

Struggling with Postgraduate Studies: Bachelor of Technology Students Writing Academic Genres

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Abstract

This article explores the academic writing difficulties of Bachelor of Technology (B-Tech) students with a focus on academic genres. Though B-Tech students should demonstrate the ability to “communicate effectively both orally and in writing with a variety of audiences, and be able to read and retrieve the essential information from a variety of sources” (FEBE Handbook 2013), B-Techs in the South African context often fail to produce texts of an academic standard. This appears to be the case despite the Communication 1A, Communication 1B and Fundamental Research Practice modules taught to the 1st and 2nd year National Diploma (NDip) students in the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment (FEBE). This paper focuses not on remedial measures aimed at addressing the insufficiencies of the NDip programme, but on the difficulties experienced by B-Tech students in relation to academic writing. The data, which was analysed by means of a qualitative content analysis, included observation records of writing consultations and the students’ responses to a survey. The results pointed to challenges such as reading and understanding journal articles, the writing of scientific research reports as well as academic writing skills such as summarising, paraphrasing and referencing. It is important to explore the academic writing challenges of B-Tech students in order to better orientate the collaborative work between writing centres and the disciplines in science and engineering.

Key words:

Academic literacies, genre stability and genre change, discourse communities, academic writing, academic reading, and English second language postgraduate students

Introduction

Bachelor of Technology (B-Tech) programmes in South Africa intend to produce graduates that specialise both in the technical and research aspects of their qualifications (Green Paper 2011), with a focus on the transferability of the acquired skills into as many sectors as possible. Increasingly in emerging countries, B-Tech graduates are sought after due to the diminished gap between their qualifications and the skill requirements of the workplace (Durban University of Technology 2014). The market-ready skills are attributed to months of mandatory experiential learning or work-integrated learning undergone by the students as part of their academic curriculum (Ibid). In South Africa, particularly at the University of Johannesburg, formerly Technikon qualifications may lead to a B-Tech qualification, a threshold to regular Honours, Masters and Doctorate degrees. Moreover, it has become apparent in the South African labour market that graduates with above-average technical, managerial and research skills are preferred to those with a National Diploma only. As a result, students completing the three-year national diploma programme and experienced employees in the science and engineering fields increasingly choose to enroll and complete the B-Tech programme (Annual Report of the Department of Town and Regional Planning, 2011). Since the merger of the former Rand Afrikaans University, Vista University and Wits Technikon in 2005 and as the transition from essentially offering national diplomas to B-Tech diplomas simultaneously has not yet been completed at the University of Johannesburg, faculty and academic development support staff embarked on various initiatives to assist students with their academic development needs throughout the one-year B-Tech programme in spite of the flagrant deficiencies in academic writing demonstrated by students.

This article reports on the results of a study that investigated the academic writing challenges facing B-tech students in order to inform future collaboration between the writing centre and the departments in the sciences and engineering faculties. It is not the intention of the researcher to delve profoundly into curriculum issues, but to explore the challenges facing the students and the root causes of the problems. In practice, these problems could be said to have stemmed either from deficiencies in the curriculum, or from a lack of academic literacies learning and practice opportunities in the form of writing intensive activities, or from a lack of deliberate integration of academic literacies into the curriculum across the national diploma programme, or even from these postgraduate students' situation as speakers of English as a second language (L2) and as students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds.

