CHAPTER 6 Student perceptions and expectations of academic literacy and writing – data analysis and discussion

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is an exploration of student perceptions on the role and function of academic literacy and writing in a tertiary context. Its main focus is on the student as producer of written academic texts in this environment. It specifically investigates a group of postgraduate students with regard to their language and study background, their perceptions about their own academic literacy and writing abilities, as well as their expectations of engaging in academic writing on a postgraduate level. Chapter 4 emphasised the importance of the academic writing expectations and beliefs of both students and supervisors, and the notion that there sometimes exists a mismatch between student and supervisor expectations. Where the previous chapter investigated the perceptions and expectations of supervisors about academic literacy and writing, this part of the research is an attempt to establish the beliefs, expectations and needs of a specific group of postgraduate student writers.

The study population used for this section of the research comprises a group of 25 postgraduate students (1 Ph.D. student and the rest master's students) from the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences. A tentative working relationship has already been established primarily with heads of department about addressing some of the problems they experience with postgraduate students regarding academic literacy. Students are registered in the following departments in the School of Agricultural and Food Sciences: Agricultural Economics, Extension and Rural Development; Animal and Wildlife Sciences; Consumer Science; Food Science; and Plant Production and Soil Science. Usually, these specific departments have all their postgraduate students assessed with TALL. Those students who are classified as being 'at risk' with regard to their academic literacy are required by their departments to register for the generic writing course for postgraduate studies currently offered by the Unit for Academic Literacy.

6.2 Survey instrument

Similar to the supervisor questionnaire, the student questionnaire (Addendum B) was designed with a number of pertinent issues in mind. Firstly, in order to collect general background information, relevant **institutional and professional issues** had to be addressed. Section 2 of the questionnaire focuses on students' **language background**. The third section addresses student **perceptions** about the **literacy demands** of their courses, as well as their perceptions about their own level of **academic literacy**. In other words, what awareness do they have, for example, about academic discourse, discipline-specific language, the importance of academic language and types of writing tasks? The following section deals with students' personal **writing needs**. It focuses mainly on difficulties that they experience with academic writing, as well as their perceptions on whether writing support could be beneficial to them. Whereas the first four sections of the questionnaire are general in nature with regard to level of study (the questionnaire was designed to collect information from students at any level of study), the final section focuses on postgraduate students specifically. This section addresses issues such as where these students obtained their previous degrees, in which language(s) they have studied until now, whether they have previously attended any extra, developmental type of language/literacy courses, as well as what specific strategies/activities they engage in when doing academic writing. Furthermore, it attempts to determine their general perception on the feedback they received on their writing in past writing encounters with lecturers/supervisors. It also determines their levels of awareness about the importance of issues such as the revision and editing of their writing, as well as their perceptions of their own abilities to use these strategies productively.

6.3 Analysis and interpretation of the results

6.3.1 Section A - Institutional and professional issues

Because this survey instrument is generic in the sense that it can be utilised for students at any level of study, it was necessary to include a question that determines the possible occupation of postgraduate students (if not full time students). In my

experience with the EOT 300 course, students who are employed full time sometimes have difficulty to meet the requirements and demands of a developmental writing course, often because they simply cannot always attend the class sessions. Many of these students fall behind and do not really benefit from the developmental writing process in class because they are not up to date with the work, and, as a result, do not participate productively in learning opportunities in class. A large majority of the study group (87%) do not have full-time occupations – they are therefore mostly full-time students. This is a positive indication for this group of students, since they do not have the extra burden of maintaining a full-time job in addition to their studies. This aspect is of further importance because one knows how much could realistically be expected of them, in combination with the rest of their studies, regarding the amount of work in a writing development course.

The diversity regarding nationality in the study group of 25 respondents is noteworthy. These students originate from 15 different countries, mostly from other countries in Africa, but also from as far as Brazil (one respondent). The highest number from one specific country is 6 students from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), while 3 students come from South Africa and Botswana respectively. The University of Pretoria admits a considerable number of international postgraduate students. For 2006, such students comprise approximately 10% (1102 students) of the total for contact postgraduate students. It is therefore important to be aware that for most of these students dealing with the demands of postgraduate study is further complicated by being in a foreign environment that probably places additional emotional stress on them.

6.3.2 Section B - Language background

Related to their country of origin, 18 different primary languages are used by the respondents (they are all additional language users of English). An important implication of this finding is that because the study population is so diverse with regard to primary language use, it would be almost impossible to make use of students' primary languages as an additional resource in the writing class. What is interesting though, is that as students progressed through their education, there appears to be a definite tendency that education was offered in one of the more

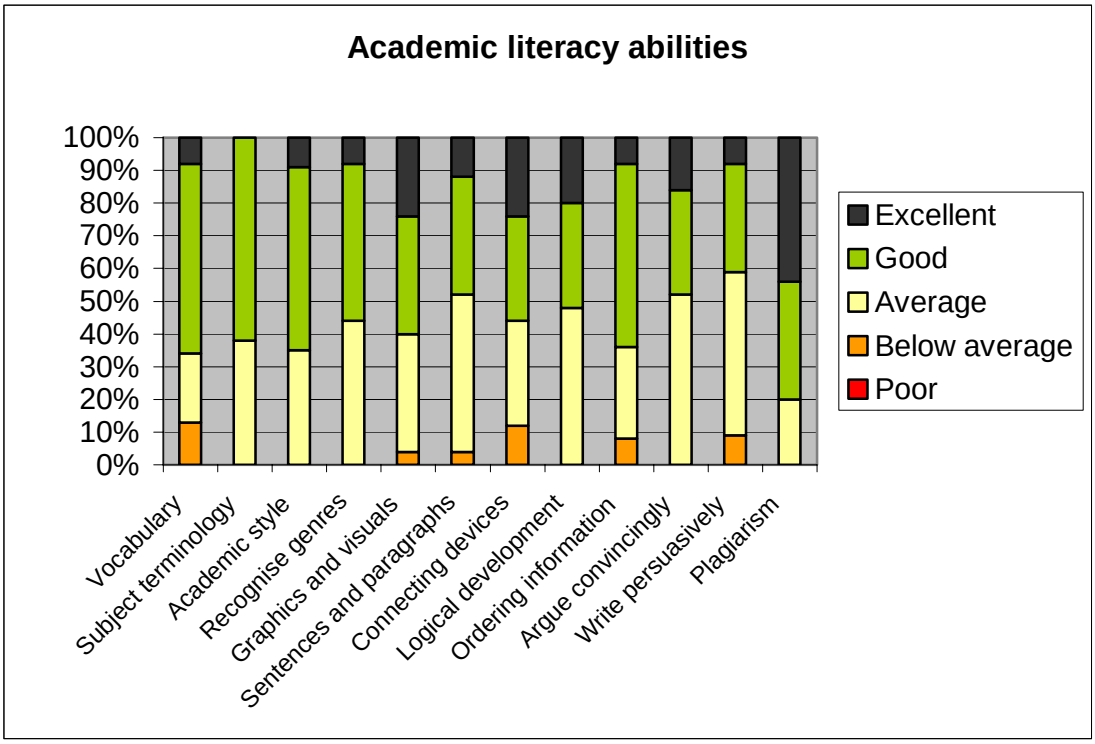
prominent world languages. In primary school students received their education in one of 8 languages, including languages such as English, French, Portuguese, Arabic and Setswana. With regard to secondary school education, the number of languages used for learning is reduced to only three languages, English, French and Portuguese. The most important concern here is that while all respondents (100%) point out that they elected to study in English at the UP, 5 respondents indicate that they have never received any formal schooling in English (one of the two languages of learning at the University). One can understand the potential difficulty for specifically these students to engage in postgraduate studies in a language to which they have had minimal exposure. Depending on these students' achievement on the University's literacy test, it might be necessary to consider offering an additional English support (proficiency) course to them that is focused on a combination of basic communicative English proficiency and perhaps, right from the outset, specific basic principles of academic discourse.

Students were further prompted about their secondary school achievement in the language they have chosen for their studies (English) at the UP. It is interesting to note that 80% of the students who studied English as a subject at secondary school achieved a mark of 60% and higher (this was probably the last time that their level of English proficiency was formally assessed). When one considers that none of these students made the cut-off point for the TALL literacy assessment (comprehensively discussed in Chapter 7), this is a further indication that secondary school language achievement is not a very reliable indicator of tertiary academic literacy in a specific language. This notion is not new at the University of Pretoria since, over a number of years, the results of both TALL and TAG (Toets vir Akademiese Geletterdheid - the Afrikaans version of the academic literacy assessment) used for new first-year students indicate that even students who achieved an A symbol (80% and higher) in Grade 12 of the South African school system, show inadequacies regarding their academic literacy levels. The findings above are disturbing furthermore, if one takes into account the fact that many students in the study group have had years of exposure to English in educational environments. It can therefore be concluded that general immersion into a language of learning is no guarantee that students' academic literacy will necessarily develop to a level that is acceptable in a postgraduate study environment.

