

## **CHAPTER 1      Contextualisation of the problem**

### **1.1      Introduction**

Why is writing so inordinately important in the academic world? Why are there such widespread perceptions among practising academics today that the writing ability of their students has steadily deteriorated? How does writing ability interact with other components of academic literacy, such as reading and putting together a coherent argument? What can be done to develop writing ability at university in the current context?

These are some of the questions that prompted the present study, and that will be examined below, together with a complex mix of subsidiary and related issues.

Of course, this is not the first time that such questions have come to be asked, nor will the answers that are attempted below be the final responses to these questions. But the questions raised do come at a time when the tertiary context in South Africa has undergone rapid change as a result of a mixture of historical, political, economic and technological factors, all of which have combined to create a unique academic environment, and one that has given new poignancy to these apparently perennial problems.

In the sections that follow, I attempt first to articulate some of the unique features of this new context, before turning to the more precise formulation of the research problem of this study, and the aims and methods employed to carry out the investigation.

### **1.2      The importance of English as academic language**

Tertiary education in South Africa has had a chequered history, mainly as a result of educational policy during the Apartheid Era. This policy distinguished between students on a racial basis, and directly affected the quality of education students

received. Apart from the inferior quality of education to which they were generally exposed, black students also had to face the further complication of receiving tuition in English, an additional language to most. A very similar situation with regard to the languages used for education prevails in present-day South Africa, where, in tertiary education particularly, thousands of students are engaged in studies through a language – English – which is not their primary language.

With English increasingly becoming the default global language, it is inevitable that more and more students who use English as an additional language will enrol at universities worldwide. Apart from its unavoidable status as *lingua franca* in South Africa, English is also generally regarded as a language of upward mobility. As a result of its elevated status, the language is preferred by many students (who are mother-tongue speakers of other South African languages) as a language of learning at institutions of higher education (cf. Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2000; Dalvit & De Klerk, 2005; De Kadt, 2005). The difficulty of engaging successfully in tertiary study in South Africa through an additional language (English) that one has not acquired adequately is well documented (cf. Blacquiére, 1989; Palazzo, 1989; Puhl & Swartz, 1989; Jiya, 1993; Moyo, 1995; Nyamapfene & Letseka, 1995; Orr, 1995; Kroes, 1996; Zulu, 2005). Consequently, it is of crucial importance that programmes for the development of academic literacy in English seek constantly to address effectively the needs and difficulties of learners in the South African tertiary context.

The remainder of this introductory chapter focuses on issues regarding academic literacy development in a South African tertiary context, with a specific emphasis on the University of Pretoria, since this University is the location for the current study.

### **1.3 The context of higher education in South Africa**

#### **1.3.1 A changing tertiary environment**

A number of complex changes have been taking place in recent years in the South African education system generally, but also more specifically in higher education. The most obvious of these changes concern the complexities and challenges presented

by the merging of a number of tertiary institutions. Another change, though not as apparent in the public perception as the institutional mergers, but equally noteworthy from a content and curriculum point of view, is the ongoing conversion of all curricula within higher education institutions to an outcomes-based education (OBE) model.

Historically, education in South Africa tended to emphasise the knowledge to be acquired in specific fields. Although some opportunities were available for the practical application of knowledge, this was not the main focus of education. It was often left largely to the designs of the learners, whenever they found employment, to activate in real-life situations the primarily static, memorised knowledge. In effect, the conversion to OBE therefore implies that curricula should not only be responsible for the knowledge learners need to master in specific fields, but also for what learners could accomplish with the knowledge they gained in order to solve problems in specific fields (Phillips, 1997). Outcomes-based education therefore emphasises an integration of specific knowledge and skills/abilities culminating in capabilities in specific fields.

### **1.3.2 Tertiary academic literacy in context**

The development of tertiary academic literacy in South Africa is typically discussed as a result of the often differing levels of education that students still receive in primary and secondary school education in South Africa. However, rapid globalisation and the consequent movement of people across the world complicate the issue of adequate academic literacy levels for tertiary study even further. In this context, it is not sufficient any more to take into account only the often inadequate preparation of students for tertiary education who went through the pre-tertiary education system in South Africa. It becomes essential that one acknowledges and prepares for students from various parts of the world entering the South African tertiary education system with diverse educational (and literacy) backgrounds and different levels of preparedness for higher education. It is further apparent that this phenomenon is not restricted to South Africa. It is evident from the copious amounts of literature available that tertiary institutions in the United States of America, for

example, have to deal with increasing numbers of students from other countries, especially those in East Asia. Many of these students have been exposed to education that emphasises and values different aspects of education compared to traditional western education. As the world moves ever closer to becoming one 'global village', it follows logically that people from different countries will increasingly become part of this global movement, and that growing demands will be made on institutions of higher learning globally to come to terms with new educational complexities.

Political change in South Africa has resulted in the transformation of education in general, but also more specifically of higher education. A general drive to increase access to tertiary education (especially for previously disadvantaged groups) has marked discussions about higher education during the past ten years or so. Another interesting development is that, with the new political dispensation in South Africa and the subsequent opening of its boundaries, an increasing number of foreign students from other African countries are gaining access to tertiary education in South Africa. Although many of these students are postgraduate students, there is also an increasing number of foreign undergraduate students who enrol at tertiary institutions in South Africa. A considerable number of these students come from Francophone and Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa, where these languages are used mainly for purposes of education. As a result, many of these students' English proficiency levels are not adequate to study through medium English (although they might have had some exposure to English as a school subject), which, in turn, requires relevant language support in order for such students to reach an acceptable level of basic proficiency in English that will make tertiary study possible.

Offering extra language support to students in tertiary education in South Africa has mainly taken the form of **language proficiency courses** presented to students who have in the past displayed language inadequacies (and then mostly with a focus on English as a second language). Initially, many such courses formed part of what was referred to as 'bridging' programmes, a period of study before officially entering tertiary education, that was supposed to prepare students adequately for the demands of studying at a university or technikon. Many such courses were also developed and implemented under the auspices of academic development (AD) initiatives. In recent

years, AD efforts appear to focus increasingly on developmental programmes that are integrated into the mainstream curricula of tertiary institutions. Another recent change is that support initiatives in language are increasingly interpreted as support in the development of **academic literacy**, an approach that highlights the interrelated nature of language being used for a specific purpose in the functional context of tertiary education. It would, however, be fair to say that, probably as a result of the practical realities created by the political history of South Africa, language support courses in the past focused mainly on the language problems of local students, and not necessarily in any specific way on the problems of foreign students, probably because it was also assumed that if such students experienced problems with the academic culture and academic literacy at tertiary institutions in South Africa, such problems would probably be similar to those of local students.

### **1.3.3 The language of learning (LOL)**

In the South African context, the languages used for educational purposes have been contentious for many years (Dalvit & De Klerk, 2005). The language issue, and in this case specifically the imposition of one of the current 11 official languages – Afrikaans – sparked the 1976 Soweto uprising that marked a very significant turning point in the country's history. Black South Africans stood up for their right not to be forced to be educated in what was, at the time, seen as the language of the oppressor.

However, even though the official language policy in a post-Apartheid South Africa recognises the right of people to be educated in their primary languages, young black South Africans continue to receive their education in a language that is not their mother tongue, viz. English, which is used as the main medium of instruction at schools. It is also apparent that many users of African languages seem to prefer being educated in English because of the perceived benefits that still accompany the language. As Coetzee-Van Rooy (2000:53) observes:

Ironically, the declaration of eleven official languages in the Constitution for the post 1994 South Africa did not change the attitudes of speakers of African languages towards the use of African languages as media of instruction. The situation with the medium of instruction is still very much what it was pre-1953.