Academic writing development and the National Diploma Programme

On completion of a National Diploma, that is, three or four years of undergraduate study, candidates may apply for the Bachelor of Technology (B-Tech) , a further one year period of study (The Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment [FEBE] Handbook 2013: 71). The Faculty Handbook Faculty of EBE Handbook describes two types of programmes; the National Diploma (three years of study) and the Extended National Diploma (four years). It is problematic that academic writing is taught in a fragmented manner across the curriculum with no real emphasis on the adequate learning or transferability of the skills to other subjects, resulting in the students' academic reading and writing skills remaining rudimentary and ineffective (Kane, 2012). An examination of the Handbook reveals that *communications studies* is only taught in the National Diploma to first-year students, without subsequent substantial follow-up in the form of opportunities to practise the taught skills. The Extended National Diplomas are taught *Fundamental Research Practice* and *Work Preparation* modules, both of which introduce students to 'Basic Writing', a deficit model of academic development. Moreover, there are no proper and consistent academic development interventions in the form of academic literacies components integrated into disciplinary content (Lea, 2004; Lea and Street, 2006; Odell, 1995). This gap in academic literacies preparation is worsened by the fact that predominantly L2 South African secondary school graduates entering university demonstrate below average academic literacy levels (Clarence-Fincham and De Kadt, 2011). It then becomes necessary to devise academic literacies development interventions that could assist in facilitating the B-Tech students' learning and practice of relevant writing skills as efficiently as possible through disciplinary content and in the appropriate context (Archer and Richards, 2011: 357). To be considered competent for postgraduate studies, B-Tech students must "do the things" postgraduate students such as Honours and Masters Students do, including writing and reading academic genres and scientific publications.

Academic writing challenges of Post-Graduate Studies

The academic literacies development of post graduate students is mainly impeded by issues of adjustment to complex academic conventions, genres and discourses (Canagarajah, 2002; Ismael, 2011), lack of English language proficiency stemming from their L2 situation (Clarence-Fincham and de Kadt, 2011; Ramanathan and Kaplan, 2000), poor academic reading skills (Horning, 2007), and even hindrances arising from the students' negative attitude and dispositions towards academic writing (Ismail, 2011: 80).

The negative attitudes and dispositions of students towards academic writing, and by implication reading, and even towards their coursework (Ismail, 2011: 80), are thought to play a detrimental role in their academic development. The tendency of

postgraduate students to consider writing as linked solely to language structures, spelling and punctuation (Assis-Brasil and Marcuszzo, 2009 in Motta-Roth, 2012: 110) undermines the development of academic writing proficiency. Research has shown that students who approach academic writing support services often “want to have someone ‘fix’ or ‘edit’ their work”, rather than seek their holistic academic development. This confirms the assertion that students and departments often ignore the true mission of the writing centre which aims to develop the writer and not just the text (Archer, 2008; Kane, 2012). This is exacerbated by the belief that academic writing should not be taught to engineering and technology students whose aim is not to study language per se (Motta-Roth, 2012). The repercussions of these erroneous attitudes are acute for postgraduate students, who often struggle with genres that require familiarity with the conventions of academic writing, register and style. Some of these include scientific research reports, long papers and articles (Motta-Roth, 2012; Crème, 2000 in Cabral and Tavares, 2002).

The literature in this article implies two concurrent trends in writing centre philosophy. On the one hand, genre instruction is conceived as a way of socialising all students including those from historically marginalised groups into how academic texts function and why they cause specific social effects (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Ramanathan and Kaplan, 2000: 171). On the other hand, the importance of the writer and the writing process is foregrounded as an all-encompassing approach that also addresses genre and organisation among other concerns (Raimes, 1991).

The emergence and development of genres is underpinned by various social conventions and practices that change over time as new genres emerge (Ramanathan and Kaplan, 2000; Russel, Lea, Parker, Street and Donahue, 2009). Nonetheless, several generic forms present a multiplicity of features co-opted from other genres by way of borrowing and recombining the conventions (Devitt, 2004). Devitt states that genres initially emerged as a strict classification system in ancient Greek literature and served in the categorisation of poetry, prose and performance as different generic forms. Each genre assumed specific characteristics and its ‘performers’ were restricted to that particular genre such that it was believed that certain individuals could only perform within one type of genre alone (Ibid).

Bakhtin (1983) posits that genres are socially specified, recognised and defined informally by a specific culture or community. Fairclough (2003: 26) offers a similar concept of genre that stresses the social context of the text, stating that genres are “different ways of (inter)acting discursively”. Academic socialisation ensures that historically marginalised students are exposed to the “ways in which the ‘hows’ of textual structure produce the ‘whys’ of social effect,” enabling them thereby to gain access to “a variety of realms of social power” (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000: 8). Because genre theory is a branch of critical theory, it is equally concerned with the specificities of particular social contexts. Raimes (1991) and Zamel (1984) advocate focusing on

the writer and actual process of writing rather than on the features and organisation of genre, which are addressed in the writing process, in any case.

