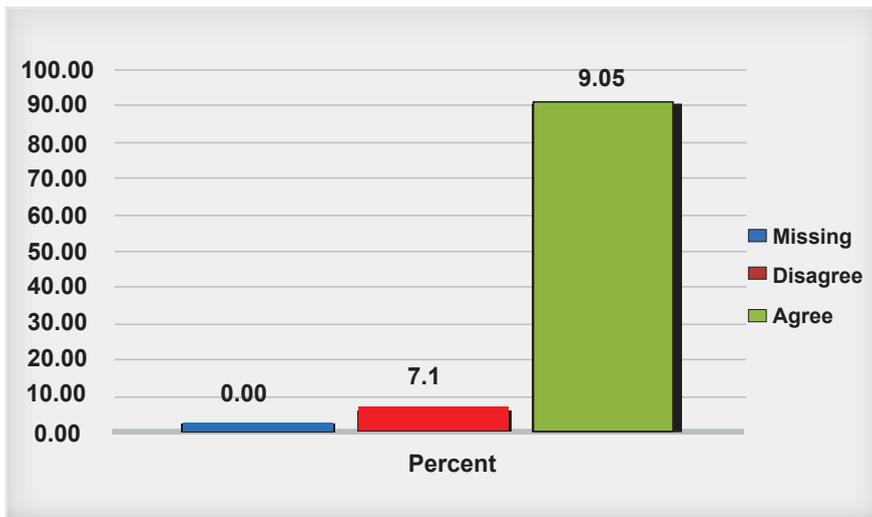


Figure 4: *I think that the tutorial programme is beneficial to me*

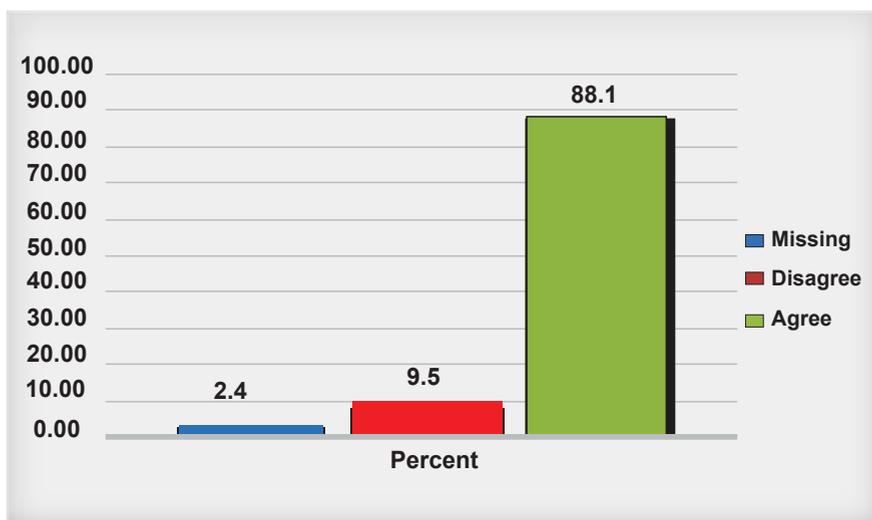


Figure 5: *Themes and topics covered in tutorials are beneficial to me*

Slightly worrying, however, was that the perceptions of students in the post-intervention stage showed a slight decline where 86% (as opposed to 91% in Questionnaire 1) see the tutorial programme as beneficial. No tests of statistical significance were done, and the perceptions of the participating students pre- and post-intervention is positive towards the intervention in general, therefore the decrease of 5% is not necessarily worrisome. Once again, in the second questionnaire (as in the first) 88% of students believe that *Themes and Topics covered in tutorials are beneficial to me*.

