

## Effectiveness of Academic Writing Activities and Instruction in an Academic Literacy Writing Course at the University of Botswana

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to report on the University of Botswana undergraduate students' and lecturers' perceptions of the effectiveness of academic writing activities and instruction given in Communication and Academic Literacy Skills (COM112) academic writing module. Students (n= 46) and lecturers (n=2) who have taught the course were probed through a questionnaire adapted from (Krause, 2001) on their instruction and assessment of the course. Fifteen (n= 12) Students were also interviewed in a focus group. The data obtained indicated that students and lecturers held different perceptions about the effectiveness of the academic writing activities and instruction. These results have implications for classroom pedagogy in that lecturers need to consider the perceptions and needs of students (Nunan, 1989) if they are to fully adopt a learner centred approach to learning and teaching that is suggested by the University of Botswana (UB) Learning and teaching policy (2008).

**Keywords:** academic writing, students' perceptions, first year university students, academic writing activities, academic writing instruction

### Introduction and Literature Review

Much of the literature on first year undergraduates' academic writing often highlights inadequacy in knowledge and the use of the conventions and expectations of academic writing (Lillis & Scott, 2007; Ivanic & Lea, 2006; Krause, 2001; Leki & Carson, 1997). Several researchers have attributed this inadequacy mainly to the failure by learners to appreciate the difference between the requirements of high school and university. Just like other universities the world over, The University of Botswana is aware of this inadequacy in writing skills and has therefore put in place academic literacy courses that are designed to initiate students into the conventions of academic writing. However, despite students going through these courses, academics across faculties are still concerned that students' writing skills fail to meet academic writing expectations. This raises a number of questions for the teaching of writing, particularly the effectiveness of activities and instruction designed to initiate students into academic writing. Thus, the researchers explore lecturers' perceptions on the instruction they provide to students but also listen to students' views regarding the effectiveness of activities and instruction they receive. It is hoped that the results of the study would inform future designs of learning activities. Consideration of students' perceptions and needs is crucial if University of Botswana academic literacy lecturers are to adopt a learner centred approach to learning and teaching that is recommended by the University of Botswana (UB) Learning and teaching policy (2008). Ellis, Taylor & Drury, (2007) emphasise that instructors need to be conscious of students' perception about writing in order to successfully support them during their writing process.

Most literature on academic writing inadequacy of university first year undergraduate students focuses on how to improve pedagogy and less on exploring the views of the students on the instruction and activities that are meant to set them up for university writing. Effective academic writing skills are a requirement for success at university because academic disciplines heavily use them as a form of assessment (Hyland, 2011; Evans & Green, 2007; Zhu, 2004; Krause, 2001; Lillis, 2001; Leki & Carson, 1994). This suggests that academic literacy lecturers need to consider students' views on the effectiveness of the activities and instruction they receive. Huang (2010)

correctly points out that lecturers' constant inquiry of students needs helps them 'prioritise what they teach' and start instruction where the learners are (p. 535). However it should be noted that the researchers are not aware of empirical evidence that proves that utilising student feedback on academic writing would increase positive outcomes. This would be an area worth exploring.

### **Students' perception of Academic writing**

Several studies carried out across the globe investigating first year university students' perceptions of academic writing suggest that they find it difficult and challenging. Krause (2001) investigated a cross section of 46 school leavers and mature-age first year students' from Educational Psychology unit at an Australian university on their perceptions of their first major academic writing experience. The students identified several challenges which were categorised into those related to the writing process and to the university context. The most difficult attributes of the writing process were found to be locating appropriate references by searching library computer databases, selecting the most relevant points for the essay and integrating ideas from different sources.

Krause's findings are very similar to those of Asaoka & Usui, (2003) who carried out a longitudinal qualitative study to investigate 10 Japanese students' perceptions of the processes of academic writing in English. The learners' in this study cited problems in finding relevant sources, selecting relevant points, synthesising information from different sources and paragraph development as the most challenging. These challenges were earlier identified by Leki & Carson (1994) who classified them into three types; language related skills, (linguistic accuracy i.e. grammar, vocabulary, spelling etc.) research and information management skills, (e.g. library research skills, gathering material, interpreting and selecting appropriate content and referencing skills) and text managing skills activities such as brainstorming, planning, outlining, drafting, editing, proof reading). Other scholars (Evans & Green, 2007, Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006) provide related results on writing problems and challenges to learners' experiences.