As a result of not having been trained to understand how academic texts function differently in various contexts or fields depending on the nature of the activities (Motta-Roth, 2012: 113), the students feel left out of their intended “disciplinary communities” (Ibid: 107). To access an ‘insider’ position, students need to engage in academic literacies and become authors or assume a voice through some deliberate process (Ibid: 112). Canagarajah (2002: 31) stresses that this can be solved through apprenticeship or under the mentorship of disciplinary specialists, an arrangement whereby students can learn to produce texts that make valid contributions to knowledge.

Research shows that a student’s ability to write is preconditioned by the acquisition of above-average reading skills (Kane, 2012). Students’ ability to read and write academic texts effectively is concomitant to their ability to deconstruct and reconstruct texts that are often complex and sophisticated (Odell, 1995: 46; Cabral and Tavares, 2002). Horning (2007: 9) emphasises the fact that the absence of reading proficiency may negatively impact on students’ writing abilities. This is because through reading, students are exposed to institutional and disciplinary genres, writing practices and conventions. Research has found that better writers tend to produce more syntactically mature writing than poor writers (Horning, 2007: 9). Cabral and Tavares (2002: 2) insist that successful writing skills at university are often associated with effective reading comprehension skills and experience. This means that the student is in a position to understand the requirements and implications of thoroughly and effectively completing assignments and projects (Vardi, 2000). Without reading comprehension, students cannot read analytically, distinguish between essential and non-essential ideas, adjust their reading to the different genres or even find reading interesting. Another reason for the importance of reading is that the critical reading skills developed through reading may foster and sharpen critical thinking skills, which may be seen as valuable to the writing process.

The University of Johannesburg Doornfontein Campus Writing Centre

The data used in this study was collected mainly on the Doornfontein Campus. The University of Johannesburg currently has four Writing Centres, located respectively on the Auckland Park-Kingsway, Bunting Road, Doornfontein and Soweto Campus, to cater for the academic literacies needs of approximately 50,000 students. The Doornfontein Campus Writing Centre was opened in February 2011 to assist both undergraduate and postgraduate students on the campus, which has a total student population of approximately 5,000 students. In 2012, it seemed awareness of the Centre and its services steadily increased among subject lecturers and students. This

resulted in a noticeable increase in the number of consultations at the Centre. In spite of the numerous challenges related to issues of capacity and full lecture timetables which left students little time to visit the Centre, consultation numbers doubled to almost 1000 consultations per year respectively for 2012 and 2013, against nearly 400 consultations in 2011.

The centre is headed by a coordinator and staffed by postgraduate students who have been trained in academic literacies and writing centre philosophy and practice. Writing centre research in the South African context has mainly examined the institutional mandates, locations, challenges and achievements of writing centres without paying attention to specific writing centre pedagogies and instruments. This paper will to some extent zoom in on specific academic writing problems, with which B-Tech students approach the writing centre, in order to better inform its services and interventions.

Methods

A mixed methods approach was used to investigate the academic writing difficulties of B-Tech students with a focus on the writing of academic genres. Firstly, a textual analysis of 200 writing consultation observation sheets filled out by records B-Tech students who had visited the writing centre between February and July 2013 was conducted. The observation sheets were chosen based on the amount of information they could provide on the difficulties of B-Tech students and analysed for writing areas that students requested assistance with. Secondly, questionnaires were administered to fifty B-Tech students from the Chemical Engineering, Mining Engineering, Electrical students from chemical, mining, electrical and Mechanical Engineering electrical and mechanical engineering, as well as Biomedical Technology and Civil Engineering Technology departments. These were selected randomly, and students were requested to provide information on the difficulties they encountered in relation to academic writing. The questionnaires consisted of four open-ended questions on the students' academic writing difficulties, the genres they found difficult, the reasons why they struggled with these genres and the type of assistance they required in this regard.