6.3.3 Section C - Student perceptions about their own level of academic literacy as well as the literacy demands of their courses

Section C of the questionnaire attempts to determine what students believe about their own academic literacy abilities as well as how they perceive the role and nature of academic literacy and writing in postgraduate studies. In the first question of this section respondents were asked to rate themselves with reference to their own ability on various issues of academic literacy. The same functional definition of literacy that was employed in the supervisor questionnaire (see above, Chapter 5, sections 5.2.2.3 and 5.2.2.4 as well as Addendum A) was utilised here. Students had to respond to 12 statements in which they had to rate themselves on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5, with 1 described as 'poor' and 5 as 'excellent'.

Figure 6.1 Student perceptions of their own academic literacy abilities



Perhaps the most conclusive general finding of this question is that students (as could be expected to some extent) generally rate themselves high on most of the statements in this section. Students therefore appear to believe that their functional academic literacy abilities are adequate for studying in a postgraduate academic environment. It is not surprising that these students feel positive about their literacy abilities in a

scenario where they have been led to believe for years that they meet the literacy requirements for studying at a university (the mere fact that they have progressed through their undergraduate years of study and have been accepted for postgraduate study should be adequate to create this impression). In short, they have not been given reason to believe differently. Alternatively, they might have successfully negotiated the literacy demands their previous courses placed on them exactly because the context did not demand much in this respect. Therefore, the literacy requirements with specific reference to academic writing might not previously have been as rigorous for these students. In yet another possible scenario, students might have been successful with their studies at other institutions because of adequate levels of academic literacy in another language they have used for learning at such institutions.

Regarding the use of the **academic English lexicon**, 67% of the respondents rate their ability as 'good' (4) to 'excellent' (5). An equally high percentage of the respondents (62.5%) rate themselves as having a 'good' to 'excellent' ability in the functional use of subject specific terminology. Interestingly, no respondents indicate that they see themselves as having a 'below average' or 'poor' ability in this respect.

With reference to writing in an **academic style**, again no respondents opted for the 'below average' to 'poor' choice on the scale. All respondents (100%) therefore see their ability ranging from 'average' to 'excellent'. Sixty-five per cent of the respondents regard their ability as 'good' to 'excellent'.

Students were also asked to respond to a statement that deals with the use of different **genres** and **functional text types** in academic discourse. These terms were explained to respondents by means of examples of those types typically used in the tertiary academic context. Although 35% of the respondents see themselves as 'average' in this regard, again 65% indicate that they have a 'good' to 'excellent' ability in making functional use of genre and text type in the academic environment.

Probably as a result of students' extensive exposure to **graphic and visual information** in the natural sciences, 96% of the respondents indicate an 'average' to

'excellent' ability in making use of this type of information in academic texts. Only 4% see themselves as below average regarding this issue.

With reference to the statements that focus on the functional use of language as well as text structure, respondents appear to feel somewhat more uncertain of their ability. Fifty-two per cent of the respondents indicate that they have an 'average' to 'below average' ability in **structuring sentences and paragraphs**, and 42% feel that their ability to **use connecting devices** in the construction of coherent texts falls between 'average' to 'below average'. Forty-eight per cent perceive their ability to **develop texts logically** as 'average', while 52% think that they have a 'good' to 'excellent' command of this ability. With regard to **distinguishing, classifying and categorising information**, 64% of the respondents indicate a 'good' to 'excellent' ability regarding the use of these strategies.

Academic argumentation again appears to present more difficulty to students. Fifty-two per cent of the respondents indicate an 'average' ability in using evidence convincingly, and 58% rate themselves as 'average' to 'below average' in **persuasive writing**. They, therefore, appear to feel unsure of the context of postgraduate writing in the sense that they may not have had adequate exposure yet to the issues mentioned above.

Because so much emphasis is placed on the contribution of the **individual student** at this level of study, it is to be expected that students would understand the implications and consequences of **plagiarism**. Eighty per cent of the respondents indicate that they have a 'good' to 'excellent' understanding of the implications of plagiarism. It should also be noted that the UP has a very strong policy on plagiarism, and that within this environment awareness of plagiarism should generally be very high. I suspect though that in their response to this statement, students focused on the possible dire consequences regarding the punishment for plagiarism and not whether they fully understand what constitutes an act of plagiarism. In my experience, although students might know that plagiarism is not permitted, they do plagiarise texts for a number of possible reasons already comprehensively discussed in this study.

As previously mentioned, this analysis shows that students in the study group generally perceive their academic literacy abilities to be above average, and rightly so since they have progressed this far in their academic careers. What is disconcerting though, is that their supervisors generally do not share the same optimism about their abilities. The mismatch between student perceptions and that of their supervisors is an issue that warrants further investigation and could be positively addressed in making both students and supervisors aware of the other party's requirements and expectations. This matter will be addressed specifically in the focus group interviews with supervisors. Apart from what their supervisors believe, the analysis of the results of TALL for this group of students, as well as the textual analysis (discussed in Chapter 7), clearly shows that almost without exception, students experience difficulty with the functional literacy issues reported above. A possible way of raising student awareness about their own literacy abilities could be the use of a diagnostic assessment instrument that indicates to students in which areas of academic literacy they could be supported with further development.

The remainder of Section C of the questionnaire deals with issues that specifically concern academic writing. Firstly, respondents had to rate a number of issues in the production of quality academic writing in order of importance (Table 6.1, below). Just more than half of the respondents (52%) indicate that the most important issue in the production of quality academic writing is the quality of the content as well as the development of an argument. The second most important issue (40%) appears to be the overall structure of the written text, while correct language use is the third most important issue (28%). Appropriacy of style and register is fourth (20%) in order of importance. There was also an option for anything else that respondents could have included if they felt it was significant. A small number of respondents selected this option, but most issues they included can be categorised with the other issues in question ('responsible use of sources' can, for example, be grouped in part under 'style' and 'quality of content and argument'). A positive finding that corresponds with research results on feedback provided on student writing (see Chapter 3), is that students appear to focus on the functional aspects of the content (the quality of the ideas) in a text first before they pay attention to language correctness. This finding is compatible with a revision strategy that focuses on the development of ideas first before one edits for language correctness.

Table 6.1 Student perceptions on the most important issues in the production of quality academic writing

Rank	Specific writing issue	Percentage
1	Quality of content and argument	52%
2	Structure of the written text	40%
3	Correct language use	28%
4	Appropriate style and register	20%

In a related issue, respondents were asked to indicate how one could realistically improve one's academic writing. Significantly, none of the respondents indicate that they think it is impossible to improve one's writing. Eight respondents (32%) indicate that they think exposure to a process of writing only might improve one's writing ability, but 17 respondents (68%) acknowledge the value in being exposed to a combination of learning about the writing process as well as having an outside editor for a final check of one's writing. Although they do think that one should develop one's own ability to revise and edit one's own written texts, a professional editor could obviously add value to these students' texts.

In response to a question on whether they see academic language to be different to other types of language, 68% indicate that they believe that there are significant differences. Respondents also had to explain their choice above if they thought it was different. Many respondents (71%) opted for some or other textual feature to explain why they thought academic language was different. A large number of students mention, for example, the formality of academic discourse, as well as technical jargon – all specific features of academic discourse. Some students also refer to the structure of academic texts, but do not elaborate. A minority of students mention more functional features that make academic language different, such as the quality of content and argument and the issue of plagiarism. There thus appears to be some awareness about the uniqueness of academic discourse and students should, as a consequence, be aware that such discourse may be characterised by specific features/conventions/conditions.

In a connected issue, respondents were asked to indicate whether they thought the language of their specific discipline differs from that of other disciplines in the tertiary environment. In this case, a smaller percentage of the study group (only 52%) feel that the language of their discipline is different compared to their opinions about academic language in general. In substantiating their choice of why they think it is different, reasons focus mainly on the terminology used, as well as the structure of writing in specific disciplines. Some students do, however, indicate that the type of content and what is allowed in the discipline with regard to what type of sources may be used as evidence do have an influence with regard to discipline specific discourse. One respondent states, for example, that:

> *We use more of scientific journals and not newspapers or magazines as other departments do because we believe newspapers and magazines write things which are not really true.*

Respondents further had to indicate on a Likert scale the importance they assign to the role of clear academic writing in the successful completion of their studies. It is evident that respondents are acutely aware of the crucial role of writing, since 84% rate such importance as ranging from 'important' to 'very important'. In an explanation for their choice, 85% of the reasons provided include some reference to the central notion of clear communication with an academic audience (e.g. be it their direct supervisor/lecturer or a wider academic audience of peers and referees of academic journals).

In order to determine student awareness about the written genres that are mostly used in their disciplines, respondents were asked to indicate the writing tasks they know they will be expected to perform in their studies. While almost all students say that they will have to write an extensive thesis/dissertation, 18% indicate that laboratory and project reports form part of their writing assignments. Other types of writing tasks include a research proposal, longer essays and assignments, examinations and tests, and seminars (that they obviously have to present in written format as well). This issue will be further explored in focus group interviews with the supervisors of these students in order to provide a focus for writing course design.

In response to whether respondents thought that their level of literacy is important for their supervisors and again rating this issue on a Likert scale, 88% of the respondents indicate that they believe it is 'important' to 'very important'. Most of the explanations for their choices (75%) focus on the fact that clear communication is important for their supervisors, while some responses highlight the fact that if written communication is muddled, this would mean extra work and more time spent on the part of supervisors. A small number of respondents also mention the issue of assessment in the sense that bad writing will be penalised by supervisors.

