

# **A FRAMEWORK FOR COURSE DESIGN IN ACADEMIC WRITING FOR TERTIARY EDUCATION**

**H.G. Butler**

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D.Phil. Linguistics

In the Unit for Academic Literacy,

Faculty of Humanities

University of Pretoria

Supervisor: Prof. A.J. Weideman

**Pretoria**

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## Abstract

Academic writing is generally regarded as the most important communication medium through which people in the tertiary academic context choose to communicate their ideas. It is also well known that it is sometimes an arduous process for students to become accustomed to the requirements (the conventions and conditions) that hold for the production of appropriate written texts in this context. The initial impetus for the current study was provided by what appeared to be a significant problem that some supervisors at the University of Pretoria identified in terms of the academic writing ability of their postgraduate students.

This study therefore investigates postgraduate academic writing with regard to a number of such issues, and does so within the broader confines of academic literacy. The ultimate purpose of this investigation is to discover how writing interventions may be designed that offer appropriate assistance to students who experience difficulty with their writing.

The study commences with an attempt to find support for treating 'academic discourse' as a potentially productive area of academic enquiry. It therefore presents an account on the nature of a 'discourse community', and attempts to ascertain whether there are any grounds on which 'academic discourse' may be regarded as a unique type of discourse used for specific communicative functions in the tertiary academic environment. It further discusses critically some of the traditional features of academic texts.

The research then proposes thirteen design principles that serve as injunctions that should be considered in the development of writing courses, and proceeds to a critical discussion of the most important approaches in the teaching and learning of writing. What is evident from this discussion is that none of the historical approaches will, on their own, enable one to design justifiable writing courses. As a result, an eclectic approach is required in order to integrate the strengths of these approaches into a strategy for writing course design that is theoretically and practically justifiable.

Subsequently, the critical interpretation of the literature in the first part of the study is used in the design of a framework for writing course design in tertiary education. This framework consists of six focuses that stand in a relationship of dynamic interaction towards a description of the context in which tertiary students write. Thus, relevant aspects concerning the writer, text, reader, institutional context and one's approach to writing are all essential elements that should be carefully considered in terms of their potential influence on the eventual design of materials that will constitute a writing course.

The rest of the study consists of an application of the proposed framework that addresses firstly, the perceptions of supervisors at the University about the academic literacy ability of their postgraduate students, as well as their requirements for academic writing. It then proceeds to an investigation of a specific group of students' (from the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences) perceptions about their own academic literacy ability and a determination of their perceptions and expectations of academic writing at university. Because the information that was collected (by means of questionnaires) in both cases mentioned above is mainly perceptual in nature, it was considered essential to determine the academic literacy ability of students in the study group by means of a reliable testing instrument. A written text that these same students produced was further analysed in order to establish possible writing difficulties they experienced. In addition, it was important to confirm certain findings from the supervisor questionnaire, and more specific information had to be collected on particular writing issues that could inform discipline specific writing course design (this was accomplished through focus group interviews with supervisors of the School of Agricultural and Food Sciences).

A combination of all the prominent findings of the empirical work mentioned above, as well as insights gained in the literature survey, is then used to make justifiable suggestions for the design of writing course materials for students in the study group.

Finally, a number of issues were identified that could not be addressed by this study and, therefore, suggestions are made for future research that may investigate these matters.

**Key words:** academic discourse; academic literacy; academic English; academic writing; postgraduate writing; tertiary education; language support; language planning; ESL teaching and learning; ESP/EAP; didactics; methodology; writing approach; writing course design.

## Opsomming

Oor die algemeen word akademiese skryfwerk beskou as die belangrikste vorm van kommunikasie wat akademici in 'n tersiêre konteks gebruik om hul idees mee te kommunikeer. Dit is verder 'n bekende verskynsel dat dit somtyds vir studente 'n moeisame proses is om gewoon te raak aan die vereistes (die konvensies en kondisies) wat geld vir die skryf van aanvaarbare geskrewe tekste in hierdie konteks. 'n Beduidende probleem wat sommige studieleiers aan die Universiteit van Pretoria geïdentifiseer het in terme van die akademiese skryfvaardigheid van hulle nagraadse studente, het die aanvanklike stimulus vir hierdie studie gebied.

Gevolgtrek word hierdie studie nagraadse skryfvaardigheid in terme van 'n aantal belangrike skryfkwessies binne die meer omvattende konteks van akademiese geleerdheid. Die uiteindelige doel van die ondersoek is om te bepaal op watter wyse skryfintervensies ontwerp kan word wat gepaste ondersteuning kan bied aan studente wat sukkel met akademiese skryfwerk.

Die studie begin deur die begrip "akademiese diskoers" as 'n potensieel-produktiewe area van akademiese ondersoek te regverdig. Die aard van 'n "diskoersgemeenskap" word omskryf en daar word bepaal of daar enige grondslag is waarop "akademiese diskoers" beskou kan word as 'n unieke diskoers wat vir spesifieke kommunikatiewe funksies binne die tersiêre akademiese konteks gebruik word. Van die tradisionele kenmerke van akademiese tekste word ook krities bespreek.

Die studie stel verder dertien riglyne voor wat oorweeg moet word in die ontwerp van 'n skryfkursus. Dit word gevolg deur 'n kritiese bespreking van die belangrikste benaderings in die onderrig en leer van skryfvaardigheid. Wat duidelik blyk uit hierdie bespreking, is dat nie een van die historiese benaderings op sigself sal lei tot regverdigbare skryfkursusontwerp nie. Gevolgtrek is 'n meer eklektiese benadering nodig wat die relevante aspekte van verskillende benaderings integreer in 'n strategie vir kursusontwerp wat teoreties en prakties regverdigbaar is.

Die kritiese interpretasie van die literatuur in die eerste deel van die studie word daarna gebruik in die ontwerp van 'n raamwerk vir skryfkursusontwikkeling in tersiêre onderrig. Hierdie raamwerk bestaan uit ses fokusareas wat in 'n verhouding van dinamiese interaksie staan ten opsigte van 'n beskrywing van die tersiêre konteks waarbinne studente skryf. Belangrike aspekte rakende die skrywer, teks, leser, institusionele konteks sowel as 'n skryfbenadering, is dus essensiële aspekte wat deeglik oorweeg moet word met betrekking tot hul potensiële invloed op die uiteindelijke ontwerp van materiaal vir 'n skryfkursus.

Die res van die studie bestaan uit 'n toepassing van die voorgestelde raamwerk. Eerstens word studieleiers aan die Universiteit se persepsies oor die akademiese geletterdheidsvermoë van hulle nagraadse studente, sowel as die vereistes wat hulle stel vir akademiese skryfwerk, aangespreek. Vervolgens ondersoek die studie die persepsies van 'n spesifieke groep nagraadse studente (van die Fakulteit Natuur- en Landbouwetenskappe) oor hul eie akademiese geletterdheidsvermoë en daar word ook bepaal wat hul persepsies en verwagtinge is rakende akademiese skryfwerk op universiteitsvlak. Omdat die inligting (wat deur vraelyste versamel is) in beide hierdie gevalle perseptueel van aard is, is dit belangrik geag dat die studente se akademiese geletterdheidsvermoë deur 'n betroubare meetinstrument bepaal word. Daar is ook van dieselfde groep studente verwag om 'n geskrewe teks te produseer wat vervolgens geanaliseer is om moontlike probleemareas in die studente se skryfwerk te identifiseer. Dit was verder ook belangrik om sekere bevindinge uit die studieleiervraelyste te bevestig. Meer volledige inligting oor sekere skryfkewessies moes ook ingesamel word om sodoende die ontwikkeling van skryfkursusse vir spesifieke dissiplines te ondersteun (dit is bereik deur van fokusgroeponderhoude met studieleiers van die Skool vir Landbou- en Voedselwetenskappe gebruik te maak).

'n Kombinasie van al die prominente bevindinge uit die empiriese werk hierbo genoem, tesame met die insigte uit die literatuuroorsig, is gebruik om regverdigbare voorstelle te maak vir die ontwerp van skryfkursusmateriaal vir die studente in die studiegroep.

Ten slotte is 'n aantal kwessies geïdentifiseer wat nie deur hierdie studie aangespreek kon word nie en daarom word voorstelle vir verdere navorsing gemaak wat hierdie aangeleentheid kan ondersoek.

**Sleuteltermes:** akademiese diskoers; akademiese geletterdheid; akademiese Engels; akademiese skryfwerk; nagraadse skryfwerk; tersiêre onderrig; taalondersteuning; taalbeplanning; onderrig en leer van Engels Tweede Taal; Engels vir spesifieke doeleindes; Engels vir akademiese doeleindes; didaktiek; metodologie; skryfbenadering; skryfkursusontwikkeling.



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

### **1.1      Introduction**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### **1.4 Problem statement**

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

## **1.5 Aims of the study**

This study aims to:

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

1.5.2 investigate the academic writing difficulties of a specific group of postgraduate students from the School of Agricultural and Food Sciences (henceforth referred to as 'the study group') by:

- a. determining the English academic literacy levels of the study group through a standardised testing instrument (the Test of Academic Literacy Levels – TALL);
- b. analysing written texts produced by students in the study group; and
- c. exploring the literacy background of students in the study group and conducting an analysis of their writing needs and expectations.

1.5.3 determine the specific academic writing (and literacy) requirements of postgraduate studies offered at the University from the perspective of supervisors.

1.5.4 apply the developed framework in providing a number of proposals on the design of academic writing course materials for the study group.

## **1.6 Method of research**

The study will be structured in the following way:

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

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

## 1.6.2 Empirical research

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

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

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

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

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

## 1.7 Chapter division

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## 1.8 Conclusion

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

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

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

### **2.1      Introduction**

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

### 2.3 Reasoning in a tertiary academic context

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

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

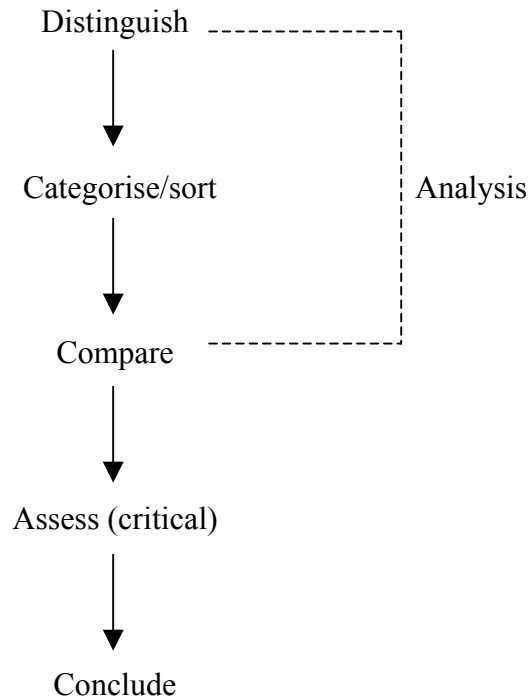
To this end Grabe and Kaplan (1996) argue that students in secondary education are not adequately exposed to writing that focuses on the transformation of knowledge. According to them a situation persists where:

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

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

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

**Figure 2.1 The cognitive process**



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### **2.4.1 Formality**

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

#### **2.4.4 Nominalization**

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

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

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

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

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

#### **2.4.5 Grammatical correctness**

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

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

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

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

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

### 2.4.7 Appropriate use of evidence

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

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

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

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

## **2.5 Conclusion**

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

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

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

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

## **CHAPTER 3                      The teaching and learning of academic writing**

### **3.1      Introduction**

This chapter discusses key issues and principles that are to inform the design and facilitation of academic writing interventions. As we have noted from the previous chapter, these issues will necessarily include those that inculcate in students a dynamic awareness of academic discourse norms and the necessary level of academic literacy to adapt their own use of language for different contexts in the tertiary academic environment.

According to Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis, and Swann (2003:12), there are three crucial issues that should be investigated in the teaching and learning of writing in higher education. They believe that lecturers teaching academic writing should:

- a) identify the kinds of language use with which students need to become familiar in order to write successfully in higher education (cf. Chapter 2);
- b) make these uses available to students in ways which enhance their learning and motivation for writing and participating in higher education; and
- c) find ways of building on students' existing knowledge of and uses of language.

Because these issues emphasise the context of writing in higher education, they may be used as a structuring guideline for the ensuing discussion of important issues in the teaching and learning of academic writing. The first issue above addresses the type of discourse to be produced within a tertiary context. The second issue emphasises the learning process and environment and the third, the learner and what he/she brings to the learning context. The following discussion addresses the needs of the learner first and subsequently focuses on textual and contextual requirements for academic writing. However, as we will note below, at times it is necessary to combine features from different focal points as a result of their interrelated nature.



### **3.2 Key issues in the teaching and learning of academic writing**

The following section deals with a number of crucial considerations in the design and facilitation of writing interventions. These issues are articulated below in the form of injunctions – requirements or conditions if you wish – which function as principles for writing course design. This articulation therefore places this study squarely within the field of applied linguistics as defined by Weideman (2007), i.e. as a field which brings various defensible principles to bear upon the design of a solution to a particular language problem. By this measure, such interventions should typically:

#### **3.2.1 Include an accurate determination of students' current levels of academic literacy**

Any intervention that aims to develop students' abilities in academic writing should have access to ways of determining students' levels of ability in regard to academic literacy and writing.

A discrete item testing instrument might yield useful information about overall academic literacy. It may, for instance, indicate the student's competence in making a text coherent, or recognising different types of text, or assess how well the student reads graphs and diagrammatic representations of information, or express whether the student can distinguish between essential and non-essential information, or has the ability to know what counts as evidence, recognise ambiguity, classify, categorise and compare, has the level of required academic vocabulary, and so forth (cf. Weideman, 2003c; Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004a; Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004b; Weideman, 2006a). All of these are competencies that are useful also to writing, or at least are pre-supposed and taken for granted before one ventures into academic writing. This kind of assessment has the advantage of indeed measuring academic literacy reliably (cf. statistics on the reliability of 7 different versions of TALL [average  $\alpha = 0.93$ ] in Weideman, 2006a). It might, however, not be the most useful or only measure of the specific ability to write.

The act of writing a longer academic text involves a synthesis of everything that students can possibly access in terms of knowledge and information processing and

production strategies with regard to academic discourse, and the context in which it is performed. All these different abilities interact in complex ways when students are asked to produce a longer, essay-type piece of writing. Most probably, the best way to determine whether students can produce an appropriate and coherent longer type text is to let them do just that, viz. produce such a text. By doing this one can also establish what strategies they use in the production of such a text, by, for example, allowing them ample time to revise their text in any manner they wish in response to feedback. The first copy and the revised copy could then give one a very good idea of students' levels of academic writing ability, as well as their writing behaviours regarding the construction of texts. Though perhaps not as reliable in terms of empirical analyses as an objectively-scored instrument, this is the kind of assessment instrument that intuitively is more credible and appealing.

It is, moreover, not only important for writing educators to be aware of students' levels of writing ability, but also what levels of such ability are required at specific stages in a student's studies.

### **3.2.2 Include an accurate account of the understandings and requirements of lecturers/supervisors in specific departments or faculties regarding academic writing**

The planning and design of academic writing interventions should determine what exactly are understood to be both surface features (such as style) as well as underlying rhetorical characteristics of academic discourse in the disciplinary context concerned. According to Johns (1990), the reader of texts contributes to its coherence with what he/she brings to the reading context. She notes that according to English second language (ESL) reading literature: "Coherence is ... established through the fit between the schemata of the reader (audience) and the organisation, content, and argument of the text" (Johns, 1990:30). If one accepts this argument, it follows that a crucial part of any course on academic writing should be working towards a match between the texts that students produce and what their lecturers/supervisors expect from such texts (i.e. how they will read them). Investigating what lecturers expect in this regard therefore stands central to such an endeavour. Such an investigation evidently includes a thorough determination of the stylistic/textual conventions that

are valued in specific disciplines, and productive ways of raising student awareness and command of such conventions.

### **3.2.3 Engage students' prior knowledge and abilities in different literacies to connect with academic literacy in a productive way**

Students do not arrive at the university as empty vessels. All students have been exposed to some literacy context for an extended period of time. It often happens, however, that the differences between literacies practised in other cultural and social contexts and tertiary academic literacy are so significant that students find it difficult to cope with academic literacy at a tertiary level. It is now generally agreed (cf. Gee, 1998) that interventions that focus on academic discourse should utilise other literacies by building scaffolding into courses, in order to lead students from their own literacies to tertiary academic literacy (cf. also Nunan, 1991). Thesen (1998), for example, reports on the design and use of English for academic purposes (EAP) materials at the University of the Western Cape. A central principle in these materials is the importance of validating "other literacy practices with which students may have come into contact" (Thesen, 1998:46). Materials that foreground a comparison between different registers and genres, for example, give students the opportunity to use their prior knowledge as a framework with which to approach tertiary academic literacy.

### **3.2.4 Consider learners' needs (and wants) as a central issue in academic writing**

Although students might not yet be aware of their specific academic writing needs, it is very important that they get the opportunity to share what they think their needs might be (wants). This will help course designers/writing instructors determine what students give priority to when they think about academic writing. It might therefore be possible to make productive use of ideas generated by students in group/individual discussions about academic discourse and academic writing in both the design and implementation of writing courses.

The amount and type of support or 'scaffolding' offered to students will depend, to a large extent, on their specific needs. Coffin *et al.* (2003:12) note that: "For successful

scaffolding to take place, lecturers need to know where the student is starting from and aiming for in the process of learning."

### **3.2.5 Create a learning environment where students feel safe to explore and find their own voices in the academic context**

As has already been noted, students new to the tertiary academic environment often find its conventions and culture alien to what they know and are used to. Lecturers and textbooks are often placed on a pedestal, as if these are not to be touched by critical inquiry. What one finds in a textbook and what the lecturer says are mostly seen as the truth and therefore not to be questioned. In this context, tertiary institutions negate one of their most basic objectives, namely nurturing critical, individual problem solvers. Furthermore, students also sometimes admit to using the words of sources exactly as they find them because of the blind respect discussed above, as well as being scared that they would misrepresent what the source says (cf. also Leibowitz, 2005 on this topic).

Angelil-Carter (2000:157) suggests that what many educators often see as plagiarism is most probably part of the process of development for beginning writers trying to find their feet (or own voice) in the academic world. Many such novice writers usually do not intentionally set out to deceive. According to her, while imitation is a crucial part of the learning process, an unbending perception of plagiarism 'criminalizes' imitation (also see discussion under section 2.4.7).

Plagiarism is, however, one of the scourges of the academy. One could define plagiarism as *ideas/words copied directly from some source without acknowledging that source, as a result of a person not wanting to make the effort (or not having the time due to bad planning) to engage fully with a problem in terms of working out its solution for him/herself*. It would make sense that students are gradually introduced to contexts in which they should increasingly make use of sources in order to substantiate what they say. A good starting point could be for beginning students to understand that: "academic writers often summarise and synthesise the work of others" and this might "help students overcome the idea that citing sources is tantamount to admitting that the work is not their own" (Coffin *et al.* 2003:27). As

Angelil-Carter (2000:168) points out: "Gaining authority in academic writing means learning how to use the voices of others to develop one's own."

Townsend (2000) further argues that one should not test students beyond their limits with regard to assignment/essay topics. If these are too difficult for students, one is actually setting them up for failure, because they will most probably plagiarise pieces of texts from sources in order to get the assignment done. It may further be extremely helpful for novice writers if one could provide some scaffolding as to how topics could be tackled.

The majority of new students who arrive at South African universities have most probably been exposed to learning situations in which they either wrote from personal experience, or they wrote assignments from a single source, usually either the subject textbook or a similarly significant text. Angelil-Carter (2000:165) notes that many students in the South African tertiary context have "had very little previous experience in writing from multiple sources." Regarding this issue, Makhubela (2000) emphasises the need for learners to develop their ability to access information from different sources for the purpose of solving problems with such information. She refers to this ability as 'information literacy'. Being 'information literate' implies that students need to know which types of sources they can consult for writing assignments. They should also be able to judge the relative value of specific types of sources with regard to their potential contribution in a tertiary environment. In addition, they need information seeking strategies that would enable them to find the most up to date information on any specific topic. This type of literacy surely holds serious implications for how learners situate themselves in the context of an information society that strives towards a culture of life-long learning. In other words, apart from the obvious problems they will experience in an environment that is characterised by a culture of seeking information, it is doubtful whether students who have difficulty in finding relevant information and who struggle to judge the contextual usefulness of information, will attempt to keep up to date with developments in their disciplines when they enter the world of work after completion of their studies.

### **3.2.6 Give careful consideration to the most appropriate mode for teaching and learning academic writing**

Due consideration must be given to the most productive approach in teaching academic writing to **groups** of students generally, but also more specifically, large groups of students. Tertiary institutions in South Africa are experiencing what is referred to as the 'massification' of higher education. This phenomenon is, however, not restricted to South Africa. Coffin *et al.* (2003:5) note that the massification of tertiary education is an international phenomenon. Therefore: "Many institutions have larger class sizes, fewer opportunities for small group teaching (such as seminars and tutorials) and – of specific relevance to student writing – little time for lecturers to comment on students' written work." It thus seems inevitable that tertiary institutions will have to cope with an ever-increasing number of students in classes, and will have to find creative ways of dealing with this issue, especially for literacy courses that are by nature supposed to be largely interactive.

In a general lecturing context with large groups of students, individual tutoring would be largely impractical when one considers the often limited resources available at tertiary institutions. In academic literacy classes, lecturers regularly have to deal with very large groups of students (e.g. 50-100 students on average in first year classes at the UP). There is, therefore, very little time in class to attend to the individual needs of students. Although lecturers can be consulted in their personal capacity, 2 hours of consultation time per week is not really adequate considering the number of students with difficulties, as well as the frequency and intensity of some of these problems. A tutor system where senior students can be consulted by individual novice writers – as is the current plan in the UP - does, however, hold potential for such writers receiving quality individualised input. But the quality depends largely on the quality of the tutors. The less experienced and the less able the tutors are, the more likely it is that quality will be compromised. In a postgraduate context, however, the specific problem of inadequate individualised attention found at undergraduate level is less severe, because writing instructors usually deal with smaller groups of students.

Individual tutoring is one of the more productive approaches in the improvement of student writing, since practical, individualised feedback can be provided to students

and misunderstandings and ambiguity clarified in a feedback-driven context. The operation of established writing centres at tertiary institutions across the world usually emphasises the importance of individual writing consultation. Students typically visit the writing centre either out of own choice or after having been referred to the centre by teaching staff. Such writing consultation also regularly includes writing centre staff working with departmental staff to address the specific writing needs of students from various disciplines. Although writing centres have proved to be one of the more productive approaches to writing development in recent times, it is also one of the more expensive options. In a context where it is expected of tertiary institutions to 'do more with less', the one-on-one consultative basis of writing support at writing centres may be considered an expensive luxury. However, if tertiary institutions can afford to establish a writing centre, such a concept may be productively integrated with that of separate writing courses offered to students in respect of offering additional, individualised assistance to such students. According to Moore, Paxton, Scott and Thesen (1998:15):

The Writing Centre [at the University of Cape Town] was established as one of a range of educational interventions that would address the differing language needs of a diverse student body. It was thus seen as complementary to initiatives like EAP (and others yet to come), recognising that language difficulties (especially as they are apparent in student writing) are not the sole preserve of underprepared students, and that a variety of provisions is needed to cater for a variety of needs.

Importantly, a writing centre can provide academic writing support to those students who experience difficulty with specific aspects of academic writing but are not necessarily perceived to be 'at risk' with regard to their level of academic literacy. These students are typically not catered for by the formal curriculum at universities with respect to academic writing support.

### **3.2.7 Determine whether primary and additional language users should be treated differently in writing interventions**

One should carefully consider whether there should be significant differences between academic writing courses designed for primary language users and those designed for additional language users, based on research findings on similarities and differences between these two groups of learners. Grabe and Kaplan (1996:1) state that: "There are ... significant differences between the two groups of learners, since there are wide

variations in learner issues within each of these major groups." These researchers further suggest that although ample research evidence is available in native language research on writing, research on the writing of additional language users is in many respects not nearly adequate. Available research has shown (Van der Slik & Weideman, 2006) that first language users are quicker in acquiring academic discourse than additional language users, probably because of the additional advantage of a relatively sound foundation in the native language. Regarding group composition for instructional purposes, one should therefore investigate the feasibility of combining mother tongue and additional language users to be exposed to a writing intervention as one group of students. Obviously an issue such as the pace of a writing course may have implications for learning. Quicker learners may, therefore, become impatient and frustrated if the pace of the course is too slow. In such a context, quicker learners will have to be productively engaged in, for example, offering assistance to slower learners in group work sessions, thereby also reinforcing their own learning.

### **3.2.8 Provide ample opportunity to develop revision and editing skills**

Research on writing practised as a process, as well as research on text construction (see Grabe & Kaplan, 1996), suggests that revision and editing as interconnected strategies stand central to the development of students' writing ability in a tertiary context. Student writers need to develop the ability to think critically about the texts they are writing with regard to its overall structure, development of argument and the appropriateness of the language and style used for the academic context. They should also be able to distance themselves from their own texts and be able to judge whether they have used sources appropriately and in a balanced way. Much of this ability will, however, relate to what knowledge students have about language in general, and academic discourse in particular.

### **3.2.9 Acknowledge assessment and feedback as central to course design**

Assessment types and practices in writing courses have central implications for teaching methodology as well as course content. When one considers that summative assessment usually takes place near or at the end of a course, developmental types of



assessment during a course (formative assessment) have a pivotal role in preparing students for summative assessment opportunities. The main purpose of formative assessment in the writing context is therefore that it is used as a teaching instrument "to help students improve their work rather than measure their achievements" (Coffin *et al.* 2003:76).

According to Starfield (2000), it often happens that the assessment of writing is relegated to an afterthought once the bulk of a course has been designed. She notes that: "Assessment should be conceived of as an integral part of course design and development and not 'bolted-on' at the end" (Starfield, 2000:103). She further notes that 'front-loading' assessment – or awarding time and effort at the outset, reflecting on and specifying the criteria which will be used to assess the students and the outcomes one would like, and by communicating these clearly to students – could go far in addressing the gap that often exists between what and how something is taught in courses and how this is assessed.

Another concept that impacts on assessment is that of the immediacy of writing. It would be unfair to expect of low ability academic writers to produce written texts of similar quality in contexts that allow little time for revision. If one considers, for example, the ample additional time usually available for revision and editing in essay-type writing tasks, one cannot really compare a text produced in such a context to a more immediate type text produced in the context of examination or test writing. Where deadlines are specified in minutes, and not in days or weeks, the urgency of completion necessarily impacts on the quality of the finished product.

The importance of a careful consideration of exactly what is to be the focus of assessment opportunities where academic writing is expected of students is highlighted by the research of Van der Riet, Dyson and Quinn (1998). These authors suggest that because second-year students in Psychology at Rhodes University are not exposed to 'appropriate' writing assignments, their metacognitive and epistemic thinking abilities are not being adequately developed. This 'appropriateness' of writing assignments relates very strongly to decisions made beforehand about what strategies and knowledge are to be developed (and assessed) in students, and then setting assignments according to such information. It follows that closer contact

between writing course developers/consultants and departmental staff can lead to productive collaboration regarding the writing done for specific disciplines.

Apart from lecturer assessment, other types of assessment such as peer and self-assessment have a crucial role in the writing classroom. The main purpose of processes of peer and self-assessment in student writing is to

expose students to situations in which through 'applying, purposefully, criteria of worth that they need to develop in their own work' to the work of others, they begin to internalise these criteria and apply them in their own work. Furthermore, students begin to appreciate the complex process of drafting and redrafting which underlies successful writing (Starfield, 2000:113).

The aim of self-assessment as a crucial skill for any student in higher education is to "develop learners who are able to accurately evaluate their own performance, reflect on areas of strength and weakness and where improvement is needed, so that over time students take greater degrees of responsibility for their learning, and can transfer these skills to a work environment" (Starfield, 2000:114). Even more so, self-assessment is central to the postgraduate endeavour where students' texts are in a constant process of revision until the final draft is presented for formal assessment.

Assessment practices should be transparent to the point of enabling students to work out the exact requirements of specific tasks. It is therefore important that, although alternative/innovative ways of assessing students might be perceived as pedagogically progressive, one should always ensure the transparency of assessment criteria. This view is supported by Coffin *et al.* (2003:75) when they note that while

innovative assessment practices may be desirable in their own terms, they may be unfamiliar to students and inconsistent with practices elsewhere. This tension suggests that innovation needs to be balanced against consistency; that there needs to be continuing dialogue between lecturers on related courses; and that assessment practices require explicit discussion with students.

Feedback opportunities that are created by assessment should, as far as possible, provide a non-threatening context for learning. Therefore, after the identification of the features of academic discourse that one would like to develop in students' writing, it may be more productive to reward the presence of such features, rather than

constantly emphasising their absence. One can therefore build on the students' strengths and not merely punish them for what they cannot do.

Discussions among writing educators indicate that although feedback on student writing might be given with the best of intentions, exactly the opposite is often achieved from what the educator actually wanted. In fact, there is a whole literature on the disadvantages of harping on error correction (cf. Truscott, 1996; 2004), and on the damage that this may do by inhibiting, rather than encouraging the production of academic text. Students regularly feel frustrated and disheartened by the feedback they receive on written assignments. There is thus a strong need to balance positive and negative feedback to students, because feedback is usually a judgement on the worth or value of what students accomplish and, as a result, strongly affective. Seen in this light, the provision of feedback is not only about being comprehensive and offering the appropriate feedback at the appropriate time, but also about how this feedback might influence the student affectively who produced the written assignment.

Although grammatical correctness is non-negotiable in the academic context, Parkerson (2000:125) suggests that it is helpful to "provide feedback only on grammatical errors that obscure meaning, and to encourage surface editing only when the student is close to the end of the writing process." Furthermore, she notes that although students need to know what they do wrong, it is as important with reference to positive affect for students to know what they are doing right. Writing educators would therefore do well in maintaining a careful balance in their comments on student writing, and not just criticise a piece of writing for its inadequacies. Yet, it is critical for students to develop their ability in noticing their own mistakes as well as those of others. Good course design should enable students to learn about the conventions of academic writing and to mobilise such knowledge about language in order to monitor the appropriateness and correctness of their own texts (also see the section on the inclusion of grammar in writing courses). Of course, there is always the question of whether students are at the right level to make such knowledge their own and utilise and apply it. So course design alone will not ensure its proper application after uptake: one also needs a lecturer who is tuned into the students' specific needs and

capacities to learn, at every stage in the instruction of writing. The aim must always be to make instruction affect both learning and acquisition.

Of further importance is the notion that if written assignments "are only discussed after having been fully marked, that is, corrected and allotted a mark, the students tend to simply want to 'put them away'" (Menck, 2000:226). It is therefore clear that the idea of writing as a process and offering appropriate feedback at the correct stage within this process is crucial for providing digestible feedback on students' academic writing.

### **3.2.10 Provide relevant, contextualised opportunities for engaging in academic writing tasks that students feel contribute towards their development as academic writers in the tertiary context**

An issue that relates to the existence of sub-discourse communities, is whether academic literacy (and more specifically, writing) courses should make use of subject-related materials in order to teach discipline-specific academic discourse. To this end, Harwood and Hadley (2004:12) observe that: "... appropriate corpora will reveal that it is dangerous as well as inaccurate to speak of accepting or flouting conventions without first considering the discipline in question." Coffin *et al.* (2003) are convinced that the most productive way to facilitate the development of academic writing is discipline-specific. They maintain that because writing differs across disciplines in the tertiary academic context, students are finding it difficult to meet the writing requirements in several different areas (Coffin *et al.*, 2003). Jackson (1995:157) also supports the notion that teaching such discourse must arise out of the content of the specific discipline. In contrast, Blanton (1998) maintains that it should not, since it is not the field of writing (language) specialists. The question that remains, then, is what content should be used that would engage the students' interest. Unfortunately, 'remedial' language classes carry with them much negative baggage that is not usually part of other courses that students **choose** to do. This very strongly influences how motivated students are in doing what they perceive as a remedial, and therefore often stigmatised, language course. I would rather argue that English for specific purposes (ESP) or English for academic purposes (EAP) courses provide an opportunity for the language expert to engage with the literacy requirements of other

fields, and although the language person might not have expert knowledge in such a field, he/she may still occupy students productively with a focus on language learning.

When one considers the importance of motivation in learning, providing a context that includes learning material that is perceived by students as contributing purposefully to their studies, is obviously central. Kutz (1998:41), for example, observes that "language learners will ... learn out of communicative need, in real contexts in which language is pushed by meaning."

### **3.2.11 Include productive strategies that achieve a focus on language form**

The issue of the inclusion or not of grammar in language courses still sparks heated debate among the language teaching fraternity. There is, however, increasing evidence for the positive effects of a focus on form in language learning. Long and Crookes (1992), for example, have argued that timely, selective attention on specific classes of linguistic items (a focus on **form**) is advantageous for language development. This does not, however, amount to a renewed focus on language **forms** (in the traditional structural sense of the word), but rather "the use of pedagogic tasks and other methodological options which draw students' attention to aspects of the target language code" (Long & Crookes, 1992:43).

In the context of academic writing, however, the ability to recognise one's own errors in writing is developed over an extended period of time through engaging in consciousness-raising activities about academic discourse. Academic writing courses would do well in providing such consciousness-raising opportunities to students in the form of, for example, peer editing of fellow students' writing, but also in students assessing their own writing according to specific guidelines. Lecturer feedback that focuses on grammar also appears to have a positive effect on student rewriting of texts (Fathman & Whalley, 1990:185). These researchers found that: "... writing accuracy does increase with teacher feedback that gives the location of grammar errors" (Fathman & Whalley, 1990:186). However, it should be emphasised again that the issue of error correction is part of a continuing debate that, at this stage, still reveals conflicting views on its effectiveness.

It is obvious that before one can devise a strategy for the inclusion of a focus on language form in writing courses, one should establish what learners' difficulties are regarding correctness in their use of academic discourse. It is further also important to know what specific language structures dominate academic discourse, so that selective attention could be given to such structures, should meaningful opportunities arise for doing so. A clear description of the linguistic features of academic discourse is essential in an endeavour to address correctness in writing.

### **3.2.12 Support and encourage the use of technology in writing**

It is unlikely that students will subscribe to a process/multiple-draft approach to writing (as is supported by this study) if they need to rewrite assignments a number of times and do this by hand. If the technology of word-processing programmes is available on computer, why not make use of it? Such technology also offers devices such as spell checkers that can be used productively in achieving the desired level of correctness in student writing.

### **3.2.13 Focus on the interrelationship between different language abilities in the promotion of writing**

In the tertiary academic context, it is impossible to discuss the process of academic writing without referring to academic reading as well. Before writing a first draft of an assignment, students usually need to gather information by consulting the latest literature on the topic. A crucial question is how students can be persuaded to practice 'deep reading' rather than 'surface reading' when collecting information for the assignment. According to Prosser and Webb (1993:9), deep reading has the potential of students actually forming a view on the assignment question, while surface reading is done just for the purpose of collecting facts and quotes. This is directly related to how students perceive essay writing in a specific field (in this case sociology) as being multi-structural - the essay as a collection of points, each related to the topic, but not contributing to a whole view of the topic, or relational – where the essay is seen as an argument and issues are included because they contribute to the coherence of the argument and not just because of some vague relation to the question (also see the discussion on hybrid approaches to writing in section 3.3 below).

### 3.3 Approaches in the development of writing

Grabe and Kaplan (1996) provide a comprehensive overview of research trends and educational practice in the teaching and learning of writing. These researchers come to the conclusion that:

The overall picture emerging from the various research approaches and their different translations into writing practice is that there is some disagreement as to what will be the most appropriate curriculum for writing instruction (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996:33).

According to Coffin *et al.* (2003:9), there are mainly three approaches to the teaching of writing worldwide (cf. also Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). These approaches can be divided into:

- 1) product (text) approaches;
- 2) process approaches; and
- 3) writing as social practice.

Although similar in most instances to the above classification, Ivanič (2004:220-245) distinguishes between six 'discourses' or approaches to writing and writing pedagogy (cf. Weideman, 2007). She suggests that writing and writing pedagogy can be divided into a **skills discourse** (regularly discussed as the product approach), a **creativity discourse** and a **process discourse** (often confusingly conflated as both forming part of a process approach), a **genre discourse** (which will be discussed in this section regarding its affinity to the context of the writing event), and a **social practices and socio-political discourse** (mostly combined under writing as social practice). In her comprehensive discussion of these discourses, Ivanič proposes that a view of writing development that does not take into account all six these discourses will lead to an impoverished view of writing development. As one of the 'hybrid approaches' that strives to combine a number of distinct approaches towards addressing the writing issue, her proposal will be discussed under section 3.3.4 in this chapter.

There is no doubt, however, as Badger and White (2000) assert, that the last 20 years or so have been dominated by product and process approaches to the development of writing. The emergence of process approaches was mainly a result of a reaction

against specific insufficiencies of product approaches, just as the development of writing as a social construct in recent times was a reaction against the overemphasised focus of process approaches on the individuality of the writer.

Developments in how the teaching and learning of writing are approached have, to some extent, also been influenced by the most influential theories on language (but not necessarily on how languages are acquired and learnt) at specific times in the development of writing. Product approaches can trace their origins to the structural linguistic analyses of the text as product and an overemphasis on the form of language. Process approaches are aligned with more communicative and task-based proposals to language teaching where explanations about the structures of language (grammatical aspects) may sometimes be neglected in favour of communicative activities. Approaches that focus on writing as social practice may be traced to critical linguistics research that focuses on the social context in which language is used, while genre approaches can trace their history to systemic functional grammar as well as language for specific purposes (LSP) and English for academic purposes (EAP) (also see Grabe & Kaplan, 1996 for an extensive discussion on the development of these approaches).

A recurring problem that faces academic writing course designers is that, although criticism can be levelled against most approaches to the teaching and learning of writing, crucial aspects can be identified in all of them that are either not included in the others, or that are not given enough emphasis in other approaches. Although Weideman (2003a) argues against what could be called an indiscriminate eclecticism in the inclusion of 'bits and pieces' from every theory, method and approach into one chaotic whole, this decision seems more complicated in the development of writing. The choice about which approach to use in one's own practice and context might focus primarily on one approach, but will probably have to include features of the other approaches as well. This seems, in fact, to be indicated by the very history of various approaches to writing, in that they display continuities with what went before, as well as discontinuities. The point is not that eclecticism is bad, one approach good, of course. It is that the combination may result in contradictions in one's own approach, destroying its integrity, and that a too glib combination may fail to exploit the really useful elements of an approach (the truly new ideas it embodies), i.e. the



discontinuities. If one wants to include features of more than one approach in one's own, it therefore stands to reason that such a combination must be a reasoned and defensible one. The evaluation of such a combination will involve, in general terms, the extent to which it conforms to the criteria implicit to the three crucial issues articulated at the beginning of this chapter (Coffin *et al*, 2003:12): (1) whether the approach utilises relevant and appropriate **language** (use); (2) whether it enhances learners' **acquisition** of academic discourse; and (3) whether the **instruction** makes such learning possible. Specifically, the approach will have to make a combination that conforms to the thirteen requirements set out in 3.2 above.

There have been various proposals for how some approaches to the teaching and learning of writing can be combined to achieve the more effective functioning of such instruction. These proposals will be dealt with in section 3.3.4. Before we turn to these, the most prominent earlier approaches are first discussed and evaluated in the section below.

### 3.3.1 Product (text) approaches

According to Coffin *et al.* (2003:11), much emphasis has in the past been placed on 'text as product' in the teaching of writing in higher education. The focus of such teaching has included an emphasis on the correctness of textual aspects such as spelling, text structure, vocabulary and style. Text approaches are therefore mainly concerned with the different types of **knowledge** necessary for coherent and appropriate writing. Such research tends to focus on analyses of the written text and, more recently, on how texts are constructed. A great body of textlinguistic research is available that focuses on the surface/syntactic level of texts: syntactic analyses of texts, corpus research, the informational structure of sentences, and the cohesion of texts all tend to emphasise the text that comes about as a result of what the writer knows about language as well as the written mode of language. Because of the emphasis of early versions of text-based approaches on the text as product, there was obviously not much focus on how the learner/writer actually got to the point of producing an appropriate academic text:

In short, product-based approaches see writing as mainly concerned with knowledge about the structure of language, and writing development as mainly the result of the imitation of input, in the form of texts provided by the teacher (Badger & White, 2000:153).

More recently, however, product or text-based approaches have emphasised the analysis of different established genres (also sometimes loosely referred to as text types) in academic writing, such as essays, laboratory reports, dissertations, etc. A genre approach will often include making explicit to students the textual requirements of different genres. Different genres will, therefore, be analysed together by instructors and students with regard to, for instance, the rhetorical purpose of the text and the relationship between writer and reader. Although genre approaches show some similarity to product approaches, they will be discussed in detail under the section focusing on writing as a social construct, since their affinity with writing and its social context can be seen as potentially their most productive characteristic feature.

### **3.3.2 Process approaches to writing**

The second approach that is prominent in research on writing focuses on the process in which writers engage when constructing written texts. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) distinguish between an expressive, a cognitive, and a social-context stage in the writing process approach. Although these authors include a focus on the social context of writing under a process approach, this stage is discussed separately in the next section because of its recent and substantial influence on writing research.

According to Coffin *et al.* (2003:10), process writing "emerged from the individualist, expressivist impulse popular throughout education in the 1960s and 1970s, and parts of it retain much currency today." The expressive approach (what Ivanič, 2004 refers to as the 'creativity discourse') mainly involved expert writing practitioners relaying to novice writers what 'worked well' for them in their composing of texts. Advice given to novice writers often amounted to advocating "that writers [should] look for their authentic voices and be able to express themselves freely. ... Writers should let their natural voices speak out" (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Although the expressive approach has been criticised on the grounds that it is mainly concerned with isolated, individual

writers and how their identities are expressed through their writing, and that it largely ignores the social context (and what is appropriate in such contexts) in which this writing is done, this approach has provided important input for more scientifically based approaches to the writing process. In fact, one of the continuities of later approaches to writing with earlier ones lies exactly in a more sophisticated, typified notion of 'voice' (cf. Zamel, 1998; Blanton, 1998).

Within the range of process approaches to writing, one also finds the cognitive approach, which focuses on providing cognitive accounts for the writing process. Influential research on providing a cognitive model for the writing process is that of Flower and Hayes (as discussed in Grabe & Kaplan, 1996:91-92). This model divides the composition process into three components: the composing processor; the task environment; and the writer's long-term memory. The composing processor generates the ideas and consists of the processes of planning, translating and reviewing. In the planning process, the writer generates ideas, organises information and sets goals. When writers create texts, they therefore translate the ideas previously generated into language that is then revised in a cyclical manner. This model focuses attention on how writers behave cognitively when creating written texts.

In general writing practice one finds a third model, that takes a more practically oriented view of the writing process, and attempts to explain what writers do when they construct texts. This view emphasises the productive use of writing strategies that could be equated to different stages of the writing process. Advocates of this and other interpretations of a process approach also emphasise writing as a process of learning (or writing to learn), through which ideas and arguments are developed. Such an approach would typically promote the practice of writing as a partly sequential, partly cyclical process that includes steps such as defining the problem/topic, prewriting, gathering information, analysing and synthesising information, writing a first draft, multiple revisions of drafts and editing a final draft. Coffin *et al.* (2003:41) note that: "A key aspect of process writing approaches is the importance of seeking and responding to the feedback of others while a text is under development." A typical description of a writing process can be found in Diagram 1, taken from a communications course for engineering students.