Kalikokha *et al*, (2009) investigated perceptions of first year Malawian students enrolled in a compulsory EAP course at Chancellor University on their essay writing process experience. 200 hundred students from the faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences were sampled in this study, of which 70% spoke indigenous languages at home, 28% English and indigenous languages and for 2% English was their first language. The study revealed that students perceived essay writing as challenging because they felt that they were inadequately trained. Academic writing aspects that they found very challenging were finding relevant information, the ability to express ideas clearly, paraphrasing and summarising information from texts and using the required academic style. Students who participated in this study showed concerns with other issues which contributed to their academic writing challenges, such as the kind of essay instruction given, availability of resources for essay writing, time spent on essay writing, discipline specific instruction in essay writing and timing of essay writing instruction. The study also revealed that students and lecturers perceived essay writing requirements in the diverse disciplines differently and that there was a need to acquaint students with basic as well as discipline specific writing.

Giridharan (2012) carried out a case study of students enrolled in the Writing and Research Skills foundation programme in Malaysia to examine the views of ESL students (n=206) towards academic writing challenges. This study found paraphrasing and providing in-text citations as the most challenging aspects of writing for students.

There seems to be consensus from the studies that students view academic writing as challenging. But it is also evident from the research that the challenges students face cannot be solely attributed to students' lack of academic writing skills, but that other critical aspects, outside the students' control, contribute to this challenge.

### Lecturers' perceptions

Research that has looked at lecturers' perceptions of students' skills in academic writing echoes the same concern of students struggling to write well.

Lea & Street (1998) adopted the academic literacies approach framework to conduct a case study using a wider institutional approach. The study which investigated perceptions and practices of student writing in higher education at two universities in the UK found that lecturers perceived students as lacking in basic writing skills and the ability to provide a well-structured and argued essay. However, the researchers argue that there are other factors such as institutional practices and miscommunication between tutors and students which play a role in problems identified in students writing.

Ganobesik-Williams's 2004 survey, carried out on a wide cross section of UK universities and higher education colleges staff from a variety of disciplines, found that a significant proportion of staff surveyed believe that university students' standard of writing has declined. 65% of those surveyed were dissatisfied with students' use of language (grammar, spelling and punctuation). This study however, cautions against drawing inaccurate conclusions from perceptual data about student writers and their writing and suggests that before making sweeping conclusions, there is a need to understand the context for teaching and learning and how to write effectively in higher education. The study further illustrated limitations of examining student writing from a deficit approach and argued for a whole institution approach to supporting students in their writing.

Huang (2010), in a study carried out to assess undergraduates' and graduates' academic language learning needs (among students who took English as an additional language at a Canadian university), reports that instructors found undergraduate students' writing skills needed improvement in summarising, paraphrasing, structuring their writing and demonstrating a command of standard written English. Huang (*ibid*) argues that not all students may be able to self-diagnose their challenges in an academic setting and instructors may not be the best judges of the ways in which their students are struggling. This argument came as a result of the divergent views of instructors and students in this study on academic language learning needs.

In an interview-based longitudinal study of 28 undergraduates supplemented by a large scale questionnaire survey of freshman at an English-medium university in Hong Kong, Evans & Morrison (2011) found that students needed assistance with academic writing. Some of the main challenges were understanding and using discipline specific vocabulary, understanding academic requirements, and producing work suitable for the discipline. This study points out that a major challenge facing first year students in academic writing could be the variety of discipline specific academic genres and linguistic features they have to learn.

In yet another study carried out at an English-medium university in Egypt, Lewko (2012) examined the perceptions of undergraduate students majoring in science and engineering disciplines and their professors of the quality of the students' writing. The study report that four professors teaching in the school of sciences and engineering found weaknesses in citation, plagiarism, organisation, appropriate style and building an argument. They attributed these problems to inadequate student training, students failing to apply skills learnt and not utilising writing resources made available to assist them.