6.3.4 Section D - Personal writing needs

Section D of the questionnaire concentrates primarily on students' personal writing needs. The first question in this section addresses students' individual problems with academic writing. Respondents had to prioritise a number of options with regard to what they found to be the most difficult issues when engaging with writing in a tertiary environment. No specific pattern emerged in this part of the data. It appears as if individual students have problems with various issues in the writing process, and for the purposes of writing course design not any one of the stages in this process is really less/more important than the others. It therefore seems as if a holistic approach that covers the whole writing process, and with each stage receiving adequate emphasis, might be the best option regarding writing development.

Next, students had to respond to the statement "I can benefit from relevant support with the development of my writing ability" by making use of a Likert scale. In this instance, only 9% of the respondents feel that they would derive 'little benefit' form such support. Seventy-eight per cent of the students believe that they will benefit greatly from relevant writing support. In a related question, respondents had to indicate whether they thought they would benefit specifically by attending a formalised writing course. Again, 83% of the respondents indicate that they believe they would derive great benefit. What is positive about these findings is that it seems as if students are mature enough to realise that their writing could be further developed and, importantly, that they believe that a formalised course could contribute positively in such development. In their explanations of why they thought they could benefit from attending such a course, responses focus on the learning of

useful writing strategies, learning about writing by being exposed to those who are more experienced in this domain, finding out about specific requirements for academic writing, and what they should contribute themselves in deriving benefit from such writing development.

6.3.5 Section E - Specific information on postgraduate studies

Section E of the questionnaire concentrates on matters that have specific bearing on postgraduate students. The first part of this section determines where students have completed their previous degrees and what language was used during their studies at those institutions. Again, three languages – English, French and Portuguese - emerged as the dominant languages of learning. It is disconcerting to find that again, 30% of respondents did not use English to study towards their first degrees, and regarding those who completed an honours degree, 44% did not do this in English. The potential difficulty of engaging in higher education in a relatively unknown additional language has already been discussed in a previous section.

Respondents were also asked to indicate whether they attended any kind of language support/academic literacy course in the past. Thirty-six per cent of the students have attended such a course previously, and 80% of these respondents found the course to be of great benefit to them. In their explanations students mostly focused on learning more about the requirements of language and observed that such courses helped with basic communication in the specific language. What is encouraging about this finding is that the respondents who have been exposed to language support courses do not appear to stigmatise such courses, as is often the case, but can see their value for their personal language and literacy development.

With regard to the question that focuses on writing as a multiple-draft activity, only one respondent indicates that he/she writes just one draft of a text before handing it in for assessment. The reason this respondent provides is that: *"May be I am to lasy."* Considering the language used by the respondent, it is clear that exposure to a multiple-draft approach to writing that focuses on strategies of revision and editing could go far in raising student awareness about their own use of language. It is

positive though that most of the respondents already see the value of producing more than one draft of a written text.

In order to determine the strategies used by the respondents when they write an academic text, they were asked to select and prioritise the steps taken from a typical process of writing (steps were presented in random order). Although 46% of the respondents start out by analysing the topic, it is disconcerting that 54% do not formally analyse the topic for writing as a first step. Alarmingly, eighty-two per cent of the respondents see a pre-writing activity such as "Writing down everything you know about a topic" as something that takes place much later in the writing process. Only 5 respondents engage in formal planning of their writing. The other steps presented to respondents show no obvious patterns apart from the fact that respondents perceive steps such as revision and editing to take place relatively late in the process. Although a process of writing will differ from individual to individual, there is a case to be made for a logical macro-progression of the different steps in such a process. So, for instance, it will be very difficult to engage in relevant and productive writing if one does not as a first step analyse the topic for writing. The formal planning of their writing is a step that is often neglected by students. Planning focuses first on managing one's own process of writing and second on a specific time frame for the progression of such a process, where specific deadlines should be adhered to. From this data it is clear that for this specific group of respondents, structured exposure to a process of writing that emphasises the logical progression of such a process as well as the recursive nature of the process, could be beneficial in their production of quality academic writing.

The next part of this section of the questionnaire focuses on the type of feedback provided by lecturers as well as whether students found such feedback useful in improving their writing. Questions on the type of feedback are divided into two main focus areas, the one focusing on feedback on the quality of the content/ideas and the other on the language used. Regarding feedback on the content, 80% of the respondents indicate that they previously received feedback on the content of their writing. Eighty-five per cent of these students indicate that they benefited greatly from such comments because it improved the organisation and format of their texts, it helped with the logical development of ideas, and assisted them to avoid irrelevant

ideas with regard to the topic under discussion. With reference to comments on language use, 88% of the respondents indicate that lecturers corrected their language in the past. Eighty-two per cent of the respondents seem to derive great benefit from comments on language use since, in general, it helps them to learn from their mistakes and improve their writing. The fact that a number of students indicate that feedback provided by lecturers creates a heightened awareness of the importance of language in the communication of one's ideas is a positive finding in this context. One respondent indicates, for example, that: *"[language corrections] [h]elp me to avoid that mistakes, and pay more attention."* Another respondent mentions that: *"[b]y correcting your language, you will discovered your weakness which so far you did not notice."* In the supervisor survey, almost all respondents indicate that they do provide feedback on both language use and the quality of the ideas (content) of student writing. An issue that will be addressed in the focus group interviews with supervisors is the kind of effect that feedback has on the quality of their students' writing. How do students therefore respond to the feedback they receive from supervisors?

Respondents' awareness of and exposure to professional editing services as a writing resource was also determined. Respondents were asked whether they have ever been required to make use a professional language editor for their writing. Interestingly enough (keeping in mind that almost all of the respondents are busy with a master's degree) professional editing had been a previous requirement for 52% of the respondents. In response to a question on whether professional editing is a requirement for their present studies, only 44% indicate that it is. It is interesting that the UP does not have an institutional policy about the editing of postgraduate theses and dissertations. This is an issue that will be further investigated in subsequent research in order to offer specific suggestions on how institutional use of professional editing could best be implemented, if desirable.

Responding to the enquiry regarding the ultimate responsibility for ensuring the language correctness of their writing, 88% of the respondents believe that it is the student's own responsibility to ensure such correctness. However, 56% believe that the supervisor also shares this responsibility with students. Only three students appear to believe that the student has no responsibility towards ensuring the language

correctness of their written texts. An interesting finding is that although most students believe that they are responsible for the final correctness of their written texts, a very small percentage of supervisors seem to share this perspective. Only 7% of the respondents indicate that the student is also responsible. While 22% of the supervisors believe that language correctness should be the responsibility of an outside editor, the majority of respondents (67%) indicate that supervisors themselves have the final responsibility to ensure language correctness.

Respondents were also asked to state what they thought the capabilities are that one needs in order to correct one's own written texts. Responses mainly include that one needs an adequate reading ability and sufficient knowledge about language. Some respondents also explain that correction implies more than mere language proficiency in the sense that the context and the content of the written text are also important considerations. In response to rating their own abilities to correct their written texts, 56% of the respondents believe that they have only 'average' to 'below average' ability while the other 44% believe that they are very capable to correct their own texts. In their explanation for the specific rating, a number of respondents state that because ensuring error free texts is basically their responsibility, they **have** to be able to correct their own texts. Some students say that it is not easy for them to self-correct, while others mention issues (such as improving one's reading ability) that will make it possible to develop this ability. Improving one's reading ability in order to improve the correctness of writing might be an indication that some students use the academic texts they read as models for writing. It is important to note though that only two students referred to the possible role of reading in developing writing ability. Twenty-seven per cent of the respondents do, however, restate in their explanation that they are capable enough to correct their own texts. Although it is always a positive indication when students have confidence in their own abilities, editing one's own written texts demands an adequate knowledge of the specific language in which one is writing, as well as knowledge about specific academic writing conventions. This issue will be further discussed in the analysis of the TALL results for this specific group of respondents as well as in the analysis of a written text they produced.

Table 6.2 provides a summary of important findings in the analysis of the student questionnaire.

