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KWAZULU-NATAL**

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YAKWAZULU-NATALI**

**A NARRATIVE INQUIRY EXAMINING THE INFLUENCES ON FIRST YEAR UNIVERSITY
STUDENTS' WRITING CHALLENGES**

BY

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DECLARATION

I, Zanele Mkhize (212537990), declare that:

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As the candidate's supervisor, I agree to the submission of this dissertation.



Dr Bridget Campbell

Date: 19.07.23

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research study was to examine the influences on first-year university students' writing challenges to ascertain if there is a link between students' secondary school literacy practices and their current academic challenges in university. The theoretical framework that was employed was the social constructivism theory. The participants were able to narrate their stories using varied data generation methods such as literate life history, visual representation, and focus groups. This study adopted the interpretivist paradigm. This research philosophy allowed the researcher to hear and understand participants' lived experiences of their literacy practices. One of the main findings is that first-year B.Ed. students find it challenging to move from secondary school literacy to academic literacy, and thus they need assistance in understanding academic discourse. The findings indicate that students need assistance with academic writing, academic reading, referencing and citing from sources, and academic literacy as a whole. A further finding is that some students face academic writing challenges due to not adequately being taught writing skills in secondary school. As a result, the study's findings highlighted that students were not aware of basic academic conventions due to the literacy gap that exists between secondary schooling and universities. The study concludes with recommendations.

Keywords: academic writing; literacy; writing challenges; social constructivism theory

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'Let my soul be at rest again, for the Lord has been good to me' – Psalms 116:7

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the late Rev. S. Mkhize, Phiwe P. Mkhize and Busisiwe J. Mkhize. I thought of you throughout this research study, and I know you would have been proud of me. The dedication also goes out to my best friends, Ziyanda, Lisakhanya and Yamihle whom I love deeply.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

ESL	English Second Language
SASA	South Africa School's Act
DOE	Department of Education
LEiP	Language in Education Policy
FL	First Language
SL	Second Language
MKO	More Knowledgeable Other
ZPD	Zone of Proximal development
CAPS	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
LoLT	Language of learning and Teaching
EFAL	English First Additional Language
FET	Further Education and Training
LLH	Literate Life History
TA	Thematic Analysis

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

This dissertation focuses on the influences of first-year university students' writing challenges at a university in KwaZulu Natal. The study aims to examine and understand students' academic writing practices and experiences. The study also aims to ascertain if there is a link between students' secondary school literacy practices and their current academic challenges in university. Feak and Swales (2004) argue that academic writing in English at the university level is different from writing in secondary school as grammar skills and linguistic structures used at the university level are different from those in primary and secondary school.

When students enroll in a university, they assume that they know how to write as many wrote well enough for secondary school purposes (Badenhorst, 2011). However, first-year students in universities are confronted with a new and unfamiliar context of writing which they must learn to succeed (Boyd and Fukazawa, 2008). Academic writing at a university is a difficult task and plays an important role in socializing students into the academic discourse of different subjects and disciplines (Gasper and Shepherd, 2009).

This chapter provides an overview of the thesis and discusses the motivation and context of the study. The research objectives and questions that guided this study are then stated, followed by an overview of the research process and limitations of the research. Finally, this chapter gives a summary of the structure of this dissertation.

1.2 Rationale/ Motivation

My interest in conducting this research study stems from my own experiences as a grade 8-12 English Second Language (ESL) teacher in a rural secondary school west of Durban for the past 5 years and in my interactions with my learners after they have matriculated. I have noticed that many of these learners battle with writing in English at the university level. I keep in touch with many of my learners who were high achievers at school, specifically in English, and many of them struggle with writing in university. Some of my former learners have even dropped out of university because of poor academic performance.

As their former English teacher, many of my ex-learners who are now in university always reach out for assistance in writing their university assignments. It is through these interactions with my former learners that a great concern regarding their writing challenges arose. I am currently assisting 8 of my former learners who are now university students, with their academic work, especially academic writing and I am thus aware of their poor writing skills. This has motivated me to examine the influences on first-year students' writing challenges, practices, and experiences to help me to better assist them. Perhaps knowing their writing challenges will position me to assist my former learners who come to me for assistance with their university assignments. This study was thus an attempt to examine the influences and understand writing challenges faced by first-year university students so that I am better positioned to assist them.

1.3 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to examine the influences on first-year university students' writing challenges and to understand their writing experiences from a lower level of education until university. Scholars and curriculum planners in South Africa are aware of the pitiable situation of academic writing in universities, especially among undergraduate students (Mbirimi, 2012).

According to Mabaso (2018), academic writing challenges for students begin as soon as they enter the university. Recent studies on university students' academic writing practices have emphasized the need for intervention through research to better understand these challenges that some first-year university students experience regarding academic literacy, as displayed by some students' poor academic performance (Singh, 2015). Leibowitz (2000) argues that one of the challenges faced by students is academic writing which is different from the non-academic style used in secondary schooling. Neeley (2005) highlights that many students find it difficult to adapt to academic writing conventions which involve ways of thinking, reading, speaking, and writing in the academic setting. According to Amalia (2021), learners are taught about all the different writing skills however they find it difficult to employ these skills. Studies conducted by Chokwe (2011) have indicated a correlation between first-year university students' academic writing practices and their overall academic performance. This relationship has sparked interest and debates over the past decade around first-year students' preparedness for university literacy practices both nationally and internationally (Tom, Morni, Metom and Joe, 2013).

1.4 Background of the study

The legacy of apartheid laws is still evident in post-apartheid South African education. Finchilescu, Gibson, Sennett and Strauss (2010) found that the racial classification of the South African apartheid system manifested itself in the different education systems for different races. It has been noted that the education system especially that which catered to black Africans¹ was largely characterised by a lack of basic materials and poorly trained teachers (Finchilescu, Gibson, Sennett and Strauss, 2010). The shift to the post-apartheid era has seen South Africa going through various changes. These changes include several students from disadvantaged schools gaining access to higher education institutions (Mgqwashu, 2007). However, the high number of students from disadvantaged schools gaining access to universities has highlighted that many students face various challenges in adapting to university.

A research study conducted by Hendry, Scott and Yeld, (2007) demonstrated that a high intake of black applicants to institutions of higher education has affected many tertiary institutions' regular curriculum to cater to and accommodate students from disadvantaged schools. Strauss et al., (2010) highlight the consequences of admitting underprepared students pointing out that black students from disadvantaged schools experience some challenges when they begin university education. This is since many of the black schools are under-resourced (Strauss *et al.* 2010). Thus, this gives the impression that those students who attend traditionally black schools are educationally disadvantaged.

The teaching and learning through mother tongue theory by the Department of Education 1996 has been vigorously challenged by several scholars (Boughey, 2002, Matlala, 2005, and Mgqwashu, 2007). Boughey (2002) argues that while the South African Schools' Act (SASA) states that students are to receive education in the mother tongue from Grade R to Grade 4, it does not seem to cater to the challenge these students experience when they switch to an additional language. South African learners, particularly, those from disadvantaged black communities, are only introduced to the English language in Grade 4, a grade where their counterparts in other nations have already acquired some levels of literacy. Furthermore, the Language in Education Policy (LEIP) also permits English teachers to teach English to learners through code-switching from English to learners' home language. In addition, in many schools that are in rural areas, learners are taught English entirely in their mother tongue (de Klerk,

¹ The majority racial population group of South Africa which was a category introduced by Apartheid and has remained ingrained in South African society.

1996; DOE, 2005). The understanding of language as an instrument of communication has led to the conclusion that students' problems arise not only because they are not familiar with the language, but also because they are not able to use academic language conventions in a way that enables them to pass and receive knowledge both in and out of school (Boughey, 2002). Silva (1997) further adds that the less time learners spend being exposed to the target language the more difficulties they will encounter later in their educational journey. However, it is important to note that it is not only English Second Language learners who battle with academic literacy but also English Home language learners as well.