Ramoroka (2012), in a study that investigated several aspects of ESL writing in content courses, investigated tutors' perceptions of good writing in two writing contexts – the EAP preparatory course and Media Studies at the University of Botswana. The study reports that lecturers from the EAP course and from Media Studies cited the same qualities of 'originality, or creativity and synthesis of ideas from other sources' (p.40) as essential in students' writing. In the same study, English for Academic Purposes (EAP) lecturers also highlighted essay organisation, language and the

ability to structure and expand ideas as also essential. The study concludes that writing at university is discipline specific and that writing skills are situational.

The studies above indicate that generally the perceptions of lecturers on student writing across the globe are similar. It is also evident that problems that contribute to first year academic writing challenges are diverse and complex and should therefore be conceptualised in a broad sense. Useful ways of looking at students' writing should focus on students and also on context, institutional practices, discipline specificity and the lecturers.

### **The study**

The study is focused on teaching and learning of academic writing in a Higher Education environment where English is taught as a second language. The study is based on the postulation that students' reflections on their experience with the academic writing instruction and activities they receive before doing their main academic writing assignment would provide invaluable insights into their needs and suggest ways in which instruction may be enhanced.

### **The context**

In an effort to address students' inadequacy in literacy and poor academic writing skills, the University of Botswana (UB), introduced a mandatory two semester course in communication and academic literacy in 2000/2001. The Communication and Study Skills Unit (CSSU) which houses this course, has the mandate to initiate students into the university learning culture and environment by offering academic literacy skills courses to all year one undergraduates.

Communication and Academic Literacy courses are known as COM courses and are discipline specific. This means that there are different COM courses for faculties of social science, health sciences, engineering, business, education and humanities. These courses are aimed at equipping year one students with academic literacy skills that will help them adapt to the new ways of learning that are required in their specific disciplines.

The participants in this study were students in the Faculty of Humanities who were enrolled on the COM 112 course. Students enrolled on the course are taught the conventions of academic writing as well as different essay types, such as argument and exposition. Instruction on summarising, paraphrasing, different stages of the writing process, referencing and academic style is given. After going through six weeks of instruction in academic writing and doing several learning activities, students were given a writing task that required them to write a collaborative essay in groups of 3 or 4 students per group. This essay was part of the regular assessment requirements. The collaborative writing task allowed students to support each other and reduce alienation. Dobao & Blum (2013) and Shehadeh (2011) posit that collaborative writing tasks allow students to share ideas and knowledge which results in high quality work.

### **Objectives of the study**

The overall purpose of this study was to explore the students and lecturers' perceptions of the effectiveness of academic writing activities and instruction given in COM112 course academic writing component. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How do students perceive the usefulness of academic writing activities done before the main writing assignment?
2. What aspects of essay writing activities students found challenging?
3. How do students perceive their ability to write an academic essay?
4. What approaches to teaching writing do lecturers use?
5. How do lecturers perceive students writing?

**Research design**

The research design for this study can be characterised as mixed methods, cross sectional survey of students and lecturer and their perception and beliefs about academic writing. Questionnaires were used and interviews and a focus group were used to explore the students' and lecturers' perception of the effectiveness of activities and instruction given in an academic literacy course.

**The sample**

All participants in this study were first year students enrolled on a full time basis at the University of Botswana. Students were selected through convenience sampling. Forty six (46) students in the Faculty of Humanities in one of the researchers' classes were invited to participate in the research and consented. Two lecturers who teach the course were also interviewed.

**Student questionnaire and focus groups interview**

The study was exploratory in nature and a questionnaire adapted from related studies (Evans & Green, 2007; Krause, 2001) was used to investigate students' perceptions of the effectiveness of class activities and instruction given prior to the assignment. The response method was a 4-point Likert scale, where students had to tick an appropriate box, where 1 was very easy, 2 was easy, 3 was difficult and 4 was most difficult. The items aimed to help students reflect on their library research and reading, writing the essay, provide an opinion regarding writing activities done before the writing assignment, writing lessons and time spent on academic writing. In addition some open ended questions were also included to give students an opportunity to write freely about how they perceived the effectiveness of writing instruction and what could be done to improve their writing experience. The questionnaire was distributed to the students after completion of the writing task at the end of the second semester of the academic year 2012/13.