Table 6.2 Prominent findings of the postgraduate student survey on academic literacy and writing

- The study group is extremely diverse with regard to students' nationalities as well as native language use (all students are additional language users of English).
- Some students (20%) have never received any formal education in English.
- A large group of students (30% for their first degree and 44% for honours) did not use English as a language of learning for their previous degrees.
- In a self-assessment of their academic literacy levels, students generally rate themselves high on most functional literacy abilities.
- Respondents give priority to the importance of the quality of content and argument in the production of quality written texts over issues such as correctness of language and register and style.
- All respondents believe that it is possible to improve one's academic writing and the majority consider the best strategy for such development to be exposure to a process of writing as well as receiving the input of a language editor.
- The majority of respondents believe that academic language is a distinct way of using language towards a specific purpose in a tertiary context.
- Students appear to be acutely aware of the important role of quality writing in the unambiguous communication of their ideas to supervisors. They also appear to have a distinct sense of the importance of audience in the writing transaction, indicating that muddled writing could lead to miscommunication and, as a result, more time and effort will be required from supervisors.
- Students' diverse reactions on specific problematic issues in the writing process indicate that, for this group, equal exposure to all steps in such a process would probably be the most productive option.
- A large majority of respondents believe that they would benefit greatly by attending a writing support course.
- It appears as if respondents generally feel positive about the possible benefits of language-type support courses (a number of students indicate previous involvement in such courses).
- Most of the respondents already see the value in producing more than one draft of a written text. They do, however, have diverse opinions about the logical progression of different steps in a writing process.
- Respondents feel that have benefited considerably from both feedback on the quality of their ideas (content) as well as their language use in written texts they have produced in the past.
- The majority of respondents believe that it is their own responsibility to ensure the language correctness of their written texts. Most do, however, believe that the supervisor also has some responsibility regarding this issue.
- A considerable percentage of the respondents believe that they are capable of editing their own written texts for language correctness.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter has established student perceptions and expectations of academic literacy and writing. In short, all students in the study group are additional language users of English but generally perceive their academic literacy abilities to be above average. They strongly believe that quality academic writing is a crucial ability in the context of succeeding with postgraduate study in the tertiary environment. All respondents see academic writing as an ability that can be developed further and generally believe that they could derive benefit from attending an academic writing support course. Both chapters 5 and 6 have presented data that are based on the perceptions of respondents. The next chapter is an attempt at verifying a number of these perceptions, based on an analysis of the results of TALL as well as a written text the students produced.

CHAPTER 7 Results for the Test of Academic Literacy Levels and written text analysis

7.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters elaborated on impressionistic and perceptual data collected from both supervisors and students as regards various issues about academic literacy and writing in a tertiary context. Chapter 5 further also focused on the findings of the supervisor survey for Agriculture specifically. This chapter aims to establish whether there is any confirmation of the largely negative perceptions of these supervisors about the academic literacy levels of their postgraduate students. It is further an attempt to identify possible problem areas in academic literacy that may be addressed in a developmental writing course for students in the study group. It therefore focuses on a formal assessment of students' academic literacy abilities that is reported in two sections. The first section discusses salient features of student scores on the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL), and the second section focuses on the results of an analysis of a written text produced by the same group of students.

7.2 The Test of Academic Literacy Levels

The Test of Academic Literacy Levels is a set of assessment instruments (at this stage consisting of 7 different versions of the test) that is currently used by three South African universities (the University of Pretoria, Stellenbosch University and the North West University) for determining the academic literacy levels of mainly new first-year students at these universities (it was also used in 2006 for first year students in the Faculty of Medicine – Medunsa Campus – of the University of Limpopo). Each year, test development sessions take place where the test for the following year is jointly developed by staff from the three universities. Although not necessarily the case at all three universities, students of the University of Pretoria have the opportunity to write this test in the language of their choice, either in English (TALL) or Afrikaans (TAG) – the two languages of learning at the University. This is a typically low to medium stakes test since it is not used for admission purposes, but identifies students' level of risk with regard to their functional academic literacy.

Normally, students identified by the test as being 'at risk' regarding their level of academic literacy are required to register for an academic literacy intervention aimed at reducing the risk of such students not succeeding with their studies. The first version of TALL/TAG was developed collaboratively by the three universities during 2002/2003 and was first administered at the University of Pretoria in 2004. Very significantly, the test has consistently measured at an average reliability (measured by Cronbach's α) of above 0.9 across the three administrations mentioned above (and across three different versions of the test based on the same construct) for the period 2004-2006 (Weideman, 2006a:3).

Although TALL is primarily used for students new to tertiary education, it was argued that because of the high reliability and validity of the test in measuring academic literacy levels (cf. Weideman, 2006a), as well as the fact that we have not yet developed a literacy test specifically for postgraduate students, it should be adequate (at this stage) in determining such levels of postgraduate students. As a result of the test focusing on the functional aspects of academic literacy (i.e. what students can practically do with academic texts), it was maintained that such a test should be applicable across the spectrum of students studying at a university. It is interesting, however, that although one would generally expect postgraduate students to do better on the test than students new to the tertiary environment, this has not been the case for postgraduate students who wrote the test in the previous year (2004). The generally low achievement of these students was not completely unexpected, though, since most of the postgraduate students tested previously were additional language users of English, some of whom have never formally studied in English. Administering the test to previous intakes on the EOT 300 course has clearly indicated that many additional language postgraduate students experience the same type of literacy difficulties new students do, and these problems were borne out in the writing classes that were presented to these students.

7.2.1 Test description

The blueprint for the test is based on Weideman's (2003b:xi) definition of functional academic literacy. In this definition, a student in tertiary education should be able to:

- understand a range of academic vocabulary in context;
- interpret the use of metaphor and idiom in academic usage, and perceive connotation, word play and ambiguity;
- understand relations between different parts of a text, via introductions to conclusions, and know how to use language that serves to make the different parts of a text hang together;
- interpret different kinds of text type (genre), and have a sensitivity for the meaning they convey, as well as the audience they are aimed at;
- interpret, use and produce information presented in graphic or visual format;
- distinguish between essential and non-essential information, fact and opinion, propositions and arguments, cause and effect, and classify, categorise and handle data that make comparisons;
- see sequence and order, and do simple numerical estimations and computations that are relevant to academic information, that allow comparisons to be made, and can be applied for the purposes of an argument;
- know what counts as evidence for an argument, extrapolate from information by making inferences, and apply the information or its implications to other cases than the one at hand;
- understand the communicative function of various ways of expression in academic language (such as defining, providing examples, arguing); and
- make meaning (e.g. of an academic text) beyond the level of the sentence.

This definition is substantially similar to the operational definition of academic literacy employed in this study to probe the beliefs about academic literacy of supervisors (Addendum A) and students (Addendum B), and discussed above in Chapters 5 (section 5.2.2.4) and 6 (section 6.3.3), respectively. The definition is functional to the extent that it defines academic literacy as an ability that is directly related to what students can practically do with academic texts in both receptive and productive modes. Although less emphasis is placed on writing (and specifically the writing of longer academic texts) because of practical constraints in administering the test, all the abilities contained in this definition (and, in turn, assessed by the test) are necessary preconditions for successful academic writing.

With regard to the format and the specific question or task types included in the test (Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004b; Weideman, 2006a), we may note that Section 1 is a scrambled text in which sentences in a paragraph have been scrambled, and students have to rearrange the sentences so that the paragraph forms a cohesive whole. It therefore tests not only students' ability in recognising text relations, drawing on their interpretative abilities regarding the context, but also their ability to recognise lexical

clues contained in the sentences. Put differently: it assesses students' command of various grammatical features of the text.

In Section 2, students' knowledge of general academic vocabulary is assessed. The context created for this section is specifically that of the tertiary academic environment, and the words tested are a selection of items from the different levels of the Coxhead academic word list (Coxhead, 2000).

Section 3 deals with visual and graphic literacy. Students are therefore asked to interpret graphic information augmented by a short text discussion. This section mainly involves simple numerical computations and making inferences based on such calculations.

The fourth section emphasizes the importance of students being able to recognise different written text types. Students are requested to match two groups of sentences with regard to similarity in text type.

Section 5 includes a longer text that students have to read and subsequently answer comprehension type questions on the content of the text. Questions focus on students' abilities to classify and compare information, make inferences, recognise metaphorical language, recognise text relations and distinguish between essential and non-essential information.

Section 6 of the test assesses a number of academic literacy abilities. This question on text editing firstly provides students with a text they have to read where specific words have been omitted. Students then have to choose between 4 options regarding where these words have been left out in the sentences. The second part of the question requires that students, having been provided with the specific place where a word has been left out, choose between 4 options as to what is the correct word. The third part combines the formats of the first two parts in the sense that students are required to integrate the two tasks and do both simultaneously. They therefore have to find both the position where a word has been left out as well as the most suitable word that would fit that position. This section of the test assesses students' functional knowledge of sentence construction, word order, vocabulary, punctuation and at times

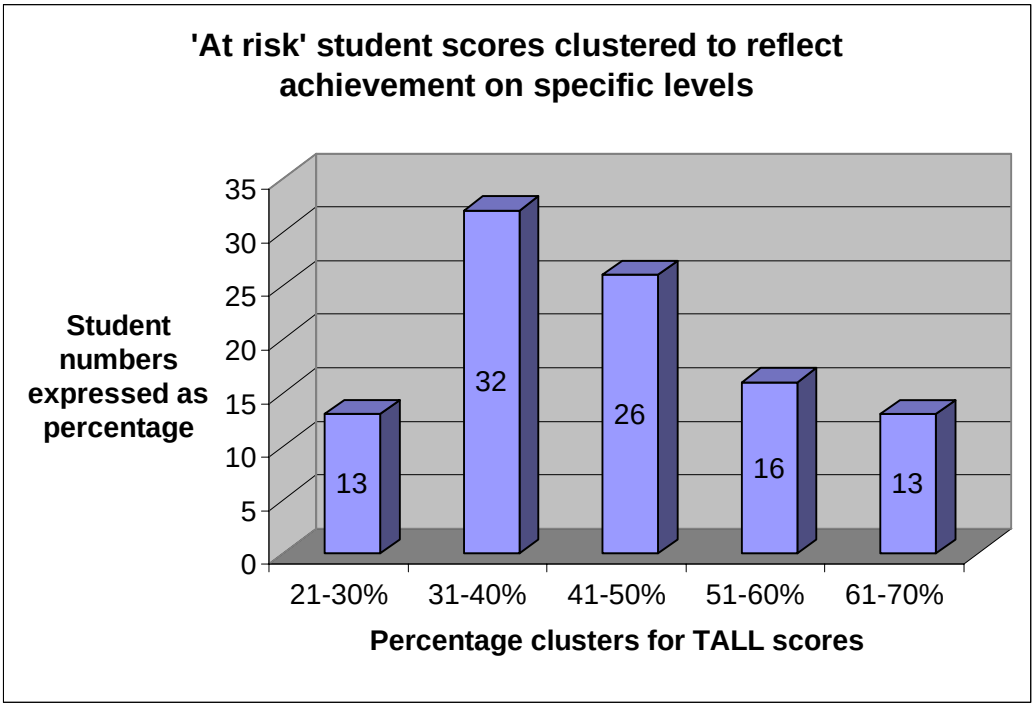
communicative function (cf. Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004b), with the main focus on the former, i.e. on grammatical or structural features of the language.