**Figure 3.1 The writing process**

<p><b>Step 1 – THINK</b></p> <p>↓</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Think about your purpose in writing, your audience, and the register you will need to use.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Step 2 – GATHER</b></p> <p>↓</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gather information, which could come from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Research</li> <li>Lectures</li> <li>Reading</li> <li>Your own knowledge and ideas</li> <li>Problem solving</li> <li>Discussion</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Step 3 – SYNTHESISE AND STRUCTURE</b></p> <p>↓</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Synthesise the information you have gathered.</li> <li>• Structure it logically (plan), using the appropriate format, e.g. for a report.</li> </ul>
<p>▶ <b>Step 4 – DRAFT</b></p> <p>↓</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write a first draft (including graphics).</li> <li>• Re-draft (many drafts might be necessary before you have an acceptable final version).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Step 5 – REVISE</b></p> <p>↓</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask yourself: <p><b>Assessment guide</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Is the register appropriate to the audience?</li> <li>Has an appropriate format been used?</li> <li>Is the argument logically structured and cohesive (have connectors been well used)?</li> <li>Are graphics clear and accurate?</li> <li>Is the information accurate; are opinions supported by evidence?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Go back to the beginning, if necessary.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Step 6 – EDIT</b></p> <p>↓</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Step 7 – FINAL VERSION</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write or type your final version neatly.</li> </ul>

(Kotecha, 1994:24)

Writing is therefore seen as a recursive process in which a written text is reworked any number of times by an author (often in response to outside comment) towards a closer approximation of typically academic appropriateness and acceptability. This approach to writing is also sometimes referred to as a multiple draft approach.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to make a distinction between process writing and the writing process. While process writing focuses more on the writer and how he/she makes use of writing as a strategy to learn, the writing process refers to the model(s) consisting of specific steps/stages that writers are supposed to go through in their creation of texts. According to Leibowitz (2000:23), "the idea that writing supports learning is at the heart of the notion of writing as a 'process'". This approach stands in contrast with views that emphasise writing as 'product', since it emphasises not the single product, but the construction of several products in various stages of completion or acceptability. An important aspect in process writing is the inclusion of mechanisms for students to reflect on their own personal learning processes while engaging in academic writing. A typical mechanism for reflection would be an activity such as journal writing in which students document their own insights with regard to the process of how they learn.

Although process approaches to the teaching and learning of writing are still being used widely, these approaches have been criticised for their overemphasis of the writing process and, particularly, for the skewed focus on the importance of the writer's voice and the writer as sole creator of texts (particularly in the writing pedagogies that Ivanič, 2004 refers to as 'creative self-expression'). Apart from a neglect of the context in which writing takes place and its influence on writing, one typically finds in process approaches a disregard for the linguistic knowledge base needed by learners to become proficient writers. "Critics of process approaches ... have argued that explicit teaching of the forms and conventions of academic writing must accompany any focus on process in order for students to gain control of dominant academic forms" (Coffin *et al.*, 2003:10).

### **3.3.3 Writing as social practice**

In an approach that emphasises writing as social practice, the central notion is that writing does not happen in a vacuum, but forms part of a definable social context. Researchers working in this field "have proposed that a writing-as-a-process approach has little meaning outside of the social context which defines a particular writing purpose .... The essential point ... is that writing can only be understood from the perspective of a social context and not as a product of a single individual" (Grabe &

Kaplan, 1996:94). Johns (1990:27) notes that in a social constructionist view "the writing product is considered a social act that can take place only within and for a specific context and audience." When applied to the context of tertiary academic writing, such a context clearly involves (a) that of the broader academic community as well as the more specific disciplinary communities within it and (b) how academic writing has evolved within such communities regarding the appropriateness of texts. In a social practices approach, students are encouraged to take on the identity of a member of a specific community – in this case, the tertiary academic discourse community. In this process of identification, students start to "identify themselves with the values, beliefs, goals and activities of those who engage in those [literacy] practices" (Ivanič, 2004:235). This approach therefore emphasises the social nature of academic writing in that students learn "how to 'be' particular kinds of people: to write 'as academics', 'as geographers', 'as social scientists'" (Coffin *et al.*, 2003:10).

What has been highlighted more recently, though, is that it is more difficult for some students to take on new identities. One reason for this is that students' own identities also have an influence on how they read and engage in academic writing. Hence, "educational background, ethnicity, cultural expectations and gender have all been shown to influence how students read academic texts and respond in writing" (Coffin *et al.*, 2003:11). It is therefore clear that students do not merely 'take on' a new identity, but probably incorporate new identities through a process of negotiation that involves a more complex process and which is strongly influenced by their own identities.

There further appears to be two related perspectives in social constructionism that focus specifically on a description of the nature of academic discourse. Firstly, there are those who support the idea of a tertiary academic community that is characterised by generic features of academic discourse, or of a core of tasks and basic academic language that students should learn when they are being socialised into this community. The second approach maintains that academic discourse is specific to the different discourse communities of different disciplines and that an understanding of general academic language will not suffice. One therefore needs to investigate how language is used in specific disciplinary discourse communities and base what one teaches on the results of such investigation.

Ivanič (2004) distinguishes between two related 'discourses' in writing as social practice approaches. What she refers to as a 'social practices discourse' of writing is similar to what has been discussed thus far about this approach. The other 'discourse' that forms part of a social approach - termed the 'socio-political discourse' – has developed in approaches known as 'Critical Literacy' or 'Critical Language Awareness'. In this framework, learners should develop

... a critical awareness of why particular discourses and genres are the way they are: the historical and political factors which shaped them and shaped the patterns of privileging among them (Ivanič, 2004:238).

As has already been argued (see section 2.2), the revolutionary nature of extreme versions of a socio-political approach to writing, as well as the general absence of suggestions on how this approach can influence writing pedagogy, have led to increasing criticism on the potential contribution of this approach to the development of writing. An enlightening instance of this revolutionary nature is found in some of Bizzell's (1987) remarks on minority students' initiation into academic discourse at universities. Bizzell maintains that 'outsider' students should not be forced to acquire academic discourse, but that tertiary institutions should rather change to accommodate such students. Although largely impractical in this extreme injunction, Bizzell's contention does refocus the enquiry into academic discourse to some extent, to address also the guardians of such discourse, and what their responsibilities are in this regard as to becoming more aware of students' literacy backgrounds and needs, apart from offering support to students in acquiring such discourse.

It is also in the context of writing as a social construct that genre approaches to writing development have made their impact felt in recent times. We have remarked above on how subsequent approaches to writing contain echoes of earlier ones, i.e. possess continuities with approaches that preceded them, and, indeed, according to Badger and White (2000), genre approaches show similarities to product approaches in that the focus of writing development is also on the text and textual (linguistic) analysis of different textual genres with regard to what linguistic features are appropriate for such genres. The main difference between product and genre approaches is that where product approaches generally ignore the existence of writing happening in a specific social context, genre approaches emphasise that writing

differs according to the social context and the purpose for which it is produced, and that different linguistic resources and organisation of such resources would be employed for written genres to be appropriate for specific contexts. Examples of genres would include, for instance, letters of apology, law reports, academic articles, etc.:

In short, genre-based approaches see writing as essentially concerned with knowledge of language, and as being tied closely to writing as social purpose, while the development of writing is largely seen as the analysis and imitation of input in the form of texts provided by the teacher (Badger & White, 2000:156).

### 3.3.4 Hybrid approaches

For Grabe and Kaplan (1996), the converging opinion of work on writing suggests that any writing intervention that focuses on the development of writing will have to account for three interrelated factors. The first factor emphasises what learners need to know with regard to the knowledge required for successful writing (e.g. knowledge about language and its uses). The second factor addresses probably the most problematic issue in writing development, in its focus on **how** students successfully acquire the skills/abilities that are necessary for writing adequately in a specific environment. The last factor focuses on the contextual nature of writing in the sense that one has to be aware of the social context in which writing takes place and how such a context may influence writing course design and the teaching and learning of writing (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996:36). The proposal from these authors also echoes that of Coffin *et al.* (2003) discussed earlier in this chapter, with the variation that the latter authors also highlight the importance of finding ways to utilise what writers as learners already know about writing and the use of language.

What is evident from Grabe and Kaplan's above perspective on writing is that these commentators support a view of writing instruction that attempts to combine evidence from the distinct approaches discussed previously into an approach that accounts for these approaches in an integrated manner.



Similarly, Badger and White (2000:157) base their process genre approach on the fact that the three approaches (product, process and genre) "are largely complementary, as becomes more apparent if we examine their strengths and weaknesses." While the main weakness of a product approach is that it neglects the process of writing, its strength lies in the fact that it recognises the importance of knowledge about texts. The process approach downplays the importance of linguistic input and does not focus strongly enough on different kinds of texts produced for a specific purpose in specific contexts. It does, however, provide a very strong focus on the writing process and the strategies included in this process. Genre approaches emphasise the social context and concomitant purpose of producing specific genres in writing, but do not place enough emphasis on the process writers use to produce texts. According to these authors: "An effective methodology for writing [instruction] needs to incorporate the insights of product, process and genre approaches" (Badger & White, 2000:157). They note that this can be accomplished either by choosing one approach and adapting it, or by combining all three approaches into one. This synthesis of all three approaches is referred to by them as the process genre approach:

The essential idea here is that the writing class recognises that writing involves knowledge about language (as in product and genre approaches), knowledge of the context in which writing happens and especially the purpose for the writing (as in genre approaches), and skills in using language (as in process approaches) (Badger & White, 2000:158).

A second hybrid approach is a combination of the product (in this case genre) and process of writing. In their research, Prosser and Webb (1993) relate the process of undergraduate essay writing to the finished product. They show in this study that the way students perceive a task influences how they approach and engage in the task and, ultimately, what the product looks like. Through phenomenography (describing the experience of learning from the viewpoint of the student) they investigated how students approached essay writing specifically in sociology. Through genre analysis they then analysed the texts produced by these students with regard to their effectiveness in the academic, and more specifically, the sociology context. They found a very strong correlation between process and product:

Students who adopted a surface approach [to reading] conceived of the essay as multi-structural and approached the writing of the essay with an intention to reproduce a series of points in a coherent way. They focussed their reading on listing

key points related to the essay topic, and focussed their writing on producing a coherent set of points in written form (Prosser & Webb, 1993:10).

It is these students who, in structured interviews, showed confusion regarding the writing task and what they tried to accomplish. These students also scored relatively low marks in the assessment of this task. On the other hand:

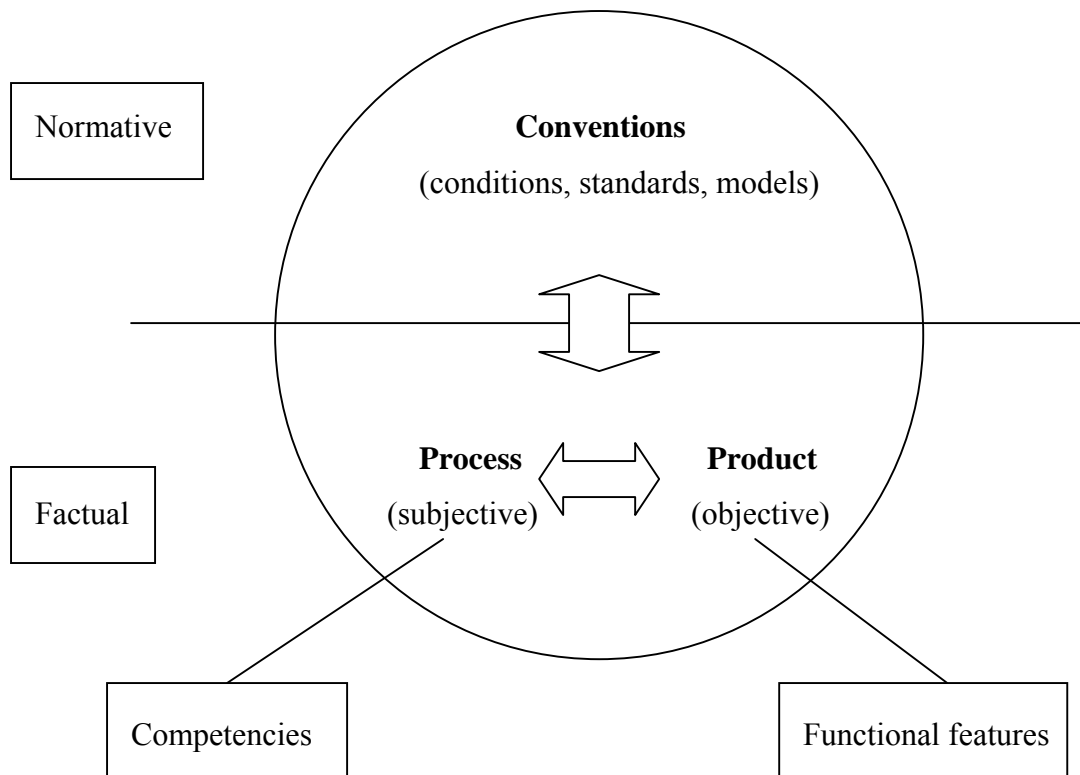
Students who adopted a deep approach [to reading] conceived of the essay as relational and had an intention to present an argument in support of a particular point of view on the question. They focused their reading for the essay on relating each author's meaning to the question and to their own previous viewpoint, and in writing the essay focussed on the coherence of the overall argument in favour of a particular viewpoint (Prosser & Webb, 1993:10).

These findings emphasise the point made several times above, viz. that making a coherent argument is what typifies competent academic discourse production. It comes as no surprise, then, that the students described here generally received good grades for their essays, probably because they also engaged with the reading material on a level where it was possible for them to have an opinion about what they read and what ideas they chose as support for their argument/point of view on the issue/problem. Their essays were also much easier to read because of the presence of what Prosser and Webb call 'predictive scaffolding'. These are ways of signposting to the reader what to expect in the essay, such as, for example, the mentioning of all the main sections of the essay in the introduction.

Boeschoten (2005) (cf. also Weideman, 1981) provides a framework (see Figure 3.2 below) that clarifies sufficiently the interrelationship between process and product in academic writing. He maintains that in order to write an acceptable academic text, students need to understand and adhere to the conventions (the normative aspect) used by specific disciplines. Students further need to have diverse receptive and productive competencies (language competence; genre competence; stylistic competence; rhetorical competence; and critical reading competence) that would enable them to deal adequately with the literature they need to integrate into their writing in order to produce authoritative argumentation in their texts. The eventual text (or product) that is produced also has to adhere to the functional characteristics of academic texts with regard to citation, argumentation, logical structuring, etc. This view is fully aligned with the conclusion reached in Chapter 2 of this study (cf. 2.2

above), that makes a case for the typicality of academic discourse – a uniqueness that is derived from the typical norms for producing language in this context, as they are embodied in factual academic texts (products).

**Figure 3.2 The relationship between process and product in writing**



Boeschoten (2005:5)

Boeschoten's diagram reinforces and brings together Badger and White's contention with that of Prosser and Webb who believe that none of the three approaches discussed earlier in this section has the potential to offer an adequate approach to the teaching of academic writing on their own, and that a combination of approaches holds much more promise for offering a more comprehensive writing intervention to learners.

Contrary to the hybrid proposals already discussed in this section, Ivanič (2004) makes little mention as to what specific features/aspects she would combine with reference to the six different discourses (or approaches) she discusses (see section

3.3). She suggests that her 'framework' could be used as an analytical instrument (in essence, a research tool) in order to identify different discourses in academic textbooks as an awareness-raising exercise. Furthermore, it can be useful in coding interview data of teachers of writing talking about their practice and how such teachers make use of these six discourses in how they teach writing (Ivanič, 2004:240). But she comes close to the perspectives discussed above with regard to what she calls a 'holistic, comprehensive writing pedagogy'. She maintains that

... written text, writing processes, the writing event, and the socio-political context of writing would be understood to be progressively embedded within one another, and intrinsically interrelated (Ivanič, 2004:241).

In yet another hybrid proposal for the teaching of academic writing, Harwood and Hadley (2004) propose a fusion between two seemingly irreconcilable approaches broadly referred to as Pragmatic EAP and Critical EAP (also see the discussion about critical approaches in Chapter 2). Their argument for proposing this fusion is supported mainly by the fact that, in reality, lecturers are often uncompromising in their demand for students to conform to dominant academic discourse norms. Writing educators would therefore not be doing students a favour in neglecting to teach and insisting upon students' conformity with such norms. Even more so, they might be setting up students for failure if they encourage a deliberate (and indiscriminate) flouting of academic discourse conventions. Furthermore, in the case of postgraduate students, they would find it very difficult to have their work published if they are not exposed to the dominant discourse norms of their disciplines (Harwood & Hadley, 2004:8-9). The point, of course, is that however important it is for students to find and develop original insight and articulate that (their 'voice'), it is equally important to remember that, in reality, global – mostly western – norms and standards apply.

Harwood and Hadley's proposal for what they call a **critical pragmatic approach** in the teaching of writing attempts to overcome the shortcomings of both approaches mentioned above through combining their positive aspects. In essence, they argue for an approach that, while still focusing on dominant academic discourse norms, encourages enquiring minds to ask why such norms are being used in specific academic disciplines.

### **3.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted important considerations in the teaching and learning of writing as well as specific approaches to the teaching and learning of academic writing. The ultimate goal of a framework for the design of academic writing courses is to provide an instrument for the writing course designer/practitioner that enables such a person to create a productive learning environment that will present relevant opportunities for the development of writing ability. We find the beginnings of such a framework in the thirteen design principles discussed in 3.2 above. To a greater or lesser extent, these principles are articulated in each of the approaches reviewed above. We should therefore follow up this discussion with an analysis of how such approaches (or a deliberate, rationally justified combination of them) measure up to this overarching requirement.

The next chapter includes a focused interpretation of the insights gained in this chapter in a more comprehensive framework for course design and the teaching of academic writing courses in tertiary education.

## **CHAPTER 4      A framework for the design of tertiary level academic writing courses**

### **4.1      Introduction**

This chapter proposes a framework that may be used in the design of academic writing courses for tertiary education. The framework is generative in the sense that it is an attempt at providing a directive that could be employed in identifying fundamental concerns in tertiary academic writing and to break these down into a focused enquiry of issues that are essential in the design of writing interventions. Two important conditions apply to the development of such a framework, namely that 1) the framework should be as comprehensive as possible with reference to a description of the context of tertiary education, and 2) the framework should be suitably flexible in order to provide for varying writing needs in tertiary education. Ideally, the framework should allow writing educators working in tertiary education in South Africa to select specific options within the framework and to combine such options in the design of writing courses that, given a number of potential constraints, provide the best possible support to specific groups of students/individuals in the development of their writing ability.

The theoretical rationale for the proposed framework has its origins in the thirteen design principles discussed in section 3.2 of the previous chapter. In a pertinent sense, the framework proposed in this chapter, therefore, is a further specification of the principles articulated in Chapter 3. The framework being proposed here is based on an approach that supports an informed eclecticism (see section 3.3) regarding the development of academic writing ability within the broader context of academic literacy. It is argued that such an approach enables one to treat past research more thoroughly and deliberately. Moreover, this facilitates the articulation of a holistic and integrative perspective towards the development of writing that also subscribes to the broad principles of academic literacy development. For reasons comprehensively discussed in Chapter 3, a framework that fuses relevant features of a product approach, a process approach, a social constructivist perspective on writing development, as well as a critical literacy perspective, will be part of the theoretical

underpinnings on which the framework is constructed. It is argued that there is an inherent danger in an absolute application of any one specific ideological approach, since this might exclude potentially relevant and productive options that could be particularly valuable for specific contexts.

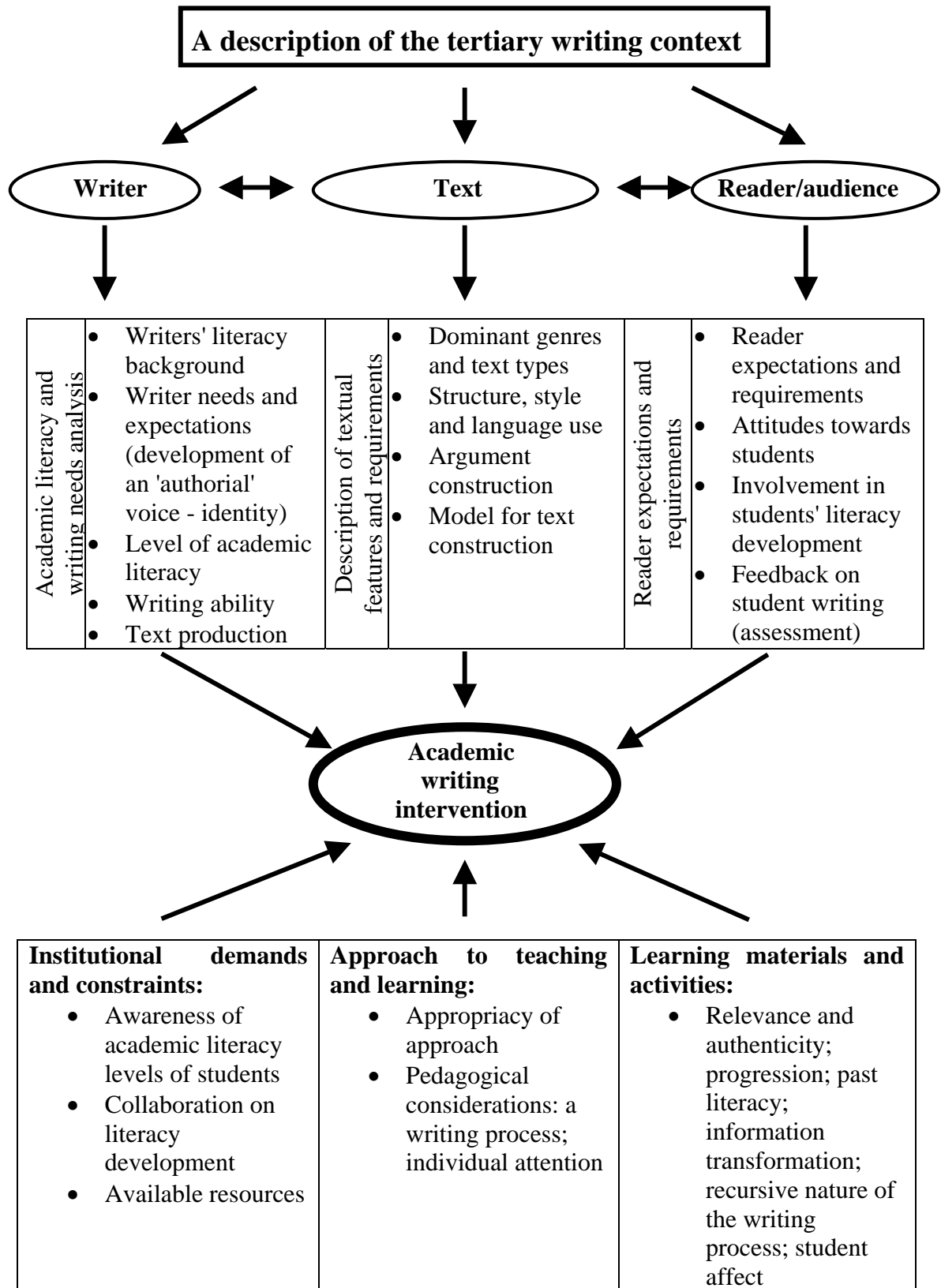
The framework further answers to the criterion that it is possible to isolate a core of important conventions/conditions in academic writing, based on certain generic features and principles of academic discourse, as well as a description of the specific academic context in which such discourse takes place, and that it should be possible to adjust the manner in which such issues/principles are applied to different disciplines to yield discipline-specific writing requirements. In her proposal for the key constituents of a tertiary writing course, Orr (1995:192) maintains that:

Prescriptive content [should be] avoided on the assumption that practical implementation of ... guidelines will need to vary from discipline to discipline across the curriculum depending on the demands of each subject course, according to the existing teaching style of each department, and in response to the particular student profiles in each case.

Following this line of argument, a very important component of such a framework should be access to and the productive use of relevant information-soliciting instruments in order to determine " ... the needs and expectations of both faculty and students within each discipline" (Orr, 1995:196). Thus, the availability of useful information soliciting, as well as assessment instruments in order to collect relevant information on a number of issues, is a central feature of the framework. This research proposes the use of at least four instruments, one that addresses student needs (and wants) regarding literacy and writing, another that determines levels of academic literacy (and specifically writing ability), and two (a questionnaire and interview) that focus on lecturer/supervisor perceptions and expectations (including textual requirements) of academic literacy and writing.

Ideally, a framework for the design of tertiary level academic writing courses would include the elements in Figure 4.1 that are comprehensively discussed in the following section.

**Figure 4.1 Key elements of a framework for academic writing course design in tertiary education**





## 4.2 Elements of a framework for academic writing course design

The different elements or focuses of the framework (and how they are further broken down into sub-components) discussed below comprise a reinterpretation and reformulation (re-synthesis) of relevant issues in the teaching and learning of academic writing within the wider context of academic literacy. Six primary focuses that need to be contextualised within the tertiary academic environment provide the major constituents of the framework (see Figure 4.1). These constituents focus on the **writer**, the **text** and the **reader** that stand in a relationship of dynamic interaction as part of and in response to the **contextual demands** of the tertiary academic discourse community (and the smaller sub-communities dispersed throughout this discourse community). Apart from the three aspects mentioned above, the design of academic writing courses further needs to respond to issues related to **institutional demands and constraints** and a **contextually relevant approach** towards the teaching and learning of academic writing. All the issues already mentioned will impact on or determine the nature of **materials and activities** to be used for writing development. Although the framework has a central analytical function regarding the identification of prominent issues for writing course design, it is important to note that the description and explanation of different elements in the framework might naturally lead one to consider them in isolation, whereas the ultimate purpose of the framework is to discover how such elements interact with each other in specific ways, depending on the specific context in which individual writers produce unique academic texts. The discussion of the framework in the following section will therefore also attempt to highlight the interconnectedness of the different elements. Following the description of each element, a short summary has been included of the most important issues that should be addressed in a specific element.

In the interpretation of this framework, it is further important to note that academic writing always functions within the wider context of academic literacy, and although not always explicitly stated, should be understood with this context in mind.

#### 4.2.1 The student as writer of academic texts

The first of the features in the framework above refers to the student as writer of academic texts.

A critical aspect of any planning towards writing courses for tertiary students is that the course designer has to know, within reasonable limits, what the student profile is. The challenges presented by the South African tertiary context with regard to student diversity are intense. Local students come from a variety of educational and literacy backgrounds, and to add to this complexity there is an increased enrolment of foreign students in South African universities. Although one is fully aware of the fact that students are individuals with unique characteristics in terms of their writing ability (and general academic literacy), it is a practical necessity, in dealing with large numbers of students as we generally do, to consider the possibility of grouping students together according to their writing needs. It is therefore necessary for the writing course designer to compile a profile of student writers with regard to a number of pertinent writing-related issues. These issues could then be used to inform different aspects of writing course design, and the profile further refined when developmental work is done with specific groups of students.

After the primary issues that should be addressed in a writing course have been identified from the perspective of student needs and abilities, the **suitability** and ultimate **relevance** of the course would clearly depend on the degree of **flexibility** as the need arises, of such a course in changing emphasis as well as in accommodating issues not originally addressed in it. Clearly, it is the writing educators who will have the crucial responsibility to be suitably accommodating in their approach and application in order to provide for individual student needs. What may be problematic, however, in this regard, is the increasing/increased differentiation between course designer/developer and language instructor in the sense that the person who designed the course may not always be the instructor. One would thus need to have strategies in place for ensuring that potential misunderstandings in how the instructor interprets the course may be adequately addressed. Issues that need to be considered in constructing an initial student profile are addressed below.

Two related aspects need to be considered in the compilation of a student profile towards the development of writing interventions. On the one hand one needs to collect **general background information** on students that includes information on current level of study, the specific course registered for (with the aim of determining sensible grouping possibilities of specific disciplines), literacy history, student perceptions of their own levels of academic literacy (including writing ability specifically), their expectations of academic writing, and typical writing behaviour. One therefore needs an information-gathering instrument that could be used to collect information on: 1) students' current engagement in academic studies; 2) their literacy background, and 3) what they perceive their writing needs to be. Obviously, one would like to be able to organise such data with specific categories in mind. The design of this instrument should therefore allow for a categorised analysis of information that would enable one to, for example, group students together with regard to issues such as language background, writing needs, the writing requirements of specific disciplines, etc. On the other hand, it is necessary to empirically determine students' current levels of academic literacy as well as writing ability specifically. This requires a reliable testing instrument that, apart from identifying a general level of academic literacy, can also be used diagnostically with regard to some areas of literacy that might be more problematic than others.

Although **student perceptions about their writing needs** will most probably translate to 'wants' (what they think they need) in many instances, there is important information to be gained with regard to determining student **attitudes and perceptions about academic writing**. In my opinion, many students' writing problems are to some extent related to misconceptions about the nature of writing in a tertiary academic environment, a point that I shall return to below. Data regarding student perceptions and attitudes towards writing are a vital source of information that would enable one to identify and address constructively possible myths and misunderstandings that may exist about academic writing. It will further show students' levels of awareness about fundamental issues in academic writing, an important consideration in the design of any writing course.

The **previous literacy experiences** of students who arrive at university differ considerably. Students who are, for instance, not familiar with the literacy practices valued in tertiary education, could easily be labelled 'academically illiterate'. Such students are often marginalized in the sense that they do not receive the kind of literacy support that will enable them to make significant progress with their studies (Johns, 2005). It is crucial to realise then that the manner in which students are initiated into the discourses of the university (Gee, 1998) will to some extent determine how successfully they will be able to use these discourses in order to succeed in this environment. For example, developmental initiatives that introduce 'new' literacy practices should incorporate sufficient scaffolding that would make such experiences meaningful in the context of students' past literacies. Johns (2005:12), for instance, indicates that:

... a course that focuses upon situated, communicative, meaningful language needs to begin with texts and experiences with which students are familiar, then move to the academic or professional genres and contexts with which they are less familiar.

If this connection is not established, students will probably grope aimlessly for something familiar in what they should experience as a frustrating and meaningless void. She suggests that one could make use of meaningful (genre-based) tasks in the classroom where students work on familiar genres first and then work towards the genres prominent in the university context.

Apart from what could be accomplished in the classroom in terms of learning about and incorporating students' past literacies into learning opportunities, it is often difficult to trace students' previous literacy experiences and writing history (especially in the case of foreign postgraduate students who, for example, have primarily practised academic literacy in a language other than the languages of learning and instruction at the UP). It is therefore suggested that a sophisticated assessment instrument be used for an **accurate determination of academic literacy levels** and writing ability specifically in the language of learning. This is a crucial step in the design of writing courses, since it will affect the level at which writing interventions are offered to students, as well as the types of learning opportunities to which they are exposed.

The integrated nature of academic writing with more general academic literacy has already been discussed at length in Chapter 3. Writing and reading ability, for example, are integrated in the tertiary environment in the sense that students are regularly required to make use of a variety of sources of information (that they mostly need to read) for writing tasks. An important function of academic reading is that readers in this context are usually expected to read purposefully to find new information/insights/different angles on or interpretations of information. Furthermore, because readers often approach a reading text with limited knowledge frameworks by means of which they may interpret the text, many of the ideas in the text might not be completely understood, which necessitates guided follow-up reading. A functional command of such reading strategies is fundamental towards students' critical engagement with texts in a tertiary environment. However, as Johns (2005:1) mentions, "... reading needs are often submerged ..., whereas elements of good and bad writing are there on paper for all to see." Although reading difficulties and needs might thus not be as overtly observable as writing needs, there is clear evidence that if students' reading ability is weak, it will affect the quality of what they write. Belcher (1990:220) offers further support for this notion by stating that "... it has been known for some time now that there is a positive correlation between amount of reading done and writing proficiency, i.e., the more reading, the better the writer" (also see Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998 for their perspective on the relationship between reading and writing ability).

In the tertiary environment, especially at postgraduate level, the information-gathering stage (and how this information is processed and utilised when writing) is critical for students to identify the most prominent points of view and information on specific issues they wish/need to investigate.

The framework being proposed here therefore supports the use of an integrative literacy assessment tool that emphasises an interplay between specific literacy abilities that contribute to appropriate and effective academic writing. This will obviously also influence one's thinking about the focus, content and structure of writing courses. Apart from the fact that the act (and therefore process) of academic writing will be the focus of a writing course, such a course needs to provide for

meaningful opportunities that effectively integrate activities of reading, listening, speaking and reasoning as they impact on and interact with the process of writing. Put differently, a writing course that is so designed as to focus exclusively on writing will be deficient in a number of respects. The information gained by using an integrated academic literacy assessment instrument could articulate with a set of core academic discourse principles that can be adjusted and used in different combinations and with different emphases in order to accommodate the average level of literacy of specific groups of students. It is therefore essential to determine students' levels of **functional academic literacy**, meaning that one needs to ascertain what students are functionally capable of doing with academic texts (in both receptive and productive modes).

Designing the type of literacy assessment instrument referred to above is a complex matter. Such an instrument should ideally also provide information on students' use of the more extended processes that characterise most academic writing in a tertiary setting. However, practical considerations such as time constraints with regard to taking down the test as well as marking it might well lead one to opt for the most practical format within such constraints. Strategies such as productive planning, purposeful gathering of information as well as redrafting of written texts may be difficult to assess under these conditions. It is therefore suggested that if a determination of the academic writing ability that enables students to produce coherent longer written texts can, for practical reasons, not be included in a literacy assessment, **such results be specifically augmented by a determination of writing ability**. Regarding such a determination, it is obviously not adequate to say that students can or cannot write. One should be able to determine what their more specific writing problems are, as well as the possible origins of these problems, in order to make informed decisions about writing support for such students. An expert analysis of written student texts is one way of identifying students' writing problems at a textual level. An interpretation of such problem areas should, however, not be limited to an analysis of students' written texts only, but should again be related to issues within the broader context of academic literacy in a tertiary academic environment.

In addition to determining general academic literacy levels, the framework needs to provide for a strategy that will distinguish between **students with real language problems** (i.e. not being sufficiently proficient) in the language of learning and **those who are simply unfamiliar with the conventions of academic discourse** in a tertiary academic environment. This will obviously compel the course designer to engage with issues such as the specific type and level of course presented to specific groups of students in the sense that the course will have to account for the fact that some students might be low language proficiency students. It will further have an impact on determining the most productive way in which to constitute groups of students for a writing intervention. In this way students could be grouped according to what specific focus needs to be applied to a specific developmental level, provided that resources at the institution allow for the teaching of such specific groups of students.

In a connected issue, the framework also distinguishes between **primary language and additional language users of the language of learning**. There is adequate evidence (see Grabe & Kaplan, 1996) of specific differences between these two groups of learners regarding the language learning and writing strategies they use, to warrant a careful consideration of the possible impact of such differences on the teaching and learning environment. Although the historical development of writing instruction for primary and additional language users appears to coincide on a number of issues, Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) highlight the fact there may be differences between the schemata of these groups of learners. The different prior experiences of learners are displayed in knowledge about content as well as knowledge about texts. Additional language users often experience difficulties with the rhetorical organisation of texts, resulting from the fact that texts are embedded in specific contexts with which additional language users might be relatively unfamiliar. Though these distinctions have been criticised, it is this embeddedness that led to Cummins' (1984) distinction between 'basic interpersonal communicative skills' (BICS) and 'cognitive academic language proficiency' (CALP). Such differences affect students' abilities in comprehending and analysing texts, as well as in their production of texts that meet the requirements of specific contexts (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998:13).

A further issue emerging in the context of distinguishing between primary and additional language users focuses on the **division of such students into groups that are considered to be most suitable for their writing needs**. One needs to reflect on, for example, whether it would be wise to group primary and additional language users together for the development of their writing ability. Although it is often naturally accepted that one would separate these groups of learners, there are potential benefits such as employing primary language users as a resource for enhanced peer-learning (if facilitated judiciously) that might not be as successful in a context where students are placed in homogenous (regarding language preference and use) writing groups (see Grabe & Kaplan [1996:23-30] for a discussion on differences between L1 and L2 learners). In SA, where such division may result in a racial split of students, it may be worthwhile to explore further the advantages of mixed ability classes.

Another fundamental question that needs to be addressed in the context of students' literacy background and writing ability focuses on **how student writers construct written texts**. One therefore needs to ascertain the behaviour of student writers when they engage in more extensive writing tasks in a tertiary context. How do students approach a written assignment from the initial planning stage (do they, for example, engage in constructive planning at all?) that includes an analysis of a topic (self-generated or provided by a lecturer) through to the submission of a final product? What reasoning and general academic literacy strategies do students primarily use when they write? What linguistic (including grammatical, stylistic and structural) choices do students prefer to convey a written message? How do strategies used by mainly inexperienced student writers compare to those used by experienced academic writers? How do writing strategies interact towards producing a well-argued, cohesive and coherent, appropriately structured, stylistically appropriate and grammatically correct final written product? The interrelated nature of the elements in the framework discussed here should be evident at this point. Although the discussion below may be situated within the next focus on the textual features of academic writing (4.2.2 below), it was decided to discuss these issues of text in relation also to what kind of knowledge writers need in their construction of such texts.



The descriptive text construction model discussed by Grabe and Kaplan (1996) provides some insight into written text construction with a focus on the text as product. Generally, these authors propose seven interacting components that should form part of such a model. These include:

- syntactic structures;
  - semantic senses and mappings;
  - lexical forms and relations;
  - cohesion signalling;
  - genre and organisational structuring to support coherence interpretations;
  - functional-use dimensions (stylistic and register dimensions); and
  - non-linguistic knowledge bases, including 'world knowledge'.
- (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996:62)

According to these authors, the fundamental building blocks from which all texts are constructed could be represented in the form of a simple matrix (Figure 4.2): the components function on two levels, the sentential and textual levels. Along another dimension, these components can also be divided into a surface and deep structure. The function of the lexicon is dispersed throughout this matrix.

**Figure 4.2 Elements of text structure**

	Surface	Deep
Sentential	Syntax	Semantics
Textual	Cohesion	Coherence

LEXICON

(Grabe & Kaplan, 1996:63)

At the **sentential level**, knowledge of surface structure syntax and underlying semantics of word meanings and possibilities for combination generate written

language. The **textual level** involves knowledge of language structures as well as overall text structure and notions on relevance writers use in order to convey a sense of text coherence. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) mention that although research suggests that part of text coherence is constructed by the reader's interpretive systems, " ... it is reasonable to assume that the text itself has a considerable role to play in the construction of textual coherence" (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996:69). Cohesion in texts has to do with surface signalling by means of linguistic markers of cohesion that writers use to guide readers towards a coherent interpretation of texts. Coherence, however, while drawing on such signalling devices, involves more than this overt signalling. It also has to do with how the underlying relations between ideas contribute to an overall discourse theme, as well as with logical patterns of text organisation and decisions about emphasis of thematic information and how old and new information are highlighted (cf. Weideman, 1987:43-54).

The functional-use (or interpersonal) element in text construction highlights the relationship between writer and reader that is observable in stylistic choices made by the writer. How do writers, for example, align themselves through the texts they construct with issues such as the personal/impersonal dimension, distance and solidarity, superiority and equality and formality/informality? Non-linguistic knowledge also plays an important role in text construction. Amongst others, issues such as world knowledge, memory, emotion and intention all interact and contribute to how texts are ultimately constructed. This complexity of written text construction calls for a keen sense of observation and application on the part of the writing course designer/teacher in order to align classroom and individual learning opportunities in a way that supports students in their construction of meaningful and coherent texts. This issue will again be addressed in the section on the textual features of academic texts.

Another concern central to text construction is **how features of text as process and text as product interact in the creation of meaningful and acceptable academic texts**. One way in which the issues discussed in 3.3.4 with regard to how the process and product of writing are connected functionally find application in the production of quality academic texts appears to be the principle of re-drafting. I yet need to locate

an academic writer (especially an inexperienced writer) who can eliminate reworking a text any number of times towards increasing meaningfulness and correctness.

Being producers and consumers of academic texts, students are expected to be critics of such texts. They should, therefore, have the ability to be critical readers, not only in the reading of others' texts, but extending such strategies to a critique of their own texts. The ability to revise productively and edit written texts is therefore a key competency that should enable student writers to improve others' as well as their own written texts. The role of reviser and editor of texts is a little different from more general academic reading, in the sense that one does not read only for the purpose of understanding the text, but also with the intention of trying to improve the text with regard to both language fluency and accuracy. One will have to consider carefully how this competency should be introduced and developed in students. A major problem here is the often contrived nature of the classroom. Usually, the need for peer revision of one's writing is determined by real-life, contextualised goals. For example, if the context is one where it is evident that language errors and incoherent argumentation will not be tolerated (e.g. submitting a master's or Ph.D. thesis for final examination), there appears to be a strong motivation to make use of other resources to ensure writing quality. Furthermore, it is uncontroversial that one would choose a resource that one trusts to add value to one's text (for example, a person knowledgeable about the discipline or language, or if you are fortunate, both). In real, purposeful contexts, one does not revise (or ask for it) for the sake of just going through the motions of revision. In the classroom, however, this purposeful motivation for peer revision becomes somewhat artificial in the sense that, apart from not always knowing their fellow students that well, there is a tendency not to trust other students with regard to their judgement. It is therefore not surprising that revision done by peers in the classroom is often perceived as a case of the 'blind leading the blind'. This makes the facilitation of productive revision in a classroom rather problematic. One possible suggestion as to how this problem could be overcome is the use of a peer feedback system where more experienced (senior) students in the same field are used (possibly on a consultative basis) as a soundboard for revision. Such an option has the potential to counter perceptions of students new to university education that other students cannot help them with revising written

texts. What is important though, is that beginning students must be introduced to **productive revision strategies themselves** (and not only rely on requesting revision from others) in terms of revising and editing written texts. This will most probably be a somewhat different issue with postgraduate students, since they are usually aware that other master's and Ph.D. students are supposed to be on the same level with some experience in the discourse (and therefore, writing) of their disciplines. Table 4.1 below includes, in a summarised format, the most important issues that should be considered about students as writers in a tertiary academic context.

**Table 4.1 Important considerations regarding student writers**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literacy background               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Previous literacy experiences of new and more advanced students</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing needs and expectations               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ How do students see their own academic identities in the tertiary environment?</li> <li>➤ What are students' perceptions of their own levels of academic literacy?</li> <li>➤ What do new and more advanced students expect with regard to writing specifically in the tertiary academic environment?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level of academic literacy and writing ability               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Instrument for determining functional academic literacy levels</li> <li>➤ Strategy for determining academic writing ability specifically</li> <li>➤ Determining language proficiency in the language of learning</li> <li>➤ Distinguishing between primary and additional language users of the language(s) of learning at the institution</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student production of written texts               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Strategy for determining what process students use to produce written texts</li> <li>➤ A model for text production</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

#### 4.2.2 Textual features of academic writing

The second element of the framework above (Figure 4.1) deals with the textual features of and requirements for academic texts.

The **surface (grammatical, stylistic and structural) features** of academic texts have in the past been the focus of numerous writing courses aimed at the development of writing ability. Although it should be clear from the discussion in Chapter 3 that a focus only on such surface characteristics would amount to an impoverished description of what academic discourse actually entails, it remains an important aspect of such a description. The text production model by Grabe and Kaplan (1996) discussed in the previous section highlights the irresponsibility of downplaying the importance of the linguistic knowledge that is necessary in the production of written academic texts. Perhaps the question of **whether** this type of knowledge is necessary is not so much of an issue as is figuring out a productive way for learners to acquire this knowledge. The functional contextualisation of linguistic knowledge, driven by the kinds of meaning that specific language structures create to make appropriate discourse possible in the tertiary context, can provide one possible solution to this problem. Still, one will have to decide whether there is room for the inclusion of any form of explicit grammar teaching in such a framework. If teaching the grammatical aspects of language is desirable, one should decide what form such teaching should take for maximum uptake by students. Should it only be included, for example, in the form of a reference grammar that is provided to students, or should there be active teaching of specific structures used regularly in academic writing? Should one perhaps consider gradually building up such grammatical knowledge by exposure to tasks that are designed to develop such knowledge? Clearly, there are pedagogical issues here that cannot be answered only from a linguistic (including textual) angle.

In addition to an understanding of the types of linguistic knowledge required of writers to construct coherent academic texts, the application of such knowledge should be related to the contextual discourses of different disciplines in a tertiary environment. It is therefore important that a surface feature textual description aimed at the design of writing courses includes a description of the **specific target genres**

(e.g. essays, reports, journal articles, theses) that students are required to produce in a specific discipline. One therefore needs to ascertain what dominant written genres, as well as internal variations on these genres, are expected of students in specific fields. Furthermore, students will be required to produce written texts of a variety of types (e.g. informative, factual, descriptive and argumentative texts) within these genres. For the sake of providing tailor-made courses to specific groups of students, if this is required, one should collect information on these issues in such a way that it could be organised into specific requirements for different fields and disciplines, departments or specific degrees. One therefore needs an information-gathering instrument that would elicit this type of information from those responsible in specific disciplines for conceptualising and assigning writing tasks to students.