1.5 Overview of key studies dealing with the topic

This study draws from and builds on various research studies. Mbirimi (2012) argues that it is important for academics to pay attention to the moment of greatest transition during the first year of study. There is much agreement in both local and international literature regarding the challenges that the transition from secondary school to university presents and the dire need for early intervention (Van Dyk and Weideman, 2004). Studies by Allard and Caroli (2016) have established that there is a relationship between low pass rates among first-year students and students' under-preparedness for university. This study also noted that academic writing remains a challenge for many first-year students, specifically black students, due to several factors such as poor reading and writing skills among others (Allard and Caroli, 2006). In support of a study by Boakye, Sommerville and Debushe (2014) found that black students are the most affected by academic writing challenges. This is mainly since English is not their first language although it is the main language of instruction in higher education. It is against this background that the present study seeks to examine first-year university students' writing challenges.

1.6 Research objectives and questions

The objectives of this study are:

- 1.To examine the writing challenges of first-year students in a University in Kwa Zulu Natal.
- 2.To examine the factors which contribute to the writing challenges of first-year students in a university in Kwa Zulu Natal.

This dissertation seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the writing challenges that first-year students face in their writing practices at the university?
2. What factors contribute to students writing challenges?

1.7 Overview of the research process

This study adopted the social constructivism theory and was framed in an interpretive paradigm, where knowledge is regarded as a social construct. The study is grounded in a qualitative approach to inquiry. Qualitative approaches allow for rich reports that are necessary for interpretivists to fully understand contexts (Willis, 2007). This study employs narrative inquiry as its research design. Narrative inquiry is situated within the qualitative approach and interpretive paradigm (Gudmundsdottir, 2001). The choices made allowed the researcher to analyze, interpret and understand the participants' own narrations of their literacy experiences that influenced their current academic practices to retell their stories (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). Gudmundsdottir (2001) defines narrative research as the study of how humans experience their world and narrative inquiry as a process whereby narrative researchers collect stories and write narratives of peoples' experiences.

1.8 Organization of the dissertation

The dissertation has been divided into five chapters. The first chapter introduces the dissertation by outlining the rationale, purpose, background, objectives, and research questions. It also provides a brief overview of the key studies drawn on and on the research process. Chapter two begins by presenting the theoretical framework of this study's research, before exploring scholarly literature relevant to this study. Chapter three describes the methodology of the study by discussing the paradigm, approach, and design of the study and substantiates the relevance thereof. In addition, the sample and the data generation methods are discussed in terms of their relevance to the study. Chapter four is a discussion of the findings of the research and Chapter five concludes this dissertation by outlining the summary, implications, and limitations of the study as well as providing recommendations.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE

REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the theoretical framework underpinning my study and evaluates the literature relevant to this study. Firstly, the social constructivism theory will be described and evaluated. Secondly, this chapter will define and discuss key concepts of writing and its importance by reviewing literature from scholarly articles related to the influences on first-year university students' writing challenges. A literature review on writing in South African schools, academic literacy, academic writing, and the transition from secondary school to university is also presented. Lastly, this chapter will highlight writing challenges faced by first-year students.

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Social Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by the Social Constructivism theory as described by Vygotsky (1978). The Social Constructivism theory argues that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences (Giesen, 2008). The theory takes the individuals' past experiences into consideration and creates new ones on which to build other experiences (Meltem, 2007). Social constructivism is based on the idea that language precedes thinking and that interactions between individuals or groups of people promote language learning and the acquisition of knowledge and skills (Kalina & Powell, 2009). This study acknowledges that students' educational and social experiences influence their academic performance, thus making Social Constructivist theory the appropriate theoretical framework for this study. Social Constructivism regards learning as an active process of knowledge construction and personal or social interpretation of the world, with an emphasis on problem-solving and understanding through authentic tasks and experiences (Christie, 2005).

Social Constructivism theory further recognises the dynamic nature of the relationship among the home environment, teachers, learners, and tasks and that classrooms collaborative learning is a process of peer interaction that is mediated and structured by the teacher (Ryder, 2022).

Greenwood (2020) notes that classroom discussion among learners can be promoted by the presentation of specific concepts, problems, or scenarios, and is guided by means of effectively directed questions, the introduction and clarification of concepts and information, and references to previously learned material that provide a view of learning as growing from interactions with other learners. This theory acknowledges that learners' early English writing experiences are influenced by the different environments learners come from as the factor plays a major role in their literacy practices and academic performances in learning both a First Language (FL) and a Second Language (SL) (Vygotsky, 1978). Based on this understanding, the Theory of Social Constructivism proposes that the learning context has a direct influence on the learning process. Thus, the social interactions that occur during language learning must involve the use of engaging tasks or activities that improve learning challenges and help to develop students' critical thinking skills and encourage helpful conversations in the classroom to assist each other in doing their work (Greenwood, 2020).

Like other theories, Social Constructivism Theory is characterised by key features that include the learning of knowledge or a set of skills through observation, collaboration, dialogue or social interactions, reflection and recognition of the experiences and perspectives of others (Armstrong, 2019). Armstrong (2019) also notes that learning takes place in a social context and may be assisted by More Knowledge Other (MKO) and develops from the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) while making use of scaffolding.

More Knowledgeable Other is one of three key principles of social constructivism relevant to my study. MKO is somewhat self-explanatory as it refers to someone who has a better understanding or higher ability level than the learner (McPherson, 2013). According to McPherson (2013), MKO can be parents, teachers, professionals, adults, friends, and even technology. Technology is also considered an MKO as it ranges from things, such as cellphones, laptops and tablets. It is important to note that technology could also help the students in overcoming their writing challenges, it cannot however be used as a replacement for teachers or lecturers as the MKO (Hartman, 2002). Pathan (2018) cites a positive about Social Constructivism as several studies conducted by Ellis (2000) indicate that Social Constructivism, ZPD, Scaffolding, social interaction, and MKO have been reviewed and proven beneficial for second language acquisition. Social constructivism refers to the collaborative nature of learning and acknowledges that human development is socially situated and knowledge (McLeod, 2023). ZPD represents the space between what the learner can do unsupported and what the learner cannot do even with support, which thus lends itself to

scaffolding, which is a process through which a teacher adds support for a learner in order to enhance learning and gradually withdraws the support when the learner is able to do the task independently (McLeod, 2023). The importance and flexibility of writing become a burden on those who do not know how to write well. This can limit academic, occupational, and personal progress (Graham, 2019), hence the need to understand and thus improve the teaching of writing in schools to limit writing challenges experienced by university students. It is important for MKO to devote time and attention to teaching writing to students as it is an important skill to have (Graham, 2019). MKO refers to someone who has a better understanding than a learner in a particular task or concept and can provide support. These principles under Vygotsky's social constructivism theory stress the importance of looking at each learner as an individual who learns distinctively as influenced by their culture or social relationships (Dahms, 2007). These thus indicate that learners' past and social experiences are paramount to children's cognitive development and in making sense of new situations or present experiences as well as their potential academic performances (Pathan, 2018).

Another principle of Social Constructivism is social interaction. Social Constructivism recognizes that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and is a shared, rather than an individual experience. In addition, Clark, D'Angelo, and Touchman (2009) believe that social interaction is basic for cognitive growth meaning that how children think, explore and solve problems is dependent on the influences within their social interactions with those around them. Furthermore, the communication that transpires in a social setting with more knowledgeable or proficient people (parents, teachers, peers, others) assists students or children in building an understanding of what they are learning. Social Constructivism is not always useful in certain contexts, especially in a country such as South Africa where many children grow up in child-headed homes, and do not have parents or adult supervision to assist them with school work (Seleti, 2009). Ogunyemi's (2012) research study results point out that another reason that Social Constructivism is not entirely successful in developing countries such as Nigeria and South Africa is the mass poverty levels and the lack of education from learners' parents/guardians as some do not understand the importance of interaction with their children from an early age and believing that learning starts and ends at school. Ogunyemi (2012) further states that incompetent teachers who are not informed about the importance of effective implementation of Social Constructivism in the classroom pose a challenge to its promotion as they also play a vital role in the development of Social Constructivism. The constructivist process works best in social settings where students can compare and share their

ideas with others as well as in attempting to resolve conflicting ideas (Lohman, 2023). It is important however to point out that this may not be possible in all contexts, especially in the South African setting as many schools still have issues with overcrowded classrooms which makes it difficult for the teacher to encourage students to share work and have classroom discussions without there being any chaos (Ugwu, 2009). De Guerrero and Villamil (2000) are of the idea that for intellectual growth to occur, a certain degree of social interaction must occur. In examining the influence of English academic writing challenges on first-year student teachers, two other interwoven socio-constructivism theories are of interest which are, scaffolding in the zone of proximal development (ZPD), as developed by Vygotsky (1978).