The last section of the test provides students with the opportunity to produce a short written text. This section is scaffolded in the sense that it provides phrasal prompts as to how students should structure their texts (usually an argument). It typically provides a short starting phrase that serves to introduce different sections of the argument. This section is marked only after the rest of the test has been scored, and then only for those borderline cases where decisions about the students' risk levels are not initially apparent.

7.2.2 Discussion of the results

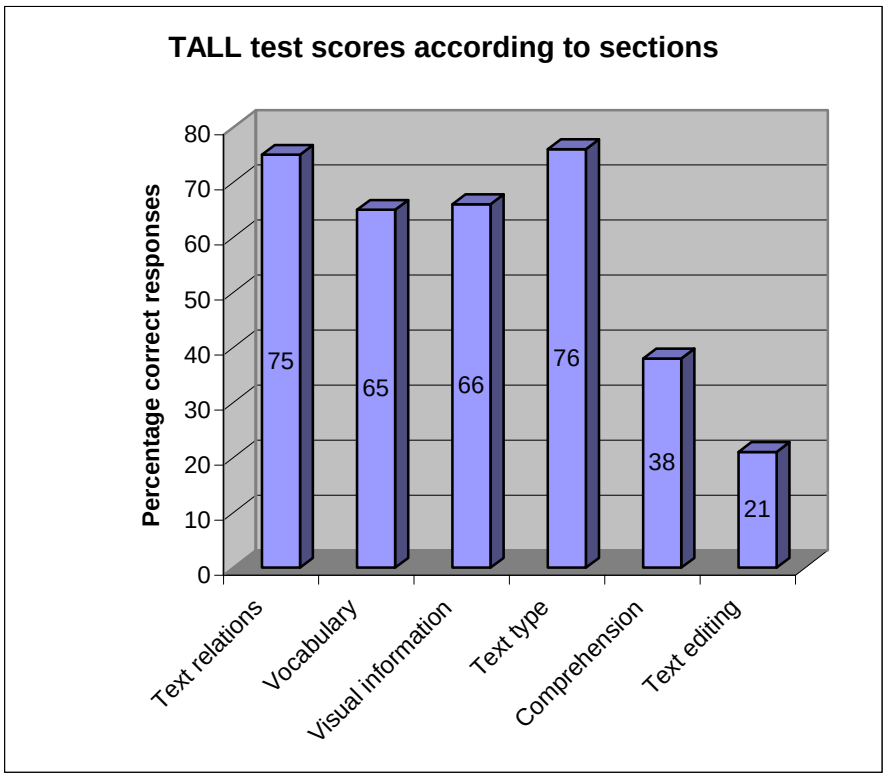
Although one would, as already mentioned, expect a higher level of academic literacy from postgraduate students, it was decided to make use of the same, historically determined cut-off point that is used for first year students at the University. Out of a group of 52 students (mixed primary and additional language users of English) who initially wrote the test in 2005, only 21 students (40%) achieved an average mark above the cut-off point for that version of the test of 72%. Sixty per cent (31 students) of this group of students could therefore be classified as 'at risk' with regard to their academic literacy. Not surprisingly, these 31 students are all additional language users of English. Regarding the latter group of students, 22 (71%) achieved a score of 50% or below for the test (see Figure 7.1). Although a student's level of academic literacy is by no means the only factor that influences student performance, it is nonetheless one of the critical contributing factors that determines academic success. These students can therefore be regarded as displaying considerable risk in the successful completion of their studies. The students who are identified as having some risk are also those who are usually required by their departments to register for the EOT 300 course (Academic Writing for Postgraduate Students) that is presented by the UAL. The course mentioned here is a generic writing course and its possible development into relevant and authentic writing courses for specific disciplines is part of the focus of this research.

Figure 7.1 Percentage of 'at risk' students clustered according to TALL test scores



The following analysis of the test results focuses on the group of 31 students who are perceived as having some risk with regard to their academic literacy levels. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the data is that these students' scores on the different sections of the test can be broadly divided into two clusters. Students generally performed much better on the first four sections of the test than on the last two sections (see Figure 7.2). These results were analysed by means of calculating the percentage of correct answers per section for the group as a whole. None of the sections that focus on **text relations** (75% of all the questions in the section answered correctly), **academic vocabulary** (65% correct), the interpretation of **graphic and visual information** (66% correct) or distinguishing between different **text types** (76% correct) appear to present problems as serious as sections 5 and 6 with regard to these students' academic literacy. What is interesting though is that out of 6 sections of the test, the students managed to score above the cut-off point for two sections (text relations [Section 1] and text types [Section 4]) only. In addition, the scores for sections 2 and 3 are marginal in the sense that they are just above the cut-off point.

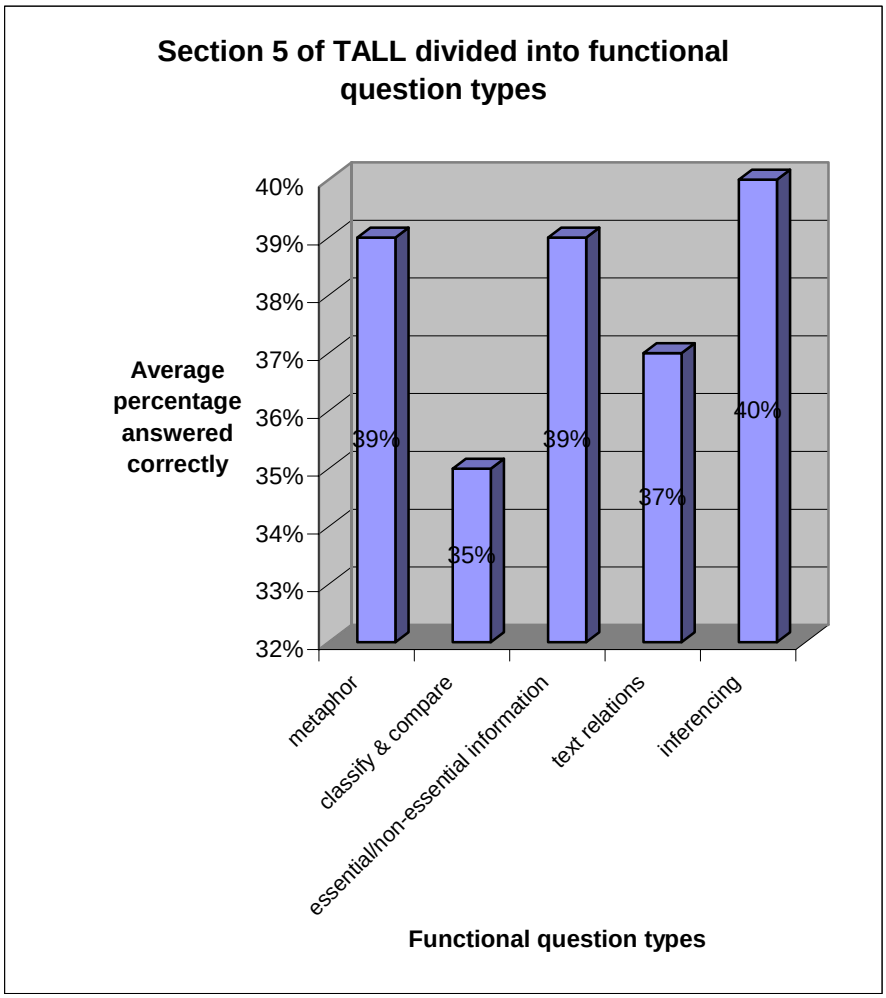
Figure 7.2 Postgraduate students' TALL scores divided into achievement on the different test sections



The most serious difficulty appears to be with the last two sections of the test. For the section that focuses on **reading comprehension**, only 38% of the questions were answered correctly for the whole of the section. In terms of a breakdown of what is specifically tested by different questions in this section, students appear to have experienced difficulty with critically important aspects such as distinguishing between essential and non-essential information, recognising text relations (e.g. cause and effect), sequencing, defining, making inferences, and handling metaphor and idiom (see the average scores for different functional test items in Figure 7.3). It is also important to note that a heavy weight in terms of marks (49 out of a total of 100) is awarded for this section. In combination with Section 6 (15 marks), these two sections account for 64% of the test. Thus, although students might have performed at an acceptable level for the first four sections of the test, their overall performance is heavily affected by Sections 5 and 6. These are also the two sections, incidentally, that contribute most substantially to the overall reliability (α) of the test. The section on **text editing** appears to be even more problematic in the sense that only 21% of the

answers were correct. Students therefore seem to have struggled much more with the sections of the test where an integrated reading and interpretive ability, combined with their knowledge of English, was required that would have enabled them to understand how different ideas in a longer text hang together. This obviously calls for an integrated language and reasoning ability that would enable one to work out the correct answers to these questions.