Apart from fears about a loss of cultural diversity (of which the use of primary languages forms an integral part), a serious concern in this context is the important connection between the formation of basic cognitive concepts and mother-tongue education (cf. Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2000; De Klerk, 2002). De Klerk (2002:2) remarks that: " ... by learning through the first language, learners will get the best chance to develop cognitively and to succeed academically ... ". This has an impact on concept formation in an additional language, in the sense that concepts that were not internalised through the mother tongue will be increasingly difficult to access in an additional language.

Although some efforts are being made at present to incorporate mother-tongue education into education in general in South Africa (see Dalvit & De Klerk, 2005), this is an extremely complex issue that is not likely to see any radical change in the foreseeable future, and even if it does, the importance of English as a parallel medium of learning to the mother tongue will probably be maintained in South African education. It would, therefore, not be bold to predict that for a number of years to come, tertiary institutions that make use of English as a language of learning will have to make provision for the academic literacy difficulties of students who study in an additional language.

It should, however, be noted that there appears to have been a general decline in the academic literacy levels of students who enrol for their first year at the University of Pretoria (cf. Van Rensburg & Weideman, 2002). The problem is, therefore, not restricted to additional language users, but appears to be a more general problem that also includes mother-tongue users of the languages of learning at the UP. This phenomenon appears not to be limited to South Africa either, and even countries such as the USA seem to experience a similar trend in literacy levels. Dillon (2005:1) reports on the results of a nationwide test administered in the USA and comes to the general conclusion that: "The average American college graduate's literacy in English declined significantly over the past decade ... ".

### 1.3.4 Academic literacy development at the University of Pretoria

The University of Pretoria had, for the period up to the end of the previous century, not been involved in offering academic literacy support courses to students **on an institution-wide basis**. There is, however, some evidence of efforts to offer additional support to students in engineering, for example, by extending the duration of a first degree and offering extra support in study skills (that includes a language component) and in more complex subjects (such as Mathematics) during the first year. In the Humanities, an extra support course has been offered for a number of years to first-year students that focuses on academic skills such as study and thinking skills. Apart from these two interventions, the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences has introduced a Foundation Year Programme (UPFY) that aims to provide access to university study for underprepared Grade 12 students.

The first co-ordinated institutional effort, however, at supporting students at the UP in their acquisition of academic literacy started in 1999 with the establishment of the Unit for Language Skills Development (ULSD), currently called the Unit for Academic Literacy (UAL). This resulted mainly from a growing awareness at the time that students entering university education are increasingly underprepared regarding their levels of language proficiency in both languages of learning (Afrikaans and English) at the University. A crucial, more recent development within the Unit is that it has become ever more apparent that viewing the kind of support we attempt to offer students as 'language proficiency' is part of a deficit view of language, in the sense that it is easily interpreted in terms of a traditional view that perceives of language as separate 'skills' that could be developed as such. As Grabe and Kaplan (1996:2) note:

Literacy, incorporating specific writing issues with a related set of reading issues, highlights the necessary connections between reading and writing as complementary comprehension/production processes.

The broader context of academic literacy thus emphasises the interrelated, contextual nature of language ability, and attempts to support students with this functionality of language in mind.

In our experience, students often find it difficult to relate their language (and academic literacy) ability to the academic and disciplinary cultures at university. Many students therefore find it difficult to see the crucial connection between their literacy levels and studying successfully at university, which is evident from the often negative reactions from students when they learn that they also have to register for a literacy course. This is not completely unexpected, though, in a context where the secondary school system has led them to believe that they have mastered language adequately to engage successfully in tertiary education. Students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds experience even greater difficulty in coping with what is sometimes a totally new experience for them. The paralysing problem for such 'at risk' students is that, as a result of the pace (and work load) of the academic year at most tertiary institutions in South Africa, they barely keep up while struggling to come to terms with independent study. While the academic culture is not supposed to serve a gate-keeping function in tertiary education, this is, sadly, exactly what often happens to students who are unfamiliar with such a culture.

The main current responsibilities of the UAL include a determination of the academic literacy levels of new first year students, and the offering of academic literacy courses to those students who are identified by the testing instrument as displaying some risk in this regard. The norm at the UP is thus to investigate the levels of academic literacy of every new group of first year students and to actively intervene, in a manner that is based on the results of such assessment.

The Unit further presents a number of other non-compulsory courses at first-year level that focus on various aspects of academic literacy (e.g. Academic Reading; Academic Writing; Legal Discourse), as well as a generic academic writing course for postgraduate students. Apart from its research commitment in the field of academic literacy, the main purpose of the Unit is, however, to support underprepared students at the University in acquiring the necessary level of academic literacy so that they stand a better chance to succeed with their studies.

It would be irresponsible of tertiary institutions to allow access to students whom they know do not stand a fair chance to succeed with their studies and not to offer extra



support to such students. Apart from the obvious ethical considerations, it is economically unwise when one considers the cost of keeping students at university for a number of months/years, who then eventually fail to complete their studies. However, the pressure on tertiary institutions created by students who are not adequately prepared for tertiary education and who demand access to such education will most probably increase in future. Therefore, with an ever-increasing number of underprepared students entering higher education in South Africa, the onus rests with institutions of higher learning to offer substantial learning support that will give underprepared students a better chance of succeeding with their studies.

#### **1.4 Problem statement**

Although academic writing is often discussed as the most important language-related ability that tertiary students should master successfully, it has been mentioned above that a discussion of writing in isolation would present a short-sighted perspective on the complex, interrelated nature of language. It is, therefore, crucial to locate writing practice within the broader confines of academic literacy. Academic writing explained within this broader context provides an extensive framework that situates this practice within the much more complex social and cultural context of tertiary academic study.

A wealth of literature is available about students' difficulties to write successfully in a tertiary academic environment (see Bizzel, 1992; Cantor, 1993; Orr, 1995; Radloff, 1994; Zamel & Spack, 1998). Many of these studies take as point of departure the fact that studying in the tertiary environment revolves around academic writing (and reading the writings of others). The most pronounced reason for this focus on academic writing is that, in higher education, most assessment takes place through the medium of student writing. Students are, therefore, expected to communicate their competence in a specific field of learning in an unambiguous and concise manner through the written mode.

The immediate context of this study derives from the concern that a number of academic departments from a variety of disciplines at the University of Pretoria have

expressed about the academic writing ability (and general language proficiency) of their postgraduate students. This concern is generally voiced with regard to these students' seeming unfamiliarity with academic writing conventions, as well as an inability at times to express themselves clearly in English. These students have not yet fully acquired the academic discourse needed in order to cope independently with the literacy demands of postgraduate study. Some departments have also expressed the wish to expose their postgraduate students to an academic writing course that will enable them to exert more control over the writing demands of their studies.

The concern that the departments involved has expressed is evident most clearly in the central role that academic discourse has as an instrument for academic success for postgraduate students (in comparison to undergraduate students). Being proficient in academic discourse is crucial for the independent reading in which postgraduate students are required to engage. Even more so, proficient academic writing is a prerequisite for sharing the results of the research projects these students undertake to be accepted into the research community. Although it can be expected that learners new to university education will need some time to acquire the finer details of the academic discourse of their field, it is often automatically accepted that postgraduate students have already mastered the academic discourse of their disciplines. Based on the communication from the departments mentioned above, it appears, however, to be a hasty and most probably erroneous assumption that additional language users, especially, will become proficient academic writers of the target language (on the level and intensity of postgraduate writing) only by being immersed for a number of years in an academic context where the target language is used as the language of learning. An interesting issue that arises from this state of affairs is how students who have gained admission to postgraduate studies managed to pass their undergraduate courses relatively well if they are still experiencing difficulty with the academic discourse of their disciplines. Although a number of possible explanations may be offered for this phenomenon, the matter will be explored further as part of the empirical study in this thesis.

