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.