Figure 7.3 Average scores for different functional test items in Section 5



Another interesting aspect is that most of the 'at risk' students appear to have spent so much time on the first 6 sections of the test, that very few of them completed the seventh section on writing. Although, as already mentioned, this section is only marked for borderline cases, it could have served as a valuable source of information on more immediate student writing that could have been compared with the results

reported in the following section that contains an analysis of essay type texts produced by the study group. Be this as it may, a considerable portion of the students classified as having 'little to no risk' actually completed the writing text. It is therefore clear that, most probably as a consequence of low academic literacy levels in English, the 'at risk' students also seem to work much slower than the students who scored above the cut-off point.

In conclusion, it is important to stress again that TALL is not a diagnostic test *per se*. The weighting of the different sections of the test is a function of the definition of academic literacy, requiring a certain balance in test item types. In so far as there is information of a diagnostic nature, it is a result of an analysis of which areas of academic literacy are tested by specific test items.

7.3 Analysis of a written text produced by the study group

Although TALL was used to determine students' general academic literacy levels, it was considered relevant also to analyse a formal, written academic text that students in the study group produced. The reason for this is related to the complex nature of writing ability that combines and integrates a number of different language, planning and thinking abilities in the production of a written text. The purpose of this textual analysis is therefore to determine student difficulties in their application of specific academic literacy strategies and abilities towards producing relevant and coherent longer academic texts. Hence, in order to identify specific writing difficulties experienced by students in this study group, a written text they produced was analysed according to specific problems they display through their writing.

7.3.1 A description of the writing task

The writing task that was given to students was a typical academic summarising task. For postgraduate students particularly, an adequate ability in extracting important information and, even more important, useful and relevant information that can be employed towards meeting the requirements of a specific writing task is paramount in their studies. Students were therefore asked to summarise the primary principles and

conditions of academic writing that are contained in Part 1 of the workbook for the EOT 300 course. These issues were dealt with on an intensive level in class discussions and various tasks that students had to complete. Apart from serving as an exercise in the analysis of academic information, as well as in reinforcing these principles and conditions, the summary writing task also had a synthesising function since students had to produce a well balanced, coherently written text on the nature and functional aspects of academic discourse. Students thus had to apply exactly what they were writing about to their own academic texts. Apart from their general use of academic English, their abilities in locating main ideas, sequencing ideas in their own written texts (whether they made use of, for example, the original sequence of the primary text), quoting directly, and paraphrasing from a source were assessed. The genre used for this task was a typical academic essay, and the task requirements emphasised that the text they produced had to adhere to the conventions of a typical academic text. A total of 25 texts were analysed ranging in length from 900-1500 words.

7.3.2 Error categorisation

Students normally experience writing problems that can be categorised into three primary types: 1) many additional language users of a language of learning (as well as, to a lesser extent, primary language users) experience some language proficiency problem (typically not knowing the lexicon or how to combine words grammatically into coherent, correct sentences); 2) students have difficulty with the construction of discourse (longer stretches of language) and, therefore, with the production of cohesive and coherent texts – they experience problems in sequencing/connecting ideas (both within paragraphs and between paragraphs in longer stretches of text) into a cohesive and coherent whole; and 3) students are unfamiliar with prominent academic writing conventions (mostly stylistic) in the tertiary academic context.

A number of researchers have developed extensive error classification frameworks for the analysis of written texts (cf. Givon, 1989; Halliday & Mathiessen, 2004). This study, however, draws primarily on attributes that concentrate on the functional, contextual nature of language used in a tertiary academic environment, and errors are therefore categorised with this functionality in mind. The first category in this

analysis focuses on students' use of the grammatical system for English. Mistakes of this kind are therefore typical grammar mistakes in the sense that some grammatical construction was used incorrectly. The second category emphasises academic discourse issues with regard to cohesion and coherence in argumentation, general text structure (as well as the specific structure for distinct written genres), general construction of argument and issues of style and register. The third category includes issues that have to do with the presentation of information in the written text (typically issues such as spelling, punctuation and layout). Tables 5.1-5.3 represent the categories of mistakes that frequently occur in these specific written texts.

Table 7.1 Category 1 – Grammar

Error type
• Concord of number (subject / verb agreement) • Determiners (article omission / incorrect use) • Expression of temporal relations • Passive expression • Possession • Prepositions • Pronouns (incorrect use) • General vocabulary use • Sentence construction/word order

Table 7.2 Category 2 – Academic discourse

Error type
• Formality (lexis) • Pronouns (personalised writing) • Contractions • Verbosity • Referencing • Passive expression • Paragraphing and structural problems • Cohesion and coherence

Table 7.3 Category 3 – Presentation

Error type
• Punctuation • Spelling • General layout

7.3.3 Analysis and discussion of the results

It is important to emphasise that although I have limited the examples used in the discussion of specific types of mistakes, nearly all of these types are represented extensively throughout the texts. If a focus on teaching specific grammatical structures of academic discourse is desired, these are typically the issues that would be emphasised for this specific group of students. This is not to say, however, that students should necessarily receive intensive and comprehensive feedback on all of these aspects simultaneously, since it will depend to a large extent on what kind of feedback students respond to in a positive manner. Although some of the examples may contain other types of errors as well, the specific error that is under discussion for a specific category is highlighted in the examples provided and the other types of errors ignored for that specific context. These examples are quoted directly and have, therefore, not been altered in any way.

7.3.3.1 Category 1 - Grammar

- **Concord of number (subject/verb agreement)**

Perhaps the most common type of error made by students in the study group is present tense subject/verb agreement. In this case the subject and the verb phrase in an English sentence should agree in number and person. Taken at face value, this should not to be a very difficult aspect (the rule itself) of the English language to master.

However, when one considers the constant correct application of this rule, it is apparent that rather specialised knowledge of the language is called for in such application (see Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad & Finegan, 1999:180-192 for a discussion of complications with concord patterns). If students therefore need to edit their own written texts for concord errors, they first need to locate the subject of their sentences, locate the verb phrase(s) and then determine whether the form of the verb phrase agrees with the subject number. Although it appears to be more difficult for students to ensure this agreement when the subject is removed from the verb, they also seem to have difficulty when the subject is right next to the verb. The following are examples of this mistake in student texts:

> *Poorly written reports or theses* ***frustrates*** *the reader …*
> *… the ideological model* ***recognize*** *…*
> *If language used* ***are*** *not meaningful …*
> *… there are several techniques that* ***has*** *been used …*
> *In a tertiary institution, one* ***have*** *to keep an open mind …*
> *There* ***is*** *many strategies …*
> *At the tertiary level* ***student are*** *…*
> *Most students are lazy in reading and* ***needs*** *texts that are a little bit simple and direct.*
> *Writing in an academic context* ***incorporate*** *…*
> *The using of reading strategies* ***depend*** *…*
> *… one of the most effective methods in teaching literacy* ***involve*** *…*
> *Academic text normally* ***have*** *a general structure which* ***include*** *the introduction, the body and conclusion but this* ***depend*** *on the type of text …*

- **Article use**

Article use is another frequent problem in student texts. The definite article 'the' and indefinite article 'a(n)' are two of the most important determiners in English. Choice of use depends on the degree of definiteness the writer wants to convey (Huddleston, 1988). While the indefinite article is mostly used to introduce a new entity in discourse, the use of the definite article usually indicates that "the referent of the noun phrase is assumed to be known …" (Biber *et al.*, 1999:263). In the study group, students either tend to omit the article where it plays a necessary determining role, or they include an article where it is not required. The most probable cause for the difficulty that students experience in a South African context is transfer from their primary language to the additional language. None of the African languages that are

indigenous to South Africa make use of an article construction to indicate definiteness. It therefore appears that if this type of structure does not exist in the primary language, or is employed differently in that language, primary language interference would make it difficult for students to control the article system in English.

> *How do students read **in tertiary** environment?*
> *… academic literacy **is very** crucial language and learning skill …*
> ***The** literacy must not be seen as simply a neutral skill …*
> *… which constitute **the** academic literacy in the tertiary level.*
> *Any write-up should **include introductory** part …*

In a number of instances, students also refrain from using the plural as generic reference. This is another example of students not being able to decide about the definiteness of reference and, in many cases, it is related to article use. It appears as if students have problems with definite and/or general reference and this is evident in them either not making use of an article with the singular noun or not making the noun plural to indicate general reference. The following examples highlight two important areas of difficulty for students. Firstly, it is possible that regarding the meaning they wanted to convey, students made use of the singular noun but did not realise that in this case, the use of an article is obligatory. Alternatively, there is the possibility that their intention was a general one, but they do not know that for general reference in this context, they need to make use of a plural noun without any article use.