Three focus group sessions were also held following the administration of the questionnaire to consolidate the data collected from questionnaires. The focus group interviews were meant to probe students further to provide rich and varied insights into their views about academic writing. The sessions were organised during office hours and took about 30 minutes. These were recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

**Lecturer questionnaire**

An open ended questionnaire was distributed to two lecturers who taught COM 112 to different classes in 2012/13. The open ended questionnaire included questions that solicited lecturers' views on whether their teaching of writing has a disciplinary approach, their perceptions of student writing and their suggestions on how they can improve the teaching of academic writing. These were also recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

**Data analysis**

Closed questions, which yielded quantitative data were analysed in terms of average figures (using SPSS). The findings do not reflect analysis in terms of age or sex differences. Qualitative data were presented according to themes that emerged from the focus group data, interview data and the open ended questions. These included students' views on writing activities perceived useful and those perceived challenging, students' perceptions on their ability to write an essay and on how the course could be improved. The themes from lecturer data included the lecturers' views of students' writing, their views on whether they were aware of students' specific needs, and whether the course adequately prepared students for disciplinary writing.

**Results**

The findings reported here represent the results of analysis of students' responses to questionnaires and focus group interviews and the lecturers' responses to the questionnaire. The findings are presented in two parts: the first part comprises quantitative data from the students' questionnaire and the qualitative data will be presented to corroborate the data. The second part will comprise thematic analysis of data from lecturers' questionnaires.

**Writing activities perceived useful**

Students were asked questions that required them to reflect on the writing activities they did prior to writing the assignment and evaluate their usefulness in helping them to produce an essay. The activities they engaged in included paraphrasing and summarising, paragraph writing, integrating sources, writing a reference list, identifying features of academic writing like hedging, topic analysis and writing an outline. Students perceived the usefulness of writing activities as follows; 62.8 % of students perceived paraphrasing/summarizing as useful, 55.8% of students perceived integrating sources as a useful activity, and 58.1% perceived writing references as a useful activity and 51-54% identifying hedging, topic analysis and outlining as useful activities.

**Aspects of writing perceived as challenging**

The students' evaluation of the level of difficulty they experienced with writing activities they had to do before the assignment is provided in the table below. The students perceived the following as challenging:

- Synthesising information (88.9%)
- Writing introduction (69.4%)
- Expressing ideas clearly (63.8%)
- Proper in-text citation (52.7%)
- Using appropriate academic style (58.3%).

Writing activities that students found easy included understanding essay questions, using their own explanations in addition to sources, using an appropriate academic style, writing references and writing the conclusion. During focus group discussion, Student 2 said; *'I found it challenging to synthesise information, to write an abstract & to write well linked paragraphs because I was used to write simple essays.'*

Students were also asked to rank the activities they did in the library in order of difficulty. Table 1 below indicates how students ranked these library activities. As shown in Table 1, finding relevant references by searching library computer databases, finding relevant references on the library shelves, putting together ideas from a number of different sources, and working out which direct quotations to use were considered by students to be either difficult or most difficult. Students found the other activities as either easy or very easy.

**Students' perceptions on ability to write an academic essay and how the course could be improved**

The majority of the students (58.3%) rated their writing ability as average (50-59%), 47.2% as good (60-69%) and 13.8% rated themselves as very good (70% and above). In response to a follow up question on why they rated themselves as such, they gave a wide range of views.

Student 02: *I struggled with essay writing exercises and I am not in a position to say I can do better than I did.*

Student 04: *Content is hard to digest.*

Student 05: *I am not well conversant with presenting ideas in a clear and logical manner. I still need a lot of practice.*