A further problematic aspect facing academic writing course designers is that it is not clear whether it is, in the first place, legitimate to view academic discourse (and

writing) as separate from general discourse. Secondly, if the existence of academic discourse can be justified, it will be important to know how such discourse differs with regard to different disciplines, and then to attempt to isolate generic features of academic writing that are shared by disciplines and that may be used as a foundation for the development of writing course materials. The literature suggests that even though ample evidence exists to allow one to refer to the mode of communication in tertiary academic cultures as 'academic discourse', the term by no means constitutes a homogenous phenomenon throughout the academic world.

In broad terms, this study thus aims to investigate conceptions of 'discourse' and 'discourse communities' towards a workable definition of 'academic discourse'. It also presents a survey of the literature on the teaching and learning of academic writing with the aim of developing a generative framework for writing course design. Such a framework may be used to design writing support materials for writing courses aiming to create enabling opportunities for students to become more proficient academic writers. The specific aims and research methodology of the study are discussed below.

## **1.5 Aims of the study**

This study aims to:

- 1.5.1 develop a generative, theoretical framework for the design of academic writing courses by:
  - a. conducting an investigation into the characteristics of academic writing and approaches to the teaching and learning of academic writing with specific reference to the available literature; and
  - b. proposing a set of possible criteria for the design of academic English writing courses.

- 1.5.2 investigate the academic writing difficulties of a specific group of postgraduate students from the School of Agricultural and Food Sciences (henceforth referred to as 'the study group') by:
- a. determining the English academic literacy levels of the study group through a standardised testing instrument (the Test of Academic Literacy Levels – TALL);
  - b. analysing written texts produced by students in the study group; and
  - c. exploring the literacy background of students in the study group and conducting an analysis of their writing needs and expectations.
- 1.5.3 determine the specific academic writing (and literacy) requirements of postgraduate studies offered at the University from the perspective of supervisors.
- 1.5.4 apply the developed framework in providing a number of proposals on the design of academic writing course materials for the study group.

## **1.6 Method of research**

The study will be structured in the following way:

### **1.6.1 Review of the literature**

- a. A literature survey will be conducted on the concepts (and various conceptualisations of) academic literacy, academic discourse and academic writing.

## 1.6.2 Empirical research

1.6.2.1 A **standardised academic literacy test** (TALL) will be administered in order to determine levels of academic literacy for the study group.

1.6.2.2 A survey will be conducted with regard to the English language background of students in the study group. **The survey will be carried out by means of a questionnaire.** The questionnaire includes a section on language needs.

1.6.2.3 A **questionnaire will be distributed to all postgraduate supervisors** at the University in order to determine their specific academic writing requirements.

1.6.2.4 **Interviews will be conducted with supervisors of students in the study group** in order to confirm the findings of the questionnaire as well as to gain more discipline-specific information that may be used in the design of writing course materials.

The study thus applies a mixed methodology consisting of both qualitative and quantitative elements. It makes use of multiple sources of data, as is evident in 1.6 above, and utilises components of an ethnographic (in the sense of lived through; richly experienced) approach, as well as elements related to the methodology of action research. All of these enable the researcher to engage in a process of constant improvement with regard to the congruencies these methods identify, and to enrich the understanding of the findings of the investigation with reference to their theoretical frameworks and justification. This methodological approach has been shown to be particularly appropriate for the design of materials, as the studies of Van der Wal (2004) and Habte (2001) have shown. The present study aims to take this forward, in particular by referring throughout to both the theoretical underpinnings of materials development and to the experience of the researcher in writing course design.

## 1.7 Chapter division

With regard to the remainder of this study, the separate chapters focus on the following issues. **Chapter 2** investigates the notion of 'academic discourse' as part of the broader concept of 'discourse communities'. It further explores the typicality of

academic texts with regard to several textual conditions and conventions that are traditionally considered important in the writing of academic texts, as well as the kind of reasoning contained in such texts in the tertiary academic context.

**Chapter 3** focuses on the teaching and learning of academic writing. It commences by discussing a number of key issues that are considered to be essential considerations when conceptualising writing interventions for students in tertiary education. The next section in this chapter provides an account of prominent approaches in the development of writing. This account includes a critique of such approaches and possible solutions to their inadequacies suggested by previous research.

In **Chapter 4**, the insights gained from the literature and discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 are combined into a generative framework that proposes six different focuses that should be considered in writing course design. It proceeds to discuss each of these different focuses also with regard to how specific issues may be investigated productively towards the eventual design of writing course materials.

The following 4 chapters (5-8) represent a practical application of the specific focuses in the proposed framework for writing course design in Chapter 4. It focuses specifically on making use of the framework in order to offer justifiable suggestions for the design of postgraduate writing courses. **Chapter 5** includes the results of a questionnaire that was administered at the University of Pretoria in order to collect information on the perceptions and expectations of supervisors about the academic literacy and writing ability of their postgraduate students. The questionnaire also attempts to determine what supervisor (and, therefore, disciplinary) requirements are with regard to academic writing. Chapter 5 reports the results of the survey for supervisors as a whole, but also makes an abstraction of the results for supervisors in the School of Agricultural and Food Sciences, where students in the study group are registered for postgraduate study.

**Chapter 6** presents the results of a student survey conducted with students in the study group. Students completed a questionnaire in which they had to rate their own

academic literacy ability, as well as elaborate on their expectations of academic writing in a tertiary context.

The data collected by both the supervisor and student questionnaires are primarily perceptual in nature. Because one deals with the perceptions and impressions of both groups, it was therefore essential to make use of empirical assessment instruments in order to ascertain accurately the academic literacy levels (and, more specifically, possible difficulties they experience with academic writing) of students in the study group. **Chapter 7** reports the results of the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL) that all students in the study group were required to write, as well as the results of an analysis of a typical academic text the students had to produce.

Because the supervisor questionnaire was considered to be a relevant **initial instrument** for gauging the general impressions of all supervisors about academic literacy in postgraduate studies, it was considered necessary to conduct interviews with supervisors of the study group as well in order to confirm certain issues raised in the questionnaires, but also to collect more specific data necessary for suggestions about a writing course for students in the study group. **Chapter 8** discusses the results of a number of focus group interviews that were conducted with supervisors of students in the study group.

In **Chapter 9**, the salient findings from Chapters 5-8 are interpreted specifically with regard to their implications for the design of writing course materials for students in the study group.

**Chapter 10** presents a discussion of how the insights gained in the rest of this study may be used in the design of writing materials for students in the study group that would address their specific needs but also address the requirements of supervisors in the specific School.

**Chapter 11** discusses limitations of the study and offers recommendations and suggestions for further research, specifically on issues that could not be addressed in this study.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted the complex nature of academic literacy problems in a South African tertiary context, as well as what is being done at the University of Pretoria in identifying and addressing such problems in a constructive manner. It has also introduced the specific problem that is to be investigated by this study in terms of finding a contextually relevant and productive approach through which postgraduate students may be supported in the development of their writing ability.

The next chapter focuses on a discussion of the nature of discourse, and consequently, on whether describing discourse in a tertiary academic context may be referred to as 'academic' discourse. It is therefore an attempt at discovering whether any specific features exist that will characterize the discourse used in this context as 'academic discourse'.



## **CHAPTER 2      Academic discourse in tertiary education**

### **2.1      Introduction**

The previous chapter considered tertiary academic literacy development with regard to the current state of such developmental initiatives at the University of Pretoria. It further introduced the specific research problem to be investigated in this study. This chapter focuses first on providing an account of the relevant literature, and then deals with a number of important further considerations relating to academic discourse and academic writing in a tertiary academic context. The purpose of the review that follows is to provide a theoretical context from which salient features/issues can be extracted in the construction of a framework for academic writing course design in tertiary education.