Another important aspect of the textual description of academic texts relates to issues of **style, register and general language usage**. Students should be aware what concepts such as style and register refer to, situate them in the tertiary academic context, and be able to identify them in others' as well as their own academic writing. They should further have the ability to contextualise and operationalise their own use of style, register and general academic language not only within the constraints of the general tertiary academic environment, but also within the unique parameters of their own academic disciplines. Because this touches on an issue that has a tendency to differ across disciplines (and sometimes within disciplines with regard to different academic subjects, for example), it will be of central importance to create an **awareness of the flexibility of these issues**, and that students should have a repertoire of available strategies and language knowledge at their disposal in order to adapt or adjust to the requirements of such specific contexts. In order to accomplish this, students should clearly develop an ability to assess correctly the requirements of specific contexts.

A textual description will further have to take into account the **structural features of textual organisation** (macro organisation) and how this could become part of the language knowledge of student writers at university. Do students, for example, understand the general progression of academic texts from introduction to conclusion, and that specific genres might differ with regard to what types of issues are included

in them and how they are organised? Are they aware of how content and argument are expressed and developed within such structures? A number of functional descriptions regarding the development of ideas have been proposed in the form of broad distinctions between 'theme' and 'rheme', 'given' and 'new' information, etc. (see Martin & Rose, 2001 and Grabe & Kaplan, 1996 for an overview). These strategies towards the development of text coherence have already been applied with great success in a number of contexts in education. To this end, Grabe and Kaplan (1996) provide an extremely useful overview of research specifically aimed at tracing such development. Table 4.2 below includes salient issues that should be taken into account in a focus on the textual features of academic writing.

**Table 4.2 Textual features of academic writing**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different genres and text types               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ What are the dominant genres and text types used in different disciplines?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Structural, stylistic and language use features of academic writing               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ What are the structural, stylistic and language use features of academic discourse – what are specific requirements in different disciplines?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Argumentation               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ How are arguments structured and what counts as evidence in specific disciplines?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

#### 4.2.3 The reader of student texts

The third element in the framework proposed in Figure 4.1 above concerns the audience for whom the academic writing is being done.

Apart from being readers of academic texts themselves, students' written texts are read by peers and most importantly, by their lecturers/supervisors. In the case of postgraduate students, they might also have the opportunity to write for a wider academic audience in the production of articles for academic journals. The one common denominator of this group of readers is, however, that they are all expected to be academically inclined and probably to share important ideas and conventions as to what an academic text should be. An element of the framework under discussion that needs clarification is the **mismatch that often exists between reader and writer expectations** of academic writing in this context. One possible way to accomplish this is by raising both writer and reader awareness about the other's expectations. Although it has been a tendency in the past to think that only student writers should live up to the expectations of their lecturers and supervisors, more recent work in critical approaches to writing suggests that it is just as important for lecturers and supervisors to be aware of student writers' expectations and needs with regard to writing in a context that is often alien and unsettling to them, especially with reference to the power relations that exist in this context. Although critical literacy focuses our attention on the potentially oppressive facets of writing in a tertiary context, it has generally not provided practical approaches that could be used in developing students' confidence, critical abilities and proficiency (Weideman, 2007; Lillis, 2003). Nevertheless, since these critical approaches make a valid point, it is crucial that an approach to literacy and writing development includes strategies that create a context that will allow for the positive construction of students' academic identities.

Another final issue for which the framework accounts is the **feedback** student writers receive from their lecturers/supervisors regarding the written texts they produce. Student writers in our current set of undergraduate (EOT 162) and postgraduate (EOT 300) academic writing courses at the UP often remark that they receive confusing messages from lecturers/supervisors. Too often, such messages are unhelpful to assist them in understanding what they are doing wrong. This sometimes has an unsettling effect that might hamper their further production of written texts. The type and quality of feedback provided by both subject lecturers as well as writing instructors can go a long way in supporting student writers to become more proficient academic writers in specific disciplines. Two connected issues are at stake in the provision of



feedback. Where **revision** tends to focus primarily on improving ideas, information flow and argumentation, **editing** is usually associated with error correction. In practice, however, it is difficult to separate these issues, since incorrect language use regularly leads to muddled ideas. Although research findings on the effectiveness of error correction appear to be largely inconclusive (Lee, 2003), there is some support for the positive effect of indirect feedback (e.g. only indicating the place of errors rather than directly correcting them), and dealing with error patterns regarding selective (as opposed to comprehensive) error feedback (Lee, 2003:3). My personal experience is that indirect error feedback that is accompanied by individual consultation has a positive effect on the production of specific error types as well as the error frequency of first year and postgraduate students. When lecturers/writing instructors provide feedback on students' written work, it is therefore essential to have strategies in place that will ensure that the educator knows whether the student found the feedback useful and can do something productive in the way of improving the text using the feedback. In order to create a context where students get consistent feedback, one could, for example, strongly consider making use of a standard set of revision and editing symbols and make details of these available to students. Furthermore, one could make use of general class discussions as well as interviews with individual students, for example, after a more substantial written assignment has been marked, focusing on what type of feedback they found most valuable. In addition, one would do well in noticing what type of feedback students respond to in a consistent manner when they redraft their written texts, after having received feedback from lecturers/supervisors. The main point, however, is not to have inflated expectations of long-term, sustained development of language ability as a result of error correction or feedback. While students may in the short term find it possible to eliminate errors and even types of errors on which they have received feedback, they may not always be able to sustain this. The reason for this kind of 'back-sliding' which is the bane of many a teacher's feedback, is of course that students may not be at the right developmental stage to learn the language component or structure at which the feedback is directed. Table 4.3 below summarises the above discussion in tabular form.

**Table 4.3 Readers of student writing**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expectations and requirements of readers           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ What are reader expectations and requirements of undergraduate and postgraduate students with regard to the written texts they produce?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attitudes towards students in the academic environment           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ How do lecturers support students to be initiated into the academic culture and in forming their academic identities?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feedback on student writing           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ What type of feedback do lecturers provide on student writing?</li> <li>➤ Do educators have strategies in place to ensure the effectiveness of feedback?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

#### 4.2.4 Institutional factors influencing the development of writing ability

The framework under discussion here also emphasises the importance of institutional factors and conditions that either promote or constrain the development of writing ability. It will, for example, probably be difficult to get support for initiatives that attempt to develop writing ability in a context where there is **little awareness of or understanding for the literacy problems of students**. A critical awareness about the literacy problems of students and prevailing thinking about the value of academic literacy and writing development will ultimately influence the amount of support and assistance for developmental initiatives. Thus, amongst others, an initial survey (such as the survey proposed in this study), that stimulates lecturing staff to consider literacy and writing matters carefully, can contribute much to raise awareness of academic literacy. Ideally, developmental literacy and writing initiatives should be embraced by the whole institution. One will therefore have to determine how much the institution is prepared to invest in such enterprises, as well as what existing (and potential) resources are available for such development. Is it, for example, an institution where both academic staff and students are aware of and act positively towards the negotiation and active promotion of the disciplinary academic literacies of

students? What is the nature of the institutional culture regarding academic literacy into which students are initiated?

It has already been highlighted that it would be unwise to attempt literacy development in isolation from the rest of an institution. The framework therefore further proposes that one makes provision for **specific strategies that emphasise a productive, continuous interaction between writing course developers/lecturers and faculty/departmental staff** on the most appropriate writing intervention for their students. A strategy of collaboration is vital in this context to the extent that it provides for building a positive working relationship with faculty staff, but even more important for keeping abreast of developments and changes with regard to the academic literacy and writing ability required of students. A joint effort in addressing literacy and writing problems in particular is potentially more valuable than the efforts of the writing/literacy expert alone. A study by Butler (1999) documents the willingness of a group of engineering lecturers to become involved in the language development of their students. In this survey, 87% of a group of engineering lecturers at a tertiary institution indicated that they were prepared to collaborate with English language specialists in addressing the language difficulties experienced by their students. Although the willingness of subject specialists to address their students' literacy problems will probably depend to a large extent on their awareness of such problems as well as their attitudes towards supporting their students in this regard, Butler's findings show that, contrary to general perception at the time, these specific subject specialists were acutely aware of their students' difficulties and prepared to address these in a collaborative manner.

A close collaboration between literacy (and writing) specialists and other subject specialists also has the potential to create a context where **subject specialists might be persuaded to assume some of the responsibility for the literacy and writing needs of their students**. Such a context approximates a situation that Zamel (1998) refers to as 'writing-across-the-curriculum' where "the entire academic community assumes the responsibility of teaching reading, writing and critical approaches" (Zamel, 1998:193).

If one subscribes to the notion that a wider, institutional approach to the development of academic literacy and writing would be most appropriate for a specific context, this has important implications for all educators at such an institution. Within this perspective, one will have to give consideration to a number of issues that have received prominence in the literature in recent years. Some of these issues have emerged as more intense interpretations of the interaction between students and lecturing staff. For example, a strong institutional awareness about academic literacy has the potential to lead to **educator introspection about their own literacy and writing practices and the quality of written texts they themselves produce**. Limerick (1998) argues, for example, that one cannot in all fairness expect of students to write clearly and concisely if their models, the lecturers, write confusingly. Along similar lines, Leibowitz (2000:15) mentions that:

Lecturers can benefit in terms of their own writing development by facilitating the writing of their students, and students will definitely benefit if their lecturers have interrogated their own writing practices, and are able to share these, where appropriate, with their students.

One of the aims of collaboration is to involve a wider spectrum of educators in the development of literacy and writing at tertiary institutions. It is, however, also an attempt to **simplify the task of literacy educators**. For example, if a sufficient level of awareness and collaboration is established at an institution, one could attempt to establish a database where all lecturers at the institution provide concise information on the literacy requirements of the specific courses they teach when decisions are made about the teaching of such courses for the new academic year. Such information could be invaluable for designing appropriate academic literacy and writing courses. At the University of Pretoria, such information could, for example, be linked to an already-existing information eliciting instrument such as the Higher Education Management Information Systems (HEMIS) documents that each lecturer at the University (and other universities nationally) must complete every year. These documents ordinarily focus on the specific courses presented by lecturers as well as the type of offering, credits awarded and so on. If the academic literacy information required of lecturers could focus on a limited number of prominent issues and, as a result, not place a heavy burden on them to provide such information, responses to

such an instrument could supply a continuous, up-to-date source of information that provides literacy specialists with the latest literacy requirements from different departments and faculties at an institution. The main issues of this section are put together in Table 4.4 below.

**Table 4.4 Institutional demands and constraints**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the institutional <b>level of awareness</b> about the literacy and writing difficulties of students?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can productive <b>institutional collaboration</b> on literacy development be established and sustained?           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Are other lecturers prepared to accept some <b>responsibility for the literacy development</b> of their students?</li> <li>➤ How aware are <b>lecturers about their own literacy practices</b> and how these impact on their students?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can institutional <b>structures be used to simplify and support</b> the role of literacy and writing course designers with regard to the collection of vital information?</li> </ul>

#### 4.2.5 Approach to teaching and learning writing

A fifth element of the framework proposed in Figure 4.1 above concerns the approach one should take to teaching and learning writing. A number of these approaches have been discussed in Chapter 3. Such approaches are often connected to specific time periods in which their history and connectivity are highlighted. So can one, for example, trace the history of writing development on a broad timeline that commences with the product approach which placed emphasis on the written text as product. As we have noted above, the process approach mainly originated as reaction to the inadequacies of the product approach, and in turn gave rise to the social constructivist approach in its criticism of the overemphasis in the process approach on the writing process and its neglect of the social context in which writing is done. Critical literacy, in turn, focuses mainly on the power relations that are sustained

through language use in the tertiary context. It is important to note, however, that there is an inherent danger in historical descriptions, because 'dated' is sometimes associated with 'no longer good' in the academic environment. Apart from the inclination to concentrate primarily on recent information on issues, one could also fall into the trap of assuming that everything connected to a specific approach is worthless because of strongly held ideological beliefs that are regularly shaped by extreme reactions to opposing points of view. The argument here is that one should not judge hastily when considering debates on past research and arguments about the teaching and learning of writing (or language/literacy, for that matter). Even past research that has been heavily criticised at the time might be useful in specific current contexts. A judicious stance would be to consider all approaches with regard to their potential contribution to the teaching and learning of writing in the possible contexts in which they might be employed. A good example is Krashen's (1982; 1985) Monitor Theory (MT) of the 1980s. Although some of his hypotheses have been criticised extensively, I believe that there is a case to be made for the function (and potential development) of an internal language monitor that enables language learners to notice their own language errors at specific stages of interlanguage development, and to correct such mistakes. Such a language-monitoring faculty is one of the literacy abilities that one would wish to develop in students towards becoming more proficient academic writers. Although there are other resources that could be exploited by students in ensuring the final correctness of their written texts, having the ability to correct others' as well as one's own texts empowers students in the sense that they do not always have to depend on the judgements of others who supposedly know better. Monitoring someone else's as well as one's own language use would, however, be very difficult without an adequate knowledge of the language in question. The implications for the teaching and learning of academic writing are obvious when one considers the central importance of strategies such as self-revision and editing in the process of writing.

At this point it is clear, though, that one cannot ignore that **experienced academic writers make use of some kind of process in their production of academic texts.** Any approach to the teaching and learning of writing will have to consider how a process of writing can best be facilitated in a writing course. It is important to note

that the description and practical implementation of a writing process in class should be flexibly designed so that it can make provision for learners with different needs, capabilities and writing styles. As Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis, and Swann (2003) note:

... not all stages [of a writing process] will be necessary for all students or in all contexts and some of the stages can occur simultaneously (Coffin *et al.*, 2003:42).

Apart from theoretical and practical considerations for the facilitation of a writing process, the selection of an approach (or a combination of approaches) for the development of writing will to some extent be guided by institutional practicalities and conditions. The one-on-one writing consultation that is currently so prevalent in the approach of many writing centres at tertiary institutions is an excellent example of how institutional constraints affect possible approaches to the development of writing. The resources (as well as specific beliefs about the development of academic literacy and more particularly, writing) of the institution will to a large extent determine whether this type of individualised writing intervention is feasible or not. Consequently, although theoretically the one-on-one writing consultation may potentially offer the most productive environment for writing development, the implementation of such an approach in its purest form may be nearly impossible in practical terms. Parkerson (2000:122) notes, however, that practical arrangements such as these do not have to be exclusionary, and suggests that although one-on-one writing consultation has developed within a specific context (mostly that of the writing centre), the same principles can also be used effectively in the tutoring or lecturing context.

A related factor that may play a role in the amount of individual attention that student writers can be afforded, is the **prevailing perception of the scale of writing problems at the institution**. The problems might be perceived to be so pervasive that the accompanying thinking never really allows for a situation of quality individualised attention to students. In other words, there may be so many students displaying an inadequate writing ability that attention to students' individual needs is considered to be totally unrealistic in the context. The question that remains in such a situation is: what type of course could add value in the development of the writing

ability of large groups of students? Although one could make use of peer revision of student writing in this context, it is clear that the successful implementation of a writing process might not be as easy or effective in a large group context. It is further apparent that this context requires an approach that would create opportunities for individualised communicative interaction (in this case mediated through the medium of written texts) that should be guided and monitored at a very intensive level.

Fortunately, institutional perspectives and conditions can be changed. So, for example, if a writing centre does not yet exist at a tertiary institution, the establishment thereof should be possible in principle. One has to decide, however, whether the potential gains are substantial enough to warrant such an effort, also taking into consideration that it might involve considerable financial implications.

The framework also stresses the **possible tutoring options relating to the practicalities of teaching writing for different levels of study**. One often finds that the resources required (with regard to the number of competent staff as well as available time) for intensive writing development exceed that of 'normal' lecturing in a tertiary context. A situation where there is little understanding of the nature of writing development can potentially have a negative impact on the usefulness of writing interventions, since quality writing intervention is usually a labour and time intensive endeavour. Although such a lack of understanding can be addressed over time, one still needs to find creative and practical ways of providing the best possible opportunity to students for developing their writing ability within such constraints.

Considering the wide spectrum of students that may possibly need writing support in tertiary education, it would be fair to say that the quality of writing expected from postgraduate students is non-negotiable, since academic texts as final product generally receive far greater attention in postgraduate studies as compared to undergraduate studies. It would also not be contentious to claim that in reality, where it seems easier for muddled writing to slip through at undergraduate level, the control measures (e.g. personal supervision, external examination) usually built into postgraduate studies are not supposed to allow weak academic writing to be accepted at this level. Regarding their level of writing ability, however, it is risky to assume



that postgraduate students will be more familiar than undergraduate students with the writing conventions of both their disciplines, and of writing in a tertiary academic environment, as a result of their more extensive exposure to this environment. A similar kind of assumption is that because one supposedly deals with more accomplished students at postgraduate level regarding their general academic ability, such competence necessarily extends to their ability to engage in quality writing in a tertiary academic environment. As has been previously mentioned, part of the initial impetus for commencing with this research was the concern of a number of postgraduate supervisors at the UP about the poor level of writing ability of their postgraduate students. With regard to the context described above, it appears as if the need for writing intervention at postgraduate level is immediate and intense. While the academic writing demands placed on students at undergraduate level are generally not that extreme, probably because they are perceived to be largely inexperienced writers in the tertiary context anyway and have time to develop this ability, the same lenience is not usually exercised at postgraduate level. These students are expected to be able to write meaningful and correct texts from the start. The conceptualisation of a writing course for postgraduate students will have to take into account the immediacy and urgency of their writing needs and, as a consequence, how writing support would be best facilitated in this context regarding possible tutoring options that will offer appropriate writing support.

**Table 4.5 An approach to writing development**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the most <b>contextually appropriate approach</b> (or combination) to be used for writing development?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What will be the most productive way of introducing a <b>writing process</b> to students?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can <b>individual attention be maximised</b> within current practical constraints?           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ What are the <b>possible tutoring options</b> available for the development of writing – how do these suit the specific context?</li> <li>➤ How does the <b>study level of students</b> affect possible tutoring options?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

#### **4.2.6 The development of writing course materials**

The final element of the framework proposed in Figure 4.1 concerns the development of writing course materials. Although the development of these materials can be seen as a culmination of the effects/influence of all the different elements of this framework, such development is also recursive in nature. In other words, materials should be regarded as the dynamic end product of an intensive process of investigation of matters related to the context and nature of academic writing, but should also be scrutinised constantly regarding what effect such materials have on the development of students' writing ability. In this regard, the question about what type(s) of materials would best facilitate the development of writing will depend to some extent both on the subjective awareness and observational capabilities of writing educators and course designers, and on the objective measurements of such development that can be made.

In short, the development of relevant materials will have to account for important considerations already comprehensively discussed in this chapter regarding the writer, the written text, the reader, institutional conditions and the theoretical and practical considerations of one's approach towards the development of writing ability. Whereas the first three aspects mainly involve a data gathering exercise, one's approach involves a dynamic interpretation of theoretical and practical considerations regarding the most productive way of facilitating writing development. Within the context of the approach proposed in this framework, one will have to consider, in the development of materials, aspects of text as product (with the accompanying principles of appropriateness and correctness), the writing process, the social context of academic writing, as well as an awareness of how power relations are articulated in, and affect the production of academic texts.

Although content-based and subject-specific models have been employed for many years in the teaching of language proficiency type courses, one should ask oneself whether this is a feasible option within the specific context of the development of writing ability. A university presents a context where a large number of different courses are presented to students. Academic staff working within support initiatives

have to make realistic decisions about whether it is practically possible to design literacy and writing courses that cater for the needs of specific disciplines. Are specialised courses sustainable, for example, when one considers the extensive revision that often accompanies such courses in their continuing relevance to changing needs? It is, however, well known that students are not usually motivated enough to engage in learning activities whose immediate relevance or importance they cannot see. It is therefore crucial that whatever materials are presented to students, such materials should be relevant to their studies, as well as engage their interest.

Another important principle that is closely allied to the degree of specificity of writing courses is how authentic these materials are with regard to what is expected in a university context. One could argue, for instance, that all students should be able to control a generic competency such as arguing in an academically accepted way. However, an issue such as argumentation may differ across disciplines with regard to, for example, what types of evidence are acceptable for specific fields. The question is, therefore, how close one prefers a writing course to be aligned with the actual content and way of reasoning in specific disciplines. Should materials be used that **only approximate the generic types** of academic writing tasks that students are expected to perform in general, or should the topics, texts and writing task types themselves also be taken from the very courses that are specific to the discipline? Obviously, in the context of a one-on-one writing consultation, the materials will to a large extent include the texts produced by student writers in specific subjects. In such a case, the actual consultation is best supported with input provided by specialist writing consultants on the principles of academic writing as well as discipline-specific writing conventions. In a context where this individualised model is not feasible and groups of students attend writing development sessions together, the issue of providing relevant materials is obviously more complex. Where writing tutors from specific disciplines are used in individualised consultation, one expects them to be well-versed in the writing conventions of those disciplines. This, however, is not necessarily the case with generalist writing lecturers/tutors who facilitate writing courses for large groups of students (these groups not necessarily being homogenous regarding specific disciplines or subject fields). In such a case the compromise could be to focus on generic principles of academic discourse, and, if students' writing

assignments from other subjects could be used, to provide feedback on such principles and not necessarily on the quality of the content. Depending on the context, it should therefore be possible to make use of more generic material (in the sense of a broader distinction between, for example, natural sciences type texts, social sciences and economic sciences texts that are not highly technical) in order to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and abilities about the broad principles and characteristics of academic discourse.

Depending on students' familiarity with the context of tertiary academic literacy, materials should also be developed in such a way that progression in such materials **connects to students' past literacy contexts**. In the case of students new to the tertiary academic environment, for example, one could expect a relative unfamiliarity with conventions in the tertiary context, and one would do well in guiding students from the literacies that are familiar to them (that of the secondary school environment, for example) to what the tertiary academic context requires of them. The incorporation of the concept of **genre** into a writing course has the potential to create an environment where one can tangibly connect to students' past literacies in terms of establishing a connection between familiar genres and those of the tertiary environment. The argument is further that, by introducing students to the written genres of academic discourse through a set of writing tasks based on such genres, we create a familiarity with their conventions. The crucial issue is, therefore, the potential authenticity of genre-based tuition, and, hence, its relevance to students.

Writing materials and task types should enable students to **engage with information on a much deeper level than merely regurgitating memorised facts**. In this context, Grabe and Kaplan (1996) discuss two types of production strategies – information telling and information transforming – that are used by inexperienced and experienced writers respectively. It is typically the second type, information transforming, that is increasingly valued as students proceed through to the postgraduate level at university. Although information telling is also required at tertiary level, it is the latter of the two strategies that enables students to engage in real problem-solving behaviour in their construction of personal interpretations of information.

Another important feature of materials is that, based on a process of writing, they should show a progression that **foregrounds writing activities which emphasise the recursive nature of such a process**. This recursive principle is activated from the start in the initial prewriting and planning stages through to gathering and analysing information, the synthesis of information and how this interacts with the writer's own perceptions and opinions in constructing an argument, and the production of the first formal draft of an assignment with all its subsequent revisions. The ability to revise constructively as a way to revisit previous ideas and hypotheses is crucial in such a context. As has been stated before, it would be unwise to assume that students already control adequate revision strategies. A writing course should make provision for ample training and practice in, for example, doing peer reviewing, be it at undergraduate or postgraduate level.

Ultimately, materials for writing development will be activated in the context of the classroom, tutorial session or individual consultation. The **manner in which such contexts are managed by writing educators** will influence the potential for constructive writing development in these environments. Apart from issues such as interest and relevance of materials, it will depend on the writing instructor/consultant to create and sustain an affective environment in which students feel secure and are prepared to take risks without the possibility of being ridiculed. Parkerson (2000:122) advocates very strongly that affect is crucial in the language learning process, and that students should feel as comfortable as possible in the learning situation. One should therefore be aware that learning contexts that are intimidating (including materials that are too challenging) to students would probably not be very effective in getting them to produce language. Even more important, students might not be very willing to reflect on their own language use in contexts that appear risky and of possible detriment to their self-image. Hence, one should carefully consider the effects of error correction masquerading as 'feedback', and the possible negative effect of inhibiting students' language production. The risk for students is obviously that of losing face. The way that learners avoid such risk is by sharply curbing production, which is exactly the opposite of what a course in developing academic writing has as its main purpose: the production of more, not less, writing. Again, this points to the adoption of a selective approach as to which aspects should be addressed in the

provision of feedback. The following issues have been highlighted in the previous discussion:

**Table 4.6 Materials development**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do the <b>elements of the framework interact</b> in the production of appropriate materials?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How <b>specific and authentic</b> should materials be?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can materials draw on students' <b>past literacy experiences</b>?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can writing materials support a <b>strategy of information transformation</b>?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How should materials be structured to emphasise the <b>recursive nature of the writing process</b>?</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the role of <b>student affect</b> in the design of materials as well as in how learning activities are facilitated in developmental situations?</li> </ul>

### 4.3 Conclusion

This chapter has proposed an integrated framework, consisting of six focuses, that should enable writing course designers and teachers to create meaningful learning opportunities towards the development of student writing. However, the context in which we try to make a difference is so diverse in terms of students' needs and the contextual requirements for writing that I tend to agree with Johns (2005) that:

... we now know that language and textual demands can never be predictable. Every classroom can have different goals, different content, or require different genres. Therefore, our most significant contribution to our students' academic growth seems to be consciousness-raising, encouraging students to research rhetorical contexts so that they can be flexible, goal-directed writers (Johns, 2005:12).

It therefore appears as if the ultimate success of what we do as writing educators will depend on our ability to convince our students of the crucial importance of literacy and writing for academic success, and to foster analytical and critical minds that are

capable of assessing contextual requirements for the production of appropriate academic texts.

The following chapter (and the rest of this study) focuses on an application of the framework discussed here. Since there appears to be an urgent and immediate need for postgraduate writing support at the UP, I have decided to make this group of writers the focus for the implementation of the framework. Chapter 5 reports the results of a general survey that was conducted with postgraduate supervisors at the UP on the literacy and writing requirements of their students.

## **CHAPTER 5 Academic literacy perceptions and requirements of supervisors - data analysis and discussion**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The framework that was introduced in Chapter 4 discusses at length the importance of the concept of audience in the academic writing transaction. Much emphasis was given to the relationship between academic writer and reader with the implication that an awareness of one another's expectations of academic writing has the potential to produce better quality student writing. This chapter focuses on providing a supervisor perspective (the primary audience for the writing of postgraduate students) of the postgraduate writing environment and discusses their perceptions on how this context is affected by academic literacy issues. It is therefore an attempt at providing a description of the context in which postgraduate academic writing takes place (a context in which the postgraduate student as writer of academic texts plays a central part) from the point of view of supervisors at the University of Pretoria. It further aims to determine supervisors' requirements, expectations and perceptions of their postgraduate students with regard to academic literacy and, more specifically, their writing ability.

Apart from the potential in raising supervisor awareness of matters that concern academic literacy and writing specifically, requesting the type of information described above is essential for writing course design. From the perspective of the academic writing course designer who often plays the part of intermediary or liaison between postgraduate students and their supervisors regarding writing matters, this information is crucial towards the design of writing courses that are relevant to students' needs as well as the requirements of specific disciplines.

As already mentioned, a number of postgraduate supervisors at the University of Pretoria confirm that many postgraduate students still struggle with academic writing. As a result of a growing number of requests addressed to the Unit for Academic Literacy (UAL) involving writing support for postgraduate students, it was decided to select a specific group of these students as a focus group for the application of the



designed framework. Although the focus group for the proposed writing course in Chapter 10 is a very specific group of postgraduate students (from the School of Agricultural and Food Sciences in the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences), it was decided to do a campus wide supervisor survey as a first step in order to gain a general impression of supervisor perceptions and requirements regarding academic literacy and writing. This was done in order to gain a more general understanding of supervisor perceptions, expectations and requirements but also with the specific purpose of possible future contact with such supervisors. **A survey of postgraduate academic literacy was therefore conducted among all postgraduate supervisors** at the UP. In this chapter, the results of the survey as a whole are reported first under section 5.2.2. Subsequently, an abstraction is made from these results specifically for the study group from Agricultural and Food Sciences compared to the rest of the respondents.

Ultimately, this chapter and the following four chapters are an attempt at providing a multi-faceted account of the different role players and issues within the tertiary environment that have bearing on the writing context. Chapter 9 specifically integrates the major findings in Chapters 5-8 with regard to their implications for writing course design.

## **5.2 Academic writing requirements for postgraduate studies**

The following section reports the results of a survey conducted at the University of Pretoria that determined supervisor perceptions of postgraduate academic literacy as well as the academic writing requirements for postgraduate studies offered in different faculties at the University.

### **5.2.1 Survey instrument**

Although there are numerous documented difficulties in the construction and use of questionnaires as information soliciting instrument (see Nunan, 1992; Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Coetzee-Van Rooy, 2002), it was considered a suitable initial instrument for determining certain general issues regarding academic literacy and

writing in the postgraduate context. It was envisaged that, once broad trends were established, more specific, discipline-oriented information could be elicited by means of focus group interviews and ongoing discussions with supervisors in specific disciplines.

Having worked with postgraduate students with literacy problems in our generic Academic Writing for Postgraduate Studies (EOT 300) course for the past three years, I have designed the questionnaire not only to confirm certain assumptions and expectations I have about the academic literacy and writing ability of postgraduate students, but also to gain important additional information with regard to what specific academic literacy and writing requirements supervisors have of their students.

In the construction of the questionnaire, I focused on the following issues:

- the **level of experience** of postgraduate supervisors;
- supervisor **awareness** about the **language preference and use** of their postgraduate students;
- the **formal language background** of supervisors;
- supervisor **awareness** about the **academic literacy levels** of their postgraduate students;
- supervisor **awareness** about the specific **literacy and writing difficulties** of postgraduate students;
- the **importance** that supervisors award to **writing regarded as a process**;
- the **importance** that supervisors assign to **language usage** in the writing of students;
- what **strategies** supervisors use to ensure **final language correctness** of written texts;
- specific **requirements** of supervisors with regard to **academic writing issues** (e.g. referencing systems; use of evidence; other stylistic requirements); and
- the **willingness** on the part of postgraduate supervisors to **accept support from the UAL on writing matters** (towards a possible closer working relationship between the UAL and specific faculties/departments).

After a lengthy process of determining which lecturers in the different faculties at the University were involved with students at postgraduate level, 500 questionnaires were distributed at three campuses (The Main Campus, the Onderstepoort Campus [Veterinary Sciences] and the Groenkloof Campus [Education]). Lecturers had sufficient time to complete the questionnaires and in the end, 101 (approximately 20%) completed questionnaires were sent back. Respondents from a wide range of disciplines returned the questionnaires (supervisors from 52 departments in 8 faculties responded) with the highest number of responses originating from the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences. A complete copy of the questionnaire is included in Addendum A.

## **5.2.2 Analysis and interpretation of the results for all supervisors**

### **5.2.2.1 Introduction**

It is important to point out that this analysis of the data is primarily descriptive. Where appropriate, however, analyses attempt to establish noteworthy relationships between prominent sections of the data.

### **5.2.2.2 Section A - Institutional and professional issues**

The first issue addressed in Section A of the questionnaire focuses on the language background of supervisors. It was considered important to determine supervisors' language experience in a more formalised context because of a possible relationship with how confident they felt in dealing with issues pertaining to the language use of their postgraduate students. Although only 40% of supervisors had had exposure to formal tertiary language training of some kind, a large percentage (67%) have confidence in their own language abilities to ensure the language correctness of final drafts of postgraduate texts. This corresponds well with the supervisory experience of supervisors, where the more experienced supervisors generally indicate that their own language ability is adequate in order to ensure such correctness. A large number of supervisors also indicate that to ensure language correctness they make use of a wider

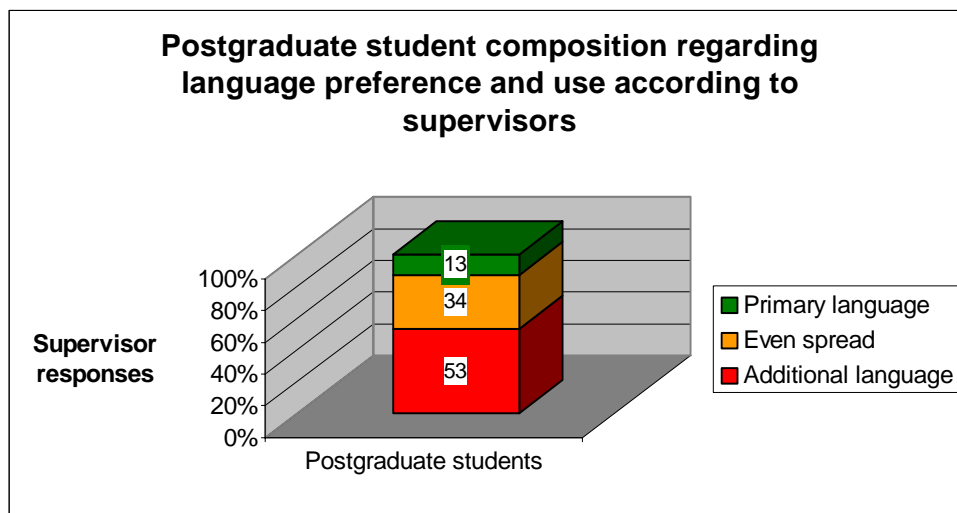
support system (other colleagues, people they know who are proficient in the specific language, editors, etc.).

As already indicated, a comprehensive strategy (such as the one proposed by the framework in this research) that aims to support postgraduate students with academic writing, has to address how informed the immediate supervisors of these students are with regard to their language preference and use as well as their academic literacy ability. Since the difficulties of additional language users specifically in reaching native user competence in an additional language are well known (an ability that is further complicated by using that language in a tertiary academic context), the questionnaire also attempts to determine supervisor awareness about the language status of their postgraduate students. Additionally, the questionnaire had the underlying aim of possibly raising awareness about language and literacy matters among supervisors that might encourage them to be proactive in addressing literacy difficulties (for example, requiring that students complete a literacy assessment when they commence with their studies), rather than discovering student problems at a later stage only. Introducing the early literacy assessment of postgraduate students is, however, an issue that should be handled with caution, since a determination of academic literacy levels should not evolve into serving a gatekeeping function that would deprive students of the opportunity to engage in postgraduate study. If such an assessment is to be used as part of the admission criteria for postgraduate studies, it could potentially be used to deny students access to postgraduate studies. So, while one would like to raise awareness about literacy difficulties on the one hand, one would also wish to encourage supervisors to seek relevant support for students with such difficulties.

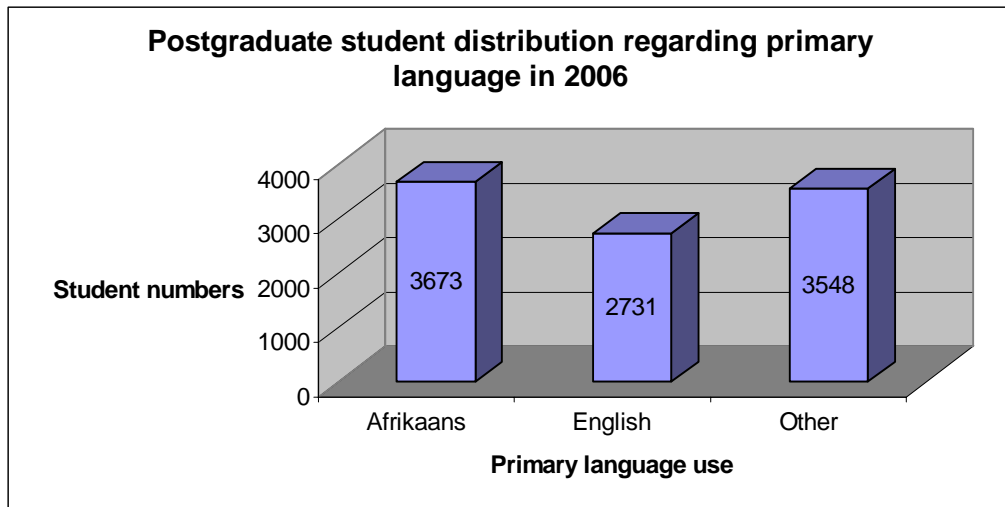
Supervisors were therefore asked to make a general distinction between whether their postgraduate students at the time consisted mainly of primary language users of the language of learning, additional language users of the language of learning, or whether there was an even spread between primary and additional language users. Very significantly, 87% of the supervisors indicate that their students are either a mixed group of primary and additional language users or mainly additional language users of the language of learning (see Figure 5.1). A very small percentage (only 13%) of the respondents indicate that their postgraduate students include mainly

primary language users of the language of learning. Although the data reported here are impressionistic in nature (these are therefore not the official figures on the language preference of postgraduate students, but the impressions of a portion of supervisors at the University), the general spread they report between additional and primary language users is largely supported by the official university data available for 2006. From a total of 9952 postgraduate students registered at the University in 2006 (Bureau for Institutional Research and Planning [BIREP], 2006), 3673 students are Afrikaans native language users (see Figure 5.2). A total of 2731 students only are native English users. With regard to their language preference, 7158 students prefer to study in English (see Figure 5.3). This total includes 948 students who are Afrikaans native language users who prefer to study in English, but also 3479 students who are users of a variety of other native languages and who are, therefore, additional language users of English. Thus, from a total of 9952 postgraduate students, 4427 are additional language users of English (largely similar findings are reported for 2005). This trend is also borne out in Chapter 7 of the research in the sense that from the group of students that was initially tested with TALL, the majority were additional language users of English.

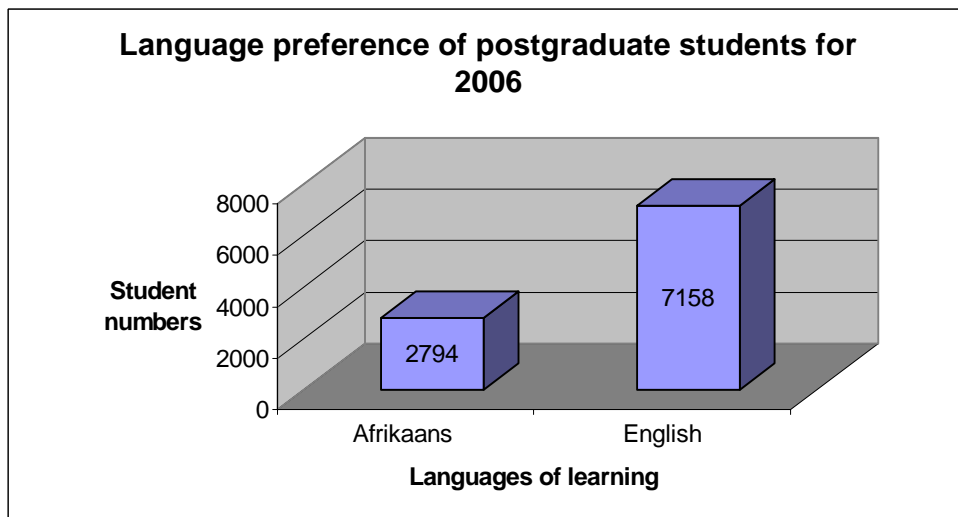
**Figure 5.1 Postgraduate students' language preference and use according to supervisors**



**Figure 5.2 Primary language use of postgraduate students at the UP for 2006**



**Figure 5.3 Language preference of postgraduate students at the UP for 2006**



Although students have a choice between using either English or Afrikaans as a language of learning at the University, there is a tendency for postgraduate students to prefer to write in English specifically, no matter what their primary language is (they are also sometimes advised to do so). The reason for this is probably related to the

status English enjoys as a *lingua franca* in South Africa but also perhaps because English is widely perceived as a world language that provides access to employment and international communication (Horne & Heinemann, 2003; Van der Walt, 2004). The inclination of postgraduate students to write in English in South Africa might further be influenced by the number of accredited academic journals that are still available in Afrikaans. A study by BIREP (2006) found that, for example, from a total of 236 journals that are accredited by the Department of Education (for 2005), only 15 have Afrikaans titles. During 2005, only 6.5% of journal articles by UP academics were published in Afrikaans journals. The trend regarding language preference and use mentioned above is alarming when one considers the generally low rating supervisors in this survey award their additional language students with regard to academic literacy and writing ability specifically. I will return to this issue later in the chapter.

### **5.2.2.3 Section B - Supervisor perceptions about the academic literacy levels of their students**

In the construction of the questionnaire, it was considered crucial that supervisors understand exactly what is meant by the term 'academic literacy'. Therefore, in order to create a shared understanding of what academic literacy means in the context of this survey, the term is defined in the questionnaire as:

*the integrated academic language ability of students that enables them to cope with the demands of studying in a tertiary academic environment. Such ability incorporates, amongst others, aspects of how students deal purposefully with written texts in their interpretation and production of such texts. This mainly includes: an understanding of how different academic texts work (their structure, type of content and how language is employed to create this structure and content), strategies for selecting, arranging and generating information appropriately in their academic argumentation and how students generally integrate their familiarity with academic language conventions (e.g. register, style and appropriateness and correctness of language) in their production of academic texts.*

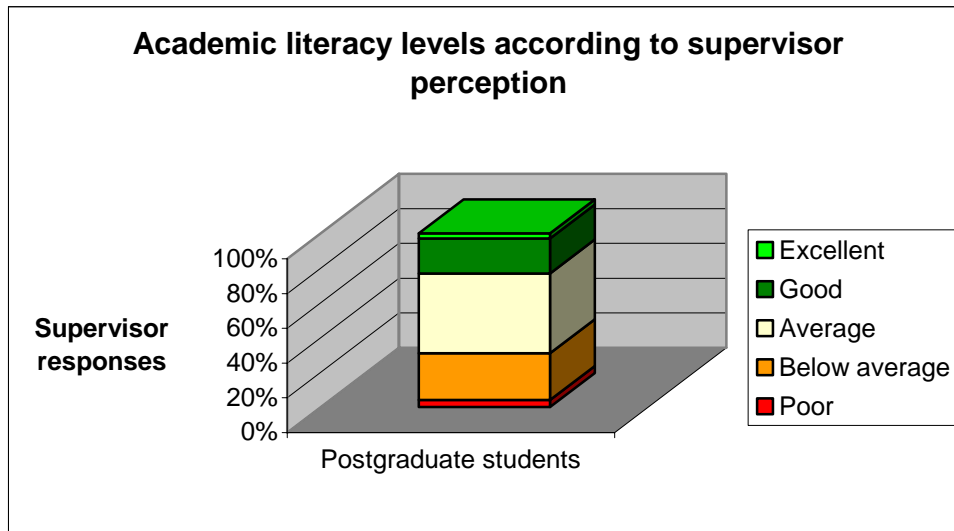
The first question related to the concept of academic literacy in the questionnaire focuses on whether supervisors see a relationship between student achievement and their academic literacy ability. Eighty-three per cent of the respondents indicate that academic literacy plays an important role in the completion of postgraduate studies. In the explanation for their choices, responses range from language and literacy-

related difficulties experienced by students that complicate their studies to a relationship between the duration of studies and academic literacy levels. One respondent, for example, indicates that: *"Literacy levels facilitate access to literature reading in order to develop concepts and expression of opinions and ideas."* In effect, a number of supervisors indicate that students with lower levels of academic literacy generally take longer to complete their studies. One respondent notes that: *"It does not prevent them from successfully completing their studies, but definitely the ease with which they complete their studies/takes longer to complete."* Another related issue involves the increased effort and time spent with lower literacy level students on the part of supervisors. Some respondents are adamant that: *"Reading and writing skills compromise them, it takes enormous amounts of time from me."* In this context, there are important institutional issues that are obviously complicated by students who do not have an adequate literacy ability. The first such issue is that of students who do not complete their studies as a result of their struggle to deal with the literacy demands of postgraduate studies. The second issue is that students take longer than they are realistically supposed to in order to complete their studies. Obviously, the throughput rate of postgraduate students at universities in South Africa is a crucial issue that warrants constant monitoring and investigation in order to ensure that there is a continuous supply of highly qualified, employable professionals.