The collected data was analysed using the qualitative content analysis method to enable a detailed and systematic examination of the participants' responses for the purpose of identifying themes (Leedy and Ormrod, 2010: 144). The results highlighted not only the challenges, but also the remedial courses of action that the students thought should be taken to redress the situation.

Results and discussion

Fifty-two questionnaires were returned, of which two were unusable. The four questionnaire questions foregrounded academic writing difficulties as pointed out in the participants' responses. The latter could be categorised into difficulties associated with scientific report writing and the reading of scientific journal articles. In view of the writing areas that are covered, the survey results corroborated the textual analysis observations and what this means is that the requirements of the B-Tech programme are similar to those of the conventional postgraduate programmes (Motta-Roth, 2012).

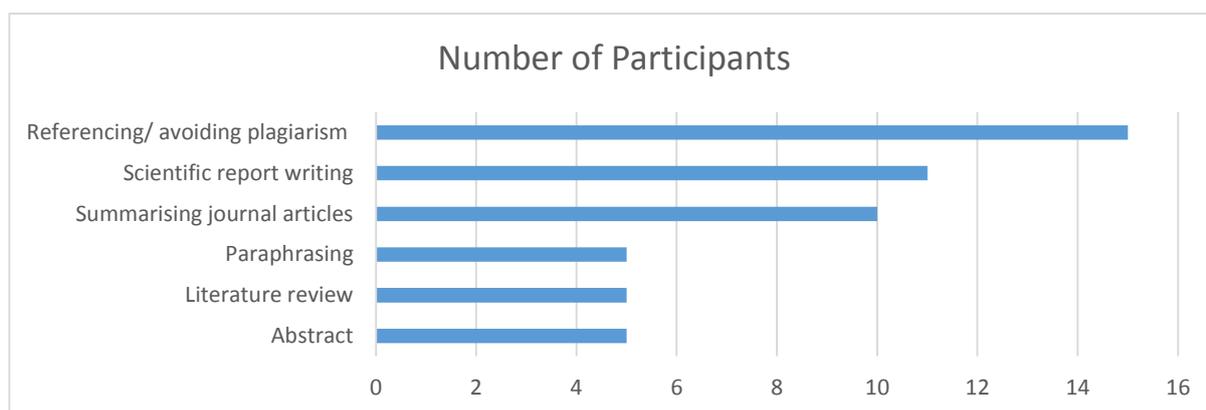


Figure 1: Academic writing difficulties encountered by the B-Tech students

In the questionnaire analysis, referencing was cited as one of the academic writing difficulties faced by 33% of the participants. Participant 14 (P14) recommended that lecturers should offer “workshops before the beginning of research to train students on referencing”; alluding to the fact that often students are given written tasks without prior instruction on specific genres (Canagarajah, 2002; Lea and Street, 2006). This confirms the importance of genre instruction done in context through integration into disciplinary content. As part of academic socialisation, it contributes to efforts to widen access to higher education by introducing and reinforcing academic conventions, discourses and genres (Archer, 2008). The latter should however be taught collaboratively by departmental and academic literacies staff, especially because genres vary according to the context of the literacies communities in which they are used (Ramanathan and Kaplan, 2000). Referring to the divergence in instructional guidelines on specific genres, Participant 30 emphasised “university standards should be specified. Use one type of referencing style”.

There seems to be consensus among participants that prior genre instruction could facilitate their writing of research reports. The complexity of academic generic forms requires instruction, practice and time:

It requires time and skills. No lecture is given on it, it is not English subject from high school. It is very different. Due to confusion one uses every format they get. (P32)

Mention is made of the lack of undergraduate interventions aimed at developing academic writing. Other participants indicated that they had no prior exposure to academic writing (P33 and P29), no training whatsoever (P46), and no solid foundation (P20 and P16). A participant stated “*I have not had enough practice and guidance on the matter*” (P21). Another remarked:

In spite of the communication module we did, I think it's not enough because that is the only module it is done and after that it's the end of such as most of our courses do not require reports until we get to the B-Tech level where we are required to write reports and proposals. (P10)

Behind most of these statements however is reluctance on the part of participants to accept responsibility for their own learning. The blame seems to be placed solely on the departments for the lack of academic writing skills. Motta-Roth (2012: 107) argues that these students feel left out of their intended “disciplinary communities” because they have not been trained to understand how academic texts function differently in various contexts depending on the nature of the activities involved. However, Motta-Roth (2012: 108) also emphasises that undergraduate students who participate fully in their departmental activities reinforce their perception of writing as ‘social participation’. Cabral and Tavares (2002) stress that participation in academic support programmes should be mandatory as they provide students with the transitional experiences needed for the development of writing, reading and study skills.