**Table 1: Students' perceptions of order of difficulty of library research and writing activities (n=46)**

	1	2	3	4	
Library Activities	Very easy (%)	Easy (%)	Difficult (%)	Most difficult (%)	Mean
Finding relevant references by searching library computer databases.	8.7	30.4	45.7	15.2	3
Understanding the meaning of the references I found	10.9	37.0	47.8	2.2	2
Identifying the most relevant points in my reading	6.5	45.7	43.5	4.3	2
Working out which points to include and which to omit for the essay	10.9	21.7	54.3	0.0	3
Putting together ideas from a number of different sources	4.3	43.5	41.3	8.7	3
Organising the points into paragraphs	8.7	39.1	43.5	2.2	2
Working out which direct quotations to use	8.7	34.8	50.0	4.3	3
Finding relevant references on the library shelves	8.7	37.0	39.1	10.9	3

A follow-up question was made that probed students to come up with suggestions on how the course could be improved in order to address their concern about ability to write an academic paper. Below is a list of suggestions that kept recurring from the different respondents' responses:

- I feel more time should be given on writing activities in class before writing the assignment.
- Individual work in academic writing should be given because working in groups is stressful, time consuming and most of all really difficult to come up with an essay that everybody agrees on.
- Provide more examples of academic writing and writing exercises.
- There should be more practice with more samples from previous scholars.
- Spend a lot of time looking at the sample essays.
- More time should be spent teaching academic writing step by step to make sure that everyone understands clearly.
- Give them more of individual work in academic writing so as to know everyone's weaknesses and strengths.
- More assignments should be given.
- Do a lot of practice with lots of discussion areas to help keep everyone on board.
- The lectures should spend more time in this area.
- Facilitate for mini group discussions for students to help each other.

### Results from lecturers' questionnaire

The questionnaire for lecturers solicited ideas from lecturers on how they approached the teaching of writing, their perceptions of students' writing, and ways of improving the teaching of academic writing.

### Approaches to teaching academic writing

With regard to the teaching of academic writing, the two lecturers asserted that they used the process-oriented approach, where they *'divide work into stages and ask them (students) to submit*

*each stage*'. This approach is also emphasised by one of the participants who elaborated on how she approaches the teaching of writing by saying, *'first of all I give them the guidelines on how they should organise their writing. Then they come to my office for assistance as they draft their ideas'*.

Since the writing that students do is aimed at helping them write in their disciplines, we also wanted to find out how the course achieved this and whether they thought that the activities adequately prepared students for writing in the disciplines. There were contrary views concerning this.

Lecturer 1: *I don't think it adequately prepares students for that, because students are just being introduced to it (academic writing skills) while at the same time they are required to produce well written essays.*

Lecturer 2 believed that it did and this is what she said: *'Yes, just that students do not see the link.'* She generally felt that what students did in the writing course was applicable across courses. However, when probed on whether the assignments given in the course took into consideration the writing that students do in their content courses, her response was also quite interesting. She echoed the following sentiment: *'I'm not quite familiar with what students do in their content courses but I think to a certain extent yes.'*

Lecturer 1 seemed to be aware of what was happening in the content subjects and what content lecturers valued. She indicated that she usually collaborated with content lecturers on issues of writing.

When asked to comment on the duration of the course, the two respondents both agreed that the duration of the course was not enough to adequately prepare students for writing in their content subjects.

#### **Lecturers' perceptions of students' writing**

This section was aimed at eliciting lecturers' perceptions on students' difficulties in writing. In response to their general opinion on students' academic writing competencies, lecturer 1 stated that *'first year students' academic writing competencies need more time to be developed since they were still at the roots stage/level'* while lecturer 2 indicated that *'students had the potential but did not want to give themselves time as a result resort to last minute rushes'*.

The second question asked lecturers to state specific difficulties students experienced when writing academic essays. The two respondents outlined the following:

- poor organisation of ideas
- grammatical problems
- unclear expression of ideas
- copying from sources instead of paraphrasing
- acknowledging sources
- failure to link paragraphs
- lack of focus on what the question requires.

From the aspects of writing outlined above, the respondents perceived poor organisation and expression of ideas, plagiarism and failing to understand the marking guide so as to focus on what is required, as the most serious.