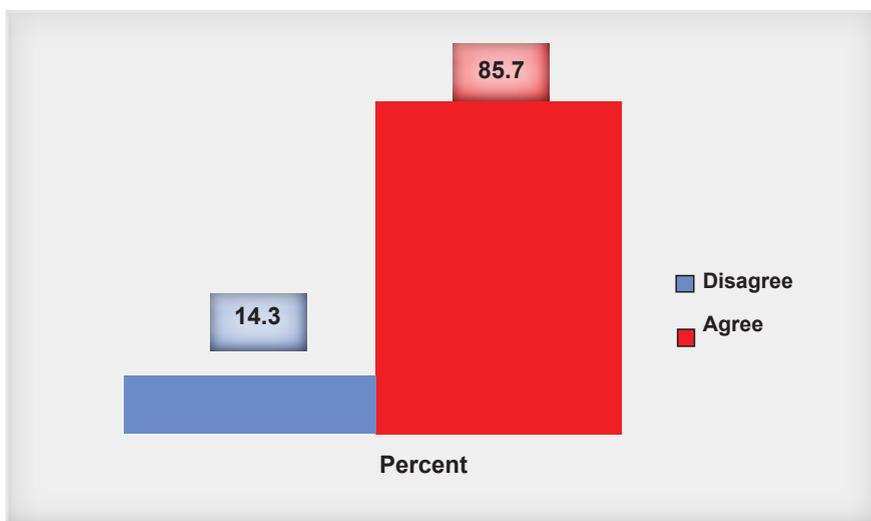


Figure 6: *I think that the tutorial programme was beneficial to me*

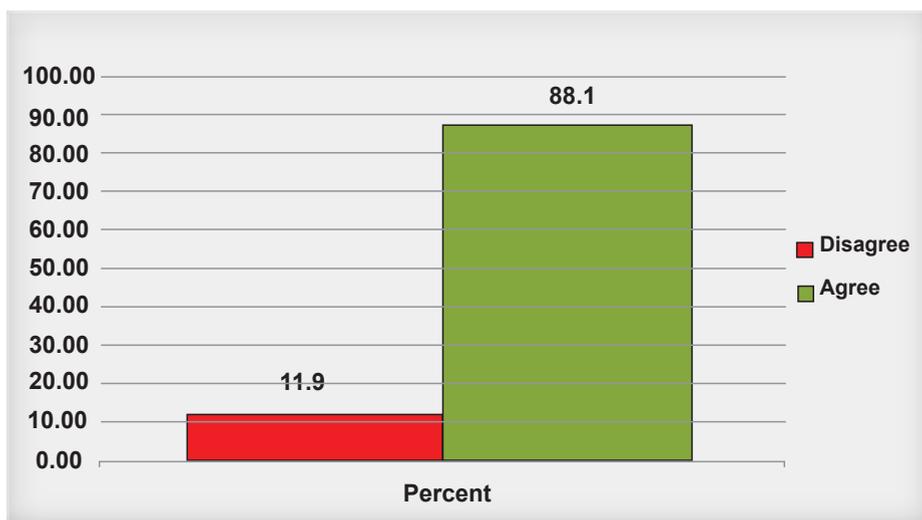


Figure 7: *Themes and topics covered in tutorials were beneficial to me*

Overall, however, the mainly positive responses to students (pre- and post-intervention) indicate that the majority of students do see the tutorial programme as well as the themes and topics covered during the tutorial part of the programme as beneficial. It must be pointed out that this research was conducted towards the latter part of the second semester (September-October). Students had been attending tutorials since February of the same year. By the time they completed the questionnaires they had covered a range of themes and topics related to academic literacy. Student responses to the questions that focus on the tutorial programme relate then to the entire tutorial programme, and not just the six to eight weeks that focus on the writing intervention.

6.4 The role of the tutor

The overwhelmingly positive response to the tutorial programme is mirrored here in the responses we see when students were asked to reflect on the role of the tutor in their learning. In the pre-intervention questionnaire, 93% of students indicated that, *The tutor provides opportunities for me to ask questions*. Creating an environment (during lecturers and tutorials) where students are comfortable to ask questions is essential in a module such as this. Should students feel threatened in any way, they will not ask questions and thus not be able to address issues/problem they may be having. Linked to this is that in the pre-intervention questionnaire, 98% of students agree that their tutor is knowledgeable about academic literacy. These very positive responses are no surprise, especially if we consider the positive responses to the tutorial programme. When faced with a similar statement in the second or post-intervention questionnaire, 95% of students agree that, *The tutor provides opportunities for me to ask questions*.