Other texts or genres that were seen as challenging by participants were journal articles, research reports, assignments, articles originating in course papers and book reviews (Cabral and Tavares, 2002: 110). The second question in the questionnaire further explored these genres or texts.

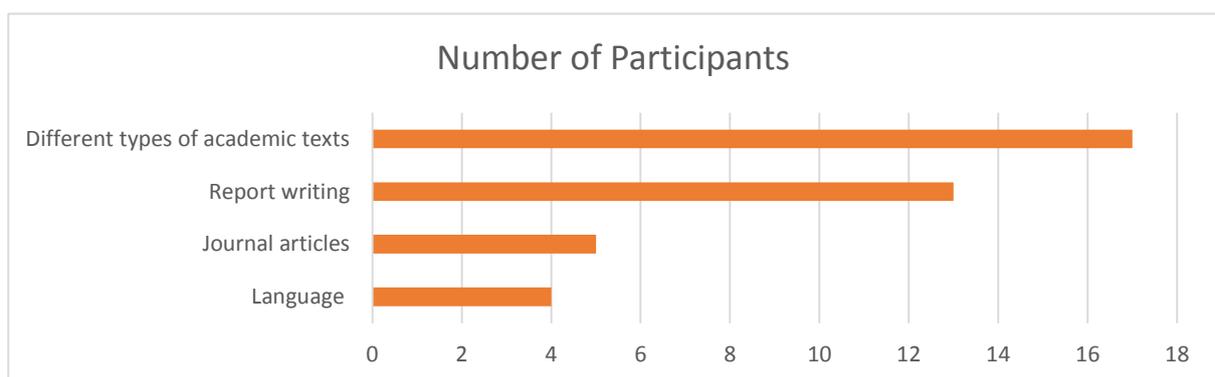


Figure 2: Texts or genres with which B-Tech struggled

Research reports and journal articles were cited as the most difficult genres by close to 30% of the participants. This perhaps confirms Canagarajah’s (2002) argument that academic genres, which consist of the practices and discourses of ‘gated’ or closed academic communities, almost deliberately aim to keep students out, particularly those from previously ‘disadvantaged groups’, who are often L2. One could affirm that

as outsiders to these institutional and disciplinary communities, the students would not be able to access these genres without ‘guidance’ from the ‘gatekeepers’, that is, tutors, lecturers and designers of study materials (Lea 2004: 743). Canagarajah (2002: 30) makes the point that because learning is a situated activity, any type of learning is a community activity, carried out in engagement with the communities that practice that knowledge. Bawarshi and Pelkowski (1999: 49) argued that writing centre serve as institutional spaces “offering training to marginalized students in how to operate as academic citizens”. This implies that both disciplinary staff and students ascribe to the deficit model of academic literacies that consider the purpose of the writing centre as ‘fixing’ “marginalized basic writers” (ibid) for access to university.

Referring to the complexity of the language and content of journal articles, a participant stated that certain scientific articles use referencing styles that students are unfamiliar with (P40). Several other participants also indicated that the reason they struggled with the writing of a scientific research report is primarily because it was new to them (P2, P11, P17). As stated earlier, the failure to teach report writing gradually from first to third year could be equated with obscuring the genre and rendering it difficult for students to understand and produce.