Responses to a question about the general academic literacy levels of postgraduate students were elicited by means of a Likert scale. On a scale of 1-5 with 1 described as poor and 5 as excellent, 77% of the responses range between levels 1 and 3 ('poor' to 'average'). Only 23% of the respondents feel that their students approximate an excellent level of academic literacy (see Figure 5.4, below). The generally negative perception of their students' literacy levels can, to some extent, be expected within the wider context of the history of education in South Africa. This is, however, not the literacy profile that one would expect from postgraduate students, given the fact that they have been exposed to the tertiary environment for a considerable time. It should be noted again that these are supervisors' perceptions and not actual student ability. There is, however, a noteworthy parallel between the general perception of supervisors about the literacy levels of postgraduate students and the results of TALL as well as the text analysis for the specific study group (discussed in detail in Chapter 7).



**Figure 5.4 Supervisor perceptions of their students' general academic literacy ability**



Based on the general expectation alluded to above that postgraduate students are supposed to be academically literate, supervisors were probed about their specific expectations in this regard. Although a large majority of respondents (96%) feel very strongly that the students who are admitted to postgraduate studies should already be academically literate in their disciplines, there is general agreement that the measures and strategies they have in place to select academically literate students are not always successful. Regarding an average mark (in this case 60%) for the previous qualification being a good indicator of academic success, 82% of the respondents feel that it is either not a good indicator at all, or not necessarily a good indicator. As explanation for this choice, a large group of respondents mention that in their disciplines, undergraduate studies often do not prepare students adequately for the demands of postgraduate writing. This is mainly a result of the formulaic and factual types of knowledge that are typically required of students, and which do not necessarily contribute to the development of writing fluency. One respondent notes that: *"60% is a low mark – proficiency in a technical subject does not imply proficiency in the use of language."* Although one would expect that an intermediate degree such as 'honours' would provide more exposure to the rigours of extensive writing tasks, this is also not necessarily the case in all disciplines. Regarding this issue, a respondent mentions that: *"Honours is lecture-based. When they reach*

*master's they have to do extensive writing and they start suffering.*" Those who are therefore responsible for teaching students who were not exposed to much writing in their undergraduate studies (as well as on honours level) would do well in proactively addressing this issue in the form of extra and appropriately designed support for postgraduate students who experience literacy difficulties.

A further disconcerting statistic is that, although supervisor perceptions clearly indicate their belief that many postgraduate students experience academic literacy difficulties, only 45% of these supervisors indicate that some form of formal academic literacy assessment is required before admitting students to postgraduate degrees. Furthermore, the strategies for determining such levels vary greatly, with 84% of the respondents who indicate that they assess academic literacy stating that their strategies are either not successful or only partly so. The reasons for their choice range from stating that even with a relatively good mark for the previous degree, one is often still unsure about students' level of literacy and that undergraduate studies do not prepare students adequately for the literacy level required at postgraduate level; to a concern about the quality of previous tuition at other institutions (both locally and from other countries) and that it is probably unwise to trust marks from other institutions as a sole indicator of students' literacy abilities. As one respondent summarises this point: *"A good average mark is not necessarily indicative of academic literacy."* Obviously, the increasing pressure to produce growing numbers of master's and doctoral graduates will to some extent influence admission to postgraduate studies at South African universities. Therefore, regarding access to postgraduate studies the possibility exists that, even if a reliable assessment instrument is used to determine the academic literacy levels of prospective students, reality will probably dictate that students with low literacy scores gain access to postgraduate studies. It is for this reason that institution-wide knowledge of and access to a reliable assessment instrument (such as the Test of Academic Literacy Levels - TALL), that could be used to determine literacy levels accurately, could assist supervisors in identifying and addressing literacy problems timeously.

In an inquiry about what supervisors thought was the most difficult aspect of postgraduate studies for their students, 72% indicate that the actual writing of the academic text is the most difficult. Although, for example, they had the opportunity

to award prominence to the perceptive ability of understanding the literature (or for that matter anything else they thought important), they perceive students to struggle most with the actual process of writing. In my experience, many postgraduate students (especially inexperienced academic writers) struggle with writing because they still entertain the idea that writing is a more or less once-off event. The misconception that 'you are not a good writer if you cannot do it right the first time' or just mere ignorance about writing practised as a process, can be addressed productively in exposing students to a multiple draft approach to writing. Such an approach allows for the development and honing of students' writing ability right from the initial stages of developing a thesis, planning their writing and collecting and incorporating sources of information, through to producing numerous drafts of a written text while making use of strategies of revision and editing. A multiple-draft approach has the potential to foreground the soundness of argumentation, the acceptability of evidence, the cohesion and overall coherence of their texts, as well as the language correctness of the texts students produce.

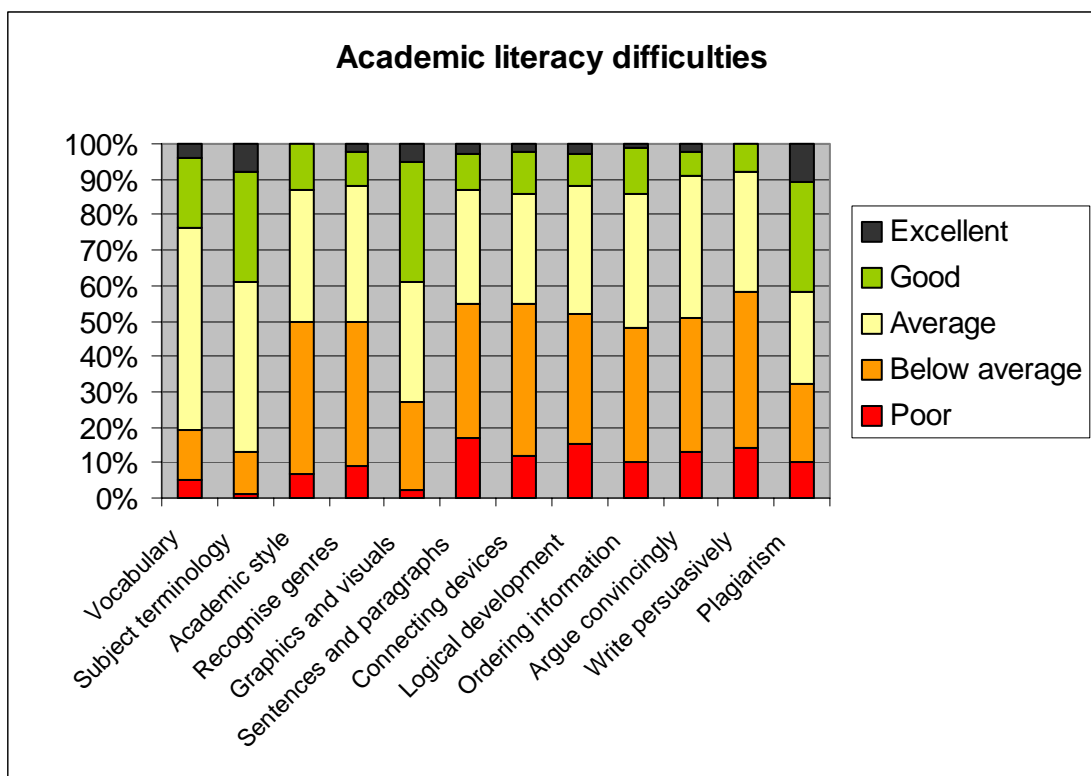
#### **5.2.2.4 Section C - Specific literacy and writing difficulties experienced by postgraduate students**

In order for the broader concept of academic literacy to be interpreted more specifically with the aim of providing a possible focus for writing courses, I decided to make use of a slightly altered version of the definition of academic literacy of Weideman (2003b:xi) in the design of the questionnaire. This definition identifies a number of functional components of academic literacy with regard to what students could practically do with academic texts. Supervisors responded to twelve statements in the form of again rating their students on a Likert scale. Their responses are summarised below in Figure 5.5.

Although the first two statements that deal with students' use of **general academic vocabulary** and **subject-specific terminology** respectively do not appear to present as big a problem as some of the other issues addressed, the fact that for both these statements the highest percentage of responses (56% and 48% respectively) identify postgraduate students as being 'average' in these abilities, is unexpected at postgraduate level (this issue is also addressed in more detail in Chapter 7). One

would expect that most students who have progressed this far in tertiary education should at least have a 'good' command of subject-specific terminology. Although the issue of general academic vocabulary could be addressed in a functional manner in a literacy course, subject-specific terminology is best left to the designs of subject experts.

**Figure 5.5 Supervisor perceptions about the academic literacy difficulties of postgraduate students**



Issues such as **academic style** and mastering **specific genres** (e.g. a technical report, thesis, etc.) and **functional text types** (e.g. argumentative, descriptive writing) used in the academic environment appear to present a considerable problem to students. A very large group of respondents (87%) indicate that their students have an 'average' to 'poor' ability to write in an academic style. Eighty-eight per cent of the respondents indicate that their students experience difficulty (an 'average' to 'poor' ability) in making productive use of the genres and functional text types regularly used in the tertiary environment. This finding is important in the context of recent positive

teaching results in genre studies that promote genre as a basis for writing development (see Johns, 1997; Johns, 2005). Within the context of writing course design this is an aspect that allows for the development of a competence in writing in those types of genres most often used in specific disciplines. As a result of the noted variability in supervisor/lecturer expectations about various aspects of academic writing (see Harwood & Hadley, 2004), writing course materials that focus on genre would be best developed in close consultation with discipline specialists.

Only two statements in this section of the questionnaire focus on the structural, linguistic aspects of language usage – one focusing on **structuring sentences and paragraphs** and the other on **making use of connecting devices** towards achieving fluency in writing. Students received low ability ratings from their supervisors on both of these. Eighty-seven per cent of respondents rate their students as having an 'average' to 'poor' ability in structuring sentences and paragraphs, and 86% feel that their students have an 'average' to 'poor' ability in making use of connecting devices. This is a clear indication that supervisors believe their students to be experiencing language proficiency problems in addition to other literacy difficulties, in the sense that many students are not proficient enough in the language of learning in order to make functional use of the language when they write. One note of caution must, however, be added here, which is that supervisors may be more familiar with these concepts relating to structure, grammar and language organisation than with concepts in this list. This may therefore have caused them to seize upon these, to their more familiar explanations of their students' lack of language competence.

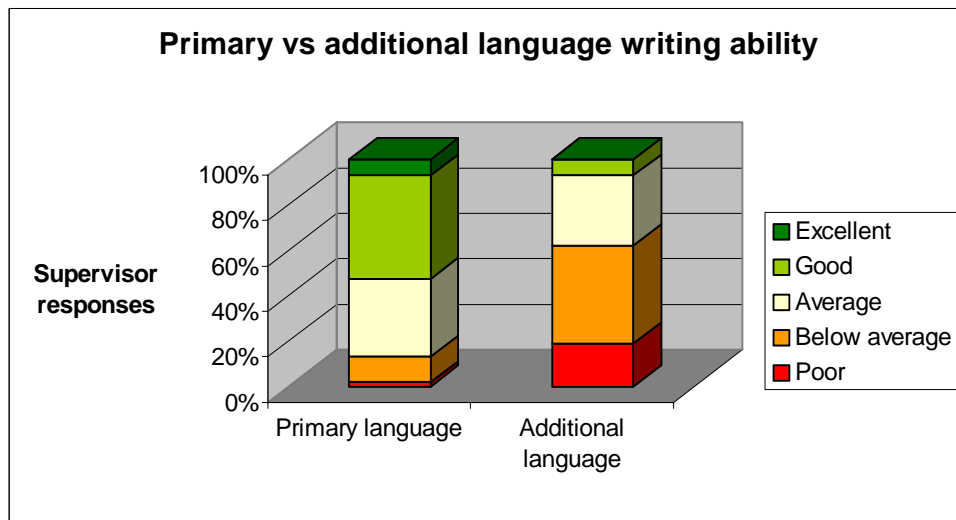
With regard to issues concerning the **logical development of texts, ordering of information, convincing argumentation** as well as **persuasive writing**, more than 80% of the respondents rate their students as having between 'average' to 'poor' ability. The only two issues that students appear to have some control over are their **understanding of plagiarism** as well as their **use of graphic and visual information**. Most supervisors (68% and 72% respectively) indicate that their students have an 'average' to 'excellent' understanding of the implications of plagiarism and make productive use of graphic and visual information in their writing. Although supervisors might be of the opinion that their students indeed understand the implications of plagiarism, this does not seem to prevent some students from

plagiarising others' work. In my experience, students are often shocked to find out that they are not allowed to use someone else's exact words without quoting directly, and seem relatively unaware of lecturers' ability to notice when some source has been plagiarised.

Although some supervisors mention that it is difficult to generalise about the academic literacy of their students, the analysis above is a clear indication that supervisors perceive many of their students to be experiencing difficulty with various aspects of functional academic literacy. On a practical level, it will be important to make supervisors aware that most of the issues mentioned above (with the possible exception of subject-specific terminology) can be addressed in a functional manner in an academic writing course for postgraduate students.

When asked specifically about the **academic writing ability** of their students and distinguishing here between the ability of primary and additional language users, 52% of respondents rate the writing ability of their primary language students as 'good' to 'excellent'. This is not the case, however, for their additional language students. Ninety-three per cent of respondents rate their additional language students as having an 'average' to 'poor' writing ability (see Figure 5.6, below). This is very significant in the UP context, since a large number of postgraduate students (nearly half of all postgraduate students registered in 2005 and 2006) are additional language users of English. It is even more significant when one considers that responses to the following question show that a large majority of respondents (90%) believe that the successful completion of postgraduate studies depends to a large extent on students' writing ability.

**Figure 5.6 Supervisor perceptions on the writing ability of postgraduate students**



**5.2.2.5 Section D - Academic writing requirements of disciplines**

Section D of the questionnaire focuses on writing issues that were expected to be more discipline specific in nature. The first issue deals with the discipline-specific nature of the language used in the discipline. In response to this question, it is apparent that a large majority of supervisors (70%) support the existence of the discipline-specific use of language. Responses to the following question further indicate that for supervisors, the language is not only specific in terms of subject specific terminology, but also in the use of specific genres and text types (62% of supervisors selected the combined option while only 31% selected the option for terminology only). These findings can also be related to the issue on who should teach students the academic discourse of specific disciplines in Section F of the questionnaire. A large majority of respondents indicate that subject specialists also need to take responsibility for this issue.

In order to provide a general indication of specific written genres and text types that may inform decisions about writing course design, the next question attempted to determine prominent genres and text types generally used in postgraduate study

(respondents were also asked to rate genres and text types in order of importance). An analysis (Table 5.1, below) of the responses indicates that a thesis/dissertation (70%), as could be expected, is by far the most prominent genre that postgraduate students have to produce. A research proposal is rated second (38%), and an academic article third (25%). Fourth most important is an academic essay (18%) and last, a report (12%). With regard to writing course design, this finding is a general indication that a focus on thesis or dissertation writing could be a potentially productive genre for authentic writing development. In practice, however, one will have to consider the usefulness (and practicality) of this genre for the design of writing course materials. Although one could make use of any specific stage in the production of a thesis or dissertation (such as the literature review, for example), it may be very difficult to co-ordinate so that all students in the group produce a literature review at the same time. It might be more practical to work with a genre such as a research proposal which is much shorter in length but is also connected to a shorter specified time regarding its production. This is, however, an issue that obviously needs to be clarified with a specific department or discipline and could be more adequately addressed in focus group interviews.

**Table 5.1 Supervisor perceptions on the importance of specific written genres**

Rank	Genre	Percentage
1	Thesis/dissertation	70%
2	Research proposal	38%
3	Academic article	25%
4	Academic essay	18%
5	Report	12%

With regard to specific text types used in postgraduate writing (Table 5.2, below), it appears as if argumentation (57%) and factual writing (54%) are by far the more prominent text types used in this environment. Only 24% of the respondents selected descriptive writing as their first priority with regard to the use of text types. It should be noted, however, that one rarely finds that a specific text type is used on its own in



academic texts. More often, a combination of these text types is used in order to build a sound academic argument and to write convincingly in the academic environment. This is another issue that should be addressed in focus group interviews, probably in combination with the previous issue on genre.

**Table 5.2 Supervisor perceptions on the importance of text types**

Rank	Text type	Percentage
1	Argumentation	57%
2	Factual writing	54%
3	Description	24%

One of the more prominent characteristics of working with ideas in the tertiary academic environment is that argument is usually built on **evidence**. This is confirmed by all of the respondents (100%) who say that claims should be substantiated in academic argumentation. A large group of respondents identify 'empirical evidence' and 'evidence from the literature' as acceptable evidence. As expected, this is an issue that calls for a focus on specific disciplines, since a number of evidence types mentioned by respondents are field-specific in nature. Among these are preferences such as 'mathematical proof' in Mathematics, 'statutes and laws' in the legal field and 'photographic evidence' in Mining Engineering as well as in Plant Production and Soil Science.

With regard to a specific **referencing system** expected of students, 64% of the respondents indicate that they prefer the Harvard method. Fourteen per cent, however, indicate that referencing is done according to discipline-specific journals. Based on these results it seems, therefore, that the Harvard would be a good default method to use in a general type writing course where students are not studying within the same discipline. Used as a point of departure, one should be able to make productive comparisons that focus on important principles of referencing when comparing the Harvard with other, more idiosyncratic methods preferred in specific fields.

### 5.2.2.6 Section E - Supervisor feedback

This section of the questionnaire attempts to elicit responses on the prominence of language in the **feedback** that supervisors provide on student writing. Ninety-nine per cent of the respondents indicate that they provide feedback on the language use of their students throughout the writing process. Of this group, 83% give attention to 'language correctness', 'style and register', 'structure', 'clarity of meaning' as well as to the 'logical sequencing of ideas'. Although only 51% make use of a fixed marking scheme in the final assessment of their students, 81% of respondents thoroughly discuss with students the way in which they will be assessed before the actual assessment. Seventy-one per cent of those who do make use of a formal marking scheme include a language component in the marking scheme and award an actual mark for language use.

Respondents were also asked to rate the language issues that are emphasised in the final mark. In response to issues such as 'language correctness', 'style and register', 'logical flow of ideas', 'overall structure' and 'clarity of meaning', the use of 'style and register' appears to be least important. All other issues mentioned above appear to be equally important in judgements about language use. One would have expected, though, that an analysis of this data specifically would have revealed significant patterns that could have been investigated further towards offering suggestions to supervisors on the provision of language-related feedback. This limitation of the data in that it does not differentiate meaningfully between these language issues could possibly be a result of supervisors not fully understanding what such issues entail. This is another matter that could be further explored in focus group interviews with supervisors.

As can be expected at this level of tertiary education, supervisors appear to be well aware of the important role language plays in postgraduate studies, and seem to spend considerable time and effort on language-related matters. Some supervisors, however, express the need to be able to "*focus more on the content rather than on correcting language mistakes all the time*". This is an important issue for the mere reason that reading for the quality of content does not necessarily coincide with reading for fluency and correctness of language. It is therefore often required that texts be read at

least twice in order to address both issues adequately. As a result, supervisors could be saved considerable time and effort if the written texts they receive are relatively error free and they could concentrate on the value of ideas and the argument presented by students.

As has already been discussed, the issue of feedback, especially the correction of grammatical errors, is far more complicated than merely stating that one does or does not correct errors. Offering support to supervisors with the provision of language-related feedback will obviously involve making supervisors aware of the current debate about this and encouraging them to adjust their provision of feedback accordingly.

#### **5.2.2.7 Section F – Academic literacy support**

A crucial issue in providing writing (and overall literacy) support to postgraduate students in a variety of disciplines is whether subject specialists regard language and literacy specialists as being capable of providing such support to their students. In response to the question on who should take responsibility for teaching writing to their students, the majority of respondents (64%) indicate that a combination of subject and language specialists should be responsible. It is clear that subject specialists do award a role for language and writing specialists in this regard. Seventy-six per cent of respondents further indicate that they think their students would benefit most in attending an integrated academic literacy course rather than language specialists providing an editing service only.

Although a large majority of supervisors depend on their own ability as well as that of their co-supervisors to ensure the final language correctness of postgraduate student texts, there is also a clear indication that supervisors are aware of other available support structures that can be accessed if needed. Fifty-two per cent indicate that professional language editing is a requirement before submitting final drafts of written texts (specifically dissertations and theses). An important issue addressed by a number of supervisors is that professional language editing can become a tremendous burden if the editor is not also a specialist in the specific discipline. It is therefore

strongly emphasised by these respondents that editors be used who are knowledgeable about the discipline.

It is further a very positive indication that after having completed a very lengthy questionnaire on academic literacy, 67% of the respondents are prepared to participate in a follow-up interview that will focus on more specific issues regarding academic writing in specific disciplines.

The most important findings of this section are summarised in Table 5.3.

**Table 5.3 Important findings regarding supervisor perceptions and requirements of academic literacy and writing**

- Although the majority of supervisors have not been exposed to formal tertiary language training, most supervisors feel confident in their own language ability to ensure the final correctness of student writing. The majority of supervisors also make use of additional resources (such as colleagues) to ensure such correctness. Professional language editing is, however, a formal requirement only for approximately 50% of respondents.
- Supervisors appear to be aware of the general language status of their postgraduate students in the sense that additional language users of English outnumber mother tongue Afrikaans and English users respectively at the university. A large number of comments by respondents were also directed at the literacy problems of additional language users specifically.
- Supervisors generally believe that an adequate level of academic literacy is crucial in the successful completion of postgraduate studies.
- A large majority of respondents believe that their postgraduate students' academic literacy levels range from average to poor.
- Almost all respondents feel that students should already be academically literate when they are admitted to postgraduate studies.
- There is general agreement that measures and strategies to select academically literate students are not always successful. Less than 50% of these supervisors indicate that the academic literacy of their postgraduate students is formally assessed.
- Supervisors indicate that they believe that writing specifically is the most important literacy difficulty for students.
- Supervisors believe that their students experience literacy problems over a wide spectrum of functional literacy abilities, but more notably in the areas of writing in an academic style and making use of academic genres, as well as making use of academic language in the construction of arguments.
- Supervisors point out that writing ability is crucial in the successful completion of postgraduate studies. They do, however, generally rate their

additional language students as being average to poor regarding their academic writing ability specifically.

- All supervisors confirm that making use of suitable evidence is crucial in the construction of an academically sound argument. What counts as suitable evidence can differ across disciplines but generally, empirical evidence and evidence from the literature are acceptable.
- Regarding a specific referencing system, the majority of supervisors indicate the use of the Harvard method.
- Almost all supervisors provide feedback on the language students use in their writing.
- Supervisors are generally prepared to accept support from the UAL in the development of their students' writing ability. The majority of supervisors also indicate that they share this responsibility with language and writing experts.

A number of other data sets will be added to the impressionistic postgraduate student profile and writing requirements provided by supervisors for the whole of the University in order to inform the design of writing interventions aimed at the needs of specific disciplines. Firstly, as has been mentioned already, an abstraction is made of the results of the supervisor survey that are relevant to the study group. This analysis is provided in the following section (5.2.3). Based on the latter analysis, focus group interviews that address a number of pertinent issues raised in the questionnaires will be conducted with these supervisors specifically. In addition, a survey that determines the academic literacy needs of students who form part of the study group, an analysis of the results of the Test of Academic Literacy Levels (TALL), as well as the analysis of an actual written academic text that these students have produced, will all add to a more comprehensive student profile, as well as to a better understanding of the literacy and writing requirements of the specific discipline.

### **5.2.3 A discussion of the data pertaining to supervisors from the School of Agricultural and Food Sciences compared to supervisors from other faculties**

Because this research culminates in a proposal for an academic writing course specifically for postgraduate students from the School of Agricultural and Food Sciences (henceforth referred to as 'Agriculture'), it was considered essential to analyse the results of the questionnaire with a focus on this particular group of

supervisors. Where results do not present any noteworthy differences between the two groups of respondents (the supervisors from Agriculture and the rest of the respondents, respectively), such results are not repeated in this section, since they have already been adequately addressed in the previous section.

With regard to the issue of a formal language background, there is a notable (though not totally unexpected) difference between the supervisors from Agriculture and the rest of the respondents. A substantially lower percentage of respondents from Agriculture show formal tertiary language training of any sort (whereas 41 per cent of the other supervisors indicate previous tertiary language experience, only 15 per cent of the respondents from Agriculture do so). It is interesting to note that in response to the question on professional editing being a requirement for more extensive writing tasks, a lower percentage of the respondents from Agriculture indicate that editing is a requirement (36 per cent compared to 54 per cent of the rest of the respondents). Although all the respondents from Agriculture regard their postgraduate students' level of academic literacy as 'average' to 'poor', these respondents also generally fall in the category of being the least experienced regarding postgraduate supervision when compared to the rest of the respondents (the majority of the supervisors from Agriculture have successfully supervised between 1-5 master's and doctoral students). These supervisors would do well in acknowledging the central role of revision and editing in the texts their students produce, not only with regard to ensuring the final correctness of written texts, but also in awarding them more opportunity to focus on the quality of ideas and argumentation. Such an awareness should obviously focus on the development of students' own ability towards productive revision of their own texts, but also on creating an awareness about other resources that could be employed to fulfil this function. One could, however, argue that the ability to correct their students' language mistakes is important in the development of supervisors themselves. This is again one of those issues that should not be regarded in the absolute terms of either correcting mistakes or not, but rather in how much time and effort are spent by supervisors on language-related issues.

Of further note is that most of the Agriculture supervisors (92%) are involved in some tutored postgraduate degree. The separate modules that are presented to students in such degrees offer an excellent opportunity for working with authentic texts to which

students are exposed in their studies, and should address sufficiently the issue of relevance that is often one of the biggest problems of support courses. There should, therefore, be a number of less extensive writing tasks that could be utilised in the design of a writing course for these students.

With reference to the issue of language use, only 8 per cent of the respondents from Agriculture indicate that their students are mostly primary language users of the language in which they study at the UP. Ninety-two per cent therefore indicate that their students are either additional language users of the language of learning (85%), or an even spread between additional and primary language users (7%). The literacy problems of additional language users, especially if they have never used a language of learning for study purposes before, have already been discussed at length earlier in this chapter.

Both groups of supervisors (the group from Agriculture and the group that makes up the rest of the supervisors) believe that academic literacy plays a seminal role in their students' completion of their studies. Similarly, both groups rate their students low with regard to their academic literacy levels and believe strongly that such students should already be literate when they are accepted for postgraduate studies at the University. It is, however, noteworthy that a larger percentage of respondents from Agriculture (62% compared to 43% of the other respondents) indicate that they determine the academic literacy of potential postgraduate students before they are accepted as students. It therefore appears as if the supervisors from Agriculture have a keen awareness of the importance of their students' literacy levels and how this ultimately contributes to the success of such students at university. It is further significant that the majority of respondents from Agriculture selected the option of making use of a proven testing instrument in determining the academic literacy levels of their students. A sizeable proportion of these supervisors do, however, still depend on assumptions about students' literacy levels with regard to the marks they have achieved for their previous degree, which is a possible explanation for 33% of these respondents indicating that their strategy for determining literacy levels is possibly non-valid and unreliable.

In their response to the question about the most difficult component of postgraduate studies, both groups of respondents indicate that the actual writing of the academic text is most difficult. A noteworthy difference between the two groups of respondents is that whereas only 4% of the respondents from the rest of the supervisors believe that dealing with the literature in the discipline is a problem, 23% of the supervisors from Agriculture see this as a difficulty. On the basis of these results, it would therefore be sensible to include a substantial component that focuses on academic reading strategies in a writing course for these students.

Responses to the enquiry about different functional aspects of their students' academic literacy did not yield any notable differences between the two groups apart from the fact that, whereas respondents from other faculties still selected the options 'good' to 'excellent' for a number of statements on the literacy abilities of their students, this is ominously absent in the choices of respondents from Agriculture. One could therefore conclude that the supervisors from Agriculture generally do not see their students as displaying an above average ability in academic literacy, or if so, only a very small percentage of students are regarded as having an excellent level of academic literacy. To some extent the results for the previous question can be explained by the response of respondents from Agriculture to the question on academic writing ability. Although they appear to have few primary language postgraduate students, sixty-two per cent of these respondents rate their primary language students' writing ability as 'good' to 'excellent'. However, this picture changes dramatically in their rating of additional language writing, where only 8% indicate that their students have an above average writing ability. Eighty-three per cent of these respondents believe that students' successful completion of their studies depends to a very large extent on their ability to write successfully in a tertiary environment.

The most important written genres for the respondents from Agriculture are in order of importance: a thesis/dissertation; academic essay; research proposal; and report writing. With regard to specific functional text types, argumentative writing is the most important type, followed by factual writing and then descriptive writing as the least important of the three.



As has been discussed earlier in this chapter, all respondents indicate that it is paramount that all claims must be substantiated by means of providing suitable evidence in academic argumentation. For the respondents from Agriculture, acceptable evidence most importantly amounts to that gained through empirical investigation (including experimental and laboratory results). It was also emphasised that results need to be statistically significant. Slightly less important is evidence collected from authoritative literature. One respondent further indicated that photographic evidence is acceptable in specific contexts.

The Harvard method is the preferred method of referencing for 77% of the supervisors from Agriculture. It would therefore be safe to include material on this method in a writing course for students from Agriculture, and as the need arises, augment the Harvard by including other methods required of students (two respondents indicate that they make use of the referencing system prescribed by specific academic journals). In my experience, it is relatively easy to switch from one method to another (from the Harvard to, for example, a specific requirement of an academic journal) once one has mastered the principles of one system of referencing to an acceptable level. Respondents from Agriculture further indicate that their students' ability in acknowledging sources is relatively poor (77 per cent of respondents rate their students as having an 'average' to 'poor' ability).

With regard to the type of feedback supervisors provide on their students' written work, all the respondents from Agriculture indicate that they provide feedback on students' use of language. Although only 53% of these supervisors make use of a formal marking scheme for the final assessment of their students' written texts, 92% discuss with students the way in which their work will be assessed before the final product is submitted. Of those supervisors who do make use of a marking scheme for final assessment, 78% include a section on language use in the assessment and 50% award an actual mark for language use. With regard to the specific language issues in such assessment, it appears as if supervisors from Agriculture focus slightly more on language correctness, the logical flow of ideas, overall structure of the text and clarity of meaning than on students' use of style and register. It is important to say, however, that the last issue is regarded as only slightly less important than the first four, and it

would thus be fair to observe that these supervisors attend more or less equally to all of the issues raised by this specific question.

The section of the questionnaire that focuses on language assistance for postgraduate students is an attempt to determine supervisors' willingness to accept assistance from the UAL in supporting their students with their writing development. It is quite apparent from the data that the respondents from Agriculture see a central role for writing specialists in the development of their students' writing ability. A large group of these respondents (54%) believe, however, that this is not the sole responsibility of writing specialists and that they themselves should be involved in such development. The majority of these respondents further indicate that they believe a writing support course is the best assistance that could be offered to their students. As indicated earlier in this section, the majority of these supervisors (62%) do not require the professional language editing of their students' final written texts (such as theses). Most of the supervisors from Agriculture indicate that they trust their own abilities in ensuring the final correctness of the written texts produced by their students.

### **5.3 Conclusion**

The supervisor survey reported in this chapter has, to a large extent, gauged institutional awareness of the academic literacy abilities of postgraduate students. Generally, the picture that emerges from this chapter is that supervisors are suitably aware of (and frustrated by) the literacy difficulties (with specific reference also to academic writing ability) that their postgraduate students, especially additional language users, experience. Although they would like to admit students who are academically literate and who can, in effect, already produce written texts that are acceptable in this environment, they realise that many of the students who are currently admitted require support in the development of this ability. The majority of supervisors indicate that admission requirements for postgraduate studies are not always sufficient in determining the academic literacy levels of students. There is thus a strong possibility (as currently appears to be the case) that students with low levels of academic literacy in English will be admitted to postgraduate studies at the University. Supervisors have further suggested that generally, they believe that

subject specialists (in this case the supervisors themselves) have an important role to play in the development of their postgraduate students' writing ability. It therefore seems that at the UP it is not the classic case of shifting this responsibility to the literacy or writing experts. They further believe that the UAL could support them in this endeavour. A favourable environment therefore seems to exist in which productive interaction may take place between the UAL and academic staff from the different faculties at the University in jointly addressing the development of the academic writing ability of their postgraduate students.

## **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

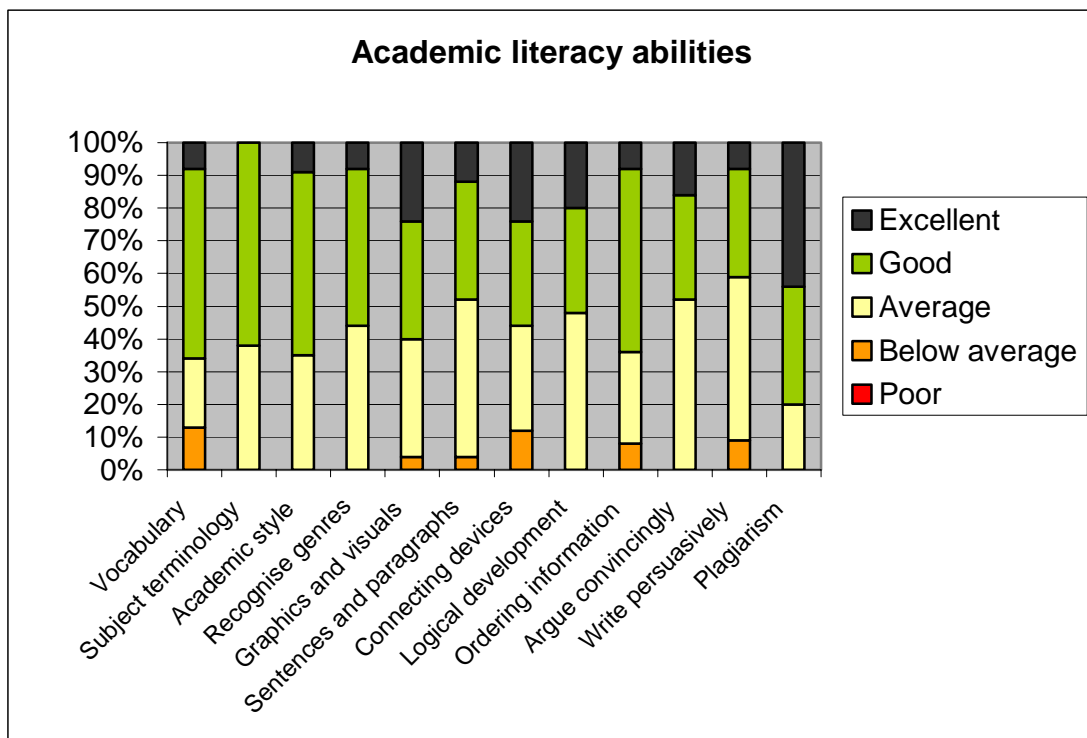
prominent world languages. In primary school students received their education in one of 8 languages, including languages such as English, French, Portuguese, Arabic and Setswana. With regard to secondary school education, the number of languages used for learning is reduced to only three languages, 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' from 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: *"Maybe I am too lazy."* 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. Alarming, 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  $\alpha$ ) 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



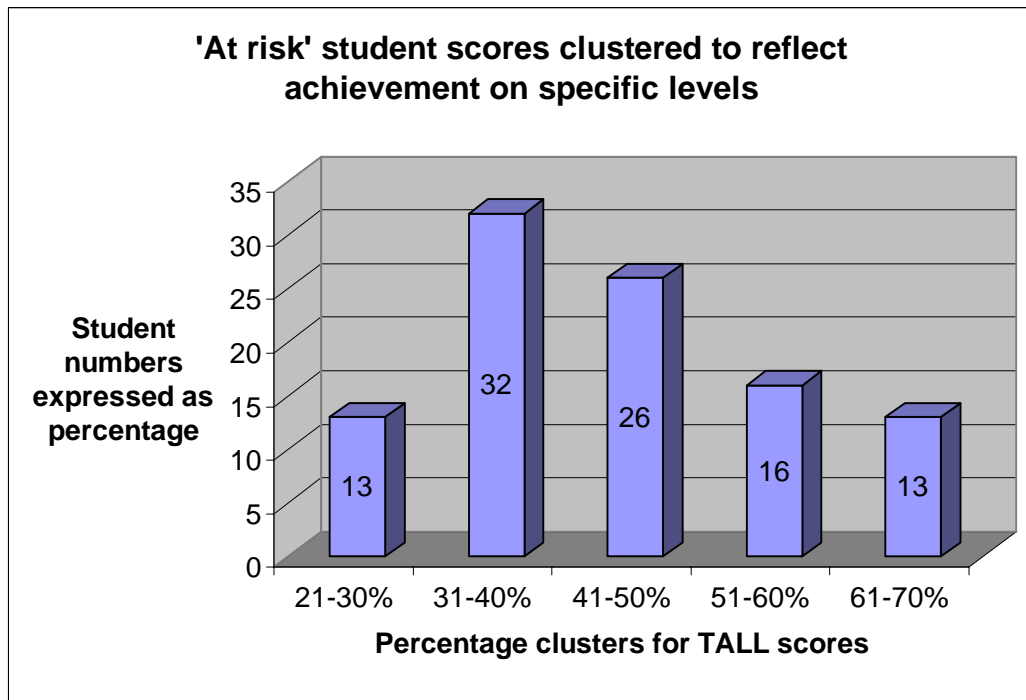
communicative function (cf. Van Dyk & Weideman, 2004b), with the main focus on the former, i.e. on grammatical or structural features of the language.

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**

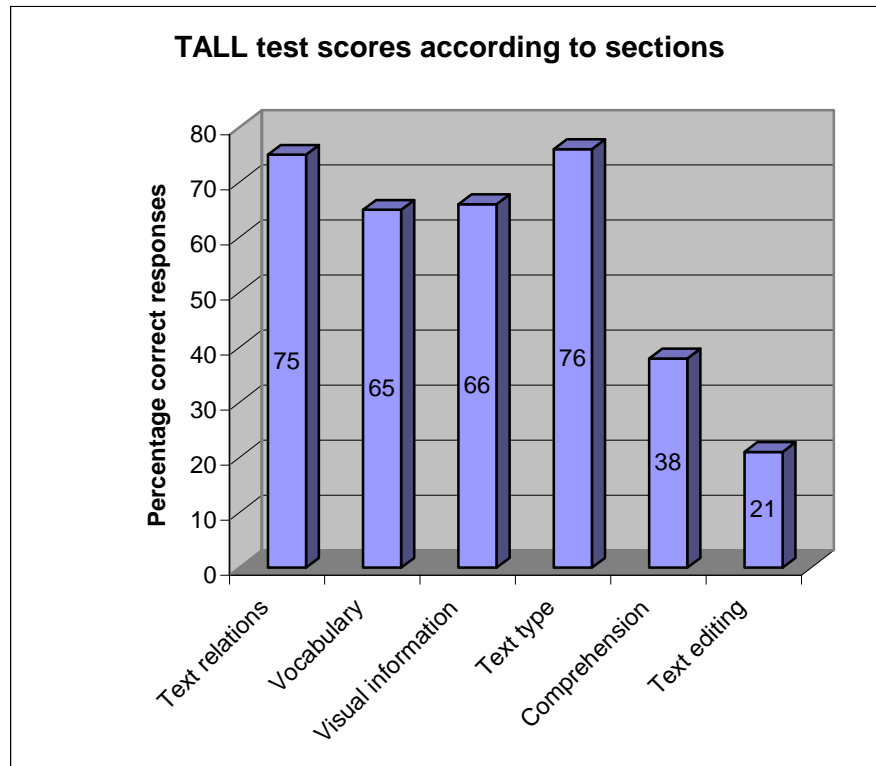
Although one would, as already mentioned, expect a higher level of academic literacy from postgraduate students, it was decided to make use of the same, historically determined cut-off point that is used for first year students at the University. Out of a group of 52 students (mixed primary and additional 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.

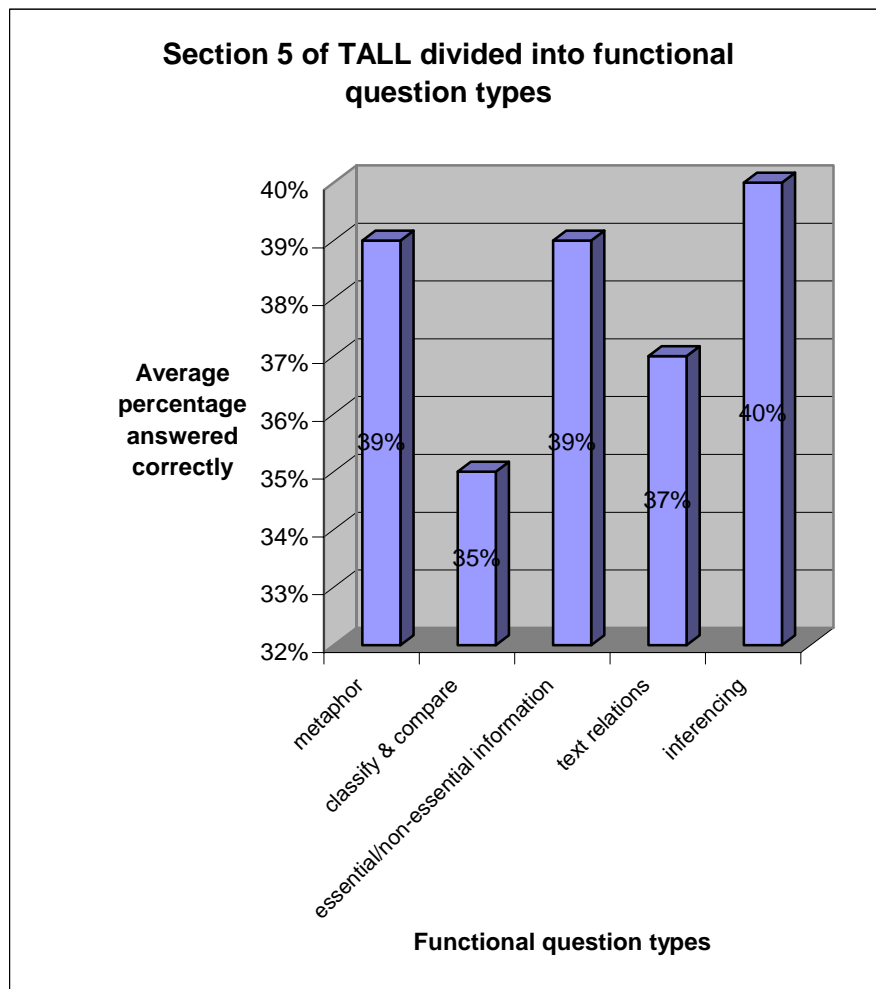
**Figure 7.2 Postgraduate students' TALL scores divided into achievement on the different test sections**



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 ( $\alpha$ ) 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
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concord of number (subject / verb agreement)</li> <li>• Determiners (article omission / incorrect use)</li> <li>• Expression of temporal relations</li> <li>• Passive expression</li> <li>• Possession</li> <li>• Prepositions</li> <li>• Pronouns (incorrect use)</li> <li>• General vocabulary use</li> <li>• Sentence construction/word order</li> </ul>

**Table 7.2 Category 2 – Academic discourse**

Error type
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Formality (lexis)</li> <li>• Pronouns (personalised writing)</li> <li>• Contractions</li> <li>• Verbosity</li> <li>• Referencing</li> <li>• Passive expression</li> <li>• Paragraphing and structural problems</li> <li>• Cohesion and coherence</li> </ul>

**Table 7.3 Category 3 – Presentation**

Error type
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Punctuation</li> <li>• Spelling</li> <li>• General layout</li> </ul>

### 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 message 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.

## **CHAPTER 8 Interview data on academic literacy and writing - analysis and discussion**

### **8.1 Introduction**

In the discussion of the data of the supervisor survey in Chapter 5, it was mentioned that some of the issues addressed in the questionnaire needed further clarification and confirmation. It was therefore considered necessary to conduct personal interviews on specific academic literacy matters with the supervisors from Agriculture in order not only to confirm some findings in the questionnaires, but also to collect more specific and comprehensive data on a number of particular issues regarding mostly practical considerations in academic writing course design.