Especially important for this article, however, was the need to determine how students felt about the involvement of the tutor directly in their writing (through the use of checklists, feedback and one-on-one consultations). The perceptions of students about this matter was tested only in the post-intervention questionnaire. Figures 8 and 9 indicate student responses to these concerns.

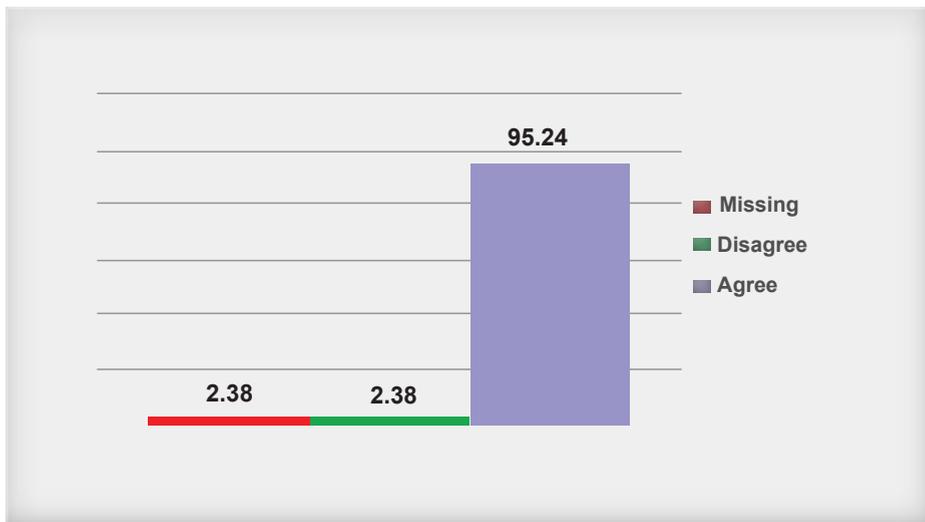


Figure 8: *I understood the feedback/comments I received from the tutor for the second draft of my essay*

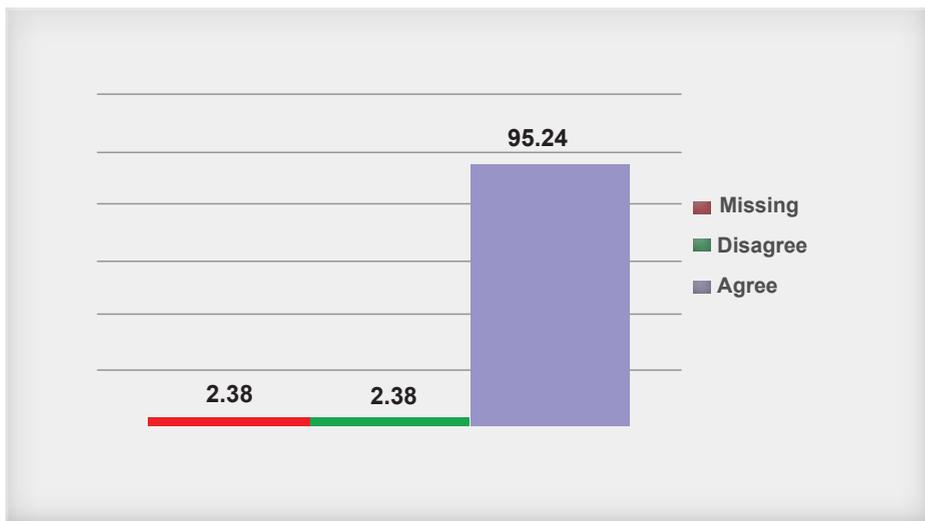


Figure 9: *I found the feedback/comments useful in revising my essay*

The highly positive response from the participating students here is telling – students very clearly perceived the support offered by the tutor as beneficial. The vast majority of students believe that they were able to use and understand the feedback they received on their essays from the tutor. Important to note, as well, is that while not all participating students took advantage of the opportunity of a one-on-one consultation with the tutor to

discuss the feedback and comments, the vast majority still value the advise/comments from their tutor on the checklists. Only 43% of the participating students had a one-on-one consultation with the tutor, but of this number 89% perceive the consultation as useful.