#### **Discussion of the results**

The present study aimed to explore students' and lecturers' perceptions of the effectiveness of academic writing activities and instruction given in an academic writing course. On the usefulness of class writing activities done prior to the assignment, the students felt that the activities provided



a useful starting point to writing an essay. However, the majority of students felt that more time should be given to prepare them to write an essay and a lot of practice exercises should be done before writing the final paper. This is consistent with suggestions made by students in the Kolikokha, Strauss & Smedley (2009) study. Students' perception of effectiveness of instruction suggests that they would greatly benefit if academic writing was given more time. Currently the time allocated for the writing component is not enough and students felt that it did not adequately allow them to gain full understanding of academic writing aspects they are learning for the first time, such as synthesising information from different texts. As other research (Kalikokha, 2008; Al-Badwawi, 2011) has indicated, developing academic writing is a long process that requires time to gain and fully master. Therefore, it is only through a lot of practice that students can learn to incorporate the various skills (collecting information, synthesising new information from sources) required to write an academic assignment. However, while acknowledging that increasing the number of hours allocated to teaching academic writing would assist students gain more essay writing skills, it should be noted that it cannot be viewed as a panacea to the academic writing challenges students face.

Lecturers, on the other hand, held a different view concerning effectiveness of instruction. As the results indicate, the lecturers employed the process-oriented approach to teaching writing and therefore, this accorded students support throughout the writing process. The process approach focuses on the stages of the writing process namely; prewriting, drafting, revising, editing and evaluating. From the lecturers' perspective, emphasis is placed on the students mastering the different stages of the writing process rather than focusing on the end product alone. The lecturers view the process approach as an effective pedagogical tool to help students master academic writing conventions (Rafik-Galea, Arumugam & Mello, 2012; Badger & White, 2000). The lecturers seem to focus more on what is considered the main concern of the process approach, which is developing effective strategies for going through the writing process to produce text, ignoring other essential aspects. Several researchers have criticised simply equipping students with these strategies and not paying attention to other factors that influence writing such as context (Lea & Street, 1998); genre (Hyland, 2003) ; and language use (Hyland, 2011). Therefore, teaching writing well involves several teaching strategies that address process, product, form and content.

Both students and lecturers shared the same sentiments about what they considered challenging about academic writing. As indicated in the results section, the most challenging writing activities for the students involved synthesising information. This included writing, working out which points to include and which to omit for the essay, understanding the meaning of the references they found, working out which direct quotations to use, proper in-text citation and putting together ideas from a number of different sources and organising the points into paragraphs. Synthesising information seems to be the most difficult skill for students as they learn to write in academic contexts as indicated in other studies (Al-Badwawi, 2011; Krause, 2001; Bacha, 2002).

There may be a number of reasons why students found these activities challenging. Firstly, it could be that they are not able to read as effectively as they should. Zulu (2005) affirms that 'many first-year students possess inadequately-developed reading skills and poor language ability' (p.112), which causes huge reading difficulties for them. Furthermore, Falke (1982) explains that reading involves comprehension, and sometimes the students may be unable to achieve this. They therefore engage in a surface approach to reading in which they consider information as isolated and not linked in any way (Hermida, 2009). These students may not have learnt to use a variety of reading strategies like summarising and paraphrasing. Secondly, the challenges may be linked to the students' inadequate competency in English.

Secondly, research (Ramoroka, 2012) also suggest that some of the challenges students face with regard to writing skills emanate from lack of awareness of what is required in the disciplines and what subject lecturers look for in students' writing. The researchers sought to find out the extent to which instruction and writing activities are linked to writing in the disciplines and how lecturers

address the problem of disciplinary differences. The researchers believe that in order for instruction and writing activities to be effective, they should be linked to what students do in their disciplines. Lecturers' responses concerning disciplinary writing indicated that there were mixed responses. It was interesting to note that one lecturer felt that the writing module taught was applicable across disciplines while the other felt that the module did not adequately prepare students for the disciplines. The lecturer who had consulted with discipline lecturers had an idea of what the disciplines required and hopefully addressed these requirements in her teaching of academic writing.

It is clear from the contrasting lecturers' comments that the concept of academic literacy is understood differently. Thus it is vital for the team teaching academic literacy to have a common understanding of what is required of students in their disciplines. This will be a starting point in helping students gain an understanding of essay requirements in their disciplines. There is need for engagement between the discipline lecturers and academic literacy lecturers in order to gain better understanding of writing in the disciplines. Research (Ramoroka, 2012; Wingate, 2006; Zhu, 2004) acknowledges that academic writing cannot be separated from the discipline and that 'successful academic writing instruction depends on a sound understanding of the complexity of writing in university content classrooms' (Zhu, 2004: p.45).