Probably as a result of its more permanent nature as a device for storing information, the written text as product has evolved in higher education as the preferred mode for student assessment. As a communication channel between students and lecturers, especially in large classes, it is not only the preferred mode, but often the only one available to those involved. It is, therefore, not strange to find a strong emphasis on the importance of academic writing specifically in the literature dealing with academic literacy in higher learning. Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis and Swan (2003:2) note that as students advance through the university, they are "often expected to produce texts that increasingly approximate the norms and conventions of their chosen disciplines, with this expectation peaking at the level of postgraduate study." It would be fair to assume that most new students arrive at tertiary institutions as relatively inexperienced writers specifically with regard to writing in a tertiary academic context. Although educators might be aware of and acknowledge the importance of academic writing and because academic writing fulfils such a crucial function in the context of higher education, one needs "a specific awareness amongst students that writing is important" (Leibowitz, 2000:94).

As we noted in Chapter 1, the integrative nature of an academic literacy perspective suggests that it would be questionable theoretically to view writing in isolation. The act of writing should rather be regarded as one component that fits into the bigger context of academic literacy as a whole. A recurring theme in the literature on writing is that writing cannot be divorced from its literacy context, in other words, from reading and reasoning ability (Belcher, 1990; Ivanič, 2004). In a context such as tertiary education that is to a large extent reading-driven, the complex interplay between students' information processing abilities, activated through the act of reading, and how these influence the written texts that students produce should be carefully considered in conceptualising a possible writing intervention aimed at the development of writing ability.

A perception of writing as a detached, mechanical skill (as was evident in much writing instruction in the United States in the past – see Rose, 1998) might well lead to a narrow focus on a complex ability that could easily deteriorate to an approach that focuses on the textual surface features (such as grammar or style) of academic writing only. A 'skills' perspective on language and language learning has the tendency to mislead one to believe that language can be perceived of as a set of discrete skills. Such a perspective is limiting with regard to the functionality of language within a specific social context and the complexity in the combination of a number of factors/abilities that lead to an appropriate language utterance in such a context. Bachman and Palmer (1996) offer some valid criticism of a definition of language ability in terms of skills. They note that one of the inadequacies of such a view is that a wide range of tasks, such as listening to a conversation, or listening to the radio, would both be classified as one activity ('listening'). They conclude:

We would thus not consider language skills to be part of language ability at all, but to be the contextualised realisation of the ability to use language in the performance of specific language use tasks. We ... would argue that it is not useful to think in terms of 'skills', but to think in terms of specific activities or tasks in which language is used purposefully (Bachman & Palmer, 1996:75).

Similarly, Kumaravivelu (2003:225) notes the impossibility of teaching 'skills' discretely, which from a pedagogical angle questions the idea of conceiving of language in these terms:

There exists a deep and inseparable connection between language use and ... context ... A different kind of connectedness exists ... [among] ... listening, speaking, reading and writing ... Skill separation is ... a remnant of a bygone era and has very little empirical or experiential justification (Kumaravadivelu, 2003:225).

Such a contextualised view of language is also supported by Grabe and Kaplan (1996) in their insistence on the importance of the context-reliant nature of the practice of writing, and as a corollary, the notion that different contexts will have different requirements for writing. A comprehensive description of writing contexts and everything that comprises such contexts is a crucial precursor for the design of writing interventions aimed at the development of writing ability. Typically, such contextual information would include information on writer identity (distinguishing between native and additional language users, for example), levels of academic literacy (with specific reference to writing ability) and the disciplinary and socially appropriate parameters for written texts (focusing, for example, on the nature and features of contextual writing tasks).

Although every writing context will amount to a unique combination of a variety of factors and conditions that impact on such contexts, the art for the writing course designer lies in the identification of the most appropriate vehicle that would address such issues and create productive conditions and opportunities for the development of writing ability in these contexts. Hence, a potentially more productive and integrative starting point for the conceptualisation of writing development in a tertiary context would be to focus on what learners have to do with the language in a specific context for a specific purpose, and to determine how the functional aspects of language ability combine and interact in order to create a coherent, appropriate language product in the academic context. Instead of focusing, then, on discrete skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), an approach that characterises academic discourse generation as (1) seeking, (2) processing and (3) producing information (Weideman, 2003b:xi) may be more in line with the functional and contextual nature of such discourse.

Although the explicit teaching of academic writing has been practised internationally for a good number of years (see Grabe & Kaplan, 1996) in both native and additional language contexts (e.g. the 'freshman' composition courses in U.S. tertiary institutions), many tertiary institutions in South Africa have refrained from explicitly

addressing this issue (apart from the more recent introduction of the writing centre model at a number of institutions), most probably because it was thought that students would 'pick up' their disciplinary discourses, and disciplinary writing in particular, as they proceeded with their studies and were immersed in such discourses. This has proved to be an erroneous assumption at the University of Pretoria (UP). In conversations about this, the supervisors and mentors even of more advanced students such as master's and Ph.D. enrolments indicate that these students often show serious inadequacies in academic writing. Many of the postgraduate students who register at the UP have not specifically completed their undergraduate studies at this university. It is alarming, nonetheless, for any student at postgraduate level not to have mastered academic discourse to the extent of being able to cope successfully with the academic writing demands of his/her studies. From an institutional perspective, it is also irresponsible to admit students to academic programmes, especially postgraduate programmes, if one has not determined very clearly whether such students' level of academic literacy (reading, writing and reasoning ability in the language(s) of learning at the institution) is adequate. One impasse in this context appears to relate to government funding formulae for universities that compel institutions to accept as many postgraduate students as is realistically possible in order to gain the maximum subsidy for these students. Be this as it may, the current context of the UP shows a very distinct and urgent need for an intervention that will support students in their growth towards becoming more competent academic writers.

All of the above has assumed, at least provisionally, that such notions as 'academic writing' and 'academic discourse' allow us to grasp the role of language within the academic world in a theoretically meaningful way, notions that, at the end of the previous chapter, I indicated still needed further investigation to determine their adequacy. The remainder of this chapter will first attempt to situate academic writing within the wider context of research on discourse and discourse communities. In part, it will focus on the context of academic writing as distinct from other contexts, and by doing so will endeavour to provide a workable definition of academic discourse and reasoning. Such a definition should serve to legitimise academic discourse as a potentially productive area of further enquiry. The researcher therefore wishes to

establish from the literature whether a specific group of contextual/cognitive/linguistic features could be attributed to academic discourse.

## **2.2 The nature of academic discourse**

As has been noted earlier in this chapter, an often unappreciated assumption in the South African tertiary context is that students naturally acquire the academic discourse of their disciplines as they proceed with their studies. Given the relatively deprived nature of the primary and secondary school education that many students have received in South Africa in the past (and are still receiving), it should be taken into account that many of these students may just not be adequately equipped for the linguistic, cognitive and contextual demands of the academic culture that exists at tertiary institutions.

One of the survival strategies to which underprepared students often revert is that of rote learning. These students rarely engage in processes of knowledge construction and often end up merely regurgitating memorised information in tests and examinations (Nyamapfene & Letseka, 1995). In many cases, educators realise that their students have never really mastered the more extended, written discourse of their discipline only when these students enrol for postgraduate studies. This is perhaps especially true for disciplines where undergraduates are not required to produce extended pieces of academic writing, when these same students are then required to write dissertations and theses for their postgraduate degrees.

In my experience, academics have a tendency to accept without question the existence of a specific discourse used in the tertiary academic environment. Some lecturers continue to believe that "academic discourse is a homogenous, easily identifiable phenomenon which can be taught unproblematically by EAP [English for Academic Purposes] support units ..." (Harwood & Hadley, 2004:2). When questioned particularly about the specific characteristics of such discourse, a default type answer often refers to 'the style of the language'. In many cases, lecturers also cannot adequately explain what they mean when referring to style.

Although academic members of staff may therefore generally acknowledge the existence of academic discourse, it appears to be a rather vague concept that means a number of different things to different people. Blanton (1998) suggests that probably because it would be difficult to prove the non-existence of academic discourse, its existence is assumed by most in the academic world. Although stylistic features might make up some of the visible, surface features of this type of discourse, I suspect that the origin of their use may go much deeper. There has to be a more legitimate reason for the preference of academics to communicate their ideas by means of a specific (academic) discourse governed by specific conventions/norms.