However, as we are all well aware, such skills/abilities developed in interventions such as these are of no use if they are not applied to the academic work students must engage in. Our role as teachers of academic literacy is to hold our students' hands through the process of reading and/or writing in the hope that when we let go, they will apply these same processes to other (academic) reading/writing they will engage in. The last two questions, in Questionnaire 2 then, focused on whether students would **apply what was learnt about academic** writing to their other written assignments. I need to acknowledge that the responses of students to these questions remain perceptions. In other words, I cannot infer from these responses whether students actually applied the skills learnt in other assignments. Another type of direct investigation would need to be planned if a more conclusive answer to this question is required. The perceptions of the participating students however are that they believe that they do apply the skills learnt in the academic literacy module to their other assignments, as presented in the graphs below.

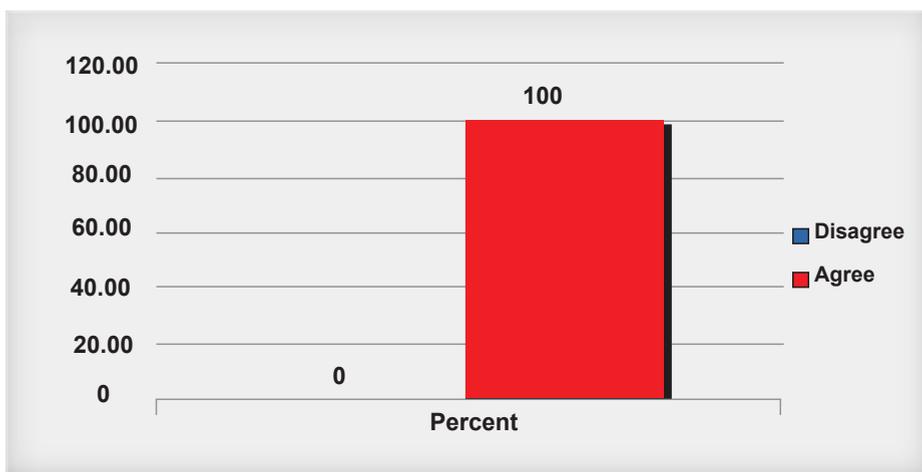


Figure 10: I will apply what I have learnt here to written assignments in my other subjects

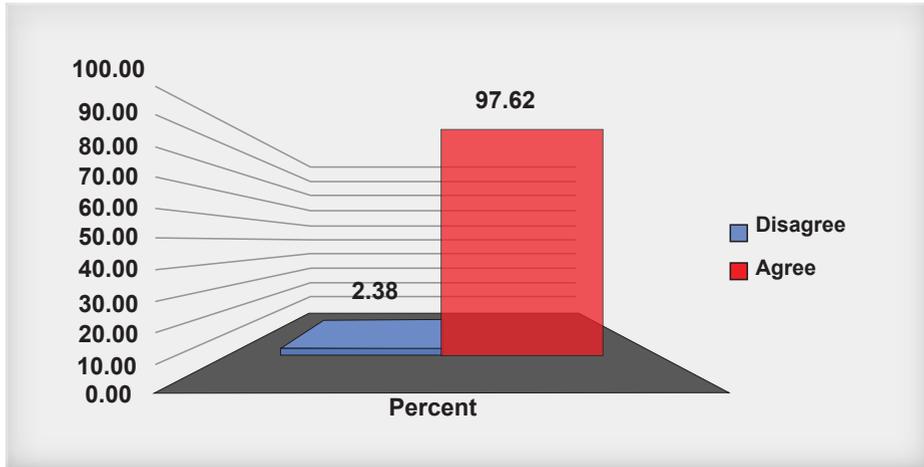


Figure 11: *I believe that I am now better equipped to handle written assignments in my other subjects*

Based on the perceptions of students as evidenced in their responses to these two questions, they do believe that they apply the skills learnt in the academic literacy module to other assignments and they do feel better equipped to handle written assignments in their other subjects.