2.2.2 Zone of Proximal Development

ZPD is described as the space between what a learner can do without assistance and what a learner can do with adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, it is the student's ability to successfully complete tasks with the assistance of a more capable person. Another important attribute of the ZPD is that when compared to traditional tests and measures that only indicate the level of development already attained, the ZPD is forward-looking through its assertion that what a learner can do today with assistance is an indication of what that learner will be able to do independently in the future (Lantolf, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). ZPD is also described as the distance between what learners can achieve by themselves and when assisted by others through interactions (Raymond, 2000; Warschauer, 2005).

The zone of proximal development refers to the range of tasks an individual can perform with assistance; the aim is to move learners, through scaffolding, to the position where they can perform these tasks without assistance (Schreiber & Valle, 2013). Teachers sometimes engage learners in tasks that may be too challenging to them and thus result in discouragement, or too easy, which could result in the learners being uninspired. In both cases, no real learning occurs because the tasks or activities do not engage the students at the correct level, within the ZPD. The value of the correct ZPD is undermined if the competent teacher causes the learners to reduce their learning effort which may result in discouragement or lack of interest in learning (Schreiber and Valle, 2013). ZPD is a key principle in understanding learning and the effects of different learning contexts and I believe that it can be appropriately adopted in this study because learning at university provides students with an opportunity to participate in different

communities of practice because universities are diverse places, with students coming from different backgrounds and bringing with them varied cultures (Seligmann, 2012).

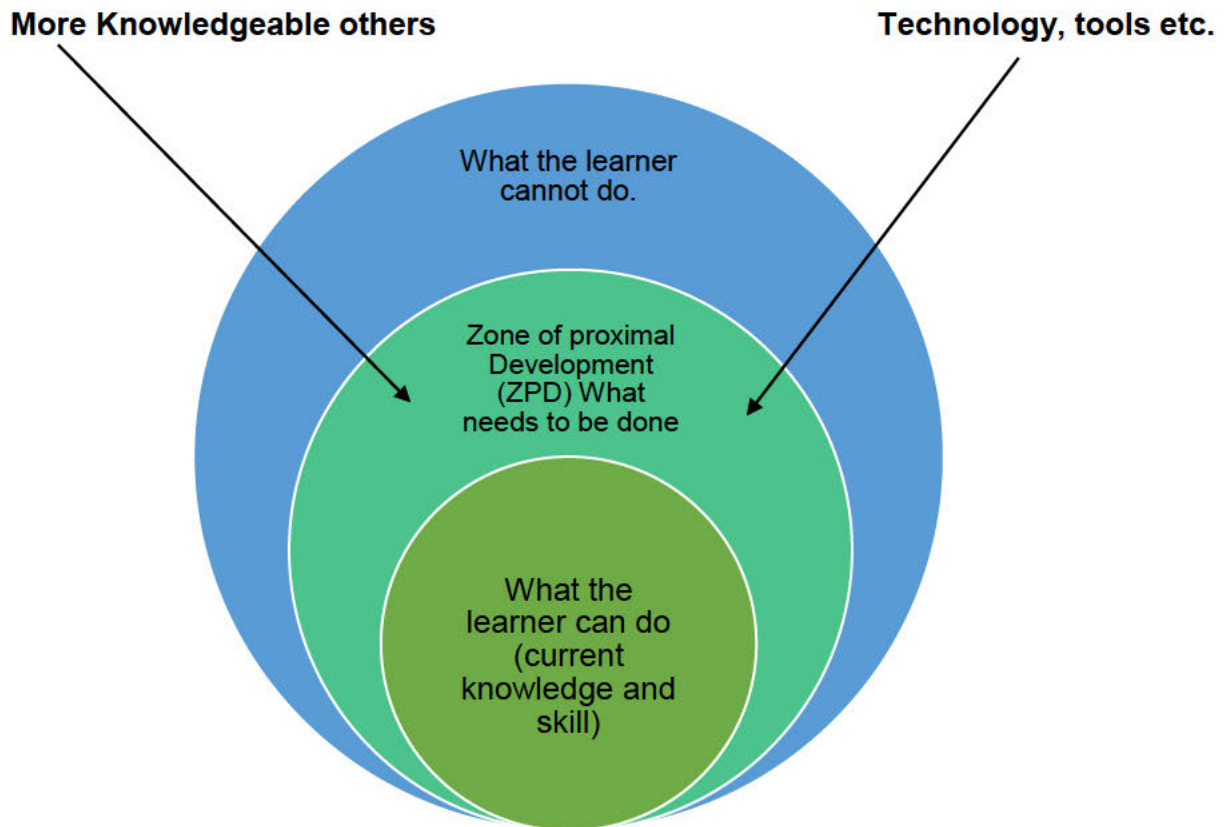


Figure 1: zone of proximal development diagram

2.2.3 Scaffolding

Scaffolding originates from cognitive psychology and language research (Turuk, 2008) and it is directly linked to ZPD in that it is the support mechanism that helps a student to perform a task within his or her ZPD successfully. In the educational situation, scaffolding is seen as a controlled instructional tool whereby the teacher modifies the intended learning task and then progressively changes the responsibility to the students, yielding educational benefits (Benson, 2004). In the process of supervising and guiding a student towards task-based independence, scaffolding emphasises the need for the teacher to be in constant revision and upgrading of the learning materials student's capacities, with the intention of finally removing the learning structure once the student demonstrates independence in problem-solving (Turuk, 2008). Scaffolding is recognised as a key element for improvement and is often used in classrooms to

help learners with skills development. When learners become more experienced, the expert slowly decreases assistance until they can achieve the task or apply the skill by themselves. This concept emphasises that when students can write independently, more support is withdrawn and only the smallest amount of support is needed from teachers. The teacher executes this by building on learners' understanding and awareness as they are trying to develop new skills. Therefore, activities provided in scaffolding instruction should go beyond the level of what the student can do on his or her own. It should be noted that the teacher should first build interest and engage the student in active participation. The given tasks should be simplified by breaking them into smaller subtasks during the process of Scaffolding. The other important feature of Scaffolding involves the teacher modeling possible ways of completing tasks, which the student can then imitate and eventually internalise (Schwieter, 2010).

One of the major challenges of scaffolding is that the MKO, such as a teacher, is not always able to scaffold all students for numerous reasons, such as the teacher's lack of knowledge on how to effectively scaffold. This is relevant to my study because the challenges of academic writing could emanate from such MKOs who are not able to scaffold thus creating students who will battle with academic writing in university. Another potential problem is that the MKO needs to know the nature of every student's Scaffolding to cater to all. The application of the ZPD in practice therefore becomes challenging as Pathan (2018) argues that Vygotsky's scaffolding failed to provide details about the effective use of ZPD in classrooms. Diverse understandings due to a lack of clear instruction on the application of scaffolding could compromise successful teaching (Verenikina, 2008). Another criticism associated with scaffolding is that it encourages a one-sided relationship between a learner and a teacher as opposed to a joint venture between a student and a teacher for a student to gain linguistic competencies (Verenikina, 2008). In other words, the student is always learning and listening to the teacher and does not have an opportunity to speak and show that they have understood what was taught and can articulate it. I do not agree with Verenikina, 2008 views because as a teacher myself I know that learners are able to show their understanding through tests and examinations for the teacher to know whether there has been proper scaffolding and understanding.