As L2, the participants indicated that they struggled with language. The problem of language compounds the difficulties associated with academic writing. This aspect of the participants’ responses was more accentuated in their responses to the third question:

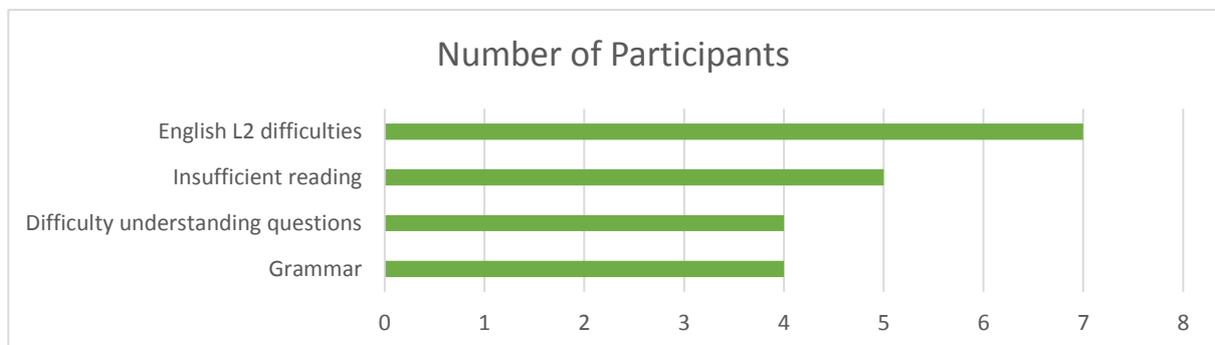


Figure 3: Reasons why B-Techs struggled with academic writing

Figure 3 shows that several participants pointed to English L2 difficulties and below average academic reading skills as the reasons why they struggled with writing academic texts. Participant 13 said “*It is basically because I cannot put everything in my own words. I normally will have to copy the first before I put it in my own words*”. Participant 17 stated “*English is my second language and expressing some of the ideas is sometimes challenging*”. Other participants explicitly attributed their difficulties with academic genres to their inability to understand or interpret academic texts or assignment questions correctly.

Research has demonstrated that there is a correlation between reading and writing academically as reading allows students to deconstruct texts (Horning, 2007: 9; Canagarajah, 2002: 34) and understand how texts work (Bawarshi and Pelkowski, 1999: 54; Canagarajah, 2002: 34; Ramanathan and Kaplan, 2000: 172, 175). It also allows them to use internalised structures and workings of texts to produce new texts in which their own voices could be integrated (Canagarajah, 2002: 40). Participant 9 stated that his difficulties with reading included:

...the extraction of information from journals, capturing the relevant information and not all information relating to the subject matter... Just key points... How to critique the information gathered and make an argument... Incorporating my own views... How to make recommendations where necessary or summarising over all key points...

It further emerged that the students' voice is hampered by language barriers. Cabral and Tavares (2000: 3) argue that success at university is associated with the understanding of what the expectations and requirements of assignments are. It is therefore crucial for students to gain exposure to disciplinary discourses taking advantage of any single opportunity to engage such discourses (Bawarshi and Pelkowski, 1999; Canagarajah, 2002: 34). They should not be excluded from the academic communities, which should be seen as the breeding grounds of upcoming academics and thinkers. This participation is of the essence as academic language, like academic writing, is better learnt in context.