> *… try to find **synonym** for them …*
> *Language for academic **purpose** is very strict.*
> *In the tertiary environment **student** read with more focus …*
> *… from journals, **article** or **newspaper**.*

- **Mistakes in the expression of temporal relationships**

Although mistakes in expressing relationships in time do not occur as frequently as some of the other types of mistakes, I am not convinced that these are necessarily mistakes in how students perceive time with regard to the meaning they wish to express. The inconsistency in how verbs are utilised in expressing time in the

examples below is rather a signal of either laxness on the part of the student or not really knowing the specific form of the verb for the expression of a specific time relation in English.

> *Reading is an active process of trying to **made** and construct meaning …*
> *… an easy way to **found** the information …*
> *… this **will entails** series of processes …*
> *But **depended** on the gender, the academic …*
> *… critically evaluate the text they **are read** …*
> ***Read** critically means think about what you already know …*
> *Comprehensive reading is about finding the main ideas and **express** that idea … (consistency)*

- **Use of the passive construction**

Although grammar checkers in computer software (most notably Microsoft Word) and general guide books on writing advise against the use of the passive construction, this is one of the strategies used by academic writers to achieve a degree of impersonality in their writing. Biber *et al.* (1999) discuss the use of both the short passive (where the agent is left unexpressed) and the long passive (where the agent is expressed in a 'by'-phrase. Their corpus findings reveal that academic prose shows the most frequent use of the short passive, probably because academic discourse is "concerned with generalisations, rather than the specific individual who carried out an action" (Biber *et al.*, 1999:938). As a result of the relatively common use of the short passive as a strategy for making one's writing more formal and impersonal, its correct application would contribute in making student writing adhere to a fundamental condition of writing in an academic context. The following examples show some difficulty in how students apply this strategy:

> *… way that **will be express** …*
> *… that needs to be **address** at tertiary education.*
> *… reading and writing that are **deal** with …*

- **Possession**

Mistakes in indicating possession can be divided into two types. The first type involves students apparently not knowing the form of the word that correctly indicates possession in English (or perhaps not realising that there is a need for indicating possession in this context), and the second, not distinguishing between a plural noun and a noun that indicates possession.

> *Know your **supervisor** expectations …*
> *These writings also sharpen the **student** skills in writing …*
> *This is about a whole **semesters** work summed up …*

- **Incorrect use of prepositions**

Difficulties with the correct use of prepositions are notorious for the English language. Some prepositions are easier than others to use correctly in a consistent way. So, for example, are those prepositions where a specific place/position is indicated such as '**on** the table' or '**behind** the door' not as difficult to use correctly as when one starts dealing with what Huddleston and Pullum (2005) refer to as 'grammaticised prepositions'. According to them, such prepositions "don't have any identifiable meaning of their own …" (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005:137). There is therefore a clear distinction between the following two examples:

"I sat **by** the door." (indicating position)
"The article was written **by** the student." (grammaticised preposition)

The following are examples of incorrect use of prepositions in student texts:

> *This report will constitute **with** three parts: …*
> *… in order **of** producing a thoroughly results.*
> *This prepares the student **to** the academic world …*
> *… which constitute the academic literacy **in** the tertiary level.*
> *… for understanding the message of the text **on** an article or a book.*
> *… copying information from a source word **for** word.*
> *… and it should be **on** the correct tense.*
> *… that would introduce the reader **about** the topic.*

- **Inconsistency in pronoun use**

A number of students also have the tendency of not using pronouns consistently within the same construction. A specific strategy for avoiding the use of first person pronouns (but also in some cases to avoid gender specificity) is making use of the non-deictic pronoun 'you' or the indefinite pronoun 'one'. As is evident in the example below, some students seem to be unaware that stylistically, one has to be consistent with this type of reference in the same construction.

> *Time management also helps **one** to improve **their** speed of reading and attaining **their** goals.*
> *When writing, **one** should keep the type of audience **they** are writing to in mind.*

- **Incorrect use of words (meaning) and incorrect derivative**

This is another writing problem that is generally related to students' knowledge of English vocabulary. It should, however, be said that many vocabulary difficulties could be overcome by students' productive use of dictionaries (both unilingual and bilingual) and thesauruses that are easily accessible from modern word-processing programmes on computer. It is often the case that students are not really aware of the resources that are available in order to improve the quality of their writing. What is alarming is that if the texts for this analysis had been hand-written, one could understand to some extent that such mistakes will occur. This was, however, not the case, since all essays were typed on computer. It is fair to expect, though, that some of these mistakes will be eradicated when students do make use of available resources such as dictionaries and thesauruses in available computer software for their writing. Other mistakes that can, for example, not be identified by making use of computer resources require a specific threshold knowledge of the language in order for students to be able to correct their own mistakes. This issue will again be addressed in Chapter 10 of this study.

> *Unpersonal* (wrong word)
> *researches* (incorrect plural)
> *carrier* (career)
> … *one of the most used **once** is* … (ones)
> … ***urging** about some or other issue* … (arguing)

*… in the tertiary **background*** (environment; context)
*Language can be **lamely** defined as …*
*… literacy in all **disciples** has a lot in common.*
*… in order to manage the huge amount of **task**.*
*… **make** quick survey …*
*… share their scientific **finds** …*
*… develop ideas or think **logical** …*
*… depending on the rules of a specific **departmental**.*
*If the information is **relevance** …*
*… but of most **important** is one person be able to …*

- **Word omission**

The analysis also shows a number of cases where students omit strategic words. The examples below might well be the result of inefficient editing (or no editing at all) on the part of the authors. In this context students should be made more aware of the importance of editing that may rectify this kind of careless writing.

***It necessary** to keep in mind …*
*Thus the reading is not a **once exercise** …*
*… reading is a crucial language and **learning, even** for …*
*Another alternative is the use **of dictionary though is** time consuming.*

- **Sentence construction/word order/incomplete sentences**

Students display considerable problems with regard to sentence construction. Although some of the problems appear to be cosmetic, many can have a very direct influence on how the text is interpreted. In the texts analysed, a number of students constructed very long sentences that included more than one main idea. This made for cumbersome reading and re-reading of such sentences in order to understand what the writer wanted to say. Some students also had problems in determining the appropriateness of the types of sentences they used. In some cases students made use of imperative clauses as directives, almost as if they were instructing someone else on how to accomplish something rather than providing a description of a phenomenon. Another possible explanation is that the 'someone else' might be the author him/herself. It might therefore be more of an exhortation to be correct themselves than an instruction.

It is important to follow in the academic writing ***a writing process****.*
… it ***would be then*** *injudicious …*
… and finally read ***critically*** *the specific part of the text.*
… the expression of ideas, ***research results presenting****, or information on paper …* (the presentation of research results)
Another crucial aspect of academic writing ***is references citing****.* (the citing of references/sources)
When writing more care is needed to meet the regulations without them the discourse might become confusing and not understandable. (two sentences conflated)
And lastly need fulfil the right formatting conventions as designed by the department or institution. (not a full sentence)
The process of obtaining information from a source and be able to understand the message the author wanted to convey. (not a full sentence)
Even though in both cases the ideas is to pass a massage through. (not a full sentence)
We need to explain the importance about in a university and why? (two sentence types conflated)
Check what is still missing for future investigations. (possible instruction)
Finally be a responsible writer by acknowledging the sources. (possible instruction)

7.3.3.2 Category 2 – Academic discourse

- **Formality**

The stylistic convention of formality of academic texts is one of the most frequent conditions not met by students. Students tend to use an informal register when a more formal register is required in the tertiary environment. I suspect that this issue can also to a large extent be related to a limited vocabulary in an additional language (in this case, English). Other examples appear to be related to students not connecting the context in which they write to the type of language used, in the sense that, for example, they might not realise that emotionally-loaded language is not usually acceptable in the tertiary academic environment. Similar to their use of contractions, students' possible exposure to other (more informal) written genres in different contexts might contribute to the apparent confusion about which register to use in the tertiary context. As already implied, it might also be the case that they have never been made aware of what exactly is meant by the 'formality' of academic language.

Therefore, if the message is not ***getting in*** *…*
The main important ***thing*** *…*
… organized ***&*** *purposeful …*
… do not ***go in line*** *with their levels …*
*Clarity above all****!***

*… and then there is the reading of graphic information, what a **hassle!***
*… enables students to **win** in their professions.*
*… in order **to go with** the pace …*
*… so that only the important **stuff** is absorbed …*
*… because the reading **goes with the brain**.*
*… which will **tell a little bit** about the topic …*
*… can help readers **to bring up** positive contribution to the academic world.*

- **Personalised writing**

Although the requirement of **impersonality** of academic writing appears to be inconsistently applied worldwide, it does still appear to find some application at universities internationally as well as at South African universities. Biber *et al.* (1999:333) indicate that:

> In academic prose, … human beings are a more marginal topic. News consistently has a higher frequency of pronouns with human reference than academic prose, because the actions and thoughts of people are frequently reported in news stories.