Most of the literature on scaffolding discusses scaffolding in the context where there is great emphasis on mastering a specific skill rather than higher-order concepts which are normally used in university (Stainer, 2015). There is comparatively very little literature that discusses the use of scaffolding in university. Stainer (2015) states that scaffolding in a university

presents several issues and challenges as teaching and learning in a university emphasises higher-order skills of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation which many lecturers find difficult to scaffold. Main (2021) cites time and students' different learning capabilities as a challenge when trying to scaffold in university. There is not enough time in university, lecturers do not see students regularly and the level of skills required from students are more difficult to scaffold than task-based practical skills which are normally done in primary and secondary school (Main, 2021). University students have different expectations about the teaching and learning process and many of them come from secondary school with different skills that are needed in university to do well academically (Main, 2021). It is therefore difficult for lecturers to identify those students who struggle academically and who need scaffolding with various skills needed to be successful in university (Stainer, 2021).

2.3 Literature Review

2.3.1 Language acquisition

Language acquisition is the process by which humans acquire and comprehend language as well as produce and use words and sentences to communicate (Miller and Gillis, 2000). Language acquisition involves structure, rules, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics (Miller and Gillis, 2000). Phonology forms the first level of language where any alphabetic language consists of symbols that represent the sounds of the language. According to (Mack and Blakeley, 2021) phonology is the crucial foundation upon which language is built and if teachers are uninformed about the various levels of language, they will not be able to understand how these parts fit together to form a whole. Morphology is the second level of language that gives clues to the meaning of words and structure while also indicating where these words fit into a sentence. The third level of language is syntax which involves word order that leads to sentence structure. Semantics is the fourth language level which puts words together in order so that they form a sentence that has meaning thus comprehension becomes evident (Miller and Gillis, 2000).

Learners face some challenges using the English language due to the phonological and linguistic demands of the two different languages, and these difficulties would not be there if the learners had been exposed to the first language only (Rost, 2001). ESL learners find it even more difficult to listen to English because the phonological system, phonotactic rules as well as tone melodies of their mother tongue may differ from those of a second language (Rost,

2001). Rost (2001) further notes that where phonics instruction takes place there is often a confusion between the ESL learners' phonics system of English and pronunciation. This means that they find it difficult to break up words into syllables and mispronounce words due to these reading errors and their comprehension becomes poor and this not only affects their reading but their writing skills as well (Rost, 2001).

Much has been learned about the acquisition of reading skills by ESL learners, leading to improved screening and identification methods for learners who face difficulties in reading. (Harrison and Krol, 2007). Lack of exposure to books and reading material can be attributed to learners' challenges with the acquisition of reading (Foster, 2015). According to Fareed (2016), children who face difficulties with acquiring reading skills are bound to have writing challenges as well. This is because reading and writing are interrelated, and if the learners experience challenges with the acquisition of necessary reading skills they will lack ideas and vocabulary when they write (Foster, 2015).

2.3.2 Schooling conditions in South Africa

The transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa has led many institutions of higher education to widen their access to universities for all students as a need to urgently address the social justice and equality in the country (Thesen & Van Pletzen, 2010; Boughey, 2012). In this way, there has been a high intake of previously disadvantaged groups more especially black applicants to institutions of higher education to accommodate those students who suffered the ills of apartheid. Sennett (2010) highlights the consequences of this massification in university by pointing out that black students from disadvantaged schools experience some challenges when they begin university education. This view is supported by Scott (2018) who notes that a relationship does exist between students from previously disadvantaged groups and poor performance in university, as many of them come from low-class families and thus their socio-economic background determines the schools that they attend. It is important to note the relationship that exists between a student's financial background and their ability to access quality education in South Africa. Many students from low-class backgrounds arrive at university without the basic literacy skills in place to do well in university. It is far more likely that students with middle-class and university-educated parents will succeed. The strong correlation between middle-class literacy practices and the literacy practices valued by universities is a key explanation for the success rates of middle-class students globally

(Boughey & McKenna, 2021). The state of many South African schools is a cause for serious concern even almost 3 decades into democracy. On the one side, there are functional, wealthy schools, which are dominated by white students. On the other, 85% of black students attend poorly funded dysfunctional schools (Sterne, 2021). According to the Department of Education's 2018 statistics, out of 23 471 public schools, 20 071 have no laboratory, 18 019 have no library, while 16 897 have no internet, 239 have no electricity, and 37 have no sanitation facilities at all (DoE, 2018). The lack of these resources in so many schools indicates that the poor are still receiving unequal education which is marked by uneven access to resources (Vavi, 2019). Such environments are unfavourable for successful teaching and learning because such schools that marked by the absence of educational resources, such as the educational resources mentioned above, and that deprives learners of the chance to use these resources in teaching and learning (Spaus, 2013). The shortage of such basic resources in schools suggests that students from such schools may experience difficulties when they reach university, where they will have contact with such resources for the first time, hence struggling to use them (Spaus, 2016).

The relationship between education, wealth, and social status means that, although South Africa is now a democratic country, the schools that were attended by whites during apartheid are today usually better equipped, which is a legacy of the apartheid era. These schools often have qualified teachers and are not overcrowded (Spaull, 2013). The unequal educational system in South Africa still somehow bears some of the inherited scars left by the apartheid era which include the overcrowded classrooms of many township² and rural primary and secondary schools which are under-resourced and are not conducive for quality teaching and learning because both primary and secondary school play an important role in developing students' reading and writing skills which are crucial skills that must be addressed adequately at school level, in order to prepare students for higher education (Spaull, 2013). Township and rural schools are generally neglected. Most of these schools are old and dilapidated, they have no sanitation or running water and no functional libraries and laboratories (Mabaso, 2009). This observation is supported by a study conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2013) which found that the majority of township and rural schools have no access to internet, electricity, and clean running water. It is for this reason and many others that most teachers working in township and rural schools are not motivated and thus show very little enthusiasm for teaching their students (Mhlongo, 2014). Mhlongo (2014) blames this lack

² A place formally designated by black occupation by apartheid legislation.

of motivation as part of the reason why the students do not do well academically. It is these factors that contribute to the low level of preparedness for tertiary education. The lack of resources in township and rural schools directly impacts the lack of interest in learning on the part of the students attending these schools and, inevitably, many of them cannot read and write well (Khumalo and Maphalala, 2018). Recent data from the PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) 2019 study showed that 80% of grade 5 learners cannot read for meaning, this means that 4 out of 5 11-year-olds cannot understand what they are reading (Sterne, 2021). In Limpopo, this is as high as 91% and in the Eastern, it is 85%, while in Kwa Zulu Natal, where this study is conducted it is 79% (Sterne, 2021). It is quite clear that it is in the early stages of education that many learners get left behind and thus struggle with the necessary skills needed in school, such as reading and writing.

2.3.3 Writing and its Importance

This study examines the influences on first-year university students' writing challenges. It thus becomes important to first understand what writing is and why it is important to understand the challenges faced by first-year university students and the factors that contribute to these writing challenges. Atabi (2020) defines writing as a process of consolidating various language components such as letters, punctuation, syntax, and vocabulary to communicate thoughts and ideas in a readable form and it is a medium of human communication. This definition focuses on general writing which refers to any piece of writing which can be informal or formal with no specific conventions and is normally subjective and personal (Atabi, 2020). The activity of writing itself can have knowledge-transforming effects because it allows humans to externalise their thinking and assist in cognitive development and create ideas that can be used for effective learning and writing. Academic writing on the other hand is a type of writing that is a formal style used in universities and scholarly publications that follows the same writing process as any other type of text but it has specific conventions and standards in terms of structure, content and consistency (Smith, 2019). It is in understanding what writing is and the link between writing and academic writing in university that I would be able to examine the writing challenges of first-year university students.