For any discussion on how participants make use of language in the tertiary academic context, the terms 'academic discourse' and 'academic discourse community' and the way they are defined are central considerations. This specific section as well as the following section on academic reasoning attempts to describe what it is that defines the academic discourse community, and critically discusses features and characteristics that are traditionally believed to form part of this community.

Weideman, as early as 1981, suggests a productive perspective on the relationship between specific contextually determined and regulated discourses and the texts produced within such discourses. He defines discourse as: " ... *a system of typical lingual norms* that regulates typical lingual facts on the factual side of the lingual aspect within the defining and limiting context of a socially differentiated lingual sphere" (Weideman, 1981:220). In other words, the socially and contextually determined and regulated discourse norms embodied and maintained by a specific type of discourse are borne out by the conventions/conditions that regulate the use of specific textual features in text production – "Normative types of discourse therefore determine the factual type of text ..." (Weideman, 1981:220). It is exactly these normative conditions that are to be further explored in a description of the nature of academic discourse. These conditions are discussed in more detail in sections 2.3 and 2.4.

Gough (2000:44) subscribes to Gee's (1990) definition that explains discourse as "socioculturally determined ways of thinking, feeling, valuing, and using' language in

different contexts in our day to day lives." Again, this definition implies a normative aspect in how language is used that is, in essence, determined by sociocultural norms and values. Gough also accepts Gee's original distinction between what Gee refers to as primary and secondary discourse:

Primary discourse includes everyday conversational interaction and demands no degree of specialised knowledge or language to participate in. It is, in a sense, one's home discourse. Secondary discourse is 'specialist' discourse. It requires a degree of expert knowledge and language to produce and comprehend it – something that is, in rather simplistic terms, learned and refined rather than acquired (Gough, 2000:43,44).

Gough perceives of academic discourse as being one such specialised (or secondary) discourse in 'western contexts'. Although Gough's classification of academic discourse as a specialist discourse is acceptable and potentially productive in the sense that it relates discourse to a specific, possibly definable social context, his assertion above that focuses on the learning/acquisition dichotomy should be approached with caution because of its absolute nature. This notion is most certainly not as 'simplistic' as he wants to suggest. A rather unproductive penchant of applied linguistics research over the years tends to dichotomise critically important concepts (e.g. function and form; acquisition and learning) to the extent that such binary opposites become absolute statements and descriptions from which one does not easily escape once convinced. Even though a secondary discourse could be perceived of as a 'specialist' discourse, nothing in the nature of specialist discourses indicates that they could **only** be learnt and not acquired. In fact, Gee (1998) distinguishes between acquisition and learning of secondary discourses as means to different goals. According to him, both processes (acquisition and learning) have a crucial role to play in the control of a secondary discourse. Gaining control over a secondary discourse happens through acquisition, where " ... it requires exposure to models in natural, meaningful, and functional settings, and teaching is not liable to be very successful ..." (Gee, 1998:57). On the other hand, according to Gee it is not possible to criticise any type of discourse without meta-level knowledge of the discourse. Such meta-level knowledge is best developed through learning: "Thus, powerful literacy,..., almost always involves learning, and not just acquisition" (Gee, 1998:57). I am therefore in agreement with Gough that language **learning** (regarding its focus on language knowledge) plays an important role in the development of academic language ability,

especially in the context of fostering a critical awareness of academic discourse. Knowledge about how language form functions towards the understanding and production of academic discourse involves the development of a meta-linguistic ability that would make it possible for students to 'refine' such discourse. This notion holds important implications for how courses on specialist discourses are to be designed as well as how such courses should be facilitated in the classroom. It should, however, be strongly emphasised that the process of **learning** is surely not the only process responsible for people gaining control over a secondary discourse. In reality, Gee (1998) mentions that learning is often applied to a discourse that has already, to some extent, been acquired.

According to Zamel (1998:187), academic discourse at the most general level "is understood to be a **specialised** [emphasis mine] form of reading, writing and thinking done in the 'academy' or other schooling situations". In this definition too, the idea of normativity is implied in the use of the word 'specialised' that educes certain parameters or boundaries as to what is acceptable and what not in academic discourse.

What is further evident in Zamel's definition above is her more traditional perspective of language regarded as skills. Although language proficiency entails having a command of a language that enables one to execute a range of tasks through the written or spoken mode, it is apparent that for both Zamel (1998) and Blanton (1998) – in line with traditional American understandings of academic language – academic discourse is much more of a written than a spoken enterprise. The abilities of listening and speaking are much less foregrounded than reading and writing. In any case, apart from making more formalised presentations about projects or defending one's Ph.D. for example, students tend not to ordinarily engage in much 'academic' speaking. Although there is usually ample opportunity for students to communicate orally about issues in the academic context in discussion sessions/tutorials/seminars, it would be fair to say that such discourse takes place on a much more informal level – in the sense of probably being less constrained for 'correctness of usage' than writing. Formal spoken academic discourse is more the domain of lecturers, especially on those occasions where they formally read papers about their research at academic conferences. Certainly, too, when lecturers assess students' work, writing has



primacy. Although students do have to listen constructively as a crucial way of seeking (and obtaining) information in the lecturing context, lecturers tend to use a far more informal register when they teach than, for example, when they prepare a written article for publication in a scholarly journal. The reason for the emphasis on writing and reading in the tertiary context is, most probably (following Ong, 1982:39), that:

Writing establishes in the text a 'line' of continuity outside the mind. If distraction confuses or obliterates from the mind the context out of which emerges the material I am now reading, the context can be retrieved by glancing back over the text selectively.

Therefore, although of crucial importance in the modes of listening to a lecture and internalising information through oral discussion, the abilities of listening and speaking are often considered not that prominent in written academic cultures. Be this as it may, it is interesting to note that in the traditional tertiary context, formal learning in lecture halls still takes place mainly in the mode of students listening to lecturers. It is also insightful that very few students in the classes that I teach engage in effective note-taking in my class, as well as in many of their other classes (personal observation and communication with students), which indicates some degree of inexperience regarding the use of effective listening strategies. Perhaps this seeming lack of student awareness and general inactivity regarding the use of relevant listening strategies in lectures demand further investigation into the facilitation of more productive listening in a tertiary academic context. If one considers listening as a fundamental ability in information processing, strategies for listening constructively cannot be ignored in the context of academic literacy support. This issue will be discussed more comprehensively in Chapter 10 of this study.

Blanton (1998) furthermore explores the idea of the tertiary academic context perceived of as a **distinct discourse community**. The notion of a discourse community may be seen as a more formalised extension of the idea of specialised discourses. Blanton asserts that, when defining the academic context as a discourse community, such a definition is much wider than merely focusing on academic style, since it includes a collection of people sharing values, interests and underlying assumptions. If one accepts academic discourse to be a specialist discourse that is to

be taught, learnt and acquired as part of the context of a specific discourse community at university, it stands to reason that one should be able to define this context into which learners should be initiated.

Grabe and Kaplan (1996) are, however, cautious in accepting the notion of discourse community, mainly as a result of the difficulty to adequately define such a concept. Although Swales (1990) provides a workable definition of a tertiary academic discourse community, his criteria for such a community are criticised on the basis that they are exclusionary (see Grabe & Kaplan, 1996:108). Loosely interpreted, Blanton's contention above might create the impression that the whole of the academic discourse community shares similar values, interests and assumptions. In this context, however, there is certainly a case to be made for the existence of discipline-specific discourse communities from which people who are not part of the community are mostly excluded, also with regard to the language they use. Blanton (1998) affirms the notion of such discourse communities when she notes that academic discourse will change like any discourse, and therefore it is probably not unimaginable that smaller academic 'sub-communities' will adapt academic discourse to fit their contexts. Coffin *et al.* (2003:45) mention that because writing differs across different disciplines in the tertiary academic context, "more students are struggling to get to grips with the **writing expectations in several different areas** [emphasis mine]." Similarly, Harwood and Hadley (2004:10) note that: "... academic writing practices vary from discipline to discipline, from department to department, and even from lecturer to lecturer."