The heads of the five different departments (Food Science; Consumer Science; Plant Production and Soil Science; Animal and Wildlife Science; and Agricultural Economics, Rural Development and Extension) in the School of Agricultural and Food Sciences were contacted and asked whether they would be prepared to participate in a follow-up focus group interview on the issue of the academic literacy and writing of their postgraduate students. In making the appointments, I emphasised that I wished to involve as many supervisors as possible in the interviews. Ultimately, I interviewed 18 supervisors, including all the different heads of department. With the exception of two interviews where only the heads of department were available at the time, all other interviews took the form of group interviews (ranging from 3 – 7 participants). The duration of the interviews was, on average, 60 minutes in which 10 questions (see Addendum C) were addressed to the interviewees. Apart from taking structured notes during the interviews, all interviews were tape-recorded (copies of these recordings are available on DVD in Addendum G) and subsequently analysed and compared with the written notes.

Although the interviewees sometimes appeared disheartened by the literacy problems of some of their postgraduate students, they were generally appreciative of the fact that my research is aimed at addressing particular literacy problems of their students specifically. The most prominent findings from the interviews are presented below.

## 8.2 Analysis of the data

### 8.2.1 Students' language preference for academic writing

The first issue I focused on in the interviews is concerned with students' **language choice and preference for the production of written texts specifically**. The issue of language preference is important in the conceptualisation of a writing intervention for these students, in the sense that one needs to consider whether it will be necessary to design a writing intervention in Afrikaans as well. Although it might be a fair assumption that many of the conditions and conventions of academic discourse would be relatively similar across languages, the treatment of, for example, grammatical issues in different languages will probably have to be approached differently. I therefore wanted to determine whether any postgraduate students in the departments mentioned above prefer to do their academic writing (with specific reference to more extensive written texts such as theses/dissertations) in Afrikaans. Without exception, supervisors in all interviews indicate that very few postgraduate students request to write in Afrikaans. Students are also generally advised to write in English, the reason being that this is generally the language of publication of most scholarly journals. Some interviewees further mention that although many of their students come from an Afrikaans background, they seem to understand that writing in English will enable them to compete on an international level. Some interviewees are also very aware of the status of English as a *lingua franca* in South Africa specifically, and thus the use of Afrikaans for postgraduate writing appears to be problematic for them in this context as well. It is further apparent that postgraduate students in this School are generally required to submit an article (based on their thesis/dissertation) to an academic journal as part of the criteria for completing their postgraduate degree. Interviewees also indicate that, consistent with the spread of the data obtained from BIREP on the language preference of postgraduate students at the UP, they have few students who are mother tongue users of English. Their postgraduate students are therefore mainly additional language users of English.



### 8.2.2 Distinguishing between primary and additional language users in terms of academic literacy ability

Because of practical considerations regarding the length of the questionnaire, there are two particular questions where I **did not distinguish between primary language users and additional language** users with regard to their academic literacy ability. The first instance where I omitted this distinction is in the question where supervisors had to rate the general academic literacy levels of their postgraduate students, and the second where academic literacy was broken down into a number of functional abilities to which supervisors had to respond. Some respondents indicated (by adding this in the margin at the specific question in the questionnaire) that it was difficult for them to treat primary and additional language users as one group in terms of their academic literacy levels, and I decided to make use of the interviews in order to create and clarify this distinction. Interviewees maintain that although mother tongue users of English also sometimes show a relative unfamiliarity with the stylistic conventions of tertiary academic writing, it is mainly the additional language users of English who experience more serious academic literacy difficulties. This also corresponds well with the results of the questionnaire where the distinction between primary and additional language users was made specifically with regard to writing. In their response to this issue in the questionnaire (see section 5.2.2.4), supervisors generally rate their additional language students low with regard to writing ability, while their primary language users are rated above average for this ability.

### 8.2.3 The mismatch between supervisor and student perceptions regarding students' functional literacy abilities

As noted in Chapter 5, an interesting finding of the questionnaire is that **although supervisors generally rate their postgraduate students low with regard to their academic literacy ability, students perceive themselves as being on a more than adequate level in this regard**. This mismatch is important in the sense that the results of TALL and the written text analysis discussed in Chapter 7 clearly indicate that students in the study group have a somewhat distorted perception of their own academic literacy abilities. It was thus decided to further explore this issue in the interviews in terms of whether it is important for students to be aware of their own literacy difficulties. In general, interviewees feel that the difference in perception

between supervisors and students about student levels of academic literacy should certainly be addressed in a productive manner. In the interviews, however, interviewees tended to discuss what they do throughout the students' studies in raising this awareness through the feedback they provide to students on their written texts. Although this is obviously an important issue during a candidate's studies, it might be even more important to determine students' literacy problems as early as possible, and to raise student awareness about such inadequacies in order to develop their academic literacy to an acceptable level. In response to a follow-up question, interviewees agree that students should be made aware of their literacy difficulties (through a reliable testing instrument) early on in their studies, but that one should be sensitive to issues of student motivation in the sense that, while students should be aware of their own developmental needs, they must know that they have support for developing their literacy abilities. It was further emphasised in the interviews that positive encouragement in terms of what students are doing correctly in their writing is crucial in terms of maintaining student motivation towards completing their studies.

#### **8.2.4 The consequences of inadequate academic literacy levels on student achievement**

In a finding that supports the questionnaire data, interviewees indicate that the **major consequence of inadequate literacy levels on student achievement** is that students take considerably longer than expected to complete their studies. One interviewee states that: *"The lower the language proficiency, the longer the student takes [to complete his/her studies]"*. Another interviewee mentions that he spends double the amount of time to get a thesis to an acceptable level, and that this is mainly due to the fact that students have difficulty to write. This situation has a direct impact on supervisors in the sense that it affects the number of postgraduate students they supervise who graduate in a reasonable period of time. It further has an effect on the publication record of the University (if students take longer to finish their studies or do not finish at all, the academic articles required for the completion of postgraduate qualifications in these departments do not get published).

An additional consequence that strongly emerges from the interview data is that the extended completion time of students' studies also affects both students and

supervisors on an affective level, in the sense that both feel the frustration that is created as a result of literacy difficulties that cause students to take longer to complete their studies. This situation also usually demands more time and effort on the part of supervisors to get students' academic writing to a level that would be acceptable to external examiners. One interviewee, for instance, mentions that he literally has to read some theses about three times in order to correct the language first before he can comment on the scientific value of the ideas.

Another important issue mentioned by one interviewee is that students often procrastinate with their writing, which is one of the reasons why students take longer or do not finish their research: *"They know they cannot do it [write academically]; they are too scared to start writing."* Some students therefore seem to lack the confidence to start writing up their research, with a subsequent need to find encouragement and support for them to start writing as soon as possible, and, having once gained momentum, to keep it going. One can also build their confidence with shorter writing assignments in a writing course in which, through balanced feedback, they are encouraged to produce as much writing as possible and to seek out the opinions of others on their ideas. Through a writing course that supports a multiple-draft approach, they may further become accustomed to a process of writing that allows for mistakes to be made in earlier drafts but that works towards an end product that will take the form of an acceptable written text for a tertiary academic context.

### **8.2.5 The reliability of traditional strategies for screening prospective students**

Supervisors in all five interviews confirm that **traditional strategies for screening students are not necessarily reliable indicators of students' academic literacy levels**. This corroborates what supervisors indicated in the questionnaire. What is also evident from the interviews is that supervisors use a number of additional instruments/strategies (apart from an average mark for the previous degree) in order to compile an integrated profile of individual students. Some supervisors indicate, for example, that they may request an interview with the prospective student if any uncertainty exists about the student's suitability for postgraduate study. Other interviewees indicate that at Ph.D. level, they are attempting to get students to submit a research proposal with their application in order to see whether they can write, but

that even this strategy may not always be successful because the student can get somebody else to write the proposal.

Although the University's admission policy clearly states that foreign students specifically should provide proof that they have previously studied successfully through the medium of English, one interviewee mentions that even if students have completed their previous degrees in English, this is no guarantee that their level of academic literacy will be adequate to deal with the rigours of postgraduate study. If proof of successful study through English is not available, foreign students are required to achieve acceptable scores on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Even in this instance, students in the study group (which included a number of foreign students) still displayed major academic literacy difficulties, as indicated in Chapter 7. Interviewees argue that academic literacy problems might be due mainly to the type of literacy experiences students were exposed to in previous academic environments (some, for example, have never presented a seminar before).

It is thus apparent that even with the strategies mentioned above in place, many students still display literacy difficulties (especially, according to interviewees, students from Francophone as well as Portuguese speaking countries in Africa). An interesting observation by some of the interviewees is that while many of their foreign students, especially those who are from neighbouring countries (e.g. Botswana; Zimbabwe) are on an acceptable academic literacy level, it is the additional language students from South Africa who experience considerable literacy difficulties. Literacy difficulties of both foreign students and students from South Africa are confirmed by the results of TALL as well as the written text analysis for the study group that are discussed in Chapter 7. Furthermore, supervisors sometimes find it difficult to determine whether the problem is related to academic literacy or whether the student simply does not understand the specific discipline. Based on the interview data as well as the data collected through the questionnaire, it is clear that although supervisors attempt to determine the preparedness of students for postgraduate study, only a reliable literacy assessment instrument will provide one with accurate information on students' academic literacy levels. Interviewees were, therefore, also questioned about the relevance of a postgraduate literacy test and, without exception, expressed their eagerness to have access to such a test for the early determination of

the academic literacy levels of their postgraduate students. This would enable them to determine timeously the relevant developmental opportunities for their students that focus on addressing specific literacy difficulties.

In two departments, there was also a suggestion of having students register for an extended study programme where they can be offered extra support, and that a literacy test be used to channel students into such a programme. Obviously, students on this programme will also need to enrol for a writing course offered by the UAL.

### **8.2.6 Are students' literacy problems restricted to writing only?**

Interviewees argue that **writing *per se* cannot be isolated as the only literacy problem of their postgraduate students**. They tend to regard academic literacy ability as an integrated concept, and stress that students also experience difficulty with academic reading (in terms of, firstly, understanding what they read but also critically interpreting academic reading texts) and argumentation (focusing on the construction of arguments with regard to logical flow of ideas; the analysis and synthesis of relevant sources; and the purposeful integration of such sources into their own writing). In most interviews it was stressed that postgraduate students do not read enough, and if one could motivate them to read more, they would also produce better quality writing. This observation may also be related to the notion that students make use of the texts they read as models for their own writing. One interviewee, for example, emphasises the relationship between reading and writing by mentioning that because students do not understand what they read, it influences what they write. According to some interviewees, students have difficulty to make the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate level regarding the way they read sources, in the sense that postgraduate students are expected to be more critical and questioning about issues in specific disciplines.

### **8.2.7 Specific literacy difficulties of postgraduate students**

The question in the questionnaire that addressed **specific aspects of a functional definition of academic literacy** was included in order to determine supervisors' awareness of specific literacy problems of their students. The analysis of the data,

however, reveals that supervisors perceive their students to be experiencing problems with most of these aspects. This may be due to the fact that supervisors in all honesty believe that their students experience considerable difficulty with most of the aspects treated by this question, or it could possibly be related to supervisors not being familiar with the terminology used in this question. I therefore decided to phrase this issue differently in the interview by asking interviewees what they thought would be the most valuable aspects of academic literacy for inclusion in a writing course for their students.

Generally, supervisors indicate that the development of ideas regarding the construction of an argument is the most valuable issue that should be addressed in a writing course. A major problem for students appears to be that they do not know how to connect ideas in a logical fashion. In addition, the ability to construct a logical argument includes that of being able to critically evaluate others' but also their own ideas (some interviewees mention that the absence of a formal course on critical thinking is a crucial limitation at the UP).

Interviewees further state that support with basic English proficiency, focusing on sentence construction and linking sentences logically will be valuable in a writing course. The interviewees from one specific department also mention stylistic problems in the sense that their students' writing is, at times, very emotional and that this specific stylistic issue should be addressed in the development of their academic writing. In this department, interviewees remark, for example, that students should refrain from using 'frilly' language such as 'very much' or 'extremely exhaustive' in the sense that such words are emotionally loaded. One interviewee, however, states that: *"We must be careful not to expect of them [students] to have the vocabulary we have."* There is thus some sense of the developmental process through which postgraduate students are supposed to become increasingly more competent writers as they progress with their studies. This is confirmed by the following comment from another interviewee:

It is very difficult for someone to start to write up their research report or dissertation or whatever first time around. It is something that you have to learn and something that you have to get used to, so I don't think that we're going to find anyone first time around that have already the style and everything in place.

Another prominent stylistic matter is that of the impersonal nature of academic writing. It appears as if first person writing is still unacceptable for most of the interviewees: *"Third person writing is expected for most publications."* The condition regarding the sense of formality of academic writing that is created, in part, by avoiding first person pronouns (that would make one's writing more personal) thus still seems to apply for supervisors at the School for Agricultural and Food Sciences. What is apparent from the interviews is that, although some interviewees appear to have only a general idea of what academic style entails, others have specific and refined ideas on what exactly this aspect embodies in academic writing.

Interviewees further focus on the technical aspect of referencing with regard to students developing their ability to cite correctly in a consistent fashion, but also on how the integration of sources affects one's construction of an argument. Students therefore appear to experience problems with both analysis of sources (deciding which sources are relevant for a specific topic) as well as synthesis of chosen sources (integrating such sources logically and coherently into their own writing as a source of evidence). Students further appear to have problems in judging the strength of the claims they make. Sometimes they place too much emphasis on an idea that only borders on being significant, and at other times have a very strong piece of evidence, but do not emphasise it enough. It may therefore help if a writing course could address the issue of subtlety regarding how strongly an issue is worded, in other words, supporting students in hedging their writing by using correctly words such as 'possibly' or 'appears to be'. Students further seem to have problems in judging whether their ideas are relevant to the topic they are writing about: *"They wander from the topic."*

An issue that is closely related to referencing is that of plagiarism. All interviewees strongly express the need for plagiarism to be addressed in a writing course. Without exception, they all agree that plagiarism is a problem in some postgraduate writing. Some interviewees mention that the moment students have to write something taken from a source in their own words (paraphrasing), they experience problems in expressing themselves clearly. One interviewee further states that students get confused when the feedback they receive on plagiarised parts of their texts is 'fantastic' and when they use their own words the text is full of comments by the

supervisor. The same interviewee remarks that they do not always have the time to check whether something has been plagiarised. Notwithstanding the heavy penalties for plagiarism at the University, this issue is problematic in the sense that it creates a skewed impression with students, and as a result, may lead to students to prefer to plagiarise (if the supervisor does not identify possible plagiarism in a consistent manner) as a result of the mostly positive feedback they receive on plagiarised sections of their texts. Students further appear to have a tendency to make use of (and in some cases, plagiarise) information from the Internet. Perhaps as a result of the accessibility of information on the Internet, some students tend to over-utilise this source of information to the detriment of other types of sources. It also happens sometimes that because students are inclined to plagiarise from various sources, their texts often display a mixture of different writing styles: "*... one cannot say that it is one person who wrote something.*" Since the achievement of own 'voice' (Blanton, 1998) is what all students should strive for, plagiarism from various sources obstructs their progress. And own 'voice' is, in becoming academically literate, a way of demonstrating the possession of authority.

A very specific issue that was addressed by the interviewees from one department is, in fact, that of students developing their ability to write with authority. They connect this issue to the different requirements for master's and doctoral study in the sense that some students think that a Ph.D. is just another master's: "*... the way they write, it is just repeating old things.*" Students therefore have to develop their own voices, they "*need to speak their minds.*"

### **8.2.8 Generic written genres used in the different departments**

With regard to **specific written genres that are shared in the different departments in the School**, thesis and dissertation writing appear to be the most generic genre. What is apparent, though, is that the unpredictable nature of being involved in the writing of an extensive genre such as a thesis or dissertation, makes this genre problematic to utilise in a writing course that is concluded within one year. It will be a difficult genre to co-ordinate within a writing course, since different students will be at different stages in the process of writing up their research. At the very best, one may attempt to utilise specific sections/stages of this genre in writing



course design. One such section that emerged in the interviews is the literature review. Some interviewees mention that in their postgraduate degrees, they have found it much more valuable to have students write and hand in a literature review as an examination, rather than to have students write a formal, often rushed, examination paper. For all interviewees, a literature review seems to be an important sub-genre that all postgraduate students should be able to produce. All postgraduate students in the School are further required to write a research proposal (which includes a literature review). It is also apparent that the postgraduate seminar (in both oral and written version) is an important instrument used in the school to provide both peer and supervisor feedback on the research of postgraduate candidates. With reference to any special assistance provided by supervisors in the writing of these genres, interviewees indicate that they do provide written guidelines (to differing degrees of comprehensiveness in the respective departments) with which students are expected to comply. It was also evident that there exists a perception that after having provided guidelines, this should suffice to have students produce texts that adhere to such guidelines. The issue of providing models of acceptable writing in, for example, presenting students with a 'good' research proposal that was accepted by a relevant research committee, was also addressed by one interviewee in the sense that "*they could do more*" in this regard. Students are, however, welcome to request such examples from their supervisors.

There is further evidence of an awareness about the importance of undergraduate writing in preparing students for the demands of postgraduate writing. One interviewee states that:

... I think one of the problems is that at undergraduate level we allow students to go through, we do not pay attention to these [literacy] issues. I think that's where they need to be addressed.

Some departments attempt to incorporate more substantial writing assignments in undergraduate courses. One department, for example, already starts with the seminar model during undergraduate studies by requiring final year undergraduate students to produce written and oral seminars. Given the size of student groups, interviewees in this department indicate that it is unrealistic to think that one would be able to provide feedback on undergraduate written work that is as intensive as that for postgraduate

texts. Interviewees in another department mention that students in their fourth year are required to write a mini-thesis. They have found that the undergraduate students who studied at the UP and who had to produce the mini-thesis, manage better with postgraduate studies because of this writing experience. Although this same department used to have a subject (Seminar 180) in which they attempted to teach students how to write assignments, this subject was discontinued because of the realisation that with large student groups, it is almost impossible to give students the individual attention they needed and for this reason, students did not *"take much out of this"*.

### **8.2.9 Acceptability of different types of evidence**

Responses to the question in the interviews that focused on the **acceptability of different types of evidence** confirm the survey data in the sense that experimental evidence, other empirically-based evidence (such as data gathered by means of surveys and interviews) and evidence from the literature (generally the most recent information from authoritative journals) are acceptable sources of evidence. A number of interviewees further confirm that photographic evidence is used in certain cases: *"Students take photographs so that they can verify what they have seen out of the results."*

One interviewee mentions that some students experience difficulty in the interpretation of data, and that they often merely present the data without interpretation. She further stresses the importance of students being able to recognise cause-and-effect relationships in data, and that these often amount to multiple relationships or 'strings' of cause-and-effect relationships between sections in the data.

### **8.2.10 Referencing systems**

With regard to a **specific method used for referencing**, the American Psychological Association (APA) and Harvard methods are used by some departments as a foundation for the introduction of referencing principles. It is apparent, however, that because all departments require the publication of an article, students are advised to

make use of the referencing system of the specific journal where they will submit their article.

### 8.2.11 Supervisor feedback on student writing

All interviewees confirm the survey data regarding the fact that they **provide feedback on both the language used in student writing, as well as the value of students' ideas**. Interestingly, a large portion of all five interviews was devoted to interviewee comments about the feedback they provide on student writing. Comments tended to drift in this direction on a number of occasions, even while addressing some of the other issues in the interviews. The issue of feedback thus seems to be a primary concern for many of the interviewees.

Students in general seem to react positively to most feedback provided by supervisors, probably as a result of the power relations that exist in this context with regard to the supervisor being respected as the 'expert' and the student filling the role of an 'apprentice' that is involved in a process of initiation into a specific discipline. This notion is supported by one interviewee who comments specifically on the feedback supervisors provide on students' ideas: *"Generally students believe that you [the supervisor] have better ideas."* Some interviewees indicate that students mostly find feedback on their language use easier to correct than feedback on their ideas. It seems as if it is easier for students just to change their language mistakes to what supervisors suggest, than to grapple with the intricacies of the ideas and concepts of the discipline. There are, however, instances where interviewees indicate the usefulness of the comments of a 'third party' (a language expert) in order to support the feedback on language that they provide to their students.

Some interviewees further touch on the affective aspect of attitude where students are considered 'stubborn' in the sense that they question what supervisors indicate. One interviewee also mentions that some students cannot 'handle' criticism, and that this attitude sometimes impairs their comprehension of the feedback provided by supervisors. The same person mentions the danger of students simply changing their written work according to their supervisors' comments, without really understanding why they need to change something. Although comments by interviewees that focus

on negative attitudes and perceptions of students appear to be the exception to the rule, it is an important aspect to consider with regard to the possibilities presented during a writing course to address some of the misconceptions that students might harbour about academic writing and the feedback they receive on their writing.

An important issue addressed by interviewees is that, in some cases, students appear to misunderstand the feedback (especially regarding their ideas) because supervisors have to correct the same idea more than once. Most interviewees, however, insist that discussing their written comments on student texts with the student in person is crucial in making sure that no misunderstandings exist with regard to their feedback. This is, however, not always possible in a situation where students study part-time and are not physically on campus, which will enable them to have such discussions with their supervisors. This is a problem that also has bearing on the possibility of postgraduate students attending a developmental writing course; because many such students are part-time students, it may be difficult for them to attend a writing course on a regular basis.

Furthermore, because of the sheer volume of language errors made by some students, it is often difficult for supervisors to understand what they really want to say. One interviewee stresses, for example, that in her opinion, students would appreciate more comments on the ideas and construction of argument in their written texts, but that because of the language restriction mentioned above, one tends to focus more on trying to correct the language (in the often limited time that is available) than really judging the ideas. Another interviewee experiences problems in the sense that it does not necessarily result in uptake if one only corrects specific types of mistakes once (when first encountered in the text). He mentions specifically that, if one does not correct the same mistake throughout the written text, students generally do not notice that they have repeated the same mistake later on in the text. The comments by this interviewee support the notion that it is risky to argue that by correcting a specific mistake in student writing once, this will result in them not making the same mistake again. As has been discussed elsewhere in this study, the effects of error correction are much more complex than a mere, direct relationship of cause and effect.

Some interviewees indicate that they attempt to make students aware of how they use language by telling them that the more language mistakes they make, the more they divert supervisors' attention from what is really important (the ideas and argument). Only 'telling' them that they should not make language mistakes will, however, not necessarily result in them making fewer mistakes. Even telling them what these mistakes are will still not necessarily ensure that they do not make the same mistakes again.

In one department, interviewees mention that they get the impression that sometimes students are just lazy. It seems as if they do not read through their texts again before submitting them to supervisors, and do not make use of standard resources at their disposal such as spell checkers. *"So when you read it you can clearly see that there is no way that this person has ever read it through again."* Some students seem to have a 'don't-care' attitude about their writing and are careless about the presentation of their texts (extra spaces between words, for example). There seems to be a real need for students to be meticulous about their writing.

Some interviewees also caution against supervisors correcting everything in students' written texts for them. These interviewees believe that this is one of the main causes for low quality student writing. According to one person, supervisors build up a reputation of: *"That supervisor will fix it for you, don't worry about it."* He emphasises that feedback should encourage students to engage with their texts on a deeper level than merely correcting what supervisors indicate. *"So, we've spoilt them, don't go and do it for them."* It is, however, important to give students a general indication of what they did wrong, for example, 'wrong tense' or 'incorrect word order'. For these interviewees it is just as important, though, to provide positive feedback on what students did well: *"Supervisors should try to find something positive in student writing."* According to this interviewee, positive feedback helps in building student confidence, something that is visible in the quality of subsequent writing they submit.

One interviewee raised the issue of supervisor and co-supervisor providing different feedback with regard to writing style, and that this is a source of confusion for students. He further points out that supervisors need to be consistent in the comments

they make from one draft of writing to the next, since he has *"heard the comment that students make: 'Oh, they've just changed it back to what it was.'"* This interviewee also comments on the inconsistency with regard to the intensity of feedback provided. He mentions that if he is very busy, he does not do it (provide feedback) in as much detail as he would have liked to.

What was of further interest is that some students appear to model their writing style on that of the supervisor. According to one interviewee, some students do not have their own writing style, and through the comments made by the supervisor essentially copy how the supervisor writes. The issue of modelling re-appears on a consistent basis throughout the data set and is obviously an important instrument that may be employed to substantial effect in both a writing course but also in supervisors' individual contact with their postgraduate students.

An issue that surfaced more than once in the interviews is that although supervisors place much emphasis on the correctness of student writing: *"There are some academics whose language proficiency is also not up to scratch."* It was suggested that contact with a writing specialist may also lead to supervisors examining their own writing practices:

This idea of a third party who specialises in language proficiency ..., not only the student is going to learn something about it, but it's also going to make the supervisor learn something about it ..., about his own style, you know.

There was a definite indication from the interviewees of one department that they would appreciate interaction between writing educators and themselves with regard to how written texts are assessed. They specifically asked whether it would be possible for a writing educator to comment on the same piece of writing they commented on so that they could compare their comments with those of the writing educator.

#### **8.2.12 The prominence of language correctness in the assessment of written texts**

It is apparent from all the interviews that **although students' language use is obviously not the main focus in the assessment of written student texts, it is**

**considered an essential component of such assessment** with regard to the practical considerations of readability and acceptability in the tertiary academic context. Supervisors do, however, seem to be experiencing increasing frustration with the quality of language use of their additional language postgraduate students, to the extent that some interviewees indicate that if something was badly written, they would advise the student to get help in terms of language editing before resubmitting the text. It is also evident that the assessment of language use is formalised in the evaluation of, for example, master's and Ph.D. theses and dissertations in the sense that supervisors need to comment on the technical aspects of the text (which include the general and scientific use of language) in their formal evaluation thereof.

### **8.2.13 Strategies for ensuring the final language correctness of student texts**

With regard to **ensuring the final language correctness** of the texts produced by their students, it is interesting to note that although some interviewees indicate that they accept full responsibility for such correctness, others are adamant that they have not been appointed to correct students' language errors, and therefore do not see themselves taking full responsibility for this issue. One interviewee states for example that: *"I say exactly the opposite; the language is not my responsibility, it is the student's responsibility."* They strongly argue that because students will, in the end, be the ones to get the degree, they should be ultimately responsible for language correctness. Most interviewees do indicate, however, that because they need to 'rubber stamp' their students' research before it is sent to external examiners, they require professional language editing (because writing with blatant language errors creates a bad impression with the examiners), but that this is an expensive option. A related problem mentioned by one interviewee is that, because of the cost involved in professional editing, some students provide the editor with only one or two pages of their writing, and that this does not solve the language problem.

In response to a follow-up question on what type of editors they use, interviewees indicate that it is not always possible to use editors who also have knowledge about their disciplines, and that this occasionally presents a problem: *"Sometimes they change the meaning of things."* Most interviewees mention, however, that they make use of professional editors who are formally recognised as editors. Some

interviewees further confirm that they would also make use of a wider support system such as co-supervisors to 'check them up'. A number of interviewees indicate that in the case of joint publication, supervisors tend to accept even more responsibility for both language correctness, as well as soundness of ideas in academic articles, because their names are linked to the texts as co-authors.

With regard to formal editing done by a professional editor, as well as the amount of change to students' language made by supervisors, interviewees raise the ethical issue of how much one is supposed to correct (and in some cases, rewrite) a student's text for such a text to still be considered the student's work. Interviewees are, therefore, careful in not surrendering to the temptation of rewriting parts of a student's text for him/her.

The majority of interviewees further indicate that they would support a writing tutoring system where postgraduate students who are good writers in their departments are used to support weaker writers. They agree that such a system has the potential to decrease their workload with regard to their focus on language and may enable them to emphasise more strongly the value of the ideas and argumentation of their students. Without exception, interviewees insist that such a service should not just be an editing service, but that there should be an opportunity for weaker writers to learn more about academic writing in the process. They would, therefore, support a system where writing tutors work on a consultative basis with weaker writers in discussing their writing with them – an option that would obviously require intensive training on the part of writing tutors. They are, however, not very optimistic about the practical implementation of such a system with regard to available finances as well as the increased workload on good writers who are also supposed to complete their studies in a reasonable period of time.

### **8.3 Conclusion**

This chapter has provided more detailed information on a number of pivotal issues in the conceptualisation of relevant and appropriate academic writing course materials for students in the study group. Most notably, interviewees indicate that a large



majority of their postgraduate students write in English, that the most serious academic literacy difficulties are experienced by additional language users of English and that these difficulties are not restricted to writing only. These students therefore also sometimes find it difficult to read and argue in English.

In addition, interviewees provide confirmation for the questionnaire results that students with inadequate literacy abilities often do not complete their studies in the required time, and that this has negative consequences for both the supervisor and the University. It is further important for interviewees that the mismatch between supervisor and student perceptions about students' levels of academic literacy should be addressed not only during the students' studies but also right at the start when students commence with their studies. One way of creating this awareness is through the comments supervisors provide on students' writing. Interviewees commented extensively on the types of feedback they provide on student writing and student responses to such feedback. The use of a reliable literacy test is another strategy that may heighten student awareness about their own literacy difficulties, and do so early on. It may, in addition, make supervisors more aware of specific literacy problems of particular students.

Interviewees also provided more comprehensive information on issues such as generic genres and referencing systems that may be utilised in the design of a writing intervention. It is further much clearer what interviewees perceive as the most prominent literacy difficulties of their students. Their comments in the interviews on the functional literacy abilities of their students also confirm many of the findings of the instruments used to assess students' levels of academic literacy.

The next chapter addresses the specific implications of the results discussed in Chapters 5-8 for the design of a writing intervention for the students in the study group.

## **CHAPTER 9      Implications of the empirical results for the design of an academic writing course for the study group**

### **9.1      Introduction**

In the initial conceptualisation of the study and specifically in determining what type of writing course would be suitable for postgraduate students within the current set of limitations at the University, it was tempting to reason that a generic writing course for all students would suffice for the development of their writing ability. It was argued that, given time and staffing constraints regarding the development and implementation of specific purposes writing courses (with reference to the involved nature of collecting the relevant information, the annual revision of such courses and their teaching), even a generic writing course would add value in the improvement of the writing ability of postgraduate students, given the seriousness of the literacy problems some of them appear to experience.

After careful deliberation it was clear that, to some extent, a generic writing course might be considered sufficient at an undergraduate level, since the requirements for coherent and productive writing are not that immediate, focused and intense for undergraduate students. The weight of the evidence in this study seems to indicate, however, that there is a totally different scenario for postgraduate students, particularly as a result of the increased importance given to the quality of written texts that are usually regulated by very specific supervisor expectations and disciplinary requirements. Thus, in order to provide students with the best possible opportunity to develop their writing ability, the conclusion that a generic writing course would not suffice for postgraduate students began to appear almost inevitable. Apart from the specificity of disciplinary discourse requirements, the notion that a generic course would not be adequate is based on arguments of the non-transferability of strategies and abilities, as well as maintaining student motivation through the relevance of writing course materials for their current studies. A writing course that employs material that is authentic to the extent that it uses real writing tasks that students have to perform in their respective disciplines may consequently solve one of the most

persistent problems of literacy and language support courses – viz. the transfer of strategies and abilities. The degree of relevance and authenticity of a writing course for postgraduate students appears to depend, if one begins to take seriously the findings of this study, to a large extent on the amount and quality of information one collects about the context in which specific groups of students write. The indicated specificity of the intervention may, in turn, have to be tempered by other design considerations that we will discuss in the next chapter, but the importance of a discipline specific approach cannot be denied.

## 9.2 Major implications for writing course design

The purpose of the following two sections in this chapter is to provide an integrated account of the empirical findings discussed in the previous four chapters, which all had the purpose of describing specific aspects of the context mentioned above. The chapter contains a combination of how the most important findings from the different sources of information (supervisors and students) are interpreted towards informed, relevant and responsible writing course design.

### 9.2.1 Supervisor perceptions and disciplinary requirements

This section presents a synthesis of prominent issues in the data discussed in Chapters 5 and 8 in terms of how such issues impact on decisions about writing course design (for Chapters 6 and 7, see 9.2.2 below).

Probably one of the most important findings of the responses to the supervisor questionnaire is that the results call for the continuous monitoring and further exploration of issues concerning postgraduate academic literacy at the UP. Although this study culminates in a proposal for a writing intervention for a specific school in a specific faculty at the University (where postgraduate students' academic literacy levels were formally assessed), **it is important to acknowledge that the extent of literacy problems of postgraduate students are probably not restricted to this school.** Even though the questionnaire results on the academic literacy levels of postgraduate students are impressionistic in nature because they originate in the

perceptions of supervisors, it would be unwise not to treat this data with the necessary seriousness. It is clear, however, that although the survey data suggests that academic literacy difficulties of postgraduate students may be a problem campus wide, this can only be confirmed through the use of empirical assessment instruments (as in the case of the study group) that provide reliable information about students' academic literacy levels. Such instruments should preferably be administered over the broad spectrum of postgraduate studies in order to make any conclusive statement about general postgraduate academic literacy levels. If required and if resources permit, a strategy for writing course design similar to the one suggested by this research for the study group, could be pursued with other departments or schools at the University.

The first noteworthy implication of the supervisor survey as regards writing course design is that, although only a minority of supervisors have been exposed to formal tertiary language training of some sort, **they appear to be acutely aware that many of their students have academic literacy problems.** This awareness is not completely unexpected, since supervisors have obviously been exposed to postgraduate studies themselves as students and also have varying degrees of experience in acting as supervisors for postgraduate students. Such awareness is a positive indication in the context of writing course development, in the sense that it creates a potential environment where literacy difficulties may be addressed through a combined effort of subject and writing specialists.

A potentially positive consequence of the awareness discussed above is that if supervisors know that apart from the availability of a reliable instrument that could assist them in assessing literacy levels, **relevant support is available in the development of their students' writing ability,** it should not take much from them to avail such an opportunity to students. As stated previously, we have already had many enquiries at the Unit for Academic Literacy from supervisors involved in various disciplines as to how we could support their students with writing development. With regard to the data analysed, the majority of the supervisors overall (as well as separately for the specific school) who took part in the survey believe that their students could benefit from literacy support offered by literacy experts in improving their students' writing ability. Again, this is a positive finding in

the context of a close working relationship between subject and literacy specialists that has more potential in offering relevant writing support than an isolated approach.

A pivotal issue that was not adequately addressed by the questionnaire for supervisors, is whether it would be necessary to design a writing course for the study group in both languages of learning at the UP. From the interview data, however, **it is clear that very few students prefer to do major academic writing in Afrikaans.** The primary reason for the finding above is that for this School, postgraduate studies are closely connected to the publication of research, and most publication opportunities (in scholarly journals primarily) have an international audience with the concomitant use of English as medium of communication. It would thus be safe to say that the design of an **academic English writing course for postgraduate students will suffice in this context.**

A major implication of the situation described above is that because most postgraduate students who register at this School will do their academic writing in English, and given the fact that supervisors indicate that few primary language users of English are involved in postgraduate studies at the School, **the majority of postgraduate students study through English as an additional language.** This aspect is also confirmed by the data obtained from the interviews. It further corresponds with the general trend in the data on language preferences of postgraduate students obtained from BIREP. In addition, a large majority of supervisors campus-wide indicate a similar trend in the survey, in the sense that they oversee the studies of a large number of additional language users of English. This situation therefore seems to prevail for postgraduate studies throughout the University.

The supervisor survey did not distinguish between primary and additional language users with regard to supervisor perceptions about the general academic literacy ability of each separate group of students. This issue was, therefore, further explored in the interviews. What is quite apparent from the interview data (as well as from the formal assessment of academic literacy abilities discussed in Chapter 7) is that **the additional language postgraduate students in the School appear to experience more serious problems with their general academic literacy than primary**

**language users.** Based on supervisor responses to the question on the academic writing ability of their students, it is also apparent that they are of the opinion that **additional language users experience more severe problems with their writing specifically compared to primary language users.**

From the discussion above it is evident that students with academic literacy inadequacies form part of the cohort of postgraduate students at the UP, a situation that is not likely to change radically within the foreseeable future. As an initial step towards the conceptualisation of a writing intervention, it is therefore important to acknowledge that although one may expect postgraduate students to be competent academically, it appears as if **the way in which their academic achievement was assessed in previous qualifications did not necessarily focus on a measurement of their academic literacy ability, with specific reference to their writing ability.**

Respondents in the survey further acknowledge **the important role of academic literacy in the completion of postgraduate studies**, and are aware that a major consequence of students with literacy problems is that they need to exert a far greater effort in encouraging such students to complete their studies. Students with literacy problems also seem to take longer to complete their studies, or do not complete their studies at all (these results are also confirmed by the interview data). Supervisors seem to use a variety of strategies in order to determine the suitability of prospective candidates for postgraduate study, but there is also pressure to enrol adequate numbers of such students and to produce these graduates in a reasonable period of time. It is apparent, furthermore, that although in some instances some sort of admission screening that involves a determination of levels of academic literacy does take place, supervisors to a large extent believe that their strategies for determining such levels are not always reliable. This is confirmed by the interview data where interviewees mention that as a result of such criteria not providing reliable information about academic literacy, they sometimes only realise that students have literacy difficulties after they have already started with their studies. In essence, therefore, although students might have relatively good marks for the previous degree or despite the fact that they might perform well in an interview or a prescribed writing task before they are admitted, **none of these strategies guarantee an acceptable level of academic literacy at postgraduate level.**

As mentioned before, one would therefore have to accept that students who experience major literacy difficulties will find their way into the system, and that such students should be supported as far as possible in order to succeed with their studies in a reasonable period of time. When one considers the **low academic literacy rating** that supervisors award their additional language postgraduate students, it seems crucial that the University has **access to a reliable instrument that can be used in determining postgraduate literacy levels**. It is further important that such information is available timeously so that the necessary support can be provided to students from the outset. Some of the most important potential outcomes of literacy support are that it may lead to a decreased workload on supervisors as well as to a shorter completion time for postgraduate studies.

In order to offer a possible solution to the problem mentioned above, this study recommends that an **academic literacy assessment instrument be used for the timeous identification of literacy difficulties of prospective postgraduate students**. There is strong support from interviewees for the use of such an instrument that is designed specifically for postgraduate studies (interviewees do, however, understand that because a postgraduate instrument is not available yet, they can rely on TALL as a reliable source of information on the literacy levels of their students). Most importantly, however, an instrument that is used to determine levels of literacy should not perform a gate-keeping function. It should thus not be employed to keep students out, but rather be exploited as a measuring instrument that can be used towards identifying and subsequently supporting students with literacy difficulties to complete their studies successfully within a reasonable period of time. It should also be borne in mind that offering support to students in addressing some of their literacy problems is only part of a more complex concern that also involves affective problems (such as motivation) and financial constraints.

The use of a reliable academic literacy test to determine students' academic literacy ability also has the **potential to address the mismatch between supervisor and student perceptions of their academic literacy levels**. Becoming aware of their own literacy difficulties (with regard to the demands and requirements of the postgraduate context in which they are studying) may well lead to heightened student awareness about such difficulties and to approach opportunities at developing such

abilities with an attitude of equipping themselves better for the demands of their studies. The results of a literacy assessment will also enable supervisors to have a better idea of their students' literacy needs, and are an essential source of information for the writing course designer with regard to the focus and content of writing courses for specific groups of students. Thus, rather than learning about students' specific literacy needs only when they, for example, hand in their first written text for assessment, **supervisors should be able to channel their students towards relevant developmental opportunities from the outset.**

It is also evident from the interviews that **students do not only struggle to come to terms with the academic discourse requirements of writing in a tertiary context; some students also have difficulties with basic English proficiency.** Although exposure to a writing course should address aspects of such proficiency on a functional level (leaning more, however, towards the principles and characteristics of academic discourse specifically), more opportunities should be available to students for the development of their basic English proficiency. Some interviewees indicate that they do currently require some of their foreign students to attend an English course for foreigners that is offered by a lecturer from the Department of English at the University (through Continuing Education [CE at UP]).

The potential combination of an academic writing course, a basic English language proficiency course, the possibility of implementing a writing tutor system for postgraduate students, as well as their overall immersion into a partly English context for their studies, may eventually result in a situation where the written texts that supervisors receive are at an acceptable level in terms of language clarity so that they may focus more on the value of the ideas advanced by students. This may ultimately also have an effect on student motivation and, consequently, on the progress that students make regarding the completion of their studies in a shorter period of time. What is clear though, is that the **biggest potential for success in the development of students' writing ability is located in an approach that supports a combined effort from a number of involved parties.** This research therefore recommends the establishment and maintenance of a close working relationship between people concerned with students' writing ability, an issue that was also addressed during the interviews. The results of both the questionnaire and the interviews indicate that



supervisors from this School are prepared to work with a writing educator in order to offer relevant writing support to their postgraduate students.

It is further obvious that, although one refers to it as an academic 'writing course', one would not be able to treat writing as a separate 'skill' in such a course. The available literature on academic literacy, the results of the literacy test and the text analysis, as well as findings of the questionnaires and interviews clearly indicate that **students also have difficulty with the comprehension and interpretation of texts they read, in addition to the difficulties they experience with the construction of coherent and valid academic arguments.** A writing course will therefore have to subscribe to a functionally integrated literacy approach towards the development of writing. What makes this easier, is that a process or multiple-draft approach to writing course design lends itself quite naturally to such integration, in the sense that the different stages of this process include aspects that focus on a critical interpretation (analysis) of available literature on a topic, as well as an integration of relevant information in written texts towards the construction of substantiated arguments. A writing course should further **emphasise the necessity of adequate reading with regard to responsible and valid argumentation in this context.** Students should, therefore, be suitably aware of the fact that insufficient reading on a specific topic could result in weak and contestable arguments in one's writing.

Although the question on specific literacy difficulties in the questionnaires did not yield prominent aspects for writing course design, the results of the interviews are more promising in the identification of specific areas that the interviewees would wish to see addressed in a writing course. Interviewees regard **devices for text cohesion and coherence as crucially important aspects that should be included in a writing course.** Such a course should, therefore, support students not only in creating a logical flow between their ideas, but also in the production of coherent texts with regard to how different sections of the text (and paragraphs within such sections) logically hang together and contribute to the overall development of the topic (and argument) of the text.

Furthermore, interviewees mention that students need support with the **stylistic requirements** of academic discourse. They focus specifically on issues such as the

**avoidance of both emotional language and the use of first person pronouns** (thus, making one's writing more formal and impersonal). A writing course will, therefore, have to support students in the use of language resources for accomplishing such a sense of formality and impersonality in their writing.

Interviewees further indicate that a thorough consultation of the literature related to a student's research topic is a critical aspect in conducting substantial research at a postgraduate level. In this regard, **students seem to struggle with both the technical as well as the functional aspect of citation** in the sense that they either fail to give recognition to the sources they use, or when they do, they do so in an inconsistent or inadequate manner.

Regarding the technical side of citation, one should be careful not to confuse students with the manner in which referencing is addressed in a writing course. **Students should be aware that there are several recognised methods of referencing** (sometimes with considerable overlap), **and that one should adhere to the guidelines of specific faculties, departments, supervisors or journals, depending on what is required in a specific context.** The main issue is, therefore, that students should be inquisitive about what is required of them in specific contexts. However, this study suggests that a specific method for referencing (such as the Harvard method) may be explored in a writing course in order to make students aware of the core principles of citation. As mentioned previously, it is usually not too difficult to adjust the way one cites to different requirements once one understands the basic principles of a specific method. Since the Harvard method is an internationally recognised and utilised method of citation, the writing course will select this method in order to address the basic principles of citation. This method would therefore be integrated into tasks that focus on citation in terms of including sources in the body of a written text but also in a list of references at the end of the text.

The functional aspect of making use of authoritative texts in one's research has the purpose of **providing evidence on certain issues in the construction of an argument, but also shows that one is aware of current debates in the field concerning the research topic.** It is further a strategy of providing a sense of authority to one's own writing in having considered and assessed the most prominent

sources that are related to one's research. A writing course will have to pursue this issue in the sense of addressing misconceptions students may have about referencing such as the dichotomy that often exists about students' own originality and making use of others' ideas in the construction of an argument.