Effective writing is a skill that is grounded in cognitive development which is the construction of thought processes, including the ability to think and form complex ideas (Trioia, 2003). Effective writing involves learning, comprehension, application and synthesis of new

knowledge (Trioia, 2003). The ability to achieve communicative competence in writing is an important facet of language development and academic success among students at all levels of the education system (Mbirimi, 2012). Writing also encompasses creative inspiration, problem-solving, reflection and revision that results in a completed manuscript (Defazio, Jones, Tennant & Hook 2010). According to Hamp-Lynos (2011), writing is a personal act through which the writer engages with ideas and transforms them into self-initiated topics. Graham (2006) believes that writing is an essential skill for students, as it allows them to acquire critical and analytical thinking to comprehend and carry out instructions, more specifically in school. This means that writing plays an important role in helping students understand and achieve academic success at all levels of education. It is therefore important to understand that the process of acquiring good writing skills takes place over a period. For students to succeed in writing it is imperative for them to understand that writing is a process, and it must be improved throughout the years spent in school and university (Leibowitz 2000). With reference to writing as a mode of learning, I believe that teachers could help their learners in school improve their writing by encouraging them to write about their backgrounds, and personal experiences or to create their own topics so that writing becomes self-initiated. For example, language teachers could teach literature in such a way that the learners connect their social constructivism experiences to those of the characters in the book or poem and make writing assessments related to the literature and to the learners' lives. This notion is supported by Vygotsky's (1997) Social Constructivism Theory which acknowledges that students' learning needs be probed by using their ideas and personal experiences. These ideas and personal experiences play a vital role in their academic performances and in understanding their challenges, which may be influenced by different cultural objects, events, and ideas (Lantolf, Thorne, and Poehner, 2015). In other words, teachers could help improve their students' writing skills by first encouraging them to write from a personal stance rather than tasks and activities developed around topics that the teacher gives that may not resonate with the student's experiences and backgrounds. It is important to note that teachers in South Africa are guided by the South African Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) document and cannot simply give their students any writing tasks that are not CAPS-aligned.

The CAPS document, which is a comprehensive and concise policy document that gives detailed guidance for teachers on what they should teach and how to assess defines writing as an important tool for communication that permits learners to develop and engage with their thoughts and ideas (DoE, 2011p37). In addition, CAPS states that it is important for learners

to write regularly, across a variety of tasks and subjects as this will assist learners to communicate innovatively as it also exposes them to different styles of writing (DoE,2011p39). Archer (2010) is of the view that writing in most schools is taught with the intent of administering a specific task, rather than it being self-initiated by a learner and being a daily practice. This points to writing being an imposed activity in schools rather than students writing for enjoyment and self-benefit. When presenting the learning objectives of writing, the CAPS document further emphasizes the importance of exposing students to various styles of writing. It is imperative that students are exposed to these different styles of writing at school as they are scaffolding for university writing. What becomes clear in the CAPS document is that writing at schools is not meant to teach academic literacy but however to assist students in learning how to write and to capacitate them to improve their writing proficiencies.

Wilkinson (2004) stresses the importance of writing by pointing out that in secondary school and university, students' results are largely determined by performances in written tests and assignments. Khumalo and Reddy (2021) conducted a study that was centered on first-year students' experiences of learning academic writing through integrated writing support at a university in South Africa. They found that the students were confronted with 3 language related difficulties; the use of academic language, the lack of familiarity with appropriate academic conventions and not having necessary writing skills, hence why universities such as the University of Kwa Zulu Natal, offer modules such as 'Academic Learning in English' assist with this ongoing challenge. Universities such as the Durban University of Technology and the University of Kwa Zulu Natal offer academic learning programs to give academic writing support to all first-year students (Khumalo and Reddy, 2021). The module is aimed at equipping students with essential skills to succeed in their academic activities which includes support on basic academic writing practices, an offering of context-embedded tutorials, and integrated examples of content knowledge (Khumalo & Reddy, 2021). Ahmed (2012) points out that regardless of there being countless approaches to teaching writing, this skill is still challenging for learners and teachers. In a study by Singh (2015), within the Great Zimbabwe University where several lecturers expressed concern that some students who have been accepted with excellent results from secondary often performed disappointingly and below expectations in written assessment because they struggled with academic literacy. This demonstrates that even globally first-year university students also have difficulties in using academic English for learning. Effective writing is important to every university student, since much of the university assessment is based not only on what information students present, but

also on how that information is presented in their writing, specifically academic writing (Dudu, Gonye, Mareva, & Subanda, 2012).

2.3.4 Writing in South African Schools

Writing is a skill that should be taught in primary and secondary school (DoE, 2015). How writing is learned and taught in school is pivotal to the academic success of a student in university as writing is how universities mainly assess their students (Mbirimi, 2012). It is therefore important to understand writing in South Africa and the background that the South African university students come from and how it has been shaped. A South African study, conducted by the University of Pretoria's Centre for Evaluation and Assessment indicated that South African schools are in crisis. This study revealed that more than 78% of South African grade 8 students have not developed the basic reading and writing skills required for learning (Moloi and Chetty, 2018). The research also showed that more than half of the students tested in English, at a secondary school level attained the lowest international benchmark (Moloi and Chetty, 2018). Two international studies reported that South African learners are ranked amongst the lowest in international standards for reading and writing and that English being the language of instruction in South African schools could most likely be the contributing factor to the student's poor academic performance, as it is a second language to most learners (Howie, Van Staden, Tshele, Dowse and Zimmerman, 2011). The study also found that out of the 30,000 Grade 4 and 5 learners who were assessed, South Africa's Grade 4 and 5 learners achieved the lowest mean scores in English compared to the other participating countries (Howie, 2011 et al.). Learners in Grades 4 and 5 showed that they barely mastered reading comprehension skills in their mother tongue as well as the second language which was English, thus depicting how the early literacy practices of first-year university students influence their current academic challenges (Pretorius, 2006). It is important that students learn to convey a cohesive representation of their texts (Pretorius, 2006), thus the focus should lie on the development of language proficiency (Kapp, 2012) and writing ability (Dukhan et al., 2016).

To interpret South Africa's school literacy patterns, it is important to understand the history of educational policy, the apartheid system the country faced and its implications. Under the apartheid regime from 1952 to 1990, the South African population was divided into four hierarchically ordered racial groups: Whites, Indians, Coloureds, and black Africans, making

race the most important arbiter of civil rights (Fataar, 2010). The Group Areas Act³ of 1950 separated residential areas to each racial group, reserving the best more developed areas for whites. Racially segregated education emerged from there, and the Bantu Education Act was designed for blacks. The schools designated for each of the racial groups received vastly different education and resources and learned from different curricula (Soudien, 2016). Schooling for black Africans was an inferior quality and designed to oppress Africans (Fataar, 2010). The black schools⁴ were overcrowded and under-resourced, while white schools were of a high standard and well-developed (Jansen and Kriger, 2020). While apartheid ended in 1990 the apartheid laws are still evident in the South African education system in the post-apartheid-era. It is thus important to point out that in South Africa, many black students'⁵ academic literacy is rooted within a context that still bears the mark of the apartheid regime, wherein many students who attended black African schools were educationally disadvantaged, as schools lacked educational resources and had high levels of overcrowded classes which exceed the teacher-learner ratio (Gravett and Seligmann, 2010). Although there have been attempts to redress these issues in post-apartheid South Africa, the inequality and disadvantages are still evident as many of these black African schools are still facing the same challenges (Bloch, 2009). The Language in Education Policy (LiEP) of South Africa has a role to play about some primary and secondary school learners' and consequently university students' literacy practices and the challenges they face.

The Language in Education Policy (LiEP) gives learners the choice of the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) in South Africa (Department of Education, 1997). Learners in mainstream schools may choose from any of the 11 official languages (DoE, 2014). In Kwa Zulu Natal where this study was conducted the language choices are isiZulu, Afrikaans, isiXhosa and English (Lehohla, 2012). Learners are generally taught in their mother tongue up to Grade 3 (South Africa. DoE, 2010), and switch to English thereafter (Navsaria, 2011). According to Spaul (2013), many parents want their children to be taught in English as English guarantees them success in the workplace (Navsaria, 2011). This has resulted in many learners learning in a language that is not their home language and that is often unknown to them as they have little exposure to English outside of school (Navsaria, 2011). This thus poses a negative impact on the writing capabilities of ESL students as their vocabulary is often limited

³ Maintained residential and business sections segregation for each race.

⁴ Schools with a majority of black African students.