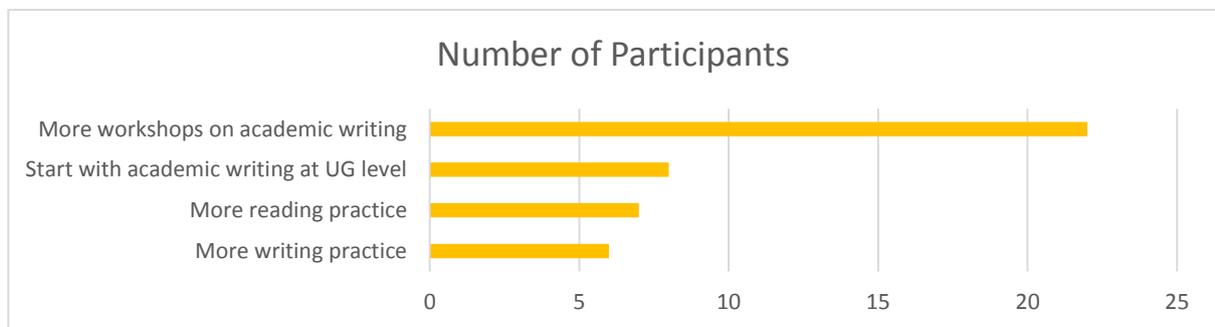


Figure 4: Suggestions on how the academic writing of B-Techs can be improved

Responses to the fourth question highlighted four main recommendations from students as to how their academic writing could be improved: academic writing workshops; integrating writing into disciplinary content; teaching early at undergraduate level and more opportunities to practice academic reading and writing.

Having workshops before beginning with research to train students on writing references and good academic writing skills... liaison of departments with the writing centre to mark papers and help professors and supervisors to teach students how to write proper papers. (P14)

Participants' recommendations suggest three things, the first of which is the importance of being coached or mentored into disciplinary discourses (Bawarshi and Pelkowski, 1999: 55; Lea, 2004: 747). Participants emphasised the need for explicit instruction in, as well as intensive practice of, academic writing from the first year of the NDip programme as a way of assisting them in improving their academic writing skills. Purser et al. (2008) advocate a curriculum-integrated teaching of writing informed by prior analysis of the context-specific literacy demands for a more efficient collaborative interdisciplinary design of learning activities. This will equally improve the development of teaching resources and assessment. Sporadic interventionist sessions on academic writing and communication in general may not achieve the intended outcomes of preparing NDip students for the B-Tech writing-intensive programme. A participant made the following recommendation:

Early start during undergrad we did more practical assessments and hardly concentrated on compiling comprehensive essays. Suddenly at B-Tech level, we are expected to write like academics... surely the incremental introduction of academic writing skills and styles at freshman level will contribute to improving the students' skills at a later stage. (P1)

Secondly, participants expressed the need to not only learn, but also to be afforded ample time to practice and experiment with academic writing conventions and discourses. Canagarajah refers to the provision of a platform where the L2 students' primary discourses can interact with academic discourses (Canagarajah, 2002: 30-31; Ramanathan and Kaplan, 2000). This need to practice the discourses almost represents a process by which academic genres may be demystified (Bawarshi and Pelkowski, 1999). Such a process would serve as a response to the reinforcement of genre stability by 'gatekeepers' (Ramanathan and Kaplan, 2000). One participant stated that

There should be more exercises and assessments that will require students to research and write so they can be familiar with report writing, proposals and anything of that sort. (P10)

Thirdly, there seems to be a need in the participants to dispel a great deal of uncertainty or inadequacy about their ability to write academic genres. The students no doubt require some form of reassurance in order to gain the confidence that will lead to better dispositions towards academic writing (Canagarajah, 2002: 31). A change in attitude is preconditioned by the disciplinary staff's 'act of good faith', a desire to have these students as part of the community, and not hostility. Failing to teach academic writing and then going on to expose students to complex materials without proper 'initiation' may represent an unwillingness on the part of the disciplinary staff to accept new members in the academic community.

Conclusion

A study was conducted at the Doornfontein Campus of the University of Johannesburg to find out the academic writing difficulties of B-Tech students. The number of students approaching the writing centre was an indication that interventions aimed at addressing the students' academic writing problems needed to be revisited. Fifty-two questionnaires, of which fifty were returned, were randomly administered to science and engineering B-Tech students on the campus to investigate their academic writing difficulties, the genres they struggled with, the reasons for their struggle and their suggested solutions. The findings showed that students struggle with academic genres such as research reports and journal articles because the genres had not been introduced early enough and gradually in their studies and for lack of correct, deliberate and systematic mentorship into the disciplinary standards, discourses and practices. They also pointed to their limited command of the language of instruction, English, and lack of workshop sessions intended to train them into and allow them to practice the academic genres. Taken into consideration, these findings could contribute to the current debate on how to prepare National Diploma undergraduates students for the B-Tech programme, and on how to maximise students' learning development during the B-Tech year.

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