The constructive treatment of **referencing in a writing course should also address the issue of plagiarism**. Firstly, student awareness about the nature of plagiarism should be raised in terms of what exactly is considered to be plagiarism in academic writing (this should also be related to official university policy about the issue). Plagiarism should further be addressed on a consistent basis in all the feedback provided to students on their writing, since again it is clear that only telling students that they are not allowed to plagiarise will not solve the problem. It is therefore important for students to have a thorough understanding of plagiarism, something that could be productively addressed by means of various tasks (including, for example, tasks in paraphrasing a source and acknowledging such sources indirectly as well as tasks in quoting sources directly) in a writing course. Such smaller tasks should preferably all be integrated into an authentic writing assignment that students need to complete for their studies.

The design of a writing course should, as far as is practically possible, attempt to **utilise the generic written genres used for postgraduate study in the School**. However, because degree programmes in the School might be structured differently with regard to what is expected of students at different times during their studies, the use of **comprehensive thesis/dissertation writing** as the most prominent genre in the School (in terms of a literacy task) might not be a realistic option in the development of writing. It is possible, though, to focus on specific sub-sections within this genre. One could, for example, utilise the **literature survey** as a sub-genre within this genre, also emphasising the pervasive nature of this sub-genre in its connection to other genres such as the research proposal and academic seminar that are used in the School. The use of the **research proposal** as a comprehensive writing task for the course may also be a productive option, in the sense that students are usually encouraged to start conceptualising their research at an early stage of their studies, and this genre could, therefore, coincide with the schedule of a writing course that usually starts at the beginning of the academic year. The research proposal is also

related to the writing of a thesis/dissertation in the sense that it normally functions as a planning document towards the production of this genre. Furthermore, the **academic seminar** has been used to great effect in the past in the generic EOT 300 course. This genre usually has the added advantage that an oral component could be utilised as an interactive planning phase towards the production of the written version, where students grow accustomed to feedback on their ideas from both their peers and the writing educator. The last prominent genre indicated by the data is the **academic article**. As a result of similar constraints to those mentioned for thesis/dissertation writing (in this case students only write an article for publication when the thesis/dissertation is completed), it also seems an unrealistic genre to utilise in its totality (in terms of students working on their required articles as part of the writing course). Again, one would be able, however, to make use of sub-sections within the genre for writing course design.

It has been mentioned on a number of occasions that **argumentative writing seems to be the main mode of writing used by academics to advance their ideas on specific issues** (this aspect is also confirmed by the empirical data for the study group). It should further be kept in mind that the data obtained from supervisors as well as that of the formal academic literacy assessments for the study group indicate that students have difficulty with coherent academic argumentation, and that it will be important that materials and tasks in a writing course address this tendency.

The writing course should further create opportunities for students to become accustomed to the **use of different types of evidence that are acceptable in the School**. The course would, therefore, have to address functionally the nature of the different types of evidence, as well strategies for the appropriate integration of such evidence into student writing.

The affective issue of procrastination in starting to write up research has been discussed in the interviews as a cause for students taking longer to complete their studies. An effort should therefore be made to **build students' confidence in their own ability to write**. A well-designed writing course has the potential to accomplish just that, encouraging students to start writing as early (and as much) as possible and building student confidence with constructive feedback on their existing capabilities.

Awareness of (and relevant developmental opportunities in) the writing principle that ideas are often developed and refined on paper, and that one regularly only discovers what you really want to say when you see your ideas on paper, should help students see the value in not putting off writing until the last moment.

The **priority that interviewees award to the feedback they provide on student writing necessitates a focus on feedback in the writing course.** One way to support supervisors with difficulties they experience in their provision of feedback is the use of an unambiguous feedback system. Furthermore, consistency in the feedback provided by different parties (supervisors, co-supervisors, the writing course lecturer and probably the writing tutor) is of central importance in order to avoid student confusion in their interpretation of feedback. If feedback could be standardised for language at least, and this be done in consultation with everyone concerned, it may minimise confusion for students in terms of how such feedback is interpreted. Such a jointly-constructed feedback system could be explained to students in detail in a writing course, and if supervisors adhere to an agreed system in a consistent manner, it should be of benefit to students. Supervisors would, however, need to invest some of their time and energy in joint work sessions aimed at investigating how they (differently) indicate specific issues in student writing and then to develop a negotiated system to be used in student feedback with which they all feel comfortable.

The issue of **text modelling can also be addressed to great effect in a writing course.** One may, for example, request model texts in the prominent genres from supervisors and employ these in the writing class to teach about the structure of such genres. One could further have students comment on examples of these genres that do not meet the requirements for academic writing, and in this way **introduce them to notions of revision and editing.**

The **importance of language correctness** for supervisors has been confirmed by the data of the supervisor survey as well as the interviews. Supervisors have identified two related areas of importance with regard to such correctness. Firstly, they do not want to create a negative impression with external examiners by presenting them with texts that are riddled with language errors. Secondly, and perhaps more important for the process of supervision specifically, is the notion that supervisors need to be able to

judge the value of argumentation in student texts. For this to happen, such texts should be relatively free of language mistakes so that supervisors may give their undivided attention to the student's ideas. Although somewhat unrealistic in its extreme of making student texts completely error free, it should be possible (at least in theory) to rid such texts of many language mistakes before they are submitted to supervisors. To this end, the implementation of a writing tutor system could make a substantial contribution towards supervisors receiving texts where the language is clear to such an extent that they should be able to concentrate on the argument. A professional editor could then still be used (if necessary) in order to ensure the final language correctness before a thesis/dissertation is assessed by external examiners.

It might further be important to **develop a web-based version of the writing course for part-time postgraduate students who are not physically on campus**. The newest version of Web-CT that is used at the University of Pretoria makes provision for a high level of interactivity that may be employed to great effect in a writing course for such students. This notion is, however, beyond the scope of this study and may be explored by subsequent research.

### **9.2.2 Student perceptions and literacy difficulties**

In this section, the most important findings of Chapters 6 and 7 are integrated and interpreted with a specific focus on implications for writing course design.

With regard to students' own awareness about academic literacy (and their possible inadequacies), this study supports the notion that **students in the study group will not become more aware of crucial literacy issues overnight, and thus adopts an approach that sees such consciousness-raising to be part of a process occurring over time**. A literacy survey for students such as the one used in this study could thus be employed with the additional purpose (apart from the collection of information on academic literacy) of raising student awareness about specific issues in academic literacy and writing. The completion of such a questionnaire is therefore considered to be an important point of departure in establishing a relationship with students that will communicate to them that their needs and expectations are an important consideration towards the provision of relevant literacy support. Furthermore, if

students complete such a survey when they commence with their studies, one could expect that a focus on literacy issues would not be completely new to students when these are reintroduced in a writing course.

The results of the student survey emphasise the diversity of the student population with reference to nationality and primary language use. Apart from getting additional language users who come from various places in South Africa, there is a large contingent from other African countries (as well as some students from abroad) who are also mostly additional language users of English. Various data sets discussed in this study suggest that additional language users of English tend to struggle more with the literacy demands of a university context than native language users, probably as a result of an often weak foundation in their general use of English. Official University data further show that a significant number of foreign postgraduate students register at the UP every year. As has been noted in the previous section, it appears as if the presence of foreign postgraduate students needs to be taken as a given, and that it would be wise to be aware of the possible literacy difficulties of these students. The survey shows, for example, that for the study group, a number of students who have never studied in English were admitted for postgraduate studies at the UP (this has also been my experience with some students who registered for EOT 300 in previous years). Apart from the fact that 20% of the students in the study group have never received any formal schooling in English, it is also noteworthy that a considerable percentage of students have not used English as a language of learning for their previous degrees. These students have therefore not had any exposure to the use of English in a tertiary academic environment. Based on these results, these students will no doubt experience difficulty not only with the stylistic requirements of academic discourse, but also with basic English proficiency. These results are verified in most instances by the analysis of the TALL results as well as the written text the students have produced. It is therefore important to realise that a writing course that focuses only on the conventions and conditions of academic discourse would probably not have the desired outcome for such students. A productive strategy will have to be employed to improve these students' basic proficiency levels in English as well.

Interestingly, whereas the overall impression in the analysis of the student data is one of **students who feel very confident about their own literacy abilities, they also seem to feel very positive about receiving literacy, and specifically writing, support.** Although the results of TALL as well as the written text they produced strongly indicate that these students experience academic literacy difficulties, it would be sensible to retain and build on students' positive self-image that is obviously a crucial aspect of their motivation to complete their studies. In other words, raising students' awareness about their own academic literacy needs should not be an exercise in 'punishing' them for their seeming inadequacy regarding academic literacy and creating the impression that they are being 'forced' to conform to the requirements of the tertiary academic context. It should rather empower students to develop the literacy abilities that will enable them to be the critical researchers and competent academic writers this context requires of them.

The mismatch between supervisor and student perceptions about students' academic literacy ability has already been addressed in the previous section. What is significant from a student perspective is that they might have been misled into believing that undergraduate studies and possibly an honours degree have prepared them adequately for the level of literacy that would be required of them in postgraduate studies. **Students will, therefore, have to come to terms with the extra emotional burden of showing a degree of risk as regards their academic literacy,** while nothing in the completion of their previous degrees may have given this indication. This has also been my experience with some of the previous EOT 300 enrolments who were very negative at first about the fact that they had to do the writing course. The data from supervisors indicate specifically that in many cases undergraduate studies do not prepare students for the rigours of writing at a postgraduate level. A writing course will, therefore, have to be relevant to the point of also changing possible negative attitudes of students by providing learning opportunities that students would consider useful and appropriate for their studies at the time.

In addition, it is clear that **students would do well in becoming more aware of supervisor requirements for writing.** I have often found that postgraduate students do not necessarily take responsibility by actively seeking information about pertinent writing issues and academic argumentation from their supervisors. This is, again,



probably a result of the relationships of power that exist in this context, where the supervisor is the person 'in the know' and the student an apprentice in the process of joining a particular disciplinary community of scholars. Be this as it may, a writing course could be instrumental in triggering a heightened awareness and a sense of purpose in students about what their supervisors require by, for example, requiring them to collect information on very specific writing issues from their supervisors (which may include stylistic matters, etc.). This may also foster a critical awareness about the intent of some conventions and conditions of academic discourse, in the sense that students could enquire about the reasons behind such conventions and conditions. As has been stated previously, this does not imply that students should flout prominent conventions and conditions, but rather develop enquiring and critical minds about all issues academic (which obviously include issues about writing). This may also be a less radical and reactionary approach to addressing the legitimate concerns of critical literacy theorists about the power relations that are perpetuated in the way academic discourse is practised (and, most of the times, imposed on students) at universities.

Clearly, the other side of the coin is that, if one wants to address literacy difficulties holistically, **supervisors need to become more aware of their students' needs, requirements and expectations of academic writing.** In this way, they would better prepare themselves in providing guidance on specific issues with which students struggle in academic literacy, probably in the way of directing them towards relevant opportunities for developing such abilities. They would, therefore, have to be aware of where to find such support, if necessary. If supervisors could be persuaded, for example, to make use of the results of a literacy assessment as well as information collected through a student survey such as the one utilised by this research, they may become more informed about their students' academic literacy abilities as well as these students' perceptions about writing in an academic context. The manner in which this may be practically accomplished would depend on the specific group of students and their supervisors, but will most probably involve the input of a writing educator.

All students in the study group have the expectation that they will have to produce a dissertation or a thesis in the completion of their degrees. Although they have

indicated the use of other genres as well, these are varied and will, judged on this data alone, probably not be as useful for writing course design. In the survey and interviews, however, supervisors provide a much clearer indication of generic genres (discussed in Section 9.2.1) used in the School. These genres will be explored for their possible inclusion in a writing course for this School. Obviously, student expectations may change once they are involved in their studies, and they will gradually become more aware of the additional written genres they need to produce in the School. What is important in this context is that the types of tasks included in a writing course should, as far as possible, meet student expectations about what they need to be able to produce for their studies. The use of a literature survey proposed in the previous section may certainly add to the notion of relevance and authenticity for students in the sense that this forms part of most of the genres they have to produce in their disciplines. One will therefore at least meet part of students' initial expectation of producing a thesis by addressing a literature review as a sub-genre for thesis/dissertation writing. As was mentioned in the previous section, the other two prominent genres (proposal and seminar writing) that will possibly be employed in a writing course for the study group both include a focus on a consultation of the literature in one's research.

Because this study supports an **approach to writing development that utilises a process of writing, it is important to consider students' levels of awareness about such a process in the design of a writing course.** The survey results indicate that most students realise the importance of producing more than one draft of a written assignment, but are not very sure about the logical macro-progression of such a process. Students therefore seem to be aware of the existence of some kind of writing process, but in my experience in the EOT 300 classes, students usually have little experience in making use of a structured, rigorous application of such a process to their writing. A writing course that is based on a multiple-draft approach would do well in introducing students to a typical writing process, and requiring of them to adjust this process according their own learning styles and writing needs. The primary reason for the facilitation of such a process is that students often evade completely or spend too little time on crucial stages of this process such as planning, analysis of the writing topic, etc. If a writing course requires that they work through

all stages of a writing process, they might well discover the value of each step in their production of written academic texts.

An additional factor that will influence the effectiveness of a process approach in the development of student writing, is **the authenticity of the writing tasks** given to students. As mentioned previously, such authenticity will be determined by the affinity of writing tasks to what kind of writing students are supposed to produce in their courses, but also by the **integration of different academic literacy abilities into writing tasks**. It would thus not make pedagogical sense to separate literacy abilities such as reading and writing when one designs tasks where such abilities are supposed to be integrated with regard to how they are applied in fulfilling the requirements of a specific task. To illustrate, the major written task expected of almost all postgraduate students is the writing of a thesis/dissertation. In fact, the process in producing most written texts at this level does not always follow a linear progression where students do background reading first and then start writing until they deliver the final product. In practice, this process involves re-reading certain texts, finding new information half way through the process of writing and including such evidence into one's writing, and so on. In effect, then, one should create writing tasks and learning opportunities in such a way that they mirror reality, or at least create the opportunity for students to apply their individual working strategies to such tasks in an integrated fashion. It would thus be unwise to present to students in a lockstep fashion a section on academic reading, then one on academic reasoning, and so forth, when many of these strategies are employed more or less simultaneously.

Students further seem to accept responsibility for the language correctness of their own written texts. One could therefore expect **that strategies used in a writing course in order to develop students' ability to correct their own texts (as well as the texts of other students in the group) would be supported** as a result of this obligation on their side. As a result of their heightened awareness about the importance of language correctness, students may also start to seek help actively from other available resources (such as fellow students with a high level of proficiency in English or language tutors). Students further seem to feel positive about both language and content feedback they have received on their written texts in past encounters with lecturers, and will probably expect such feedback from their

supervisors. This notion is supported by what is reported in the literature regarding such expectations of students. The function of a writing course in this regard would be to ensure to the greatest possible extent that the feedback students receive results in uptake over a period of time. This could be addressed by, for example, attempting to ensure that there is some agreement between the feedback used in the writing course and that of the student's supervisor. As mentioned earlier, a feedback system that standardises feedback to some degree could be negotiated with different supervisors. One could therefore discuss major findings in the literature on feedback with supervisors and attempt to get them to agree on a specific structure, focus and sequence in the provision of their feedback.

Of further interest is that a **considerable percentage of students believe that they are capable of editing their own texts for language correctness**. One will have to distinguish here between the ability to make one's own text relatively error free, and whether one could correct one or two mistakes in a text. Considering the type and frequency of the writing mistakes students make (as indicated in the analysis of their written texts), it is not likely that they would, at such an early stage in their studies, be capable of producing relatively error free texts themselves. However, as students indicated previously, they do feel and respond positively to feedback. This was confirmed in their writing of a second draft of the same written text that was analysed in this study where they were required to respond to my comments on their writing. Almost without exception, students have corrected nearly every one of the mistakes. Now, as previously mentioned, there is no guarantee that students would not make the same mistakes after only one correction. I would be pleasantly surprised if that was the case. However, a series of such corrections and discussions with students about these errors may have a positive effect on them starting to use the correct constructions in a consistent way.

Although the preceding perceptions of both supervisors and students are central considerations in decisions about the design of writing courses, it is just as essential to have access to empirical evidence that can guide one in addressing specific literacy difficulties of students.

Regarding the overall results for TALL that were employed to determine students' levels of academic literacy, it is alarming to note that from a group of 52 students, 60% (31 students) did not make the cut-off point for the test. For the study group at least, this finding confirms the opinions of supervisors with regard to the generally low academic literacy levels of their students. It is even more disturbing when one considers that the instrument was originally developed to assess the functional literacy abilities of new first year students at the University. Furthermore, the students' profile with regard to language preference and use indicates that those students who are designated as being 'at risk' are all additional language users of English. One should, however, be careful not to label additional language users as 'problematic'. As alluded to in the previous section, **what is not needed in this context is for these students' sometimes already difficult circumstances (e.g. being foreigners in a strange country) to be compounded by feelings of ineptness because they are not primary language users of the language of learning.** It would, on the other hand, also be irresponsible to ignore the fact that additional language users are studying in a language that is not their primary language, and that some of these students might need extra support in order to overcome literacy difficulties posed by their studies. It is a positive finding, though, that in this context students generally do not perceive themselves negatively regarding their literacy abilities. One's approach towards addressing such students' literacy difficulties will thus have to maintain a **sensitive balance between retaining student motivation and offering the kind of literacy support that will allow students to develop their identities as postgraduate academic writers.**

The test results are a clear indication that **students experience problems in their basic understanding and interpretation of longer type texts.** Students therefore display problems in making use of key academic strategies for accessing and processing of information such as classification and comparison, making inferences, recognising text relations and most importantly, distinguishing between essential and non-essential information. For a writing course, one would thus have to design tasks that would give students the opportunity to develop these strategies and abilities. Once more, such activities and tasks should not be isolated, unrelated exercises of which students could see little value or relevance. Although one may prefer to focus specifically on instances where the strategies and abilities mentioned above may be

emphasised, such activities should preferably be integrated into larger, authentic writing tasks that students are required to complete.

The previous section mentioned the possibility that **students in the study group may also experience problems with basic English proficiency**. This is confirmed by the students' dismal performance on Section 6 of the test that focuses on their functional knowledge of the English language. This section assesses students' knowledge of sentence construction, word order, vocabulary (word choice), punctuation and communicative function. Overall, this is the section of the test for which students received the lowest scores.

It is evident that in each of the two problematic sections of TALL discussed above (cf. also Chapter 7), students were required to cope on a functional level with discourse (longer stretches of language) in which they had to depend on their interpretive abilities in English as well as knowledge of the language in order to answer questions correctly.

This data confirms that, apart from availing opportunities through which students could develop their basic English proficiency as well as their use of academic discourse specifically in the production of written academic texts, one will have to expose them to appropriate reading strategies that may enhance their academic ability in dealing adequately with academic texts.

The analysis of students' written texts **reiterates the point made above about the reading and interpretive abilities of students**. Students display problems not only with regard to the extraction of important information, but also on a macro-level in decisions about the weight awarded to larger sections of text in the overall organisation of a theme. Students seemed unable to grasp the interconnectedness of different academic literacy abilities (e.g. how reading and writing are interrelated in the tertiary context) in the topic they had to address in their writing, and failed to understand that with regard to the content of their texts, they had to exercise their academic judgement in how much to write about a specific issue. In this case, one is tempted to believe that students focused more on the sections that they understood more clearly. What is important here is that students need to be made aware that their

representations of information (and more importantly, transformation of information at this level) will be inherently flawed if the abstractions they make from sources include only the parts they understand more clearly. A significant part of a writing course would thus have to focus on the development of reading strategies that may enable students to unlock more difficult sections of texts, but even more crucial at this level of study, develop their ability to be critical commentators on the academic texts they read.

With regard to **students' knowledge of the English language and conventions of academic discourse as these are displayed through their writing, some serious problems exist with reference to a number of typical errors** to which many additional language users of English succumb. Students also seem to lack awareness about basic academic writing conventions. In short, students show difficulty in their functional use of the following grammatical and stylistic categories of English: concord of number; determiners (use of articles); expression of time relations; possession; contractions; sentence construction/word order; vocabulary use (incorrect use of words/incorrect derivative/incorrect spelling/word omission); prepositions; pronoun use (inconsistency); punctuation; paragraphing, general layout and structure; coherence and cohesion of ideas; and stylistic issues such as the concise use of language; formality; personalised writing; and referencing. It should, however, be noted that this is by no means an exhaustive list, but the most salient difficulties of this specific group of students.

It is therefore clear at this point that apart from a focus on the characteristics and conventions of academic discourse, a writing course for this group of students should include materials that develop the functional literacy strategies identified in TALL, integrated with a number of basic grammatical concepts and structures identified through the text analysis.

### **9.3 Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the results of a number of different sets of data that offer a description of issues regarding the context of tertiary academic writing, as well as the

implications of such results for decisions about writing course design. However, if one takes into account that applied linguistics could be regarded as primarily a discipline of design (see Weideman, 2006b), statistical results and theory are relatively worthless in this discipline if they cannot be employed on a practical level for alleviating some of the difficulties they identify. Such a practical application may of course entail a relaxation of the highly discipline specific nature that is indicated for such a course by the conclusions reached and discussed in the current chapter. Should practical and logistical considerations force themselves upon the course designer when the problem is considered from these angles as well, the question is: to what extent can one accommodate potentially conflicting and contradictory findings in the eventual design of course materials?

The next chapter therefore provides an account of how the insights and information discussed in the preceding chapters of this study could be practically applied in one's design of a writing course for the study group, and what further constraints obtrude in this application.



## CHAPTER 10    **A proposal for the development of academic writing course materials for the study group**

### 10.1    **Introduction**

Important issues related to academic literacy and writing have been highlighted in Chapters 2 and 3 and these, in turn, informed the development of the framework in Chapter 4. Specific issues proposed by the framework necessitated empirical investigation, and the results of these investigations are reported in Chapters 5-8. Chapter 9 relates the most prominent and useful findings in these sections to how they impact on writing course design. This chapter then represents a culmination of the rest of the study in the sense that it takes into account the insights and information collected through the literature survey, as well as the empirical investigations, in order to make practical suggestions for writing course materials for the specific study group of postgraduate students.

With regard to the proposed framework specifically, there are a number of focuses (cf. Chapter 4) that should be considered in a **comprehensive approach to the design of writing course materials at university level**. An important principle in this approach is the interconnected nature of these focuses. Therefore, the writing materials that are eventually developed for a specific group of students will be strongly influenced by issues related to the identity of the writers, the types of texts they are required to produce, the primary readers (and assessors) of their writing, as well as the results of the contact with additional parties involved with/impacting on the students' writing. Additionally, issues relating to institutional constraints and opportunities, as well as one's approach to the development of writing, will shape the writing materials designed in this context. This chapter therefore attempts to account also for how the requirements and principles addressed in the application of the framework in Chapter 4 may be practically translated into suggestions for writing practice for the group of students from Agriculture.

It should be noted that although the **comprehensive approach** proposed by this study may be justifiable in theory, and while this study shows that it is practicable to

approach the development of writing course materials in this manner, one of the possible limitations of applying this approach is that, in practice, it may be time consuming. One would thus have to consider realistically how much of the approach proposed by this study could be accomplished at the beginning of the year for a number of possibly different groups of students. However, once a basic understanding of the literacy requirements of specific disciplines has been achieved, this foundation may be used in the development of writing courses for subsequent groups of writers in these disciplines, depending on continuous and productive contact with lecturers/supervisors in such disciplines. This study has, to a large extent, created such a platform for Agriculture. It has, in addition, provided a point of departure for a similar process to be pursued in the writing development of postgraduate students from diverse disciplines throughout the University by means of the general supervisor survey.

It is further apparent at this point that even in the case of aiming for the development of discipline specific writing materials, a degree of generalisation will be inevitable initially. One would, therefore, have to rely on general trends in the data on student needs as well as reader requirements. A basic discipline-specific writing intervention would thus be based on salient, generic difficulties and writing requirements for the group. In other words, one will have to utilise a basic generic core of issues to be addressed in the course. Depending on the size of student groups and, as a consequence, the time that may be spent on writing consultation with individual students, core issues may be adjusted and augmented (and other issues introduced) in order to address the needs of specific individuals in a group of students – an issue that can be addressed in a scenario where one deals with individual students in one-on-one writing consultation. The potential use of such a basic course for subsequent groups of writers in the same discipline will obviously be determined by collecting the same type of information as was done in this study, and deciding on this basis whether drastic changes are necessary to the materials that constitute the course. It will clearly also depend on the feedback one receives about the value of the course, once implemented, from both students and supervisors in conjunction with the writing lecturer's observations on student progress, and how, after having worked with the writing tasks in class, such tasks may be adjusted to have the optimum impact on student development.

In general, what one would wish to accomplish through adequate writing course materials is to **develop students' functional literacy abilities** while, at the same time, also **raise awareness about disciplinary conventions and features of academic discourse**. It is crucial in this context that a writing course for these students should have real potential in making a contribution in developing their writing ability, but also that one does not create inflated expectations of what may be accomplished in such a course. In other words, one's expectations should take into account the realities of the context in which students write, as well as the realities of language and writing development. For example, since it is generally accepted that this kind of development takes time, it would be wise not to create the impression that a writing course is the ultimate answer in solving the academic literacy woes of supervisors regarding their students. One should, therefore, be careful in not creating expectations that would be impossible to meet, but rather focus on what may be achieved realistically over a year. It would, for example, be inane to suggest to supervisors that a writing course would make students fully proficient users of English. Although one would hope that better basic English proficiency will be a result of the writing course, it is well known that any number of other variables may influence such a result. In any case, rather than attempting to 'remedy' students' basic language proficiency at this juncture, it might be more important to **create a heightened awareness of the central role of language and writing specifically in the tertiary context**, and to provide students with opportunities to develop strategies that would enable them to become **flexible, life long language learners that can adjust to the demands and requirements of different contexts**. To accomplish this, students will have to be aware that no one set of requirements exists for academic writing at the University, and that they should strive to discover as quickly as possible those requirements that hold for any specific context.

The approach followed from the outset in this study is that literacy/writing specialists cannot work in isolation in the design of writing interventions for students. This proposal for the design of writing course materials therefore forms part of a comprehensive strategy that proposes regular contact with supervisors discussing student needs, supervisor requirements (and possible writing needs), supervisor feedback on writing, as well as the possible implementation of a writing tutor system. If a departmental tutoring system cannot be implemented, one may consider the use of

the academic literacy tutors employed at the UAL, but this would basically amount to an editing service, albeit with explanation of language issues in students' texts. In this regard, a series of meetings/consultations could be arranged with departments in order to negotiate the issues referred to above.

This proposal is, therefore, discipline specific in as far as it considers the specific writing requirements and the needs of postgraduate students of Agriculture in the decisions about such materials. It further makes use of an integrated design regarding two crucial aspects: the integration of academic literacy abilities that finds expression in the employment of a process of writing in developing students' writing ability; and the integration of a number of prominent approaches to the teaching of writing, each emphasising a unique primary focus on a specific aspect of writing development. Of course, the specificity of the proposal in disciplinary terms applies more than anything else to the **content** of the instructional intervention. In terms of its **form**, the course proceeds from a generic, and therefore potentially generalisable starting point. In this way the materials of which examples are given and discussed below entail an accommodation of the indicated specificity (Chapter 9) and the inevitable general nature of any writing intervention.

So far, this study has thus been an attempt at engaging in a responsible and justified approach to the investigation of academic writing in a tertiary academic context. In order to present a more refined notion of this justification with regard to **student learning**, the overarching principle to which such a validation for course design should adhere for any language course, is that it "should make language learning possible in the classroom" (Weideman, 2003a:37). The development of writing course materials will thus have to adhere to principles of course design that are pedagogically responsible and justified so that optimum **learning** opportunities are created for students. Weideman (2003a:15) mentions a number of design criteria (cf. also Nunan, 1991) that should be considered in justifying the tasks one develops in language courses. Although he discusses these criteria in the specific context of communicative language teaching (CLT), one would agree that these criteria have been incorporated into language course design over a wide spectrum, and that they generally hold true for the design of language learning tasks today. The first criterion emphasises the importance of **making use of authentic texts (and tasks)** in the

design of language materials. "It means, therefore, that language teaching must be related as closely as possible to real language use, as well as to the present and prospective needs of the student (Weideman, 2003a:31)" The second criterion refers to the **equal importance of all the different skills** in the development of language, a criterion that is also echoed in a literacy approach that emphasises the integrated nature of different language abilities. This is also the principle Nunan (1991) applies in his acknowledgement of the **interactive nature of language** and that, as a result, language tasks should emphasise communication through interaction. Another important consideration for Nunan is the importance of a **focus on learner needs**. One therefore has to consider learners' needs in terms of their functional language needs, but also their emotional needs in terms of the learning atmosphere in class. Weideman (2003a) suggests a 'stress index' that may be used for determining the level of stressfulness of language learning tasks. Although his criteria in such an index focus on 'beginner' students, he mentions that the criteria could be adjusted easily to make provision for different levels of learners. Responding to these criteria that focus on student affect, language tasks should, as far as possible, make learning free of embarrassment, fear and anxiety. Connected to this issue is the notion that good language learners take risks, and that learners may engage increasingly in such behaviour in situations that are relatively stress free. Regarding the learning atmosphere created in the writing class, one will have to create a careful balance between what is required of students in terms of their writing ability at this level, and the stressfulness of actually producing such texts. Keeping in mind the academic literacy problems of the specific group of learners, it will thus be crucial that writing tasks are 'scaffolded' sufficiently so that students do not feel 'abandoned' in their production of such texts. The fourth criterion focuses on the **information gap activity** that stands central to the design of language tasks. Although this type of activity was developed specifically in the context of communicative language teaching, it is clear that it has enduring relevance in the sense that it enables authentic information transfer between participants in order for the negotiation of meaning to take place. In addition, Weideman mentions two further criteria suggested by Nunan (1991). These involve, firstly, that learning opportunities should enable learners to **focus on not only the language, but also on the language process itself**. The second of these criteria focuses on **what the learners' personal experiences may contribute to learning** in the classroom. It should be evident at this point that some of the criteria

discussed above have not only already been accounted for to varying degrees throughout the study, but in a very real sense bring together the various yardsticks for course design as these are reflected both in the framework discussed above, and in the findings of the empirical part of this study. They will further be employed as barometer for a justification of the materials proposed in the rest of this chapter.

The following section presents a list of the intended outcomes for the writing course, and then discusses each separately with regard to how such outcomes may be achieved through specific writing tasks and materials.

## **10.2 General aims, critical outcomes and learning outcomes for the course**

In this section, the objectives of a comprehensive strategy for writing development are stated in the form of firstly, discussing general aims that do not necessarily form part of the specific writing materials for the course, but need to be addressed as a result of their possible influence on the design of the materials as well as on the implementation and functioning of a writing intervention. Thereafter, the objectives for the writing materials specifically are stated in the form of critical outcomes and learning outcomes, with the subsequent section discussing how such outcomes may be addressed through writing tasks and materials.

Apart from the fact that Outcomes Based Education (OBE) is the accepted educational model for all sectors of education in South Africa and has been so for some time in higher education, the development of objectives for the course in the form of learning outcomes requires one to deal with what students should be able to do practically and functionally with regard to their academic literacy abilities. It is therefore an educational approach that forces one to make justifiable decisions about the development of learner ability and to express elements of such ability in a way that should be measurable on a practical and functional level.

A writing intervention for the study group would thus include the general aims, critical outcomes and learning outcomes mentioned below.

### 10.2.1 General aims

A comprehensive approach to writing development for the study group aims to:

- Expand the current working relationship with supervisors from Agriculture;
- Create opportunities for supervisors to share their strategies on providing feedback on the writing of their students – initiate contact with supervisors on the development of a standardised feedback system for their students; and
- Support supervisors in the development of their own academic writing ability if requested.

Up to this point, the relationship with supervisors from Agriculture functioned on an *ad hoc* basis with regard to having contact in the beginning of the year when they usually request that their postgraduate students write the literacy test (TALL). After this initial contact, students with risk are directed to the EOT 300 writing course and contact effectively stops. This study would like to propose a more meaningful and productive relationship for future groups of students from this School where the formalised support in determining their students' academic literacy abilities, as well as student views and perceptions of academic literacy and writing, are augmented by work sessions with the supervisors where information is provided to supervisors/lecturers on their students' performance on the literacy test as well as the results of the student questionnaire. One could, therefore, help them to identify the specific academic literacy needs and requirements of students and, as a consequence, raise supervisor awareness about the specific difficulties their students experience with academic literacy.

One could further arrange opportunities where a negotiated system of feedback could be jointly developed for supervisors in the School. This could take the form of supervisors commenting on a specific student text from the discipline (preferably a weak text), which could then be discussed in a work session in order to determine differences in the way supervisors indicate the same issue, as well as differences of opinion about the importance of certain stylistic conventions used in the School. Such

work sessions could typically be promoted as part of staff development sessions, an obligation that all departments at the University are to fulfil.

The interview data suggests that there is an awareness among some supervisors that because they are not mother tongue users of English themselves, they may also benefit personally from contact with writing educators regarding their own writing ability. This contact will obviously influence the quality of support and feedback they could provide to their students. A closer working relationship with supervisors in the School that emphasises academic literacy issues as its main focus may, therefore, also make supervisors more aware of their own writing strategies and as a possible consequence, equip them to better facilitate a process of writing to their students.

### **10.2.2 Critical outcomes**

The course will address the following critical outcomes:

- Identifying and solving problems in which responses indicate that responsible decisions using critical and creative thinking have been made;
- Working effectively with others as a member of a group;
- Communicating effectively in an academic environment using language skills;  
and
- Collecting, analysing, organising and critically evaluating information.

### **10.2.3 Learning outcomes**

The learning outcomes for the course are the following:

At the end of the writing course, students should be able to:

- Employ their heightened awareness of their own academic literacy and writing abilities in order to seek out actively opportunities and resources for the development of such abilities;



- Apply adequately the knowledge and strategies with regard to the writing requirements of their specific disciplines in their own academic writing practice;
- Engage in writing activity as an integral part of academic literacy by making productive use of writing practised as a process; and
- Make productive (and continuous) use of opportunities for (or guidance as to what resources may be used in) the development of their basic proficiency in English.

### **10.3 Writing tasks and materials**

The following section contains a description of writing materials that may be used towards achieving the learning outcomes for the course, and eventually, the critical outcomes as well. It is important to note that most of the students in the study group have already completed parts of the writing course being proposed. The writing materials suggested in the section that follows, however, serve as an example not only of how writing materials may be designed for subsequent groups of students in the same School and Faculty, but also for student groups from other faculties.

Because this research subscribes to a view of making use of authentic academic tasks (and texts) in the development of writing, it does not support a view of exposing students to isolated, out of context writing exercises that do not contribute as a functional part of an authentic, integrated writing task. Such a strategy would compromise the integrity of the approach proposed here in terms of the integrated and contextual nature of academic literacy ability. The following section will therefore discuss the learning outcomes mentioned above with regard to three integrated writing tasks that serve as examples as to how these outcomes may be addressed adequately.

#### **10.3.1 Support students to become more aware of their personal needs with regard to academic literacy (and writing)**

As an information gathering instrument that is to be used in the **placement of students**, an academic literacy test should be administered as early as possible in the

students' studies (preferably even before they have formally commenced with their studies). Once a selection has been made of students who will attend the writing course, sharing the results of the academic literacy test may be instrumental in making students more aware of their literacy needs. It is important then that the results of this instrument are available to students, not only in the form of reading a final score from a list, but also discussed in detail with each student on an individual basis, in order to strengthen the impression of students that their unique needs are important and to emphasise the fact that the specific difficulties that students experience can be addressed productively by a literacy intervention. The heightened awareness that may result from such discussion may also lead students to begin to seek out actively opportunities that are presented in other contexts than the writing class in order to develop the specific abilities identified by the test. In addition, all students should complete the student questionnaire on academic literacy and writing, and their expectations discussed with them individually. Such discussion will help the writing lecturer to focus on the unique background and expectations of individual students, but also has the potential to emphasise certain misgivings students have about literacy and writing in a postgraduate environment.

Connected to the issue mentioned above, it is further suggested that the writing lecturer responsible for this group of students keep a personalised record, a portfolio if you may, of individual students (that includes, for example, test scores, questionnaire results, copies of written texts, etc.) with the purpose of providing individualised attention in consultations. Such a system should enable the writing lecturer not only to determine at which level individual students are with regard to their academic literacy levels at the start of their studies, but also to monitor their progress as they develop their writing ability over time. It is important to realise that in our context, the writing lecturer who presents the course and the course designer may not always be the same person. It would, therefore, be essential for the writing lecturer to have access to all information that was collected about a specific group of students in a specific discipline, and thus to also be aware of the writing requirements of the specific discipline he/she is teaching. Although what has been discussed above does not constitute a writing task *per se*, it is considered an essential exchange between students and the writing lecturer towards raising student awareness about their academic literacy and writing needs.

Furthermore, consistent and appropriate feedback (supported by individual discussions with students about such feedback) on the writing that students produce for the writing course should also result in a stronger awareness of how students' writing needs relate to important writing conventions and conditions in the tertiary academic context.

### **10.3.2 Make use of writing tasks that would guide students to discover the writing requirements of the specific discipline**

#### 10.3.2.1 Investigate the specific writing requirements of the discipline

As was mentioned above, an important point of departure for the kind of writing intervention proposed here is to raise student awareness about their own literacy and writing needs in conjunction with the academic literacy and writing requirements of their disciplines. When translated into the design of a meaningful, integrated writing task, the results of the student questionnaire which contain students' expectations, the results of the supervisor questionnaire that include the requirements of supervisors, as well as the results of a survey task where students need to interview their supervisors about academic literacy and writing, could be shared and compared in class and subsequently be incorporated into a set of writing requirements for the discipline. Making use of this data, students could then be required to produce a short research report on the requirements for academic writing.

Regarding the student interviews with their supervisors (see Figure 10.1, Task 1 below), this specific section of the writing task requires students to initiate contact with their supervisors (or lecturers teaching on a tutored postgraduate course) on specific issues in academic literacy and writing. The social and contextual situatedness of academic writing is thus emphasised by the information seeking strategies (which essentially amounts to students negotiating writing requirements with supervisors) employed by this task. The task attempts to get students to determine what is required specifically of them in their disciplinary writing contexts and connecting such requirements to their own expectations. Practically, students could be given guidance on which issues to address in the interview (see Task 1.1 below). These may include, for example, specific stylistic matters such as the use of

personalised writing and which specific system of referencing they should use, and will essentially foreground assessment in terms of students finding out from supervisors what they value in academic writing (students will further be encouraged throughout the course to explore with supervisors/lecturers the exact requirements of specific writing assignments they need to complete for their studies). After having conducted the interviews, the group can negotiate during a class discussion what the most prominent writing conventions appear to be in respective disciplines within the School (see Task 1.2 below). Ideas could be refined with the assistance of the writing lecturer, be combined into a comprehensive set of requirements (Task 1.3) and students requested to write up the combined and integrated data in the form of a short research report (Task 1.5).

One would also, however, like to introduce students to a strategy of peer revision and editing as early as possible in the writing course. Keeping in mind that most of the students will probably be relatively inexperienced peer revisers and editors, it would be unwise to expect of them to engage in a peer-revision task without any guidance at this point. It is thus suggested that students are supported by means of a task (Task 1.4) that mediates between the information collected on writing requirements and students' production of the research report (where they will be required to revise and edit one another's reports). The proposed scaffolding task may take the form of providing students with a short, authentic written text (taken from the previous year's assignments) and requesting their critique of this text for the next class session. A specific requirement for this task would be that students need to apply selectively only one of the three focus areas (see Task 1.3) used as organising principle in the compilation of the integrated requirements that were negotiated during the class discussion. Students thus have to critique the text regarding its content (ideas) and structure. The main reason for this selective focus is that one cannot, in all fairness, expect of students to comment adequately on language correctness or, for that matter, correct academic style this early in the course. Their first introduction to revision and editing should, therefore, be restricted to commenting on the ideas (e.g. claims that are unsubstantiated) and structure of the text. In other words, the first peer revision task should attempt to focus on the quality and relevance of the ideas (meaning) first. A subsequent (surface editing) task may then emphasise surface issues regarding language and style (correctness).

This matter is, however, not as uncomplicated as the above contention may imply, since the meaning of ideas is sometimes obscured by incorrect language use (Parkerson, 2000). For example, the incorrect use of words and incorrect word order in writing have greater potential in obscuring meaning than for instance, errors in concord and article use. Inevitably, instances will thus arise in a discussion of the text where one will have to comment on grammatical problems in as far as they conceal the meaning of ideas. As stated before, other grammatical issues that do not have such a direct impact on meaning could form part of a later surface editing exercise. It is also important, however, that one does not confine students in this regard by taking away naturally occurring learning opportunities in class sessions. Therefore, if they do notice surface language errors, they may, of course, indicate them (and one may discuss them at this point). It is also important that the text one uses for this task have some rather obvious structural and argumentation problems (e.g. repetition of ideas; unsubstantiated claims; irrelevant ideas; etc.). Considering mistakes with language and style, one may opt for selecting a number of issues in the text that are prominent problems in the students' writing, and focus on these rather than discussing the mistakes in the text comprehensively. As noted previously in this study, although studies on error correction are largely inconclusive at this point, some do suggest that selective attention to specific aspects of language could have a positive effect on student uptake of grammatical and stylistic issues.

This writing task should also be a good opportunity to introduce students to a **system of revision and editing symbols** that they need to use in what they indicate about texts they will be required to assess. This set of correction symbols should be limited initially to include only aspects that focus on the issues concerning ideas mentioned above (Task 1.4 below). In the subsequent discussion about their revision of this text, one could physically go through the text with students (on transparency) and make use of the correction symbols (and indicate them as such in the text on the overhead for students to see), as students identify what they see as problematic in the text. Regarding problems concerning language and style, a useful strategy may be to focus on a limited number of prominent language problems identified by the text analysis, to explain these to students and to ask them to attempt to identify these errors in the text on the transparency (see Addendum E for an error correction scheme that may be used in this regard).

It should be noted that this task serves the function of **introducing** students to peer revision and editing in order to get them started. The ultimate aim of this strategy is that students may get so used to commenting on others' writing (and receiving comment), that they would of their own accord seek out opportunities for offering their own writing to somebody else to comment on. Whether students will engage in such strategies out of their own accord will depend to some extent on whether they find the feedback of their peers (and any other resources) valuable in improving their writing, which obviously implies the judicious selection of such resources. In essence, this study suggests that a system of revision and editing used by students for peer revision and editing, as well as the system of feedback that the writing lecturer, supervisors and possibly a writing tutor use, emphasises the construction of meaning first before focusing on surface language errors that do not impact as severely on meaning.

Students will further be given guidance as to the structure of the research report, and as a next step be required to physically write the research report (Task 1.5) and then to have it revised and edited by a writing partner from the group (they would already have had the introductory experience to revision and editing discussed above). After receiving back their texts from their writing partners, students will also have the opportunity to make the changes they wish to their texts (and also make use of outside resources such as the writing tutor) before the final submission of these.

This writing task already introduces students to one type of data – that collected through conducting interviews and administering questionnaires – considered important in the School, as well as their interpretation thereof (a discussion of the data will also focus on students' ability to judge the strength of this kind of evidence). The writing task discussed above thus has the potential to create a sense of immediate relevance regarding the materials dealt with in the course. In addition, part of the justification for the task is to be found in that it is a typical task in which students have to seek information, process such information and then produce information on the basis of what they have learnt.



2 Are there any important **stylistic conventions** to which I should adhere in my writing?

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3 What do you expect from students with regard to the **language used** in a written text?

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4 Do you **award marks** for language and style in written texts? (If you do, what is penalised/rewarded when you mark for language and style?)

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5 What **referencing system** should I use for my own writing in the department?

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6 To what extent do you indicate or correct language/stylistic mistakes in written texts?

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1.2 Draw up a prioritised list of at least 3 supervisor requirements for quality student writing from your interview.