⁵ Students that have origins in any of the black racial groups in Africa.

and they cannot fully express themselves (Cole, 2015). The CAPS document calls for greater emphasis to be put on LoLT in the intermediate phase⁶ as this will allow learners to develop their cognitive and academic skills which they will need through all subjects (DBE, 2011). The CAPS document for Senior and Further Education and Training (Senior and FET Phase) assumes that learners would have reached a high level of proficiency by grade 12 to prepare them further for higher education or the world of work (DBE, 2011). Therefore, in teaching writing in secondary school, an EFAL teacher is extending the work done by the teachers in primary schools. By the time a student reaches the FET phase (DBE,2011) believes that learners should be able to demonstrate proficiency in academic, creative, interpersonal, and work-related writing. It is through these policies that universities expect students to have reached all the levels of proficiency stipulated in them and thus assume that they are adequately prepared for the university's academic literacy (Armstrong, 2016). This is often not the case as many students enter university with inadequate literacy skills and have not been exposed to all styles of writing in primary and secondary school due to many factors such as incompetent teachers who under-prepared them (Armstrong, 2016).

Teaching approaches are at the core of teaching and learning (Leach & Moon, 2008). In the South African classroom context, many teachers have a limited understanding of the writing approaches that need to be used to engage their students so that they can be active participants in learning how to write (Leach & Moon, 2008). Although the CAPS document advocates the use of the process approach to writing, where the focus is on the steps involved when writing a text and the teacher is a facilitator during these steps and assists the students where assistance is needed before they can present their final work (Nunan, 1999). The process approach is thus learner-centered. However, Dornbrack (2014) observed that many teachers in the South African classroom context still use the product approach when teaching writing. In the product approach, teachers usually are the driving force of the lessons as they give students examples to emulate when they are constructing their own texts (Escholz, 1980). The product approach is popular among teachers in black African schools where there are issues of overcrowding in classrooms as it makes the writing process easier and less time consuming because there is no continuous back and forth of editing work between student and teacher (Akinyenye and Pluddemann, 2016).

⁶ Intermediate Phase is the education phase from Grade 4 to Grade 6.

In South Africa, poor writing skills of students have been linked with teachers' incompetency in utilising effective writing approaches to assist the development of writing among students, especially among students who speak English as a second language (Blease and Condy, 2015). Using a study that sought to assess teachers in a teacher training college, Pretorius (2014) writes that a standardised English literacy test, administered to third-year pre-service teachers in a teacher training college in 2011, showed that at least 60% of the students were writing below a level of a Grade 8 learner. While 30% were writing at the level of a Grade 8 learner and only 10% were writing above a Grade 8 level (Pretorius, 2014). A similar report was brought forth by Vavi (2016) who draws attention to the fact that the National Planning Commission (NPC) states that in the year 2008 teachers scored less than the minimum scores expected from the average learner in the subjects they teach. According to the results from the training teachers, these applicants proved to be unprepared to be at any university or tertiary institution as reading skills are to be mastered at the primary school level (Vavi, 2016). Therefore, many first-year students enter university not having been prepared enough for writing even in their primary and secondary school. Thus, academic writing is bound to pose a challenge for first-year students as it is a different and more complex style of writing. It is characterised by evidence-based arguments and demands an impersonal tone which differs from the style of writing in secondary school (Burger, 2016).

The teaching and learning through mother tongue theory by the Department of Education 1996 has been vigorously challenged in recent years by several scholars such as Boughey, 2002, Matlala, 2005, and Mgqwashu, 2007. Boughey (2002) argues that while the South African Schools' Act (SASA) states that students are to receive education in the mother tongue from Grade R to Grade 6, it does not seem to cater to the challenges these students experience when they switch to an additional language such as English. The understanding of language as an instrument of communication has led to the conclusion that students' literacy challenges arise due to students not being familiar with the English language. Learners are not able to use the language in a way that enables them to pass and receive knowledge both in and out of school (Boughey, 2002). In her research based on a South African schooling context, Boughey (2002) points out that the teaching of English in many township and rural schools is to discipline rather than empower learners, hence giving the impression that the English language in rural and township schools is used to intimidate learners rather than to equip them with the conventions of the language. Therefore, the less time learners spend being exposed to the target language the more difficulties they will encounter later in their educational journey. It is on such grounds

that language is observed to serve as a barrier to learning. It is on this background that one can note that the language barrier in the teaching and learning context is directly related to academic literacy and writing difficulties experienced by students both in secondary school and university, while also not ignoring that there are many other facts that may also contribute to students' writing challenges (Boughey, 2002). Sanchez and Paulson (2008) observed that students who enrol in transactional English courses often come from inferior schooling backgrounds and were taught in different languages, therefore this study acknowledges that in order to address students' academic literacies and their writing challenges, it is imperative to understand the South African schooling context and how it impacts the academic literacy of many students.

Concerns about effective writing among secondary school learners and undergraduate students in university have been well documented. Secondary schools and tertiary institutions differ in various ways and the shift from secondary school to tertiary institutions places demands on students to change their perceptions about academic work (Mqgwashu, 2009). The problem is global as is evident in Cook and Leckey's (1999) Northern Ireland research study, which reported that many students find it difficult to manage the transition from secondary school to university. In a published guide for first-year students in university, Andreatta (2009) points out that the transition from secondary school to university marks a different step in students' academic performance.

2.3.5 Transition from secondary school to university

The ease of the transition from high school to university is dependent on a complex interaction of factors within a student's educational and socioeconomic background (Camelia and Nastase, 2018), as well as challenges and support that the higher education institution offers to its first-year students (Underhill and McDonald, 2010). Tinto (1983) provided a model to explain student's experiences of transitioning from high school to university that has been used widely as a basis for understanding first-year students' expectations compared with their experiences at university. To adjust to the university context, students move through various phases: separation and transition (Tinto, 1983). Each phase encompasses factors that provide an understanding of why students may be at risk of dropping out of university as Kwai (2009) has pointed out. In the context of the South African higher education sector, we note that Tinto (1983) promotes an integration model in terms of which diverse students are expected to adjust

to an inclusive higher education institution. The calls for free, quality, decolonised education by South Africans and university students highlights the fact that universities are not always inclusive spaces and need to be more responsive to the lived experiences of their student to better assist them and introduce them to this new phase of their lives (Joseph, 2022).

The separation phase is described as a decline in interactions with past and familiar connections and a change in behaviour. According to Tinto (1983), this is the phase during which first-year students need to dissociate themselves from their past school experiences and transition to a tertiary setting by becoming familiar with its norms and demands, especially socially and academically. For some students, especially first-year students, the separation phase means developing new friendships as well as changing their behaviours, learning new bodies of knowledge, and employing new ways of thinking in their academic life (Tinto, 1983). While students who can adjust to their new environment can create a positive sense of belonging, it is during this phase that some students experience personal challenges that they may not voice out, thus it is important that universities ensure that they have clear transformative support structures and orientation programs in place to ensure that this separation phase is not severely traumatic for first-year students, especially socially and academically (Tinto, 1983).

Students' backgrounds and their income level are some of the social challenges that can affect their integration into university spaces as Camelia and Nastase (2018) have reminded us. Students experience challenges when they feel that they do not belong to the social or academic sectors of the university. For many first-year students in South Africa, this is a common experience (Dison, 2019). Students also experience "isolation" (Tinto, 1983) when they are unable to form meaningful relationships or communicate effectively with people (such as peers or lecturers) at the university because of their social or financial background. This could lead to students being unable to access important information and this could lead, in turn, to their withdrawing voluntarily from tertiary studies. Student's income, particularly if it is low, is also a common factor leading to dropout (Lassibille and Gómez, 2008; Ramrathan, 2013) but it can also affect feeling included or excluded at university. In the absence of sufficient funding, students could find themselves without safe accommodation and lacking food security. This is common in the South African context where many students who enter university come from disadvantaged backgrounds and many do not have funds to survive in university thus affecting their academic performance negatively (Jansen, 2009).