Other challenges expressed by students were writing an introduction, expressing ideas clearly and using appropriate academic style. This is consistent with results in other contexts: Cai (2013); Kalikokha (2008); Bitchener & Basturkmen (2006) and Dalsky & Tajino (2007). On the other hand, understanding essay questions, using own explanation in addition to sources, writing the conclusion and writing references were found to be easy. It was interesting to note that although lecturers viewed understanding the essay question as a challenge to students, the students on the other hand did not feel that it was a challenge. Generally the students' perceived their ability to write an academic paper to be average to good and none rated themselves as poor. This suggests that students have high self-efficacy about their writing ability despite mentioning the challenges discussed above.

### **Limitations of the study**

The limitations of this study need to be considered when discussing the results. The findings are based on data collected from a small sample in one faculty and we cannot claim this to be representative of a bigger population of the University. A larger sample is needed representing a cross section of students in all the faculties and taking account of variables such as work experience on admission. Another limitation is that the questionnaire we used provided a 4 point Likert scale instead of a typical 5 point Likert scale. We believe this scale is likely to have influenced the choices students made particularly where a student had to decide between 'easy' and 'difficult' response and could have opted for a 'moderate' response. Despite this limitation, the study provides a useful starting point to establish the usefulness of teaching instruction and activities designed to initiate students into academic writing and to add to the literature on students' perceptions of their writing ability.

### **Implications for the teaching of academic writing**

There are several implications for teaching academic writing that arise from the findings discussed above. The findings point to the fact that writing is a skill that develops over time, and requires constant practice and support. Therefore the findings underscore the need to extend the duration of the teaching of academic writing in order to help students master the conventions of writing an academic paper. Availability of resources and enough teaching personnel would help extend the writing course to at least the third year. There is also a need to open a dialogue with content lecturers who can help EAP lecturers understand the writing requirements in content courses. This will help the EAP lecturers to adopt a discipline-oriented and contextualized approach to the teaching of academic essay writing even within an EAP context rather than focusing on generic skills. A long term solution will be to collaborate with English teachers in high school who teach the

last two years of high school. Teachers at this level could engage students in writing tasks that require (analysis, synthesis, research and critical thinking) as a way of giving them a solid foundation for assignments they will encounter at university level.

There is also a need to develop students' reading skills. As literature has indicated (Hermida, 2009; Zulu, 2005), academic reading skills are very critical for academic success, Therefore students need to be taught this skill explicitly. There is a need for the Communication and Academic Literacy Unit to test students' reading competency when they first come to university in order to determine the degree and amount of scaffolding necessary to assist students to read and understand university material. There is also a need for both EAP lecturers and content lecturers to make a concerted effort to explicitly teach students academic reading in the discipline courses where students engage in a lot of reading (Hermida, 2009). We concur with Petraglia (cited in Leki & Carson, 1997) when he argues that 'reading should be acknowledged as lying at the very core of developing rhetorical abilities rather than as a peripheral activity merely intended to prompt the kind of writing we are really interested in' (p.63).

### Conclusion

This study set out to explore the University of Botswana undergraduate students' and lecturers' perceptions on the effectiveness of academic writing activities and instruction given in the COM 112 course. What emerged from the responses of the respondents is that the process approach to writing and the writing activities given to students are beneficial. But both the students and lecturers shared similar views that the time allocated to teaching academic writing was inadequate and that it should be increased. The question is, with limited human resources and time, how can the academic writing curriculum be extended to benefit the students? The answer could lie in collaboration of discipline lecturers and communication and academic literacy lecturers see (Elton, 2010) and also opening up dialogue with high school teachers who lay the writing foundation (Harmida, 2005). The findings also show that academic reading poses a challenge to the students and that there is need for concerted effort to explicitly teach academic reading across the curriculum. It will be interesting to find out whether discipline lecturers see the value of explicit teaching of academic reading and whether they are willing to collaborate with lecturers in the academic literacy course

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