1

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2

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3

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4

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1.3 Aided by your EOT 300 lecturer, compile a comprehensive, prioritised list of supervisor requirements/expectations about student writing from a whole class discussion about the topic:



**Lecturer expectations about student academic writing**

Content/argument	Style and presentation	Language use

**1.4** Your lecturer will provide you with a text that contains a number of structural and thinking errors, as well as errors in grammar and style. For the next class session, you need to read through the text and try to identify as many errors as possible regarding those aspects contained in column 1 above (content/argument). Try not to focus too much on how the language was used, since this aspect will be considered jointly with your writing lecturer after a discussion of your findings on the value of the ideas in the text. Please make use (as far as possible) of the following symbols in indicating specific issues in the text itself:

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| Rep  | Repetition of an idea                           |
| Evid | Unsubstantiated claim (no evidence provided)    |
| Con  | You are contradicting yourself                  |
| Log  | No logical flow between ideas (ideas unrelated) |
| Pos  | Idea does not belong here                       |
| Irr  | Idea is irrelevant to the topic                 |
| ?    | I do not understand/it does not make sense      |
| [NP  | New paragraph                                   |

**1.5** Write a short research report of between 1000 to 1500 words in which you give an account of lecturer expectations of student academic writing (it is important to realise that your report should also adhere to the specific requirements you are discussing in

the report). Make use of all information you have gained on the issue thus far. After you have finished writing the report, hand it to your writing partner so that he/she can check it for inconsistencies and errors in argument (ideas). Such errors should be indicated in pencil in the report itself. Make use of the same symbols we have used in Task 1.4 to indicate problems with the ideas in the text and also make use of the writing check (see Addendum D) as a guide to what specific issues to focus on in the text. After you have made the changes you want (in response to what your writing partner has indicated), write a second draft of your report and give this to your writing tutor for editing. Only after you have made the changes suggested by the writing tutor, you may submit your final draft to your writing lecturer.

### 10.3.2.2 Make use of generic written genres in the School

Writing materials should, as far as is practically possible, focus on strategies for discovering the characteristics of the written genres employed in the School, as well as require students to produce such genres that adhere to their supervisors'/lecturers' requirements. In the rest of this section, it should be apparent from the proposed writing tasks that the aim is to make the tasks as authentic as possible.

Students will thus be required to write a literature survey (see Task 2 below) on a specific topic selected in the course. A limited number of topics relevant to the discipline in general may be negotiated with students for the focus of the literature study. A topic such as 'desertification', for example, is generic for the discipline in the sense that students registered for different courses may approach this topic from their specific perspectives (e.g. a student from Animal and Wildlife Sciences may approach the topic in terms of the impact of this phenomenon on animal management, a student from Plant Production and Soil Sciences could approach desertification from the perspective of the impact on soil resources and a student registered for Agricultural Economics, Extension and Rural Development may approach the issue from the perspective of the economic [and social] impact of desertification). As discussed comprehensively in 10.3.4.1, students could be provided with a number of basic texts on the issue of desertification and be required to analyse such texts and extract

relevant information. This would address literacy abilities such as distinguishing relevance, classifying information, paraphrasing, etc.

**Figure 10.2 Task 2 – A survey of the literature**

**Task 2 – The Literature survey**

- 1 Copies of six different texts on 'Desertification' have been reserved for you in the main library on campus. As a first step, you need to decide which of these texts are relevant for the topic you need to investigate. You could, therefore, first skim read the texts in order to gain a general impression of what they are about. Make copies of the texts you select and read them comprehensively. Read specifically for information on the following important issues:
  - A definition of desertification
  - Major causes of desertification
  - Major consequences of desertification
  - Proposed solutions for how the effects of desertification could be minimised
- 2 While you read, keep these issues in mind and write short, summarising notes under each heading. Also write down important quotes (as well as their references) you feel may be useful in support of specific ideas/issues in your discussion of the topic.
- 3 Make use of your notes in order to construct a schematic diagram on the important information you have extracted from your selected texts. Copy this diagram on the transparency that your lecturer will provide (you may also make use of a Powerpoint presentation if you wish). Also make sure that you include the complete details of each of the texts you use according to the Harvard method of citation (as was discussed in class) on a separate transparency. During the following class session, each student will be required to present his/her diagram to the rest of the class.
- 4 Another important article on the topic has been reserved for you in the library. Make a copy of this article and read through it thoroughly. You will note that the perspective in this article contradicts that of the previous texts you read. Based on the evidence provided in this article, decide for yourself how you will include this new information into the diagram that you have already developed on the issue.

- 5 Now that you have established a basic understanding and framework on the issue of desertification, you have to address this problem in your specific field of study. For example, if you are registered for a degree in Animal and Wildlife Sciences, your angle on the topic would be how issues in this specific field are affected by desertification. At this point it will be necessary for you to consult more sources on research that was conducted specifically about the impact of desertification in your field. Make use of the basic diagram you have constructed and add any new, more specific information from your additional reading into the diagram in a logical manner.
- 6 Make use of your diagram as well as any additional notes and write a first draft of a survey of the literature on the impact of desertification in your field. Make sure that the structure of your text adheres to the general structure of introduction / body / conclusion. Follow the same procedure of revision and editing used in Task 1. You thus need to have your first draft edited by a writing partner from the group and the second draft by the writing tutor before submission of the final draft.

Since all students are required to produce a research proposal in the School, this is an important genre that will be exploited in the writing course. Every student will thus have to produce a research proposal during the year (see Task 3 below). This task will be explained comprehensively to students relatively early in the course and they will be encouraged to start working on it as soon as possible. It will also be made very clear that this is the same proposal that they have to produce for their research project in their field. Students may submit their proposals as a writing assignment for the course at any time they wish during the year, depending on the requirement that they have had at least three consultations on the proposal with their writing lecturer, and have presented it as a seminar to the rest of the group. An additional requirement will therefore be that students have to present their proposals in the form of a seminar (both written and orally) to the rest of the students in the group, for the purpose of receiving feedback from their peers, that may help them in improving the proposal. A writing task of this nature is surely the closest one could get in adhering to the criterion of making use of authentic academic tasks (and texts) for the development of writing in a writing course. The proposal is thus that the same research proposal they have to produce for the main research project of their studies is utilised as an authentic text for writing development.

Because proposal writing also tends to differ across disciplines and even within disciplines (there is, therefore, not one 'correct' or standard format for the writing of research proposals), it will be important for students to investigate this issue with regard to the specific reader/audience (their supervisors) who will require of them to produce this genre. In order to support students with this investigation, one could ask them to bring examples of research proposals they have collected from their supervisors to the writing class (obviously they need to ask for a proposal that has already been accepted), analyse such proposals in terms of content and structure, and then expect of each student to produce his/her own proposal during the year. As noted above, students may further be supported through a series of individual consultations with the writing lecturer about the proposal. One may, therefore, make productive use of the notion of text modelling in the sense that students may request examples of model texts (such as a research proposal) from their supervisors and that these then be analysed in order to discover what the appropriate structure and content would be for these genres in the School.

The research proposal is used here as a writing task that highlights the practical worth of employing a process of writing in terms of its emphasis on requesting feedback from various sources and making changes accordingly.

### **Figure 10.3 Task 3 – The research proposal**

#### **Task 3 – Writing a research proposal**

- 1** This task requires of you to produce a research proposal for the main research project towards completing your degree. This is essentially the same research proposal you will have to produce for your supervisor before you can start with your research project.
- 2** For the next class session, please ask your supervisor for an example of a research proposal on which you may base yours (preferably, this should be a proposal that has already been accepted by a research committee). Read through this proposal thoroughly and try to take note of the type of information that is required for a research proposal as well as how it is structured with regard to such information. Each student's proposal will be discussed in class with regard to the two issues mentioned above in mind
- 3** Your task now is to write a research proposal for your main research project after having discussed at length a possible topic, as well as your supervisor's specific requirements for

proposal writing, with him/her. Obviously, the date of submission of this proposal (as a writing task for the writing course) will depend on your own time frame according to your study schedule. The requirement for the writing course is, however, that you should submit the proposal during this year. Obviously, you will have to take this task into account when you plan for your studies, since you are required to have three consultations with your writing lecturer on your progress with the writing of the proposal (you may also make any additional appointments with your lecturer if required).

- 4 If at any time you feel you want the rest of the writing group's input and feedback on your progress with your proposal, you should please inform your lecturer so that he/she could schedule a time in which you may present your proposal in the form of a seminar to the rest of the group (you should also hand a copy of your seminar to your lecturer so that it could be distributed in the group). Obviously, this should be done before you hand your final proposal to your supervisor or submit it as a writing task for the writing course. The presentation of this seminar is compulsory for the writing course.

#### 10.3.2.3 Strengthen student awareness about different types of evidence that are acceptable in their disciplines

The writing tasks proposed here also aim (as far as possible) to integrate the different types of evidence that are acceptable in the School into the texts students are required to produce. Supervisors for the study group have indicated primarily that evidence from the literature and empirical evidence (gained through experiment as well as survey-type evidence) are acceptable types of evidence in the School. All three writing tasks discussed in this chapter are well suited to emphasise the judicious use of at least two of these evidence types in student writing. For example, Task 1 that requires students to conduct a survey and write a short research report is suitable in addressing the collection of data from interviews as well as questionnaires (and their interpretation) as a source of evidence. Apart from offering support to students in collecting information about disciplinary writing requirements, this task is also an attempt to guide students in making justifiable decisions about the strength of claims put forward and engaging in the responsible interpretation of data in their own writing.

Regarding evidence from the literature, Task 2 (Figure 10.2) focuses on the consultation of a number of different sources on a specific topic and emphasises the

extraction of salient information (and evidence) from the literature that would enable one to construct a sound argument based on evidence located in such literature. This task is discussed in more detail in 10.3.4. Task 3 (Figure 10.3), which involves the writing of a research proposal, also focuses on evidence from the literature in the sense that for this genre, one is usually expected to include a short survey of the literature in order to situate one's research problem in the context of one's discipline. This task is discussed comprehensively in 10.3.2.2.

Although experimental data have been identified by supervisors from Agriculture as one of the sources of evidence for the discipline, this type of evidence is at the heart of the discipline regarding insight into the content of the field. Apart from the difficulty of setting an authentic writing task that includes such experimental data, it may be wise for the course designer not to engage too closely with the intricacies of content in the discipline. Students may, however, be supported with the individual written texts they produce in the discipline regarding the way in which they have made use of language to construct their arguments based on experimental evidence.

#### 10.3.2.4 Address prominent stylistic conventions of academic discourse for the School

Apart from what students may learn from their supervisors about writing requirements (and, more specifically, stylistic conventions) in the interviews (Task 1), the data from the interviews with supervisors from Agriculture indicate that stylistic issues they find problematic (or that they value) in this School are mainly restricted to the formality and impersonality of the language used in academic writing, as well as consistency in citation. Although stylistic matters would be addressed throughout the course (mainly in the feedback students receive on their written texts), this issue will be addressed comprehensively in the class discussion session about supervisor requirements in Task 1.3. The writing lecturer could further emphasise specifically those issues that are considered to be important in the discipline by indicating them on the transparency of the text that students had to critique with regard to argumentation and structure (Task 1.4).

One could, therefore, make use of instances of style emphasised by supervisors during students' interviews with them, and augment such instances by information gained from the supervisor questionnaire (Chapter 5) and interviews (Chapter 8).

### **10.3.3 Provide opportunities for (or guidance as to what resources may be used in) the development of basic proficiency in English**

Both the results of TALL and the textual analysis indicate that students in the study group need support with the development of their basic English proficiency. It is therefore crucial that students with proficiency difficulties in English are supported to improve their proficiency. If not, many of these students will probably have extra difficulty in starting to write, and when they do, be tempted to plagiarise sources because they simply do not control English at a functional level that would enable them to deal in a productive manner with the reading and writing demands of studying in a postgraduate context.

Obviously, one would expect that a situation where students are partly immersed into the additional language through which they study should improve their basic English proficiency as they proceed with their studies. However, what complicates this situation is that students with an inadequate proficiency in basic English are already involved in postgraduate studies and will probably be hamstrung with regard to the progress of their studies in general. A writing course will have to take this into account with regard to the pace at which the course proceeds. Writing educators will have to be aware of such problems for specific students (something that could be determined by using a literacy test) and monitor the progress of individual students in terms of how they are coping with the demands of the writing course. Again, it is clear that for the type of writing intervention suggested by this research, the size of writing groups will have to be restricted to allow for the individual monitoring of students' progress suggested here. As has been mentioned previously, it would be unwise just to assume that students' basic English proficiency will improve to a level that makes productive study on postgraduate level possible by mere exposure to the language.



One would therefore have to consider alternative possibilities for the improvement of basic English proficiency, such as the (foreigner) English proficiency courses that are presented by a lecturer from the Department of English at the UP (under the auspices of CE at UP). This course is presented at different levels of proficiency, and may provide an opportunity for English additional language students to acquire a threshold level of basic English proficiency that would provide the necessary foundation for such students to engage productively with a writing course. This is, therefore, another reason for approaching writing development in a comprehensive manner by establishing a co-operative working relationship with that Department regarding what type of English proficiency courses are available to students.

The second possibility is that of the judicious integration of key grammatical issues into an academic writing course for such students. This way, one could incorporate priority language structures (as well as stylistic issues) that are prominent in academic discourse, but also those proficiency difficulties that are identified for a specific group of students through the assessment instruments one uses. It is, moreover, an opportunity to focus on the functional nature of such grammatical structures/issues and stylistic devices with regard to what they contribute towards producing texts that adhere to the specific conditions and conventions of academic discourse. For example, students may be made aware of the functionality of making use of correct passive constructions to conform to the condition of impersonality of academic discourse. Clearly, it would be important to guard against presenting language structures in isolation where it is difficult for students to realise the connection with the academic discourse used in the tertiary environment. A potentially productive way to address this issue practically would probably be to utilise those naturally occurring opportunities in a context where meaning is negotiated in class. Therefore, if one notices a consistent grammatical problem in a student's writing, one may address such a problem in individual writing consultation with specific students or, if required, through an extra group discussion about the specific problem (if other students display the same problem). Another suggestion is that one may adjust the error correction scheme that students will use for peer editing in the course to include the specific grammatical problems identified through the text analysis so that special emphasis may be placed on these. Obviously, these aspects will be addressed in the feedback the writing lecturer provides to students on their writing as they occur. It is,

however, crucial that practicable solutions are sought constantly for addressing language proficiency problems. As stated before, one cannot depend on students' immersion into an English environment to resolve the issue, since it is apparent in this study that in many instances it does not happen.

Although one may then be cautiously optimistic about the potential of a writing course to contribute to the development of basic English proficiency, it is clear that the main focus of a writing course cannot be the development of such proficiency and, therefore, students who display serious difficulty with English proficiency will be advised to register for the proficiency courses offered through CE at UP, either before they enrol for the writing course, or doing the two courses concurrently.

### **10.3.4 Introduce students to academic writing as an integral part of academic literacy ability**

#### 10.3.4.1 Introduce students to writing as a process

All three integrated writing tasks proposed in this chapter will require of students to make use of a multiple-draft (or a process) approach to writing. Students will, therefore, be introduced functionally to such an approach already in the very first writing task in the course. Apart from the fact that a process approach to the writing of academic texts involves the production of more than one version of a text towards increasing complexity and acceptability for this context, the stages of planning the text and collecting relevant information on the topic are crucial aspects of such a process. Through their active engagement with the tasks proposed here, students will be guided through the different steps of the writing process: from the initial planning stage to the writing of the final draft.

In order to adhere to the criterion of authenticity, the tasks further emphasise the integrated nature of academic literacy abilities, most notably that of academic reading and writing that, in tertiary education, are functionally bound together. Tasks in a writing course should therefore focus on the utilisation of specific academic reading strategies that are used deliberately in seeking and accessing (processing) information. Working on a set writing topic, one may, for example, provide students with a number

of reading texts on the topic (see Task 2). Whereas a number of these texts must be relevant to the topic to different degrees, at least one text should be unrelated, but not too obviously so (for example, that students could immediately see in the title that it is unrelated). In a writing session, one could therefore ask students to select the texts they want to use towards constructing a valid academic argument on the topic, and require of them to explain by means of concrete evidence taken from the texts why they have chosen certain texts and not others.

By restricting the time in which students have to select these texts, students will have to make use of a reading strategy such as skim-reading, a vital ability in the armour of any postgraduate student towards finding relevant information on specific topics. By discussing their selection at this point, one would be able to learn which strategies they have used in their decisions. Students could then be asked to search for specific phrases or quotes that offer evidence on specific aspects on the topic. Students would thus engage simultaneously with two other important reading strategies, that of scanning for information but also reading comprehensively in making sure that what they have chosen as evidence does actually provide substantial evidence for the issues at hand.

Students will probably also, at this stage, start to appreciate the interrelated nature of academic literacy and the central role of adequate reading in the construction of an academic argument.

Eventually, after having discussed students' selection of evidence from the literature with them, one could ask them to write a short review of the literature they have studied where they need to integrate (and provide a logical sequence for) the important issues they have extracted from the different sources. As the first literature study in which students engage, the task could be 'scaffolded' in the sense that one may provide guidance with regard to the specific issues to which students should pay attention in the writing of their texts. Students would thus not be expected to accept full responsibility for choosing the major issues in the construction of their arguments at this stage since, if one considers the data on students' interpretative abilities, this aspect might be beyond their current capabilities. By providing them with a framework, it should be easier for students to read for specific information relevant to

main issues identified beforehand for them. One would, however, expect from students to make the kind of judgment referred to above in subsequent writing tasks (such as Task 3), since the ability to find relevant information from sources (in effect then, judging its worth) is crucial towards the construction of valid arguments in the tertiary context. Later writing tasks would thus have to focus specifically on students' ability to be critical readers as a necessary precursor for presenting legitimate and authoritative written arguments.

Another important issue that was raised by supervisors is the adequacy of the background reading students do. Writing tasks should, therefore, encourage students to make use of academic reading strategies that also emphasise comprehensive and critical reading as necessary abilities in their construction of valid written arguments

The adequacy of the background reading that students do will to a large extent depend on students' information seeking ability, as well as the way in which they process sources of information on specific topics. An integrated writing task may emphasise this requirement by, for example, providing students with texts advancing one side of an argument initially (as in Task 2 explained above), having them make use of these texts to construct their own text on the topic by making use of information taken from these texts. Only after students have written their own texts, they could be presented with an additional text that contradicts the argument of the previous sources. Students would then need to adjust their own texts (and arguments) accordingly in acknowledging the existence of such counter arguments, deciding whether it is necessary to change their stance completely based on the strength of the counter argument, or perhaps deciding that the evidence presented in this argument is not compelling enough to change their angle on the topic. This may raise student awareness about the importance of doing adequate background reading for their research, in the sense that if one fails to consult important texts on a specific topic that present valid opposing arguments (that one does not acknowledge at least in one's own argument), one's research may be perceived as deficient/inadequate as regards its theoretical background.

This literature survey could then also be presented to other students in the group as well as the writing lecturer in the form of a seminar.

#### 10.3.4.2 Use writing as a device to organise ideas

Writing down one's initial ideas in one's planning of a writing text as well as during a consultation of the literature on a specific topic, gives one the opportunity to create a conceptual framework on paper with regard to what one really wants to address about a specific topic. It may also serve as encouragement for those who have difficulty in starting to write, in the sense of knowing that they have already written something (albeit as notes or ideas organised into some logical scheme or framework) on the topic. Again, the writing process will be utilised in this regard by expecting students to use the texts provided in Task 2, for example, where they have to extract the most important issues and first write them down in the form of a diagram (they could also be encouraged to attempt to write down such ideas in their own words). Students could subsequently be required to present their diagrams (summaries) to the rest of the class where issues they raise may be further explored and discussed and as a consequence, planning documents refined before they start writing the first draft of the text.

#### 10.3.4.3 Build students' confidence in their ability to write acceptable academic texts

Building students' confidence in their own writing ability is obviously an aspect that will be developed over time as students become increasingly more proficient academic writers in the tertiary academic context. What is crucial in this context is that students should be aware of their starting point as well as how they are progressing towards producing written texts that are acceptable in this context. This awareness will depend, to a large extent, on the nature of the feedback that is provided to students on their writing. It would therefore be important that students know that they are making progress with their writing ability. In essence, the feedback one provides should be balanced so that, apart from indicating unambiguously what students still need to learn and acquire about academic writing, they also have to know what they are doing correctly. Again, it would be ideal if this principle in the provision of feedback could be practised by all those involved in the writing of these students.

It is further important to take note that the issue regarding basic English proficiency raised in 10.3.3 will probably also have an effect on students' confidence in writing. It has been my experience in the past that students on the EOT 300 course with proficiency problems have difficulty in coping with the demands of the writing course: in essence, their proficiency is so low that it is difficult to have a simple conversation in English, let alone have them engage in productive academic writing in English. As has been suggested in 10.3.3, what would probably serve such students best is to attend a course in English proficiency first in order to really benefit from developmental opportunities offered in the writing course.

#### 10.3.4.4 Assist students in their interpretation of feedback on their writing

At the very least, students should be exposed to consistent and appropriate feedback. However, apart from what may be accomplished in the writing course itself regarding the provision of appropriate feedback, the ideal scenario proposed in a comprehensive approach to feedback suggests that if possible, a similar system of feedback should be used by everyone involved in the writing of specific groups of postgraduate students. Whether this is a realistic aim in the context of the specific School used in the application of the framework is still to be ascertained. If such a feedback system could be negotiated with supervisors from this School, it would obviously be the feedback system that will be employed in the writing course as well. If not, one would attempt that the feedback system used in the writing course is unambiguous to the greatest possible extent, and that students would be encouraged to discuss feedback with the writing lecturer, supervisor and writing tutor whenever they do not understand what is indicated. With regard to writing course materials, students will be introduced to the system of feedback that would be used in the writing course (and possibly by supervisors and writing tutors) as part of their first writing task in the writing course. As was mentioned in 10.3.2.1, this may coincide with the task that focuses on their critique of an actual text that was produced in their field. One would hope that the more students make use of the feedback system, either in criticising others' texts or interpreting comments on their own texts where such a system was employed, the more they will become used to the system, and, as a consequence, minimise confusion with regard to how they understand feedback.

#### 10.3.4.5 Introduce strategies that would minimise the language errors in student texts

As mentioned before, one of the more serious problems for supervisors seems to be that because of the number of language errors made by students, they find it difficult to assess the argumentation in such texts. It has further been discussed in 10.3.2.1 that different types of language and stylistic mistakes could contribute in differing degrees to obscuring meaning in a text. However, the overall impression from supervisors indicates that they do not necessarily differentiate between the different types of mistakes, but tend to group them together under 'language mistakes'. Thus, although one may downplay initially the importance of surface level language mistakes in favour of mistakes in argumentation when following a process of writing in the writing course, students need to be suitably aware of the impact of all such errors on the readability of their texts (for supervisors). To address this need, one of the aims of a writing course would thus be to encourage error free writing in students. There are various strategies through which one could address this issue, one of which is to develop students' own ability to productively revise and edit their own texts (which is pursued in all three tasks proposed here). However, as noted before, although it is the ideal that students should be able to edit their own texts for language correctness, this is also an ability that typically develops over time, and it would be unrealistic to think that students will be able to accomplish anything near what is required in this context when they start with their studies. One would thus have to explore additional avenues through which this issue could be addressed adequately.

As has been suggested earlier, one way of ensuring relatively error free student texts (after their utilisation of computer resources such as spell checkers), is by making use of a writing tutor system. Part of the discussion on a negotiated feedback system to be used for this group of students, is the notion of a writing tutor system where writing tutors (who should obviously be proficient writers in their disciplines) from the School are used to support other postgraduate students with their writing. This is, however, an ideal scenario (one has to keep in mind that such tutors will have to receive training in the provision of feedback). If the implementation of a departmental writing tutor system is not possible, one will have to consider making use of the literacy tutors at the UAL to fulfil this function. However, while the tutors

at the Unit may have a good working knowledge about issues in academic literacy (and writing), they will not necessarily know much about other disciplines, and could thus not be expected to offer much more than a 'glorified' editing service to such students (language issues could, however, be discussed with students on a consultative basis). Even in this instance, such a strategy could alleviate some of the language pressures that supervisors experience and may lead to a situation where more time could be devoted to student argumentation. Students would thus be required to consult the writing tutor assigned to their group for all the written texts they produce in the writing course before final submission of such texts (I usually require that students hand in all the different drafts of any assignment produced through a process of writing). Therefore, although the issues of revision and editing will be a constantly recurring theme in the writing course itself (regarding peer revision and editing tasks), this strategy should ideally be extended to include outside resources that are available to these students whenever they have the need for them: once students become more aware of the importance of how they use language in their writing, they may thus start to make use of a wider support system in terms of finding someone they may trust to help them with language correctness in their writing.

#### 10.3.4.6 The construction of authoritative academic arguments

Both the literature and the empirical findings of this research indicate that argumentative writing is the primary text type used in tertiary education (especially at postgraduate level) for the advancement of one's ideas. Writing course materials and tasks therefore need to acknowledge this primacy in the construction of arguments, and create an awareness as to what makes it possible to argue convincingly and with the necessary authority (essentially, then, discover one's 'voice') in this context. In the first place, writing tasks should emphasise the importance of acknowledging authoritative literature in advancing the authority of one's own argument, and, in effect, promote the principle of making use of sound evidence in order to construct convincing arguments. Authoritative argumentation would therefore, in part, depend on students' functional literacy abilities discussed in Chapter 7 with regard to their ability to locate relevant information, to classify (categorise) and sort such information, to make valid inferences based on the information and to integrate the information (synthesise) coherently into their own writing. These issues have all been



addressed in the different writing tasks proposed in this chapter where students will be required to make use of these strategies in their analyses of reading material in order to complete specific writing tasks.

Furthermore, students should be aware that at postgraduate level (with specific reference to doctoral studies), making use only of the literature to construct an argument will not be adequate, and that an element of originality in their research is also important. This is probably what results in one being able to distinguish a student's 'voice' in their writing, that unique combination and interpretation of information that convinces the reader that they have something substantial to say about a topic.

As has been implied above, the notion of writing with authority is also closely connected to writing convincingly on a postgraduate level. Undoubtedly, apart from using unassailable evidence in argumentation, the way in which one makes use of language resources will influence the authoritativeness of one's writing, in the sense that incoherent argumentation with regard to how language is used may well lead to weak argumentation. The presence of language mistakes in a text presented for assessment will probably further add to an impression of weak and careless research. In effect then, it might be difficult to take students' ideas seriously that are presented by means of poor language. Students will, therefore, have to be aware that in order to be taken seriously in this context, they will have to ensure that apart from making use of compelling evidence in their arguments, such arguments should be expressed by means of a logical (and therefore coherent) structure created through the way language is used. Moreover, they need to ensure that the language they employ adheres to stylistic conventions as well as the principle of clarity, so that it is easy to follow and understand. Developing a 'voice' in this context thus refers to firstly, having something that you want to say and secondly, ensuring that one is heard when saying this.

To this end, it will further be important for students to develop an awareness about the finer nuances of how one makes use of language in one's specific writing style, in the sense that one could come over too strongly to the extent of sounding pompous and arrogant. One's choice of vocabulary (with regard to strategies of hedging also

identified in the interviews) is obviously important in this regard in relation to using appropriate utterances for the strength of claims made in one's writing. It should be noted, however, that the issue of hedging is a relatively advanced aspect of writing that develops as one receives increasingly more feedback on one's own writing, as well as being exposed progressively to reading more academic texts in a tertiary environment. It is something that will be addressed continuously in the feedback provided on students' writing.

#### 10.3.4.7 Use the Harvard method as foundation for the principles of referencing

In all writing tasks that require the integration of sources, the approach to referencing will be based on the Harvard method. Students will, however, be made aware that referencing is pretty much regulated by the context for writing, and that they should be suitably aware of what system is required by different contexts. It is exactly for this reason that this issue is also to be addressed in the interviews students conduct with their supervisors in Task 1.1, which should provide one with valid information to highlight the flexibility of this issue in the writing course. Writing tasks should allow for a focus on citation within the text itself, as well as how to compile a list of references for a written assignment. Although one would expect students at postgraduate level to know how to cite sources correctly, previous experience with student writing in the EOT 300 course has shown that, probably because of the variability with which citation methods are applied, students are confused as to what is regarded as the 'correct' method. Most importantly, therefore, students should be made aware that there is not one 'correct' method, but only a contextually appropriate method where correct application of the method will depend largely on their inquisitiveness about the issue.

In both the literature survey (Task 2) and the research proposal (Task 3) students will be required to integrate additional sources into their own texts. Since students will be dealing with the same set of texts for Task 2, this is also where, when they make use of the sources they have consulted for this writing task, the specific intricacies of the citation of different types of sources will be introduced.

#### 10.3.4.8 Address the nature of plagiarism

As mentioned before, students may well be aware of the consequences of plagiarism and may even be able to provide a rather refined definition of plagiarism. This does not ensure, however, that they do not revert to plagiarising texts in their writing. It is therefore necessary for students to discover the true boundaries of plagiarism in the sense of working with sources in such a manner that these boundaries are strictly defined for (and by) students. Writing Task 2 requires of students to paraphrase sources (in the short summarising notes they have to write) as well as make use of direct quotation. This task may be used productively towards creating such observable boundaries for students. The fact that all students (as well as the writing lecturer) will have a reading knowledge of the same texts will make it easier to address misconceptions and misunderstandings students may have in this regard. Obviously, students will be aware that it is impossible for their lecturers or supervisors to read all texts that are available on specific topics, and that it will depend on their academic integrity (and, therefore, how they see themselves regarding their academic identity) whether they would revert to plagiarising texts.

#### 10.3.4.9 Make productive use of connecting devices

One of the most important aspects in writing cohesive and coherent academic texts is whether one makes productive use of connecting devices in order to signal relationships between ideas and different sections in one's text. Writing tasks will introduce the use of such devices in a functional manner in the writing course (cf. example included in Addendum F). Students will, therefore, be introduced to different types of connectors they may use in the functional relationships they create between their ideas, but also as a stylistic device that offers alternatives in how to create a specific type of relationship between ideas (e.g. regarding a relationship of cause and effect a number of different connectors such as: 'because'; 'as a result'; 'subsequently'; 'consequently'; etc. may be used). This may also help to emphasise the notion that all information is not equal, and that the use of connecting devices should clearly signal such relationships between ideas.

## 10.4 Conclusion

The suggestions for writing tasks and materials contained in this chapter emphasise the importance of the integrated nature of different literacy abilities that should be reflected in the tasks in which students engage in a writing intervention. More specifically, the three examples of writing tasks discussed here show how the learning outcomes for such an intervention could be addressed through the manner in which writing course materials are designed. The two primary issues, however, that these three tasks address in an integrated manner are 1) a consideration of the academic literacy and writing needs of the specific group of writers investigated in the study and 2) a focus on the disciplinary writing requirements of the context in which the students write. A set of further examples, not discussed here, is included as further illustrative material in Addendum F.

The last chapter contains a number of concluding thoughts as well as specific limitations encountered in the study. Recommendations for further research will also be made, based mainly on the limitations of the study.



Present texts that are visually appealing regarding layout;  
Write in an appropriate academic style;

If we could return to what has been said in Chapter ??, students should be able to seek info, process info and produce (new) information in an authentic way.

In a subsequent section, it then comments on a potentially productive structure and sequence as to how the writing tasks could be integrated to form part of a holistic and comprehensive approach to the academic writing development of the study group.

Probably, assessment criteria will have to be connected to those of supervisors for their writing tasks. This is also where student discussion with supervisors could be invaluable in determining exactly how and what they assess – to some extent this has been done generally in focusing on their requirements for writing.

Therefore, when conceptualising a writing course for postgraduate students, they should probably be tutored by more experienced writing lecturers/tutors in small (depending on the amount of individual attention required), homogenous (regarding the type of postgraduate qualification) writing groups, while undergraduate students could, for example, be tutored by trained writing tutors (possibly senior students) from their specific faculties. One option is that such a system could be coordinated to function as a decentralised writing centre, therefore, to function within specific faculties but being coordinated from a central point.

Writing teachers who teach writing within specific disciplines and who are not discipline specialists will have to rely on the students as informants and allow them to teach them about the content – this needs a special kind of teacher (Belcher, 1990:222).

- Employ their heightened awareness of their own needs with regard to academic literacy development in order to seek out opportunities and make use of specific strategies for the development of such abilities;
- Make use of writing tasks that would guide students to discover the writing requirements for their specific disciplines;
- Introduce students to academic writing as an integral part of academic literacy, therefore focusing on academic reading strategies (with a specific focus on critical reading) as a necessary precursor for constructing valid written arguments;
- Provide opportunities for (or guidance as to what resources may be used in) the development of basic proficiency in English (also recommend that students on a specific level do the foreigner English course at the Department of English)?
- Introduce writing tasks that would encourage students to make use of the different steps in a process of writing;
- Encourage students to organize their ideas through writing them down and, in the process, attempt to persuade them of the value in starting to write as soon as possible;
- Build students' levels of confidence in their ability to write coherent academic texts;
- Motivate students to do adequate background reading (from a variety of sources) for writing assignments;
- Attempt to minimize student confusion in interpreting supervisor feedback in the possible development of a standardized feedback system (in consultation with supervisors) and to obviously also make use of this system in the writing course – also how to provide feedback in terms of, for example, focusing on specific issues at specific time, or just make supervisors aware of the research on this?



- Develop and introduce strategies that may limit the number of language errors made in student texts so that supervisors have an opportunity to pay more attention to the value of ideas and argumentation (students' own abilities in revision and editing but also in making use of other resources [such as computer resources and people in the know] for this purpose);
- Focus on argumentative writing as the primary text type in postgraduate academic writing;
- Develop the concept of authority in student writing (their 'voice') in terms of what exactly makes one's writing 'authoritative';
- Strengthen students' awareness about the nature of different types of evidence as well as support them in judgments about the strength of claims put forward – support students with the interpretation of data (possibly in the survey done on supervisor requirements);
- Make use of the Harvard method of citation to highlight the principles of referencing but also raise student awareness about the flexibility of the issue;
- Address plagiarism on a practical level that would make students aware of exactly what constitutes an act of plagiarism in the tertiary context;
- Support students in the use of connecting devices towards the construction of cohesive and coherent academic arguments in their writing;
- Address academic writing conventions (style and register [formality; impersonality]; citation);
- Employ, as far as is practically possible, the written genres used regularly in the School for writing tasks in the writing course and attempt to use model texts from the discipline to teach about genre – also explore further the idea of students making use of academic texts in general on which to model their own written texts;

- C Capitalisation problem
- Incorrect word order (correct word but misplaced)
- ∧ Missing word or words
- P Punctuation problem
- Correct word family, but incorrect word form
- sp Spelling problem
- art Absence of or incorrect article usage (a/an/the)
- WW Wrong word
- X Unnecessary
- ∪ Combine
- ¶ Paragraphing problem
- (?) I did not understand (try again)
- F Fragment (incomplete sentence)
- R Run-on sentence (sentence is too long)
- S/V Agreement between subject and verb (concord)

## CHAPTER 11 Conclusion and recommendations

### 11.1 Introduction

Perhaps the most significant finding of this study is that the comprehensive approach adopted here for the development of academic writing materials (in its application of the framework proposed in Chapter 4) is practically feasible. This is so despite the fact that one of its potential limitations may be the availability of time for conducting such investigations. Such an approach enables one to justify academic writing course design from a variety of pertinent angles and perspectives. As mentioned in Chapter 1, it was necessary in this study to utilise a range of research methods, which has enabled the researcher to exploit the congruencies in such methods, identified in the findings through the employment of a variety of approaches. All of these approaches, together with the multiple sources of data that were utilised, have contributed towards the comprehensive approach to writing course design that was adopted here.

In essence, therefore, the character of this study is partly qualitative (ethnographic) in the sense that it employed multiple strategies for data collection (e.g. the questionnaires and interviews) in order to gather the necessary information that was required by the different focuses in the framework. A number of information soliciting instruments have thus been developed and administered in order to gain a better understanding of the contextual requirements for postgraduate writing, as well as the perceptions and attitudes of students engaging in such writing at the University. The study is, however, also quantitative in its reporting of the statistical results obtained for the questionnaires as well as the literacy test. In order to obtain reliable data on the academic literacy levels and writing ability of students in the study group, different assessment instruments have been utilised in this study. These instruments had the additional function of identifying specific literacy problems students experienced. The ultimate purpose of all the different methods of data collection used in this study was to inform the design of writing interventions in a responsible and theoretically justifiable manner. In an echo of the approach adopted in the rest of this study, it is evident, too, that no one research method on its own will provide one with

an approach that is dynamic enough to account for all the different focuses that have been complementarily employed in this study.

What is further evident is that, because one may wish to make use of a similar approach for other departments at the UP, it will be necessary for the research instruments utilised here to be constantly adjusted and refined in order to offer the most useful and relevant information for writing course design. The comprehensive approach adopted here should therefore be seen as a dynamic approach that seeks to achieve the constant refinement of instructional materials, and relevance towards the writing needs of students as well as the requirements of lecturers in the tertiary context.

The one finding that is of specific interest in its general applicability for the University, is that the results of the supervisor questionnaire used in this study indicate that their perceptions about the literacy levels of their postgraduate students are generally not very positive. In particular, they perceive their additional language students to be weak academic writers. Although this study focused on a formal determination of such ability for students in the study group only, the perceptual data suggest that this may be a more general problem, and that perhaps all supervisors should be encouraged to make use of the formal postgraduate academic literacy test that should be available to them in the near future. This will enable them to assess their students' academic literacy abilities reliably in order to address possible student difficulties timeously. The potential benefits in doing so have been discussed extensively in this study.

## **11.2 Limitations and recommendations for further research**

One of the most obvious limitations of this study is that, while it does refer to the author's experience in working with similar kinds of materials, it does not report on the actual implementation of the writing materials proposed here. It will, therefore, subsequently be necessary to gauge the effectiveness of these materials in addressing adequately the specific development of writing that they were purposefully designed to emphasise. The effectiveness of the materials suggested in Chapter 10 will now

have to be assessed through their implementation over a period of time in the writing class (by means of action research; cf. Van der Wal, 2004 and Habte, 2001) and the materials refined accordingly for new groups of students from this School. The same comprehensive strategy proposed here for writing course design will, therefore, also be utilised in the design of writing courses for subsequent intakes of postgraduate students from the same School, and the materials for the course adjusted according to the results of such work. This ongoing research will also be reported on in scholarly publications in order to get the input of a wider audience of academic scholars on these materials.

The intensive working relationship proposed here between the UAL and Agriculture will be further pursued with regard to constantly emphasising pertinent issues in the development of their students' academic literacy abilities, but also more specifically to negotiate a combined feedback system for their students, as well as to discuss the possibility of implementing a departmental writing tutor system.

A similar strategy to the one proposed in this study for writing development will be suggested to a number of other departments at the UP that have expressed the need for writing support for their postgraduate students. The results of the initial supervisor survey are flexible to the extent that an abstraction may be made of the results for any department at the university (depending obviously on whether supervisors in such departments have completed the questionnaire) in order to provide a foundation on which future discussions may be based.

The academic literacy test for postgraduate students specifically referred to in the study is in the process of being developed, and a final version of the test should probably be available to supervisors at the University from the beginning of 2008.

A second limitation is that the study did not investigate institutional perceptions about the feasibility of the establishment of a (postgraduate) writing centre for the future. One would, however, not just want to follow current thinking on the issue because it is fashionable to do so. It has been remarked in this study that although a writing centre offers the possibility of quality individualised writing consultation, one will

have to determine whether the potential benefits for students are worth the considerable financial implications of establishing and running such a centre.

Another issue that requires further investigation is the possibility of establishing an institutional editing service for postgraduate students. Although we offer a professional editing and translation service (through Creative Language Services) as part of the UAL, this service is maintained as a business unit that caters mainly for the editing and translation of documents from people outside the University. Although I do regularly refer postgraduate students on the EOT 300 course to make use of this service, this is not its primary focus and it is not marketed as such. One may, therefore, consider to start advertising Creative Language Services as a service that is available specifically for the editing of postgraduate writing (if resources permit), and perhaps attempt to get the service subsidised by the University so that such students know that they have access to an affordable final resource in terms of the language correctness of their texts. A related issue is whether an institutional policy about the editing of Ph.D. and master's theses is desirable at the university. This matter is complicated by the fact if such a policy requires in its extreme that **all** postgraduate students should have their research edited by a professional language editor before final submission, one may disadvantage those students who are competent writers. This issue will thus have to be addressed with the necessary sensitivity about the flexibility of such a policy.

The study also suggests that the establishment of a database for academic literacy requirements may be a valuable resource for focusing literacy course design in terms of changing needs and requirements at the University. Further research could thus explore the possibility of creating such a database, where one would make use of either an already instituted information-gathering instrument such as the HEMIS information system, or if this is not possible, considering adapting the questionnaire utilised in this study for such purposes. The main purpose of such a database would be, however, to have a continuous flow of information on specific literacy issues from all academic departments at the University, and should therefore preferably not be a once off occurrence.

Another important finding of the study emphasises the predicament of part-time postgraduate students who are not on campus regularly and who can, for this reason, not utilise fully opportunities to discuss in person supervisors' feedback on their writing, as well as the difficulty of such students with literacy problems to attend a writing course on a regular basis. It would, therefore be important to investigate the possibility of designing web-based writing courses for such students, which would in turn depend on the interactive nature of a computer platform such as Web-CT currently used at the UP.

### **11.3 Conclusion**

It is hoped that the proposals made in this study for a comprehensive approach to writing course design for tertiary students will benefit other professionals working in the field of tertiary academic writing not only in the identification of important issues that should be considered in conceptualising possible writing support for students, but also in presenting a workable and justifiable strategy for the practical investigation of such matters. Course design initiatives such as the ones that have formed the background of this study, inevitably, it seems, have to meet the requirements both of feasibility and, in the current post-modern context of academic work, defensibility.

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## **Addendum A Questionnaire – Supervisor perceptions of the academic literacy requirements of postgraduate students regarding the production of written academic texts**

Unit for Language Skills Development  
University of Pretoria  
Researcher: H.G. Butler  
Tel: (012) 420 2269  
Cell : 082 872 5631  
E-mail: gustav.butler@up.ac.za



### **INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

**Title of research:** A framework for course design in academic writing for tertiary education

Dear colleague

The questionnaire ‘**Supervisor perceptions of the academic literacy requirements of postgraduate students regarding the production of written academic texts**’ forms part of a larger DPhil study in Linguistics that investigates academic writing in a tertiary academic environment. The study aims to develop a comprehensive, generative framework that could be applied to the design of writing courses aimed at the improvement of academic writing ability at the University of Pretoria (UP). In this study, the application of the designed framework will focus in particular on the academic writing needs of postgraduate students. A crucial component of the research is, therefore, to determine the specific academic writing requirements of postgraduate studies offered at the different faculties and departments/centres/units at the University.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your personal contribution to the research is, however, extremely important in the sense that the researcher wishes to involve as many supervisors as is practically possible. Information obtained from the questionnaire will be used to make informed decisions about the content and structure of academic writing support offered to postgraduate students at the University. The data would be treated confidentially, in other words, you would not be personally implicated in the research. You might, however, lose anonymity if you declare yourself willing to participate in a short follow-up interview. At the completion of the study, the data will be incorporated into the ULSD database which consists of ongoing research data on academic literacy and language-related matters.

Ethical clearance for the study has been obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria. Permission has also been received from the deans of faculties to distribute the questionnaire in their faculties.



Would you be so kind as to complete the consent form as well as the attached questionnaire and return it to Gustav Butler (office no. 22-4, ext. 2269, Human Sciences Building, Unit for Language Skills Development) prior to 6 June 2005.