The transition phase is the period during which students are torn between the past (secondary school) and the present (university). According to Tinto (1983), during this phase, students must acquire the knowledge and skills needed to interact with members of a new group and find ways to adhere to the norms, values, and beliefs (Kuh and Love, 2000) of the university. The transition stage is not always the same for each student, given their diverse lived experiences (Tinto, 1983) and the differences in their social capital. Therefore, universities cannot assume that the transition phase will be the same for all students and should be obliged to ensure that their diverse needs are accommodated. Furthermore, some students might find it challenging to understand the academic literacy of the university which tends to be very different from those of secondary school and this could lead to them dropping out (Forbes and Wickens, 2005). Furthermore, first-year students are more likely to drop out if they are unable to integrate sufficiently into the academic life of the university (Mostert & Pienaar, 2020).

The transition phase is not always the same for every student, and these differ naturally among students (Tinto, 1983). It is during the transition stage that students encounter challenges that include inconsistencies between the academic knowledge and skills that were learnt at secondary school and the expectations of university courses (Camelia and Nastase, 2018). While almost all first-year students experience difficulties in adjusting to the academic literacy level required to function optimally at university (Dison, 2019), this is of particular concern given the increasing number of students who are not academically prepared for the expectations of higher education enrolling at universities (Gabriel, 2008). Hence universities need to have a more transformative agenda to deal with students' academic challenges.

Universities expect students to adjust to the level of academic literacy required at university which is described as the gap between lecturers' expectations and students' ability to deliver expectations (Brenner & Shalem, 2010). This is problematic because school-leavers do not necessarily have access to academic discourses and literacy practices that will allow them to feel included at university. Furthermore, students' expectations of academic challenges as opposed to the actual challenges they encounter might be different. It is thus the responsibility of the university to minimise the impact that various knowledge gaps have on students' future learning (Mutimani, 2016). This would mean that first-year course curricula need to incorporate various academic reading and writing skills to deal with student's academic challenges, such as academic writing and academic literacy. If this were to be done, students,

particularly first-year students would be eased into the next phase of their lives and transition from secondary school literacy to academic literacy (Mabaso, 2017).

2.3.6 Academic Literacy

Academic literacy can be defined as the ability to understand a range of academic vocabulary in context and to be proficient in academic reading and writing about an academic subject (van Schalkwyk, Bitzer, & van der Walt, 2010). Academic literacy practices such as reading and writing are practiced in universities and may require students to analyse, summarize, compare and synthesize ideas and related information from a wide range of sources (Papashane & Hlalele, 2014). Although academic literacy is grounded in reading and writing, it is important to note that it is more than that, it is also about understanding the communicative function of various genres in academic language and the rules and requirements that are needed for academic success (Papashane & Hlalele, 2014). The above definition of academic literacy acknowledges that it is more than reading and writing. It is about the ability to discuss and analyse formal, academic, and subject-specific jargon and to contribute meaningfully to various fields of study (Chokwe, 2011). This begs the question as to whether the students entering universities have the required writing competencies to enable them to acquire academic literacy competencies.

It is imperative to understand that students bring with them not only their academic literacy skills from primary and secondary school but also different cultures and experiences from diverse educational backgrounds (Cliff & Hanslo, 2009). Students bring to lecture rooms their home culture, and when lecturers seem to ignore these crucial aspects of their lives, they may feel separated from the university (Cliff & Hanslo, 2009) which is why social constructivist theory is important to this study. Mckenna (2004) highlights that in the South African context, literacy practices are historically constructed, where social class differences determine access to different kinds of literacy material. Boughey (2002) notes that students' problems are rooted in their status as outsiders to academic discourses and their lack of familiarity with the literacy culture.

One of the literacies students bring with them to university is the reproduction ideology of learning, which values learning that reproduces and gives back what teachers and lecturers have given to students (Boughey, 2005). In this regard, Boughey (2005) reminds us of that students' reproduction of what has been written by scholars and lecturers is an indicator of the

lack of understanding of their role in their academic writing. This assertion by Boughey (2005) resonates with this research study as I seek to examine the factors that influence first-year university students' writing challenges. It is important to understand that every discipline at university has its own genre of academic literacy thus requiring students to understand those specific to their discipline.

Some ESL first-year university students find academic literacy challenging since most students have not well-developed critical thinking skills and therefore struggle in their classes while they are developing these skills (Andreatta, 2009). This is evident in first-year students coming straight from secondary schools where academic work was conducted in the lower order of Bloom's Taxonomy hierarchy⁷ (Andreatta, 2009). Bloom's Taxonomy Hierarchy is a rubric that is used to identify cognitive levels, ordered from lower to higher levels of intellectual complexities (Suskie, 2017). Bloom's Taxonomy hierarchy forms part of the first-year students' schooling background and becomes a challenge when they are required to engage their critical thinking skills to blend in well at university (Leckey, 1999).

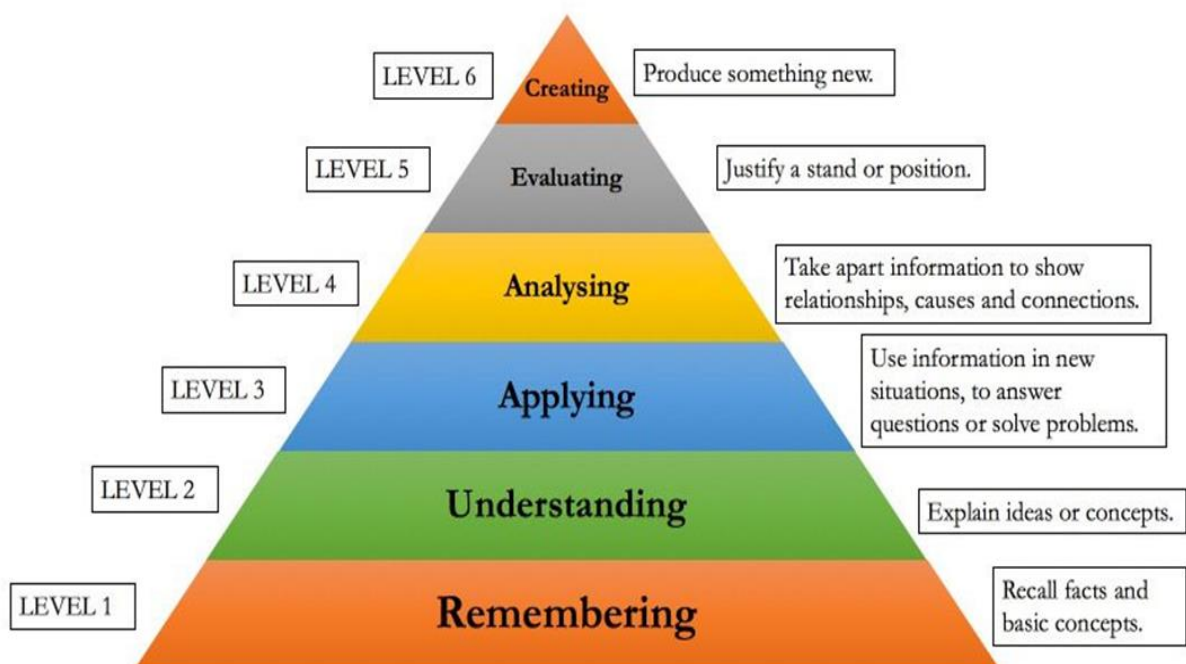


Figure 2: Blooms Taxonomy Hierarchy

⁷ A set of three hierarchical models used to classify educational learning objectives into levels of complexity and specificity (Hyder, 2016)

Bloom's taxonomy is a hierarchical arrangement of 6 processes where each level is conceptually different, and these levels can be helpful in developing different learning objectives (Anderson and David, 2022). These levels as illustrated in *Figure 1* above range from simple to complex, one being Level 1: remembering, level 2: understanding, level 3: applying, level 4: analysing, level 5: evaluating, and level 6: creating (Fastiggi, 2019). Bloom's taxonomy is a practical tool to use, providing a framework that teachers can use to plan their lessons and deliver appropriate activities, assessments, questioning, and intended outcomes (Gershon, 2015). Bloom's taxonomy is a hierarchy of progressive processes in which it emphasises the importance of mastering the lower levels first before tackling higher levels as learners are introduced to the next level thus becoming more knowledgeable, and skilled and developing an improved understanding of the content they are learning (Gershon, 2015). It is clear that although the CAPS document emphasises the use of Bloom's taxonomy as a framework to support teaching and learning it is not used effectively in South African classrooms. A study conducted by Collett (2021) which looked at cognitive education in schools revealed that the participants which were grade 11 and 12 learners battled to answer questions from level 4 upwards. What becomes obvious is that the curriculum requirements are not met in schools because CAPS clearly states that by grade 12 learners must be able to engage with all levels of Bloom's taxonomy (DBE, 2011). However, it is through these policies that universities work under the assumption that first-year students possess the required literacy competence, whereas the research has proven the opposite.