It is this variable, complex nature of describing and defining academic discourse referred to above that is one of the major emphases of **critical approaches to literacy**. The main focus of a critical approach is a rigorous interrogation of the desirability to reinforce the dominant norms of academic discourse if such norms and practices change anyway, and if there is such considerable disparity among academic staff as to what actually constitutes 'good writing'. Furthermore, a critical approach to literacy maintains that additional language students particularly are placed at a disadvantage by the "exclusionary *status quo*, which is intolerant of difference and excludes non-native speakers, depriving them of their own voices" (Harwood &

Hadley, 2004:6). These authors argue that extreme or rigidly defined and prescribed normativity stifles individual expression of identity that is a necessary precursor for writing with authority. If students are, therefore, to discover their own 'authorial voice' as is suggested by Blanton (1998), it seems unlikely for this to happen in a context where they are labelled as 'inexperienced' and must conform (without question) to the 'normative straitjacket' of the dominant academic discourses of specific contexts. In their assuming of another identity (that of participants in the tertiary academic endeavour), students tend merely to copy the dominant literacy practices and rarely own them, probably as a result of never having had the opportunity to practically negotiate why these practices and norms are necessary. Critical literacy itself has, however, also been widely criticised. Probably the most prominent difficulty associated with a critical approach is located in the fact that although it is never shy of criticising dominant literacy practices, it offers very little with regard to what could be pedagogically implemented in the classroom situation. Also, the sometimes extreme relativist starting points associated with critical approaches (cf. e.g. Lillis, 2003) would, as a matter of course, view any kind of appreciation for normativity with suspicion. Relativism sees and appreciates only the factual side of human endeavours.

In contrast to a critical approach to academic literacy, pragmatists insist that students are disadvantaged if they are not taught the dominant norms of academic discourse that would provide access to particular discourse communities in a tertiary context (Harwood & Hadley, 2004). As students progress to postgraduate level, the burden of conforming to universally applied, general academic standards becomes heavier still.

From the discussion above it should be apparent that, when one discusses academic discourse, it would be unwise to attempt such a discussion with reference only to the textual features or characteristics of the discourse. Not only should such discussion take a position on the notion of norms (and their potentially legitimate contestation) for academic discourse, but one should, for example, also investigate what ways of reasoning find expression in the use of specific textual characteristics of factual academic discourse.

### 2.3 Reasoning in a tertiary academic context

Blanton (1998) reiterates the point that one should go beyond a focus on the surface (textual) characteristics of academic discourse to what characterises the context of the academy. Therefore, what is it that academics wish to accomplish with language? What are their language 'behaviours'? Blanton's suggestion can be seen as a more functional approach in asking what academics do with language, in other words, how they 'behave' with language. It is apparent, for example, that academic discourse is much more than style. It is also a way of thinking and behaving with ideas in texts.

In order for academic discourse to be related to its purpose in the academic environment (and therefore, culture), one is compelled to discuss it with regard to its functionality in this environment. In other words, how does academic discourse contribute to the inner workings of academia? Part of this discussion relates to how academic discourse is connected to thinking and reasoning in the academic world. Parkerson (2000), for example, mentions that lecturers often complain that their students cannot write good academic essays. People often attempt to address/improve poor language ability in order to improve this situation, and do not realise that although language ability is an important issue, "the problem embraces a broader phenomenon, namely, that students are often not acclimatised to academic ways of thinking ... " (Parkerson, 2000:118). It would, therefore, be worthwhile to include reference to how thinking in the academic context (and in specific disciplinary contexts) is realised through academic discourse in a discussion on the nature of academic discourse.

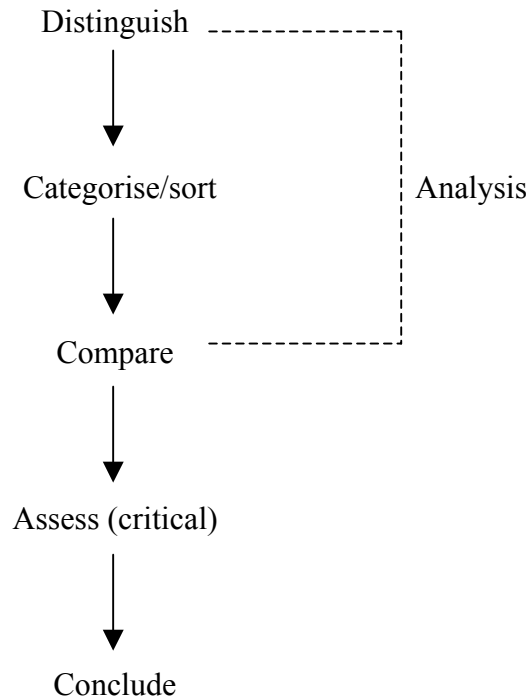
To this end Grabe and Kaplan (1996) argue that students in secondary education are not adequately exposed to writing that focuses on the transformation of knowledge. According to them a situation persists where:

In most academic settings where students are learning to write, the educational system assumes that students will learn to compose with the ability to transform information. In fact, many students learning to write before they enter the tertiary level have little consistent exposure to writing demands beyond retelling (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996:5).

These authors further note that texts such as narratives and descriptions demand little more than providing an account of memorised information that is already known to the writer (typically used for knowledge 'telling' in traditional tests and examinations). Knowledge transformation or processing, on the other hand, requires a complex cognitive process of combining different pieces of information into a well-argued, coherent text that usually involves the problem-solving capabilities of the writer. Examples of knowledge transformation would include the production of expository and argumentative or persuasive texts. In tertiary education, students are required to have the ability to construct both of the latter types of texts. They should, therefore, have adequate control over the cognitive strategies that would enable them to create texts appropriate for specific contexts if they are to satisfy the requirements of tertiary education.

The type of thinking that is mostly 'rewarded' in academia can broadly be referred to as critical thinking. Critical thinking is based on distinction-making, probably the most important component of academic literacy (Weideman, 2003b:xi). Barnet and Bedau (1993) explain critical thinking as thinking about a topic by trying to see it from as many sides as possible before coming to a conclusion. This preliminary position on thinking does not, however, adequately convey the intricate complexities of academic thinking and reasoning. Critical thinking in this context should be further broken down into two strategies: analysis and evaluation of ideas. According to these authors: "... part of the job [of being critical] is analytic, recognising the elements or complexities of the whole, and part is evaluative, judging the adequacy of all these ideas, one by one" (Barnet & Bedau, 1993:5). The cognitive process thus seems to be:

**Figure 2.1 The cognitive process**



The process of critical thinking often results in the production of argumentative writing, mentioned above. Coffin *et al.* (2003:14) note that: "Argument is considered to be the key rhetorical purpose of much academic writing, indeed is seen as an essential aspect of intellectual activity within higher education." Writing in this context therefore focuses on making use of academic discourse in such a way as to build a solid argument. One example of the use of academic writing conventions towards achieving the objective of constructing an acceptable argument refers to the inclusion of authoritative sources in academic texts. This convention usually has the very specific purpose of presenting support/evidence for the writer's argument. Unsubstantiated claims are generally frowned upon in the academic world.

For the purposes of this study, it is therefore also important to investigate what information types (description; argumentation; presenting factual information; etc.) are primarily used in specific contexts in the tertiary academic environment, and what academic writers wish to accomplish by making use of one specific information type rather than others.