7. Discussion and conclusions

The main aim of this research project was to determine student perceptions regarding the role of the tutor and the tutorial programme in improving the academic writing of these students. The information elicited from the questionnaires administered to students indicates that:

- Students valued the support from the tutorial programme. What was interesting was that students seem to have had a positive attitude to the tutorials even before the intensive intervention. This positive attitude to the tutorial programme was evident from the very positive responses in Questionnaire 1 where 91% of students agreed that the tutorial programme was beneficial.
- Overall students also indicated that the themes and topics covered in tutorials (both pre and post-intervention) were beneficial and that they were comfortable enough with the tutor to ask questions.

- With regards to the writing process students indicated, even before the intervention, that they follow the draft approach to writing and that they plan and revise their essays before submission. This should come as no surprise, as the process approach to writing is implemented in high school and students are very used to planning, drafting, and editing of their essays in at least their home language and first additional language subjects (Van der Walt, 2010). The process writing approach is further emphasized at university where lecturers and tutors continue to stress the importance of drafting and revising a written text from the very first assignments that students prepare from mid-February onwards. In addition to this, students were encouraged to see their tutors during the tutor's consultation hours to seek advice about written assignments in any module.
- With regards to questions designed to determine students' understanding of the concept of academic literacy, as well as the difference between academic language and general language ability there are a number of concerns. In future questionnaires, one should probably approach these questions differently by maybe presenting students with examples of "language errors" and "literacy" errors in writing and asking them questions about the differences in the presented texts. Or one should delete these types of questions from the questionnaire altogether and investigate the understanding of students about the differences between "language issues" and "literacy issues" via interviews based on examples of texts. One also needs to consider at a basic level whether knowledge about this meta-linguistic issue is at all important. It is far more important for students to demonstrate that they understand principles of, for example, effective academic writing, than being able to provide definitions of the concepts academic literacy and an understanding that language issues form a part of this, but relate to different matters,
- Students indicated a very positive response to the support provided by their tutor. Students state that tutors provided them with opportunities to ask questions and were knowledgeable about academic literacy. Importantly, they valued the feedback they received from tutors about their writing. They found this feedback useful and are of the opinion that are able to use it to revise their essays, also in other modules.
- Overall, it can be stated that students have a very positive attitude to the support provided to them as indicated in the pre- and post-intervention questionnaire data. This is not limited to the writing intervention carried out later in the second semester, but to the year-long tutorial programme in general.

The research project on which this study is based was carried out to determine the effectiveness of the tutorial programme in improving the academic writing ability of first-year students. The results from the first part of this study, which used a pretest-posttest design to draw a comparison of the marks students received for the two assignments they were expected to write, as well as the marks students

received for the two main dimensions of the scoring rubric used by the lecturer in both written assignments, has shown a marked improvement in students results (reported elsewhere). Coupled with this very positive response to the tutorial programme and the role of the tutor in their learning, it is clear that the participating students held positive views about the intervention before they were exposed to it and they continued to hold positive views at the end of the intervention. While it can be pointed out, correctly so, that such intensive, individualised interventions are bound to have positive results we must note that the value of such interventions lie in students' ability to apply the abilities learned during this process, to their other written assignments. The nature of this research design did not include a measure of direct observation to determine if students actually apply the skills learnt in the academic literacy module in their written assignments for other subjects. The responses to the last two questions in Questionnaire 2 (Figures 10 & 11) confirm for us that students believe that the skills learnt in the academic literacy module prepare them to handle written assignments in other subjects and they believe that they apply these skills in assignments of other subjects. The positive views of the participating students towards the intervention indicate that from a student perspective, there is a good return on the investment made by the institution in offering these courses. Based on the perceptions of the participating students in this project, it could be concluded that the same level of support must be made available to all or other students, within the faculty, and across the university. While this may seem like a tall order, and an expensive one at that, good throughput rates, highly motivated students and academic success may only be possible if such support structures are implemented widely.

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About the author

Avasha Rambiritch

Postal address:

Unit for Academic Literacy (UAL),
University of Pretoria, 0002,
South Africa

Email address: Avasha.rambiritch@up.ac.za

The author is a lecturer at the Unit for Academic Literacy, University of Pretoria where her main research interests are academic writing and language testing.

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