Participant signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date and place: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date and place: \_\_\_\_\_

## QUESTIONNAIRE - SUPERVISOR PERCEPTIONS OF THE ACADEMIC LITERACY REQUIREMENTS OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS REGARDING THE PRODUCTION OF WRITTEN ACADEMIC TEXTS

### Instructions and additional information:

- *For the purposes of this questionnaire only master's and doctoral students are regarded as 'postgraduate students'. All questions that focus on students are aimed at postgraduate students.*
- *The term 'academic literacy' in the context of the questionnaire refers to the integrated academic language ability of students that enables them to cope with the demands of studying in a tertiary academic environment. Such ability incorporates, amongst others, aspects of how students deal purposefully with written texts in their interpretation and production of such texts. This mainly includes: an understanding of how different academic texts work (their structure, type of content and how language is employed to create this structure and content), strategies for selecting, arranging and generating information appropriately in their academic argumentation and how students generally integrate their familiarity with academic language conventions (e.g. register, style and appropriateness and correctness of language) in their production of academic texts. In part, the purpose of this questionnaire is, therefore, to gather data on how postgraduate students are guided in their use of different aspects of this integrated ability in order to arrive at an acceptable written product that could be presented for final assessment.*
- *'Primary language' refers to the student's mother tongue. In other words, this is the language a student acquired first. 'Additional language' pertains to any other language a student has acquired apart from his/her primary language. In the UP context, 'additional language' students are those for whom English or Afrikaans is not their primary language.*
- *Please complete all sections of the questionnaire.*
- *Where necessary, indicate your choice with an 'X' in the appropriate space.*
- *Where requested, please provide a short motivation for your answer.*

### SECTION A: INSTITUTIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL INFORMATION

1 To which faculty and department/centre/unit do you belong?

Faculty	
Department/centre/unit	

For office use only

V1 

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 1-3

V2 

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 4  
V3 

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 5-7

2a Did you complete any formal tertiary language course (English on second year level, isiZulu on first year level, for example) in your own studies?

Yes	
No	

2b If yes, please provide details about the course(s)/qualification:

1 \_\_\_\_\_

2 \_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_

4 \_\_\_\_\_

5 \_\_\_\_\_

3a How many purely research students (writing only a research thesis) do you supervise at present?

Master's	
Doctorate	

3b Approximately how many postgraduate (master's and doctoral) students have you successfully supervised?

Master's students	
Doctoral students	

4a Do you present specific subjects to students registered for tutored postgraduate courses?

Yes	
No	

4b Please list the specific subject(s) that you present to these students:

1 \_\_\_\_\_

2 \_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_

4 \_\_\_\_\_

5 \_\_\_\_\_

4c The subject(s) above form(s) part of the \_\_\_\_\_ degree.

V4  8

V5 

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 9-11

V6 

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 12-14

V7 

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 15-17

V8 

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 18-20

V9 

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 21-23

V10 

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 24-25

V11 

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 26-27

V12 

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 28-30

V13 

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 31-33

V14  34

V15 

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 35-37

V16 

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 38-40

V17 

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 41-43

V18 

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 44-46

V19 

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 47-49

V20 

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 50-52

**SECTION B: ACADEMIC LITERACY**

5 Please indicate whether your postgraduate students are:

1 mostly primary language users of the language in which they study.	
2 mostly additional language users of the language in which they study.	
3 an even spread between options 1 and 2 above.	

V21  53

6a Do you believe that postgraduate students' level of academic literacy regarding the language in which they study (English or Afrikaans in this case) plays any significant role in the successful completion of their studies?

Yes	
No	

V22  54

6b Please substantiate your answer to 6a:

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V23 

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 55-57  
V24 

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 58-60  
V25 

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 61-63

6c How would you rate the general level of academic literacy of your postgraduate students?

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V26  64

7 Do you believe that the students who are accepted for postgraduate studies in your department/centre/unit should already be sufficiently academically literate in the language of learning to cope with the demands of your discipline?

Yes	
No	

V27  65

8a Are you of the opinion that any student with relatively 'high' marks (60% and above, for example) for their previous degree will be academically literate enough in the language of learning in order to cope with the demands of your postgraduate degrees?

Yes	
No	
Not necessarily	

V28  66

8b Please substantiate your answer:

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V29	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	67-69
V30	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	70-72
V31	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	73-75

9 Is it a requirement in your department to determine postgraduate students' level of academic literacy either before or after they have enrolled?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

V32  76

9.1a If yes, how do you determine students' level of academic literacy?

1 The overall average mark for the previous degree is used (with the obvious assumption that the student must be academically literate in the language of the discipline to have achieved the mark).	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Students write a test of academic literacy in the language concerned.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 Students must provide proof of previous academic writing proficiency (an article published in an accredited academic journal, for example).	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 A specific final year secondary school symbol for the language concerned is used (please specify the symbol: _____).	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 Other (please specify):	<input type="checkbox"/>

V33	<input type="checkbox"/>	77
V34	<input type="checkbox"/>	78
V35	<input type="checkbox"/>	79
V36	<input type="checkbox"/>	80
V37	<input type="checkbox"/>	81
V38	<input type="checkbox"/>	82

9.1b Is the information that is gained on literacy levels in 9.1a used as an access requirement?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

V39  83

9.2a Do you find your strategy of determining levels of academic literacy reliable and valid (in effect, is this a reliable and valid instrument in determining which students to admit to your postgraduate courses regarding academic language use, or alternatively, in identifying students who need extra support with language)?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>
Partly	<input type="checkbox"/>

V40  84

9.2b Please substantiate your answer above:

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V41 

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 85-87  
 V42 

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 88-90  
 V43 

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 91-93

9.3a If no specific strategy is used to determine your students' level of academic literacy, are you aware of any alternative method being used to determine whether students have reached an adequate level of academic literacy in order to cope with the demands of the degree?

Yes	
No	

V44  94

9.3b If yes, please elaborate:

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V45 

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 95-97  
 V46 

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 98-100  
 V47 

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 101-103

10 In your experience, what do you believe is the **most** difficult component of postgraduate studies for your students?

1 Mastering the literature of a specific subject/discipline (in the case of both tutored programmes and purely research studies)	
2 Identifying a suitable topic for research	
3 Writing the actual thesis/dissertation/report/assignment	
4 Other (please specify):	

V48 

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 104-106

### SECTION C: SPECIFIC WRITING DIFFICULTIES

11 The issues addressed below form part of a comprehensive definition of academic literacy. Please assess your postgraduate students' ability to:

11a Understand and use academic vocabulary in context:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V49  107

11b Understand and use subject-specific terminology in context:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V50  108

11c Write in an academic register/style with reference to the conventions that apply to the tertiary academic context:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V51  109

11d Recognise and produce different genres (e.g. essays; reports; theses) and functional text types (e.g. description; factual texts; argumentation) within an academic context:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V52  110

11e Interpret, use and produce information in graphic or visual format:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V53  111

11f Structure sentences and paragraphs appropriately:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V54  112

11g Use connecting devices (connectors such as 'because', 'therefore', 'as a result', etc.) effectively to connect ideas in sentences and between paragraphs in order to create a coherent text:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V55  113

11h Interpret and produce structured texts that show an awareness of the logical development of texts, from introductions to conclusions:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
-----------	---	---	---	----------------

V56  114

11i Distinguish between essential and non-essential information, fact and opinion, propositions and arguments and cause and effect; and classify and categorise data that make comparisons:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V57  115

11j Argue convincingly as a result of their understanding of what counts as 'evidence' in your discipline:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V58  116

11k Write persuasively and with an 'authoritative voice' in the academic context:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V59  117

11l Understand the implications of plagiarism:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V60  118

12 How would you generally rate the level of **writing ability** of primary language postgraduate students and additional language postgraduate students respectively?

12a Primary language students of the language of learning:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V61  119

12b Additional language students of the language of learning:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V62  120

**SECTION D: ACADEMIC WRITING REQUIREMENTS**

13a To what extent does your students' successful completion of their studies depend on the production of correct and meaningful written texts?

1 not at all	2	3	4	5 a very large extent
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V63  121



13b How much writing is typically required of your students? Please elaborate (e.g. for master's students - 3 long essays; a mini-dissertation)

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V64 

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 122-124  
V65 

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 125-127  
V66 

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 128-130

14a Do you believe that the language of your academic discipline is specific to the discipline?

Yes	
No	

V67  131

14b If you believe that discipline-specific language exists, in what way would you say it is specific to your discipline?

1 Using specific genres and functional text types (e.g. technical reports and descriptive texts)	
2 Using field/subject-specific terminology	
3 A combination of 1 and 2	
4 Other (please specify):	

V68 

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 132-133

15 What genres and functional text types are your students expected to produce during their studies? Please list these in priority order by starting with '1' for the highest priority, '2' for the next most important option and so on. Please leave the options blank that you do not choose.

Genre	Priority	Functional text type	Priority
1 Research proposal		1 Description	
2 Thesis / dissertation		2 Factual writing	
3 Academic article		3 Argumentation	
4 Report (laboratory, technical, research report)		4 Other (please specify)	
5 Academic essay			
6 Other (please specify)			

Genre  
V69  134  
V70  135  
V71  136  
V72  137  
V73  138  
V74  139  
V75  140

Text type  
V76  141  
V77  142  
V78  143  
V79  144  
V80  145  
V81  146

16a Is it generally important in your academic field that students should substantiate claims that they make?

Yes	
No	

V82  147

16b If yes, what constitutes acceptable 'evidence' (empirical results, for example) in your field of study?

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V83 

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 148-150  
V84 

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 151-153  
V85 

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 154-156

17a What referencing system do you expect students to use in the completion of academic writing tasks that involve the use of sources in your subject/degree?

1 The Harvard method	
2 Other (please specify):	
3 I am not aware of a specific name for the method	

V86  157

17b How competent are students in acknowledging authoritative sources of information?

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V87  158

17c Is the referencing system referred to in 17a used as a departmentally agreed upon/faculty agreed upon/university-wide system, or is it a personal preference not necessarily shared by your department/faculty/the university?

1 Departmental requirement	
2 Faculty requirement	
3 University requirement	
4 Requirement of the discipline	
5 Personal preference	

V88  159  
V89  160  
V90  161  
V91  162  
V92  163

**SECTION E: SUPERVISOR FEEDBACK**

18a Do you offer feedback on the language use of your postgraduate students throughout the writing process when they engage in more extensive writing tasks such as dissertation, thesis or report writing?

Yes	
No	

V93  164

18b If you do offer feedback on language during the writing process, what type of feedback do you provide (you may indicate more than one option)?

1 Feedback focusing on language correctness (spelling, grammar, etc.)	
2 Feedback focusing on style, register and structure	
3 Feedback focusing on clarity of meaning	
4 Feedback on the logical sequencing of ideas	
5 All of the above	
6 Other:	

V94  165  
 V95  166  
 V96  167  
 V97  168  
 V98  169  
 V99  170  
 V100  171

19a Do you make use of any specific marking scheme (with fixed sections and marks allocated for the assessment of, for example, structure, content, etc.) for the **final assessment** (the formal examination) of written work produced by postgraduate students?

Yes	
No	

V101  172

19b Is the way in which students' written work will be assessed (be it whether a formal marking scheme is used or not) discussed with them in detail **before** written work is handed in for final assessment?

Yes	
No	

V102  173

19c If you do make use of a marking scheme for **final assessment**, is there a section allocated to language use?

Yes	
No	

V103  174

19d Does language use form part of the marks you award in the **final assessment** of written work?

Yes	
No	

V104  175

19e If you do consider language use in the **final assessment** of written work, what are the language issues on which you focus (you may indicate more than one option)? Please prioritise the issues you choose by starting with '1' for the most important issue and continuing with '2', '3', etc.

1 Language correctness (grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.)	
2 Style and register used (formality, impersonality, etc.)	
3 Logical flow of ideas expressed by the language (use of appropriate connectors such as "because", "therefore", "however", etc.)	
4 The overall structure of the text	
5 Clarity of meaning	
6 Other (please specify):	

V105  176  
 V106  177  
 V107  178  
 V108  179  
 V109  180  
 V110  181  
 V111  182

## SECTION F: LANGUAGE ASSISTANCE

20 Who do you think should be responsible for teaching students the academic discourse/writing of your subject/field?

1 Subject lecturers	
2 Language (writing) specialists	
3 A combination of 1 and 2	
4 Other (please specify):	

V112  183

21 What kind of assistance (if any) can academic writing experts offer to postgraduate supervisors in supporting their students with academic writing?

1 Structuring student writing	
2 Acquiring stylistic features and the appropriate register of academic discourse	
3 Acquiring revision and editing strategies focusing on clarity	

V113  184  
 V114  185  
 V115  186

3 Acquiring revision and editing strategies focusing on clarity of meaning as well as correctness of language	
4 Other (please specify):	

V116  187  
V117  188

22 If language assistance were offered to your students, what kind of assistance would generally benefit your students **most**?

1 An editing service only (correcting language errors)	
2 An integrated academic literacy course focusing on the production of appropriate writing products as a consequence of the development of a more comprehensive academic literacy	
Other (please specify):	

V118  189

23a Do you require students to have a final draft of a more extensive writing task language edited by a professional editor?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

V119  190

23b If you do not require formal language editing from your students, how do you ensure the language correctness of final drafts of the written texts they produce?

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V120    191-193  
V121    194-196  
V122    197-199

24a If a short, follow-up interview needs to be conducted on the academic writing of your students, would you be prepared to participate in such an interview?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

V123  200

24b If yes, please provide details as to where you could be contacted for further arrangements. Please be advised, that although your answers to the questionnaire will be treated confidentially, you will lose anonymity.

Tel: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_

## Addendum B Questionnaire – background in academic literacy (student profile)

Unit for Language Skills Development  
University of Pretoria  
Researcher: H.G. Butler  
Tel: (012) 420 2269  
Cell : 082 872 5631  
E-mail: gustav.butler@up.ac.za



### INFORMED CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**Title of research:** A framework for course design in academic writing for tertiary education

Dear student

The questionnaire '**Background in academic literacy (student profile)**' forms part of a larger DPhil study in Linguistics that investigates academic writing in a tertiary academic environment. The study aims to develop a comprehensive, generative framework that could be applied to the design of writing courses aimed at the improvement of academic writing ability at the University of Pretoria (UP). In this study, the application of the designed framework will focus in particular on the academic writing needs of postgraduate students. A crucial component of the research is, therefore, to determine in what ways postgraduate students could be supported in the development of their academic writing ability.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your personal contribution to the research is, however, extremely important in the sense that the researcher wishes to involve as many postgraduate students as is practically possible. Information obtained from the questionnaire will be used to make informed decisions about the content and structure of academic writing support offered to postgraduate students at the University. The data will be treated confidentially, in other words, you will not be personally implicated in the research. Your anonymity regarding the information that you provide is assured. At the completion of the study, the data will be incorporated into the ULSD database which consists of ongoing research data on academic literacy and language-related matters.

Would you please be so kind as to complete the consent form as well as the attached questionnaire, and return it to your lecturer during class time?

Ethical clearance for the study has been obtained from the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria.

Participant signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date and place: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date and place: \_\_\_\_\_

## QUESTIONNAIRE – BACKGROUND IN ACADEMIC LITERACY (STUDENT PROFILE)

### Instructions and additional information:

- The term ‘academic literacy’ in the context of the questionnaire refers to the integrated academic language ability of students that enables them to cope with the demands of studying in a tertiary academic environment. Such ability incorporates, amongst others, aspects of how students deal purposefully with written texts in their interpretation and production of such texts. This mainly includes: an understanding of how different academic texts work (their structure, type of content and how language is employed to create this structure and content), strategies for selecting, arranging and generating information appropriately in their academic argumentation, and how students generally integrate their familiarity with academic language conventions (e.g. register, style and appropriateness and correctness of language) in their production of academic texts. In part, the purpose of this questionnaire is, therefore, to gather data on how students could be supported with different aspects of this integrated ability in order to arrive at an acceptable written product that could be presented for final assessment.
- ‘First language’ refers to the student’s mother tongue. In other words, this is the language a student acquired first.
- Postgraduate students should complete all five sections (A-E) of the questionnaire. Undergraduate students should not complete Section E, since this section is reserved for postgraduate students.
- Where necessary, indicate your choice with an ‘X’ in the appropriate space.
- Where requested, please provide a short motivation for your answer.

### SECTION A: PERSONAL INFORMATION

1 Age: \_\_\_\_\_

2 Gender:

Male	<input type="checkbox"/>
Female	<input type="checkbox"/>

3 Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

For office use only

V1    1-3

V2   4-5

V3  6

V4   7-8



4 Where did you complete your secondary (high) school education (school where you matriculated)?

School:	
Country:	

5a Are you engaged in undergraduate or postgraduate study? Mark the appropriate box below:

Undergraduate study	<input type="checkbox"/>
Postgraduate study	<input type="checkbox"/>

5b Course registered for: \_\_\_\_\_

V5 

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

 9-10  
V6 

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

 11-12

V7  13

V8 

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

 14-15

## SECTION B: LANGUAGE BACKGROUND

1 What is your first language (mother tongue)?  
\_\_\_\_\_

V9 

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

 16-17

2 In what language did you receive your pre-tertiary education (use the 'Additional information' column for more specific information)?

Educational level	Language	Additional information
Primary school		
Secondary school		

V10 

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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 18-19  
V11 

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
--------------------------	--------------------------

 20-21

3 In what language are you studying at the University of Pretoria (the two languages of learning at the university are English and Afrikaans)?

English	<input type="checkbox"/>
Afrikaans	<input type="checkbox"/>

V12  22

4a Did you receive any formal schooling in the language you have chosen for your studies at the University of Pretoria (studied the language as a subject at school/additional language classes)?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

V13  23

4b If yes, for how long did you receive formal schooling in English/Afrikaans?  
\_\_\_\_\_ years

V14 

<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
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 24-25

5a What was the final symbol/percentage (Std. 10/Grade 12/last year of schooling before tertiary education) you received in the language you chose for your studies at the University of Pretoria?

English	
Afrikaans	
Did not study either language before	

V15  26

5b If you have not received your pre-tertiary education through either English or Afrikaans, what was the final symbol (Std. 10/Grade 12/last year of schooling before tertiary education) you received for the language in which you primarily studied at school?

Language	Symbol

Language  
V16   27-28  
Symbol  
V17   29-30

**SECTION C: STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE LITERACY DEMANDS OF THEIR COURSES**

1 The issues addressed below form part of a comprehensive definition of academic literacy. Please rate your own ability (in the language you use for your studies) to:

1a Understand and use academic vocabulary in context:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V18  31

1b Understand and use subject-specific terminology in context:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
-----------	---	---	---	----------------

V19  32

1c Write in an academic register/style (e.g. formality) with reference to the conventions that apply to the tertiary academic context:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
-----------	---	---	---	----------------

V20  33

1d Recognise and produce different genres (e.g. essays; reports; theses) and functional text types (e.g. description; factual texts; argumentation) within an academic context:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
-----------	---	---	---	----------------

1e Interpret, use and produce information in graphic or visual format:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
-----------	---	---	---	----------------

V21  34

1f Structure sentences and paragraphs appropriately:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V22  35

1g Use connecting devices (connectors such as 'because', 'therefore', 'as a result', etc.) effectively to connect ideas in sentences and between paragraphs in order to create a coherent text:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
-----------	---	---	---	----------------

V23  36

1h Interpret and produce structured texts that show an awareness of the logical development of texts, via introductions to conclusions:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
-----------	---	---	---	----------------

V24  37

1i Distinguish between essential and non-essential information, fact and opinion, propositions and arguments and cause and effect; and classify and categorise data that make comparisons:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
-----------	---	---	---	----------------

V25  38

1j Argue convincingly as a result of your understanding of what counts as 'evidence' in your discipline:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
-----------	---	---	---	----------------

V26  39

1k Write persuasively and with an 'authoritative voice' in the academic context:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
-----------	---	---	---	----------------

V27  40

V28  41

11 Understand the implications of plagiarism:

1 poor	2	3	4	5 excellent
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V29  42

2 In your opinion, what are the most important issues in producing quality academic writing? Please prioritise the options you select by starting with '1' for the most important issue and continuing with '2', '3', etc.

1 Correct language use (e.g. grammar, spelling)	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Appropriate style and register (e.g. formality of language, specific way of referencing)	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 Quality of the content and argument	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 Overall structure of the written text	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 Other (please specify):	<input type="checkbox"/>

V30  43  
V31  44  
V32  45  
V33  46  
V34  47  
V35  48

3 How could one realistically improve the quality of one's own academic writing?

1 It is impossible to improve one's academic writing.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 One could learn more about the process of academic writing and improve one's ability to revise and edit one's own writing.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 Get a professional language editor to edit one's writing.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 Both 2 and 3	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 Other (please specify):	<input type="checkbox"/>

V36  49  
V37  50

4a Do you think that academic discourse/language (the kind of language that is used in a tertiary academic environment) is different from other types of language?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

V38  51

4b If yes, in what way(s) is it different?

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V39    52-54  
V40    55-57  
V41    58-60

5a Do you believe that the language of your discipline/field is different from other disciplines/fields?

Yes	<input type="checkbox"/>
No	<input type="checkbox"/>

V42  61

5b If yes, in what regard do you think is it different?

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V43 


 62-64  
V44 


 65-67  
V45 


 68-70

6a Do you think that clear academic writing is important for the successful completion of your studies?

1 not important	2	3	4	5 very important
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V46  71

6b Please substantiate your answer in 6a above:

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V47 


 72-74  
V48 


 75-77  
V49 


 78-80

7 What types of writing tasks are expected of you in your studies for which you will be assessed (e.g. laboratory report; dissertation; thesis)?

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V50 


 81-83  
V51 


 84-86  
V52 


 87-89  
V53 


 90-92  
V54 


 93-95  
V55 


 96-98

8a Do you believe that students' level of proficiency in academic writing is important for their lecturers/supervisors ?

1 not important	2	3	4	5 very important
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V56  99

8b Please substantiate your answer in 8a above:

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V57	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	100-102
V58	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	103-105
V59	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	106-108

**SECTION D: PERSONAL WRITING NEEDS**

1 What do you find most difficult in your own academic writing? Please prioritise your choice by starting with '1' for the most difficult issue and continuing with '2'; '3', etc. for the others:

1 Understanding/choosing a topic	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Finding relevant information	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 Incorporating sources into your writing	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 Organising the ideas in your written text in order to build a well-reasoned argument	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 Finding the right words to express yourself	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 Using language correctly	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 Using language appropriately in terms of style/register	<input type="checkbox"/>

V60	<input type="checkbox"/>	109
V61	<input type="checkbox"/>	110
V62	<input type="checkbox"/>	111
V63	<input type="checkbox"/>	112
V64	<input type="checkbox"/>	113
V65	<input type="checkbox"/>	114
V66	<input type="checkbox"/>	115

2 Make use of the scale below in your response to the following statement: 'I can benefit from relevant support with the development of my academic writing ability.'

1 strongly disagree	2	3	4	5 strongly agree
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V67	<input type="checkbox"/>	116
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3a Do you think that you can benefit by attending an academic writing course?

1 no benefit	2	3	4	5 benefit greatly
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V68	<input type="checkbox"/>	117
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3b Please explain your choice for 3a above:

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V69	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	118-120
V70	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	121-123
V71	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	124-126

**SECTION E: POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS ONLY**

1 At which university did you receive your first degree (and additional degrees, if any – please specify)?

Degree	University	Country
First degree		
Honours		
Master's		
Doctorate		

2 In which language did you receive your lectures at this university / these universities?

Degree	University	Language
First degree		
Honours		
Master's		
Doctorate		

3a Have you previously attended any additional language support/academic literacy course in the language in which you have chosen to study at the University of Pretoria during your undergraduate studies?

Yes	
No	

3b If yes, was this a **general** academic language proficiency / academic literacy course or an academic **writing** course specifically?

General academic language proficiency/literacy course	
Academic writing course	

3c Was it compulsory for you to attend this course?

Yes	
No	

University

V72	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	127-128
V73	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	129-130
V74	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	131-132
V75	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	133-134

Country

V76	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	135-136
V77	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	137-138
V78	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	139-140
V79	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	141-142

University

V80	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	143-144
V81	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	145-146
V82	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	147-148
V83	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	149-150

Language

V84	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	151-152
V85	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	153-154
V86	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	155-156
V87	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	157-158

V88  159

V89  160

V90  161

3d Please indicate on the following scale whether you believe you benefited from the course or not:

1 no benefit	2	3	4	5 great benefit
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V91  162

3e Please substantiate your answer in 3d:

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V92    163-165  
 V93    166-168  
 V94    169-171

4a When you write longer academic texts, how many drafts/versions of a written assignment do you usually produce?

One draft	<input type="checkbox"/>
Two drafts on average	<input type="checkbox"/>
More than two drafts on average	<input type="checkbox"/>

V95  172

4b Please explain your choice above:

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V96    173-175  
 V97    176-178  
 V98    179-181

5 Which of the following steps form part of your approach to a longer academic writing assignment? Please provide a sequence for the steps you follow by starting with '1' for the first step and continuing with '2'; '3'; etc. for the following steps. (Please leave options blank that do not form part of your approach.)

1 Synthesising (putting together) the information into a coherent whole	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Revision and writing of subsequent drafts	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 Writing a first draft	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 Writing down everything you know about a topic	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 Gathering information on the topic	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 Editing and writing of the final draft	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 Analysing the topic	<input type="checkbox"/>

V99  182  
 V100  183  
 V101  184  
 V102  185  
 V103  186  
 V104  187  
 V105  188  
 V106  189



8 Planning your writing

6a Did university lecturers offer relevant comments on the content of your written texts during your undergraduate studies or for any subsequent degrees?

Yes	
No	

V107  190

6b If yes, did you benefit from such comments?

1 no benefit	2	3	4	5 great benefit
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V108  191

6c Please explain your choice in 6b:

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V109    192-194  
 V110    195-197  
 V111    198-200

7a Did university lecturers correct your language (e.g. grammar, spelling) during your undergraduate studies or for any subsequent degrees?

Yes	
No	

V112  201

7b If yes, how much did you benefit from such correction?

1 no benefit	2	3	4	5 great benefit
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V113  202

7c Please explain your choice in 7b:

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V114    203-205  
 V115    206-208  
 V116    209-211

8 Has professional language editing (correction) ever been a requirement in previous degrees you completed?

Yes	
No	
I cannot remember	

V117  212

9 Is it a formal requirement of the degree for which you are currently registered that you have your academic writing (your thesis; dissertation; final project) edited (corrected) by a professional language editor?

Yes	
No	
I do not know	

V118  213

10 In your opinion, whose responsibility is it to correct your written academic language? You may choose more than one option.

Yourself	
Supervisor	
Professional language editor	

V119  214  
V120  215  
V121  216

11a What do think are the capabilities one needs in order to correct one's own written language?

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V122    217-219  
V123    220-222  
V124    223-225

11b What do you believe is your capability in correcting your own written academic texts?

1 incapable	2	3	4	5 very capable
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V125  226

11c Please substantiate your answer in 11b above:

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V126    227-229  
V127    230-232  
V128    233-235

## **Addendum C    Questions for the follow up supervisor interview on academic literacy and writing**

### **Interviews – Agricultural and Food Sciences**

In the analysis of the questionnaires, there is a clear indication that supervisors generally perceive their postgraduate students to experience academic literacy difficulties. Do you agree with this perception for both primary and additional language users? Are you increasingly faced with postgraduate applications of students who are additional language users of English?

- 1        It is interesting that contrary to supervisor perceptions (borne out by the results of TALL and a textual analysis of a written text your additional language students produced on the EOT 300 course), your students who completed the student questionnaire generally perceive their literacy ability to be ‘good’. Why do you think is this so? How do you think can one address this apparent mismatch in perception between supervisors and students?

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- 2        What is the effect of low literacy levels on student achievement? What are the main consequences for you as supervisor?

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- 3        The majority of supervisors indicate that traditional ways of screening students for admission (using an average mark for the previous degree, for example) are not always reliable indicators of their academic literacy levels. What do you believe is a possible reason for this? Are you aware of any reliable way to determine AL levels? Is it important to determine this before admission?

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Specific literacy difficulties of mostly additional language users are confirmed by the results of TALL as well as a textual analysis of a text that your students produced. What do you think is the best way of supporting such students with their literacy problems?

- 4 Although a majority of supervisors see academic writing as a major problem, some supervisors also indicate that students have problems reading and understanding the literature of their disciplines. Do you also think that reading is a problem? What appears to be students' main reading difficulties? (Reading difficulty is confirmed by the TALL results and the textual analysis for your additional language students).

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- 5 If one wants to design a writing course that focuses in part on students' main writing difficulties, what do you think would be most valuable in such a writing course offered to your students? (vocabulary; register/style [do they understand?]; using genres [understand?]; general language use [grammar; sentence construction; connectors – signaling intentions]; sequencing ideas/arguing convincingly/writing with authority; do students plagiarise?).

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- 6 How much writing is done by your postgraduate students? What are your typical writing assignments (genres) for postgraduate studies? (You indicated a thesis/dissertation.; essay; proposal; and report.) What type of writing is mainly involved here (argumentative; factual; descriptive)?

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- 7 What counts as evidence? (You indicated experimental results; literature; and photographs.) What kind of referencing system is generally used? (You indicated the Harvard method mainly.)

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- 8 Almost all supervisors indicate that they provide feedback on students' use of language as well as their ideas throughout the writing process. Do you focus more on correctness; style/register; logical flow of ideas; structure; clarity of meaning? In your experience, does this help to improve their texts (possible difference in how students respond to feedback focusing on language correctness vs. quality of ideas)? What are the most frequent language mistakes and content problems?

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9 Does language correctness play any part in the assessment of students' major written texts (e.g. theses, dissertations, research reports)?

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10 How do you ensure final correctness of student texts? Only 36% of your group of supervisors indicates that editing is a requirement – is this not a departmental or faculty requirement then? The majority of students indicate that apart from their own responsibility, supervisors also have a responsibility towards ensuring the language correctness of their texts. Do you share this view?

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## Addendum D Revision table

### Revision table

Name of student (whose assignment you revised): \_\_\_\_\_

Name of the reviewer: \_\_\_\_\_

Question	Yes	No
1. Is there a clear introduction, body and conclusion (not only in terms of structure but also in function)?		
2. Is the problem that the writer investigated clearly stated in the introduction?		
3. Does the introduction guide the reader with regard to what to expect in the rest of the assignment?		
4. Does the evidence provided in the body of the assignment support the thesis?		
5. Does every paragraph have a main idea that is supported and elaborated by other ideas in the paragraph?		
6. Do all the sources quoted in the text appear in the list of references (and in the correct format)?		
7. Have all headings and sub-headings been used purposefully?		
8. Is the problem that the writer solved again emphasised in the conclusion?		

General comments about the assignment:

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## Addendum E Error correction scheme for language and style

- C** Capitalisation problem
-  Incorrect word order (correct word, but misplaced)
- ^** Missing word or words
- P** Punctuation problem
- Incorrect word form
- sp** Spelling problem
- art** Absence of or incorrect article usage (a/an/the)
- s/v** Agreement between subject and verb (concord)
- ww** Wrong word
- X** Unnecessary
- ∪** Combine
- /** Split
- (?)** I did not understand (try again)
- F** Fragment (incomplete sentence)
- R** Run-on sentence (sentence is too long)

## Addendum F Additional examples of writing tasks

### 1 General text structure and connecting devices

- 1.1 Read the text below carefully. You will notice that the text is scrambled in terms of the sequence in which the paragraphs are presented. Arrange the text in such a way that it adheres to the general structure of introduction / body / conclusion discussed in class. Number each paragraph in the margin in order to indicate the correct sequence for the paragraphs, e.g. start with '1' for the introductory paragraph. In addition, provide a heading for the text, as well as a concluding paragraph:

1

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2

3

The greenhouse effect **and** global warming are already having adverse effects:

4

5

- Changes in the climate have occurred in some areas with higher average temperatures **and** changes in rainfall.

6

7

- Patterns **and** areas of food production have changed. In some parts of East Africa, rainfall has decreased **and** food crops have failed more frequently than before.

8

9

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- Global warming has caused an overall melting of the polar ice caps **and** this has resulted in rising sea levels with more frequent coastal floods.

11

12

13

Some of the worst damage to our environment is caused by pollution. Most pollution is caused by waste materials **and** waste energy from people's homes, vehicles, industries, farms **and** other activities. The word pollution normally brings to mind waste material **such as** sewage, sulphur dioxide **and** CFCs (chlorofluorocarbons). **But**, pollution **also** includes excessive noise (e.g. from aircraft) **and** waste heat (e.g. from power stations).

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The worst contributor to the global warming effect is carbon dioxide produced by the burning of fossil fuels. **In addition** to molecules of carbon dioxide being larger, they are heavier than the gases in clean air, **such as** oxygen **and** nitrogen. **Because** of this, heat radiation cannot pass through carbon dioxide as easily as it passes through clean air. **As a result** of the rising concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, less heat escapes from the Earth **and** the temperature slowly rises. **In other words**, carbon dioxide traps heat in the Earth like a greenhouse. This has led to the term greenhouse effect.

21

22

23

24

25

26

27



28 **If** harmful emissions are not \_\_\_\_\_

29 \_\_\_\_\_

30 \_\_\_\_\_

31 \_\_\_\_\_

32  
33 One of the most serious effects from waste gases **and** waste heat is the warming of the  
34 Earth (global warming). **As a result**, different experts have estimated that global  
35 warming will have increased the temperature of the Earth by between 1 and 3 degrees  
36 Celsius by the year **2050**.

37

38 (*WESSA, 1998:122*)

**1.2 What are the main functional characteristics of the paragraph(s) in the:**

Introduction: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Body: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Conclusion: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**1.3 Make use of the text on global warming that you have already employed in the previous task to create a meaningful context for this task. All the words in bold are logical connectors and have the function of creating cohesion between ideas in the text. Locate the connectors mentioned below in the text and write down which ideas are connected by each of these connectors. Remember that we are not necessarily referring to complete sentences here, but ideas. The idea that you write down may, therefore, also be represented by a single word.**

1 'and' (line 3)

Idea 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Idea 2: \_\_\_\_\_

2 'such as' (line 16)

Idea 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Idea 2: \_\_\_\_\_

3 'But' (line 17)

Idea 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Idea 2: \_\_\_\_\_

4 'in addition' (line 21)

Idea 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Idea 2: \_\_\_\_\_

5 'Because' (line 22)

Idea 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Idea 2: \_\_\_\_\_

6 'As a result' (line 24)

Idea 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Idea 2: \_\_\_\_\_

7 'In other words' (line 25)

Idea 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Idea 2: \_\_\_\_\_

8 'If' (line 30)

Idea 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Idea 2: \_\_\_\_\_

9 'As a result' (line 36)

Idea 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Idea 2: \_\_\_\_\_

10 '2050' (line 38)

Idea 1: \_\_\_\_\_

Idea 2: \_\_\_\_\_

**1.4 Consult the reference list of connectors provided to you and see whether you can substitute the connectors you have used in 1.3 by at least one other connector from the same category in the list (do this in the original text by writing in the alternative just above the original word/phrase).**

## Reference list of logical connectors (signpost words)

- **Additive words** (these words usually add information to what has already been said)

also	further
and	furthermore
as well as	in addition
at the same time	likewise
besides	moreover
equally important	too

- **Amplification words** (these words usually expand or enlarge upon preceding ideas)

as	specifically
for example	such as
for instance	that is
in fact	to illustrate

- **Repetitive words** (a writer or speaker could use these words in order to repeat something with more emphasis or to make it more understandable)

again	that is
in other words	to repeat

- ***Contrast and change words*** (the writer will most probably use these words to introduce the 'other side of the story', or, in other words, the contrasting side of the argument)

but	notwithstanding
conversely	on the other hand
despite	still
even though	though
however	whereas
in contrast	yet

- ***Cause and effect words*** (these words are used when one wants to introduce or link ideas of causality and consequence)

accordingly	since
as a result	so
because	then
consequently	therefore
for this reason	thus

- ***Qualifying words*** (these words introduce important information that is usually necessary to make the data or concepts that are discussed valid. They, therefore, introduce conditions under which the data or concepts are to be considered)

although	providing
if	unless

- **Emphasising words** (these words are used to highlight or emphasise that of which the sender of a message wants the receiver to take special note)

above all
more / most important (ly)
more / most significant (ly)

- **Order words** (these words are used when the sender of the message wants to point to a specific sequence or order of events or data)

afterwards	now
at the same time	presently / today
before	subsequently
first (ly), second (ly)...	then
formerly	ultimately
last (ly)	until
later	while
meanwhile	historically
next	historical periods

- **Summarising words** (senders usually use these words when they would like to make sure that the receiver grasped the essence of their argument before they continue. It could be useful for both senders and receivers to check [by using these words] whether the main line of argument is understood)

briefly	in conclusion
in brief	to summarise / to sum up
in short	in summary

(Adapted from Orr and Schutte, 1992)

## 2 Referencing

When one wants to use quotations in a text that one is writing, the sources of such quotations should be properly acknowledged. The following are examples of how this should be done in the text itself and finally in the bibliography (list of references) at the end of one's assignment or research project:

For references in the text, the abbreviated Harvard method of reference should be used with no footnotes or endnotes:

Quoting **indirectly**:

According to Mokoena (1984:3), the role of ...  
 ... Behr (1983:42) states that ...

**Direct** quote:

It is of utmost importance that "the student should take responsibility for his own learning" (Spengler, 1992:16).

The following are examples of typical entries in a list of references for the main types of sources (they have all been taken from the example list below):

- A book with one author:

Kotecha, P. 1994. *Communication for Engineers: an integrated approach to academic and language skills*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman.



- A book with editors:

Rose, M. 1998. The language of exclusion: writing instruction at the university. In: Zamel, V. & Spack, R. (Eds.) *Negotiating academic literacies*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum. pp. 9-30.

- A journal article:

Badger, R. & White, G. 2000. A process genre approach to teaching writing. *ELT Journal*, 54(2):153-160.

- An Internet reference:

Beckleheimer, J. 1994. *How do you cite URL's in a bibliography?* [Online]  
Available: <http://www.nrlssc.navy.mil/meta/bibliograpy.html> .  
[Accessed: 1995, 13 Dec.]

Example of a list of references:

## REFERENCES

- Badger, R. & White, G. 2000. A process genre approach to teaching writing. *ELT Journal*, 54(2):153-160.
- Beckleheimer, J. 1994. *How do you cite URL's in a bibliography?* [Online] Available: <http://www.nrlssc.navy.mil/meta/bibliograpy.html> [Accessed: 1995, 13 Dec.]
- Du Toit, A.P., Heese, M. & Orr, M.H. 1995. *Practical guide to reading, thinking and writing skills*. Halfway House: International Thomson Publishing (Pty) Ltd.
- Du Toit, A.P. & Orr, M. 1987. *Achiever's handbook*. Johannesburg: Southern Book Publishers.
- Kotecha, P. 1994. *Communication for Engineers: an integrated approach to academic and language skills*. Cape Town: Maskew Miller Longman.
- Morris, K.T., & Cinnamon, K.M. 1983. *A handbook of verbal group exercises*. San Diego: Applied Skills Press.
- Orr, M.H. & Schutte, C.J.H. 1992. *The language of science*. Durban: Butterworths.
- Rose, M. 1998. The language of exclusion: writing instruction at the university. In: Zamel, V. & Spack, R. (Eds.) *Negotiating academic literacies*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum. pp. 9-30.
- Sebranek, P. & Meyer, V. 1990. *Basic English revisited*. Wisconsin. University of Stellenbosch: Centre for Educational Development. 1995. *Edward de Bono's six thinking hats and thinking tools*. Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch.

- 2.1 The list of references below contains a number of inconsistencies with the Harvard method of referencing we discussed in class. Read through the list, encircle all such inconsistencies and make suggestions on the list as to how you would correct the entries:

Jay, R. 1994. How to write proposals and reports that get results. London: Pitman.

White, R. 1987. *Speaker's digest: business quotations*. London: W. Foulsham.

Hill, M.D. 1997. Oral presentation advice. Available <http://www.cs.wisc.edu/~markhill/conference-talk.html>.

Patterson, D.A. How to give a bad talk. 1983. Available <http://www.cs.wisc.edu/~markhill/conference-talk.html>.

Dickinson, S. 1998. *Effective presentation*. London: Orion Business.

Stuart, C. 2000. *Speak for yourself: the complete guide to effective communication and powerful presentations*. London: Piatkus.

Urech, E. *Speaking globally: effective presentations across international and cultural boundaries*. Dover, New Hampshire: Kogan Page.

Hager, P.J., H.J. Scheiber & N.C. Corbin. 1997. *Designing and delivering scientific, technical, and managerial presentations*. New York: Wiley-Interscience.

Chemical and Process Engineering, University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. 2001. Presentation skills. Available <http://lorien.ncl.ac.uk/ming/Dept/Tips/present/present.htm>.

Jay, R. & A. Jay. 2000. *Effective presentation: powerful ways to make your presentations more effective*. Prentice-Hall: London.

Tierney, EP 1999. *101 ways to better presentations. A hundred and one ways to make more effective presentations*. London: Kogan Page.

(Adapted from Weideman, 2003b)



Also underline the keywords/key concepts in the quotes to show which issues you want to introduce or support by using the quote.

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### 3 Locating and organising main ideas

In the academic context, it is crucial to know that **not all information is equal**. If a paragraph, for example, were well constructed, there would usually be **one main idea** that is supported by evidence, for example, and/or other subsidiary/explanatory information. This is also how efficient students read academic texts – they select the main ideas from paragraphs in order to emphasise such ideas for themselves. Similarly, this is how effective writers write – by constructing a paragraph around one main idea.

It is further important to know that, when reading and interpreting a text, the main idea does not necessarily equate to a complete sentence. It is quite natural, for example, to read a sentence, pick out the keywords from the sentence and combine these words to form a main idea. This is exactly what should happen in Task 3.1 below.

#### 3.1 Identify the main ideas in each paragraph in the following text by underlining or encircling them:

### **Genetically modified foods and organisms**

#### **What are Genetically Modified (GM) Foods?**

Although 'biotechnology' and 'genetic modification' commonly are used interchangeably, GM is a special set of technologies that alter the genetic makeup of such living organisms as animals, plants, or bacteria. Biotechnology, a more general term, refers to using living organisms or their components, such as enzymes, to make products that include wine, cheese, beer, and yogurt.

Combining genes from different organisms is known as recombinant DNA technology, and the resulting organism is said to be 'genetically modified', 'genetically engineered', or 'transgenic'. GM products (current or in the pipeline) include medicines and vaccines, foods and food ingredients, feeds, and fibres.

Locating genes for important traits - such as those conferring insect resistance or desired nutrients - is one of the most limiting steps in the process. However, genome

sequencing and discovery programs for hundreds of different organisms are generating detailed maps along with data-analyzing technologies to understand and use them.

In 2003, about 167 million acres (67.7 million hectares) grown by 7 million farmers in 18 countries were planted with transgenic crops, the principal ones being herbicide- and insecticide-resistant soybeans, corn, cotton, and canola. Other crops grown commercially or field-tested are a sweet potato resistant to a virus that could decimate most of the African harvest, rice with increased iron and vitamins that may alleviate chronic malnutrition in Asian countries, and a variety of plants able to survive weather extremes.

On the horizon are bananas that produce human vaccines against infectious diseases such as hepatitis B; fish that mature more quickly; fruit and nut trees that yield years earlier, and plants that produce new plastics with unique properties.

In 2003, countries that grew 99% of the global transgenic crops were the United States (63%), Argentina (21%), Canada (6%), Brazil (4%), China (4%), and South Africa (1%). Although growth is expected to plateau in industrialized countries, it is increasing in developing countries. The next decade will see exponential progress in GM product development as researchers gain increasing and unprecedented access to genomic resources that are applicable to organisms beyond the scope of individual projects.

Technologies for genetically modifying foods offer dramatic promise for meeting some areas of greatest challenge for the 21st century. Like all new technologies, they also pose some risks, both known and unknown. Controversies surrounding GM foods and crops commonly focus on human and environmental safety, labelling and consumer choice, intellectual property rights, ethics, food security, poverty reduction, and environmental conservation.

*(Ackerman, 2002:45)*

**3.2 Draw up a diagram of the main ideas in the text above. Make sure that you choose only keywords for inclusion in this summary of the text. Make use of the next page for completing a map-like representation of information in the text:**

**GM foods and organisms**



## **Addendum G    Recordings of the supervisor interviews on DVD**