Although it would be a fair assumption that academics in tertiary education share the types of ideas that are permitted in the academic context (and, therefore, in academic texts), it appears as if there do exist disciplinary differences with regard to what is accepted and acceptable as evidence in different disciplines. Coffin *et al.* (2003:27) note that: "What counts as suitable evidence to support an argument is governed by the *epistemic conventions* of a discipline. Epistemic conventions refer to the means of establishing 'truth' as based on accepted forms of evidence." These authors further believe that one can plot the natural sciences (e.g. chemistry, biology, geology), social sciences (e.g. sociology, politics, psychology) and humanities (e.g. history, languages, fine arts) on a continuum of what is accepted as academic knowledge. On the one extreme, the natural sciences usually accept new knowledge on the basis of quantifiable experimental proof. On the other extreme, subjects in the humanities may not be quantitative in their methods. Yet in both cases, the building of an argument is central: "Knowledge about a subject is accepted or rejected on the basis of how well argued a case is" (Coffin *et al.* 2003:48). In between these two, the social sciences mostly base claims on statistical analyses of probabilities. It therefore seems critical that students become aware of what counts as evidence in their specific field of study in order to argue persuasively in that field.

It is important to note, however, that since Kuhn (1962), the above contention on what counts as academic knowledge has been contested (cf. too Gee, 1998 on this topic). The post-modern point is that what counts as evidence is a political decision, i.e. a decision that is based on a complex set of power relations on what is the dominant discourse in any discipline. In so far as the dominant discourse precludes/is intolerant of the consideration of alternatives, it becomes politically ever more powerful, and critically unassailable. Their argument is that hearing and articulating their own 'voice' becomes impossible for students in such a setting; their voices are drowned out by the dominant political discourse.

Even though most students will not become academics, the traditional view has been that they are apprentices in the field during their period of study. The conventional expectation therefore is that they should be able to make productive use of academic discourse in the academic context in order to argue successfully in this context.

Students should therefore approximate the behaviour of academics with regard to a number of academic tasks, but specifically with regard to how they interact with texts. They are also, in producing their own texts, writing for an audience of academics who most probably value the features and norms of academic discourse. If, for example, one of the academically literate behaviours of academics is to use the correct form of language in order to satisfy their audience, students (who form part of the same discourse community), upon creating their own texts, should be able to meet this expectation of their audience. However, there appears to be dissonance between what lecturers expect and what they are prepared to offer in terms of student support regarding this specific feature of academic discourse. There is very little evidence of lecturers (apart from language lecturers) who actively support undergraduate students regarding the correctness of their language when marking their scripts. If correctness, for example, is to be seen as a characteristic feature of academic discourse, should all academics not be paying attention to the correctness of the language used by their students? This is a crucial question to answer at the University of Pretoria. It is furthermore evident that even though lecturers might subscribe to certain characteristics of academic discourse, this does not necessarily mean that they would support students in their acquisition or learning of such features. Who should, therefore, take responsibility for providing developmental opportunities to students so that they could reach an acceptable level of academic literacy?

As noted earlier in this chapter, Weideman (1981) suggests that the characteristic features/conventions of academic texts could be related to those material conditions that govern academic discourse. The general academic discourse norm to which texts as products have to adhere in the tertiary academic context is that of **acceptability**. This acceptability is, however, not restricted to grammatical acceptability (the correct use of grammar), since an utterance can also be unacceptable, for example, with regard to not substantiating claims put forward. In a similar vein, the use of slang and colloquialisms is not permitted in written academic texts. The general condition of acceptability in the tertiary context encapsulates the general norms of **appropriateness, relevance and informativity** that have been identified in pragmatics and text linguistics. It is the specifications of these norms, i.e. their adaptation to the specific requirements of, in this case, the academic context, that



guides the production of academic texts. And it is the employment of these norms in assessing the language of factual texts produced within the academic context that probably provides the clearest evidence for the existence of academic discourse as a typically different kind of language, and of academic discourse communities as the organised relations of scholars and students (apprentices) that apply such norms to texts. We shall, therefore, in the rest of this study, assume that the concepts 'academic discourse' and 'academic community' have a reality that makes them useful in our subsequent investigations.

The next section focuses on a critical discussion of some of the more conventionalised textual features that are used in academic writing in order to conform to the material conditions of this type of discourse.

#### **2.4 Textual conventions of academic discourse**

If one wants to refer to not only the norms and conditions of academic discourse, but also to academic discourse as an objective, factual entity on its own, it is obvious that one should be able to say what it is and, therefore, which distinctive features (should) characterise such discourse. Determining the textual (lexical, grammatical, stylistic) academic writing conventions for the whole of the academic discourse community would, however, be a mammoth task to accomplish. We do of course have access to texts produced all over the world in an academic context and should be able to infer certain generic features from such texts (this is exactly the focus of some of the more recent studies in the field of corpus linguistics [see Conrad, 1996 and Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999]). The descriptions of the textual characteristics featuring in academic writing courses and manuals may be determined, therefore, by conducting text investigations. In addition, in determining the typical identity of academic discourse, one should ask not only whether such features are limited to academic discourse, but also whether they form part of other types of discourse (cf. Hyland, 2000). It is obvious that in the case of a requirement such as the formality of academic writing, for example, academic discourse shares this characteristic with much occupational writing (technical report writing in engineering, for example, as well as much of business communication). A more realistic deduction

regarding academic writing as a separate discourse would be that on a textual level, features also found in other discourses are combined in such a way as to form what could be referred to as academic discourse.

Sometimes the expediency of certain surface structure academic writing conventions is questionable. There often appears to be a mismatch between what academic language is supposed to accomplish and the actual language forms that are used in written academic English, for example. The section below presents a discussion of some traditional formal features of academic discourse. Although criticism is offered regarding the sensibleness of some of these characteristics, it obviously does not imply that such characteristics should be deliberately flouted by students (as is suggested by extreme versions of a critical literacy approach), especially where they are deeply entrenched in some disciplinary discourse. The aim of the following discussion, therefore, is to assess the value of such features in the context of their purpose.

#### **2.4.1 Formality**

One of the most prominent features found in various guides and workbooks on academic writing is the notion that it is formal. This can most visibly be seen in the lexical items used in this type of discourse, where, for example, if there is a choice between a more informal and a more formal word, the default choice would probably be the formal word. In this regard, the use of words that are characterised as colloquialisms and slang language are generally not acceptable in academic writing. Apart from a slight chance for misunderstandings to occur in the case of the use of colloquialisms, one should ask what functional purpose it really serves for academic writing to be formal, apart from creating a sense of seriousness and that academics are engaged in what they may perceive to be very important matters. It is probably this sense of seriousness, the awareness that one is dealing, through language, with things that are generally true, that Blanton (1998) is characterising, amongst other things, when she speaks about academic discourse having 'authority'. The formality that is so often mooted as a characteristic of academic discourse no doubt serves to enhance the

authoritativeness of the claims made in such language. The main point is that formality *per se* is not a characteristic of academic discourse, but becomes such a feature when it is used for an academic purpose and with academic intent. The functionality gives a typical academic purpose to the formality.

#### **2.4.2 Conciseness and exactness**

Academic writing is supposed to be as to the point and exact as possible. The use of indeterminate/vague lexical items such as 'thing' and 'something' is, therefore, not usually exact enough to be acceptable in academic writing. Along the same lines, verbosity and redundancy clutter academic argumentation and are not supposed to be surface features of academic writing. It is interesting that, for example, the general avoidance of first person pronouns and contractions contradicts this convention because such structures are often replaced by longer strings of words/letters. The use of the latter, however, also contradicts the idea of formality referred to above, since they are associated with more casual, informal, less severely constrained forms of discourse, such as conversations among equals.

The use of metaphor (and the ambiguity that might accompany this) may, at first glance, conflict with the formal requirements of academic language to be concise and exact. However, all language is metaphorical, and our use of metaphor in academic discourse serves to sharpen the distinctions made, not to blur them. We achieve the clear distinction-making that is characteristic of academic concept-formation through all kinds of means. Metaphorical expression is one of these.