A further interesting finding by Biber *et al.* (1999) shows that where the frequency of use of the first person pronoun 'I' is negligible in academic prose, there is a stronger occurrence of the use of 'we/us'. The reason for this occurrence might be that when an academic writer prefers the plural pronoun 'we' rather than 'I', it tends to make the writing more impersonal with relation to the writer him/herself. However, if 'we' is used to include the reader, it has the opposite effect of making the writing more personal. The most important difficulty when students personalise their writing is that it is often used as a mechanism for not accepting the responsibility of substantiating claims that they make. It seems to be easier just to state that an idea is 'my opinion' and thus that it is open for contestation rather than making an effort to find the evidence that is normally required in this context.

*In this topic **we** meet one another …*
***I** am suggesting …*
*This brings **us** to the term academic literacy …*
*Everyone of **us** have their unique style of writing …*
*As postgraduate students **we** can all read and write otherwise **we** would not have made it this far!*

- **Use of contractions**

The convention of not using contractions in academic writing is a stylistic requirement that is still generally adhered to in the tertiary academic context. This requirement is to some extent connected to pronoun selection that is governed by the convention/condition of employing formal, impersonal language in academic writing. Biber *et al.* (1999:1128-1132) mention that although the use of both verb contractions (e.g. *it's*) and negative contractions (e.g. *it isn't*) is a feature of conversation (spoken language) primarily, written registers such as fiction and news (in their direct reporting of spoken discourse) also contain a degree of contraction use. In their corpus analysis findings, academic prose contains almost no contracted forms. It is interesting that students at postgraduate level still make these mistakes after extensive exposure to the tertiary academic environment. Variability in how this convention is applied in different writing contexts and disciplines might offer some explanation for the occurrence of this mistake.

> *… they **can't** fully share …*
> *… they **don't** want to spend …*
> *… **it's** an easy way …*

- **Redundancy/conciseness**

A number of texts show difficulties not only in students using repetitive terms, but also in lengthy descriptions and explanations that could have been expressed more concisely. This probably has to do with many additional language users' often limited vocabulary in the additional language, and that when they do not have access to specific words, they tend to offer a more extensive description in an attempt to express the same meaning.

> *… scientific paper **and as well as** exam.* (repetition of connector)
> *This includes looking for sources **which have done something in the area of concern** …* (on the topic)
> *In addition language structures and stylistic conventions are used for the accomplishment its effectiveness, **which render language effective**.* (repetition)

- **Referencing**

Referencing is another problematic issue in tertiary education in the sense that the use of referencing systems varies across disciplines. However, the most important principle of referencing that many students appear to misunderstand is that of internal consistency in the specific referencing systems used in their disciplines. In other words, they regularly do not consistently use a specific format required by a specific system. Part of the problem might also be their exposure to different ways of referencing and the accompanying uncertainty of what is appropriate in specific disciplines or contexts. Another problem which is perhaps more serious is that many students do not understand the general principle of citation. They often do not distinguish between finding evidence for their ideas/argumentation in the literature and acknowledging these ideas as such, and blatantly use the exact words (and ideas) of another author without providing the necessary recognition. In the following example, one specific student states that:

> *It is an obligation that a writer acknowledges the source of information used in his/her written document by referencing.*

The student referred to above failed to provide any references in what she wrote, either in the text or by including a list of references. The same student has made ample use of the exact sentences used in the prescribed reading for the text she had to write, without once indicating that they were someone else's words. Although only one example is mentioned here, this is a much more pervasive problem among the texts analysed.

- **General paragraphing problems**

Some students did not divide their texts into paragraphs at all. The impression of one never-ending idea makes such writing difficult to read, specifically in the case of more extensive texts. Apart from the structural issue of not including a clear introduction or conclusion in their writing, students also sometimes appear not to understand the function of these text components. Although one student for example

included a conclusion in her text, the conclusion was an exact (word by word) repetition of sentences in the body of the essay.

- **Difficulties with clarity of ideas/meaning and coherence**

Some students further show problems with regard to the accuracy and legitimacy of their ideas:

> *Readers get the message from a text in a very formal and objective manner.*
> *In simple terms, reading translates writing into sounds.*
> *… which cannot be changed but rather improved.* (is improvement not change?)
> *… it is intended for many academics who have no relationship with the writer.*
> *… the grammar is supposed to be correct and so should the spelling as well as language.*
> *A lot of literate people still cannot communicate their ideas due to poor writing skills.* (can they be called 'literate' then?)

Others use language in such a way that it is very difficult to make meaning of what they want to say:

> *Because in an academic environment, errors and mistakes can compromise credit over the audience.*
> *Academic writing does not have gestures, but it is the straight message.*
> *At this level reading is done with high mental understanding especial with grammar and spelling.*
> *… reacting to the message in different ways of language expressions.*
> *This could be informing of articles or assignments.*
> *Introduce an object or text that speaks to your interests in language and literacy.*

Other content type difficulties include the manner in which students sequence their ideas and the main sections of their essays, with some opting not to make use of the original sequence of the text they had to summarise. As a result, they lose the inherent logical progression of the original text that, in turn, causes problems of text coherence. In addition, some students have difficulty in determining the weight of the various components of the essay. It is almost as if such students came to a point where they thought that they had done enough, even though they have barely touched on some crucial sections of the work.

In their discussion of the main ideas, some students furthermore appear to have difficulty to judge how much it is necessary to elaborate on an idea not only in order for the idea to make sense, but also to connect ideas in a specific sequence. Often, one gets the impression of a bulleted list of ideas with no real connection rather than a flowing, well-argued piece of academic writing. In a related issue, one student made use of additional sources, but only strung a series of unrelated quotes together without any specific argument (the 'pearls of wisdom' approach). Also, students take ideas from sources that are discussed in a different context (like the school context) and apply such ideas without any realisation of their irrelevance in the context of tertiary education.

7.3.3.3 Category 3 – Presentation

- **Punctuation**

General punctuation mistakes occur frequently in the texts. Whereas the omission of full stops at the end of sentences might be a general oversight on the part of students, problems in the use of commas are often more strategic in the sense that it affects the flow of reading that either demands the text to be re-read, or that makes understanding cumbersome. One also regularly finds too many/too few spaces between punctuation marks and the rest of sentences/new sentences.

> *e.t.c.*
> *This would include* ***writing reading*** *and verbalizing …*
> *For* ***instance in*** *a given reading …*
> *For* ***example some*** *students take short notes …*

- **Spelling**

Spelling variants may be classified into two major types. The first is the systematic difference between the spelling of some words in American and British English. The important principle that students need to apply in this case is again one of consistency. Although British spelling seems to be preferred in South Africa, the consistent

application of the spelling for American English will not be incorrect. The second type is more obvious where students have simply misspelled an English word. It should be said that in both cases there is a very simple remedy available in the form of spell checkers on computer software. Spelling mistakes are inexcusable in the tertiary context, taking into account that the occurrence of misspelled words is mostly a sign of laxness on the side of students. The following are examples from student texts:

to day
ectcet-era
enviroment
short coming
there fore
reserch
distinguee
massage [message]

- **Layout**

A number of students show very little understanding of the visual appeal of the texts they write. It is almost as if they believe that once the ideas are on paper, that is all that matters. These students therefore appear to have little cognisance of the use of white space on paper, leaving some open space at the top and bottom of pages, leaving extra spaces between paragraphs and sections, being satisfied with jagged margins and generally showing very little regard for arranging text and graphics on paper. Many students also refrain from using a very basic organising strategy in not numbering either pages or headings.

The mistakes and limitations discussed above contribute in no small way to an overall impression of incoherence of many of these students' texts. The frequency of errors in some of the texts is so high that it is extremely difficult to work out the meaning that students wish to convey. Although many of the grammatical errors in students' texts could be edited out by a language editor, the obvious absence of any such editing is exactly what supervisors frequently object to. Students generally do not have their written texts edited before submission (for a variety of possible reasons), and supervisors complain that some texts are riddled with grammatical errors to such an

extent that they find it difficult to make meaning of the ideas. This analysis therefore emphasises that students in the study group have language proficiency inadequacies in the traditional sense when one considers the grammatical errors discussed here. They do, however, also show inadequacies with regard to applying the stylistic conventions of academic discourse (e.g. impersonality, formality, consistency of referencing), as well as with some ideational conditions of such discourse (e.g. making use of suitable evidence to substantiate claims).

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has emphasised that students in the study group experience difficulty with academic literacy on both receptive and productive levels. Difficulties on a receptive level were glaringly obvious when questions in TALL required that students used their functional interpretive abilities for text analysis. These difficulties were also echoed in the texts students produced with regard to their difficulty, firstly in locating the important information in the text and, secondly, deciding about the weighting (and sequence) of sections of their written texts in order to produce a well-balanced text that comprehensively covered the most important ideas in the text. Apart from issues that focus on the overall coherence of academic texts, students also showed inadequacies in correctly structuring sentences, making use of incoherent word order that sometimes seriously impaired the reader's ability to understand what they meant. This problem is also identified in TALL, where students scored the lowest on all sections for the section that focuses on text editing. This specific section also emphasises students' difficulty with English vocabulary (in spite of their self-reporting about how good they are in this respect), an issue that re-appears in the analysis of the written texts that they produced. Furthermore, students had considerable difficulty (both technically and conceptually) to incorporate textual evidence from an outside source into their own written texts.

The literacy difficulties identified in this analysis will be further explored in Chapter 9 that integrates the findings of Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 in a discussion of the implications of these findings for writing course design.