#### **2.4.3 Impersonality and objectivity**

Coffin *et al.* (2003:29) mention that: "For much of the twentieth century, particularly in the sciences, the notion of objectivity meant that there was no place for a personal voice." One needs to question whether it really leads to more objective writing if one refers to oneself as 'the author' and not 'I', for example. Is the quality of research not rather to be found in how the research was structured

and conducted, or in its content? In fact, the more recent view is that for students to become competent authors of academic discourse, they need to achieve their own 'voice', i.e. express their own identity. Again, an (emerging) material condition finds expression in the formal features of language, i.e. when we actually **encourage** (newly initiated) academic writers to use the personal pronoun. And without 'voice', there is no critical thinking, the hallmark of academic reasoning.

In a related issue, the use of the passive is normally supposed to make writing more impersonal (which is an important traditional feature of academic writing), yet sources on academic writing differ about whether using passives is a good practice in such writing. Academic texts are written at and for different levels of accessibility, and we may therefore in some cases wish to avoid passives in order to write more intelligibly.

#### **2.4.4 Nominalization**

Another important feature of academic discourse is the degree of nominalization that typically characterises such texts. Ventola (1998:68) maintains that scientific language has evolved over time to suit the needs of those who practice it. She explains this change as follows:

The grammar of scientific language has changed as reporting about scientific experiments and processes have developed. Thoughts are now foregrounded. Dynamic actions have become static, intellectualised, when grammatical roles have changed, through nominalization, from processes or events into things.

The discourse act that involves the nominalization of processes, of course, makes it possible for academic discourse to create abstractions – something that Martin and Rose (2001:92) refer to as 'ideational metaphor'. They explain metaphor in general as: "a transference of meaning in which a lexical item that normally means one thing becomes to mean another" (Martin & Rose, 2001:93). For them, ideational metaphor involves a transference of meaning from one kind of element (in this case a grammatical element) to another. The example they provide clearly illustrates this shift in meaning, where a process such as **marrying** can also be

treated as a quality, **married**, as well as a thing – **marriage**. These authors further explain that in modern written languages, the shift in meaning accomplished when using a strategy such as nominalization expands the set of meanings available to writers. In essence, the creation of an abstraction that is achieved through nominalization serves the purpose that is central to theorising, conceptualisation and argumentation in academic writing, viz. distinction-making.

What is further evident is that a high degree of nominalization is one of the features of academic writing that, because it makes the language more complex, also renders it less readable (and, therefore, accessible), especially to those who do not form part of the academic discourse community. Although students new to this environment might have had some limited exposure to information-dense academic texts, this is one of the obstacles that denies many students, especially additional language users, access to the tertiary environment. It might also be interesting to note that again, an important feature of academic writing – in this case its information density – seems to negatively affect another feature, its clarity, with regard to how students new to this environment struggle to unlock the meaning in such texts. Relevant support to enable students to unlock such texts productively seems unavoidable if many new students are to succeed with their studies in this environment.

#### **2.4.5 Grammatical correctness**

Grammatical correctness of academic texts is supposed to be non-negotiable in the academic world. Student writing, however, often appears to be riddled with grammatical errors. The question should be asked then why very little evidence exists to suggest that lecturers from disciplines other than language pay any attention to grammar when they mark undergraduate student scripts, or when they do, they do so in a highly selective way, focusing on one or two grammatical features (e.g. tense, concord) only. These lecturers in some way still seem to understand student writing, which indicates that the communicative requirement, viz. conveying the **appropriate** information, in this case from student to lecturer,

is being met. This issue could probably also be connected to that of coherence in student writing discussed under the next point.

#### **2.4.6 Coherent and cohesive (logical) structure and argument**

Coherence and cohesion in academic writing are mostly created by the purposeful use of connecting devices that highlight the flow of ideas and signal the writer's intentions regarding the specific relationships between such ideas. While cohesion usually involves sentential and ideational connection within the text, coherence refers to the overall organisation of text into a recognisable sequence (e.g. text development from the introduction to conclusion). Prosser and Webb (1993) refer to specific devices used to create a predictable text structure as 'predictive scaffolding'. Proficient academic writers make use of such devices in order to lead readers through a text, also showing awareness of the fact that academic readers will probably know the textual patterns of academic texts and therefore find it easier to understand texts organised in this manner. Formulated in ethnomethodological terms: competent academic writers (and the readers of their texts) have an orientation to something that we may term an argumentative schema or framework. Once this framework is activated, e.g. through the use of discourse markers, the text becomes more intelligible. We again have an instance here of how a factual feature of academic texts, in this case coherence, is determined by a norm or condition – the orientation towards an argumentative framework.

Given the number of complaints by lecturers about students producing incoherent texts (especially at postgraduate level), one could ask whether this issue might not also be related to ways in which lecturers read student texts. Do lecturers read student scripts for fluent argumentation, or are assessment opportunities arranged in such a way that only fragmented chunks of knowledge are often required of learners and therefore acknowledged by lecturers? If so, this a clear example where students' overall literacy development is neglected by lecturers in their undergraduate years and when supervisors require language fluency and correctness on a postgraduate level, they suffer the consequences of such neglect.

### 2.4.7 Appropriate use of evidence

Academic writing shows certain conventions with regard to how the ideas/words of authorities (other sources) are acknowledged. Although different referencing systems are used across the world, what is shared by academic writing (in a western context) is that other people's ideas should be overtly acknowledged in one's own academic writing. It is interesting that the notion of writing and ideas as the individual's 'property' is not always shared by all cultures, especially where, historically, the development of ideas and knowledge has taken a different route. In China, for example, a learned person is recognised as someone who can memorise information very well, especially regarding texts that classical authors wrote. As a consequence, such texts become part of the person's memory and are supposed to be recognised by other learned people without it being necessary for anyone to state explicitly that the words were initially spoken or written by somebody else.

Another interesting perspective on the issue of plagiarism is that neophyte writers may be making use of sources as models for meeting specific written conventions and norms of the academic discourse community. Although they may not necessarily want to copy the ideas of a source, they may want to copy the way in which language is used by the source (cf. Angelil-Carter, 2000 and discussion in 3.2.5). So, while violating one of the most important conditions of academic writing on the one hand, they might be striving to meet another, that of the appropriate use of language, on the other. In this case, a degree of flexibility is called for in understanding the predicament of writers new to this environment and that this kind of copying might form part of their process of becoming more proficient academic writers.

What lecturers require, however, is that references should be purposefully integrated into the text in support of the writer's argument, and not just be a collection of quotes without relationship or interpretation. Again, the idea of academic writing being framed by the notion of a structured argument is evident: references are used to support one's argument. Similarly, the concept of authority

comes to the fore: in order to enhance the authority of one's own academic text, one supports it with reference to that of an already acknowledged authority.

## **2.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has emphasised the notion that similar to any other type of discourse, academic discourse cannot be divorced from its social context. Academic discourse is further not a homogeneous entity, but varies considerably across and even within disciplines in the tertiary academic environment. This variability is a crucial feature of academic discourse that should inform the design of writing courses in university education. Nonetheless, certain key normative features of academic discourse can be identified, and one can identify, also, various typical features of academic texts that are regulated by such normative conditions, and that are in complex interaction with one another.

This discussion has set the scene for the consideration, in the next chapter, of the key issues in the conceptualisation of a writing intervention. After a critical discussion of such issues, the chapter continues to elaborate on salient approaches in language education that aim to develop academic writing.



[Another crucial aspect to consider in this context relates to the concept of cultural identity as explored by Coetzee-Van Rooy (2000). In her study, one of Coetzee-Van Rooy's most prominent findings is that there is a relationship between a positive cultural identity and L2 English proficiency. In short, students who identified positively with their own cultures (of which the L1 forms an integral part) displayed a higher proficiency in English than those who identified weakly with their own cultures.]

[There is further a definite possibility that the literacy inadequacies displayed by the postgraduate students that form part of the study group can be connected to them never having incorporated a tertiary academic identity into their personal identities.]