Some language analysts are of the view that the strategy of teaching and learning co-occurring through an additional language such as English, has not been successful (Boughey, 2002). Pevensie (2015) argues that students understand better when they are taught in their mother tongue, as this is the language they are familiar with. In the same way, it is when students are taught an unfamiliar language by a teacher who is less adequate in the unfamiliar language that the language serves as a barrier to learning (Pasensie, 2015). This view is supported by Leibowitz (2005) who points out that some students experience difficulties in expressing themselves in English. These scholars' arguments suggest that students may understand and do well in their exams if they were written in their mother tongue. In a research study that was conducted in 2006 in the Western Cape, the provincial Department of Education recommended the use of mother tongue in several schools which were used for the purpose of the research. In an analysis of the use of the mother tongue as a medium of instruction, Pasensie (2015) concluded that mother-tongue speakers showed a significant increase in results for content

subjects and mathematics. This shows that students taught and assessed in their mother tongue usually do well in their subjects.

The teaching and learning through mother tongue theory by the Department of Education 1996 has been vigorously challenged in recent years by several scholars (Mgqwashu, 2007). Boughey (2002) argues that while the South African Schools' Act (SASA) states that students are to receive education in the mother tongue from Grade R to Grade 6, however, this does not seem to cater to the challenge these students experience when switching to an additional language. The understanding of language as an instrument of communication has led to the conclusion that students' problems arise not only because they are not familiar with the language, but also because they are not able to use the academic language conventions in a way that enables them to pass and receive knowledge both in and out of school (Boughey, 2002). In her research based on a South African schooling context Boughey (2002) points out that the teaching of English in many townships and rural schools is to discipline rather than empower learners, hence giving the impression that the English language in rural and township schools is used to intimidate learners rather than to equip them with the conventions of the language. Therefore, the less time learners spend being exposed to English the more difficulties they will encounter later in their educational journey. It is on such grounds that language is observed to serve as a barrier to learning. It is on this background that one can note that the language barrier in the teaching and learning context is directly related to academic literacy and writing difficulties experienced by students both at secondary and university, while also not ignoring that there are many other facts that may also contribute to students' writing challenges (Boughey, 2002).

It is common amongst universities that when first-year students enter university they are treated in the same way as senior students (Mbirimi, 2012). First-year students are assumed to have undergone the same education system and have the same educational experiences; thus, they are seen as one homogeneous group who differ only about individual talents (Mgqwashu, 2000). In support of Mgqwashu's argument, McInnis (2001) points out that some universities assume that first-year students have a good school education and, therefore, they are ready for their university studies. Furthermore, McInnis (2001) adds that universities assume that first-year students have been exposed to various methods of teaching and learning and in that way, lecturers expect first-year students to actively participate in their lectures. In this way, the university ignores an important fact about first-year students' educational background and learning history, which is that all students come from diverse backgrounds. As a result, first-

year students from disadvantaged schools, who experienced the traditional teaching method, may struggle in the transition phase and with academics in university (McInnis, 2001). It is therefore important to understand that socioeconomic factors contribute negatively to students' academic literacy learning (Hobson, 2014).

2.3.7 Academic literacy in South African higher education

Enrolment in colleges and universities globally continues to increase at staggering rates. Students entering higher education institutions in recent years show increased diversity in religion, culture, race, language, levels of academic preparation, and physical ability, among others (White & Lowenthal, 2011). However, even though the number of students entering higher education institutions has continued to rise, the success rate recorded among students remains low (Munyoro & Dube, 2020). Most students do not have higher academic literacy or language mastery, which makes it difficult for them to interact with learning materials. The low success rates show the importance of academic literacy and language mastery for higher education success (White & Lowenthal, 2011; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Burger & Naudé, 2019; Munyoro & Dube, 2020). Many students enrolled in universities were unable to read and write at the level expected of them and possessed gaps and contradictions to what universities offer (Khumalo & Maphalala, 2018). These gaps are compounded by the fact that learning in university is different from how the students were taught in secondary school and it requires students to adapt to new ways of thinking, understanding, and organising knowledge (Bharauthram, 2012). Academic literacy and mastery of the language of learning and teaching are vital for academic success (Mukhroji, 2020). Now, many more students need to master the English language so that they can understand their disciplines and successfully navigate their learning. In recent years, language educators across the world have shown an interest in instilling knowledge in academic literacy by using genre-centered strategies to analyse written and spoken discourse (Johnson, Lin & Lin, 2016). Nations around the world have also made efforts to improve academic literacy because of its global demand (Fouche, 2010; Jefferies, McNally, Roberts, Wallace, Stunden, D'Souza and Glew, 2018). In South Africa, many educational policies about academic literacy in higher education have been developed. However, the language used in teaching and learning has continued to be a barrier to access and success in higher education, considering that African languages do not have a high academic status in education (Van Dyk, 2019). Most students entering higher education

institutions in South Africa are neither proficient in African languages nor English, which makes it difficult to help them learn and develop academic literacy. Research shows that low levels of academic literacy in the language used for learning is the main reason why most higher education students in South Africa fail (Van Dyk, 2019). Students with low academic literacy levels find it challenging to deal with complex academic materials. Van Dyk (2005) and Letseka (2009) reveal that dropout rates of students at tertiary institutions have increased in recent years. According to a study done by the National Plan for Higher Education or NPHE (2001) 25% of first-year tertiary students drop out of school before completing their education. Research shows that not only has the country recorded increased numbers of first-year dropouts, but also, a 40% dropout rate among disadvantaged students (Murray, 2014; Department of Education, 2015; Van Dyk, 2019). The situation remains a challenge for higher education, with contributing factors including poverty, language difficulties, and difficulties in adapting to the new environment, among others.

Another reason for low levels of higher education achievement is that most universities in South Africa use English as the main language of instruction. Research shows that English first-language speaking students are more successful at the end of their first year and subsequent years than those who use English as a second language (Hibbert, 2011; Neumann, Padden and McDonough, 2019). Most students currently prefer English as the language of learning and teaching, even though the use of English as a teaching and learning language is a disadvantage to their performance in higher education. These challenges have compelled universities in South Africa to address under-preparedness in the context of higher education and to implement strategies to support under-prepared students rather than passing the blame and responsibility to the secondary schooling system (Cliff, 2015). Cliff (2015) further suggests strategies that can be used by universities to address and deal with the issue of under-preparedness, especially for first-year students, is to develop interventions such as academic literacy modules that will help students cope and adapt to their new ways of thinking and tertiary studies demands. These new strategies pay attention to the many post-enrolment factors that influence academic success, including low levels of academic literacy while also helping students to engage in learning and encouraging new ways of thinking critically (Cliff, 2015). Exposing students to academic literacy modules helps them get a deeper understanding of what the university expects of them in terms of reading and writing conventions (van Wyk, 2014). The policy implemented by some higher learning institutions to deal with academic literacy challenges is the establishment of a Language Unit for Academic Literacy (UAL), which aims

at enhancing students' academic literacy. Many universities in South Africa have established language departments and courses to help deal with low literacy and language mastery issues.

Different universities have different courses or modules used to facilitate academic literacy skills for their students (Khumalo & Maphalala, 2018). At the University of Zululand, all first-year students who enroll in the university must take academic literacy as one of their core modules (Khumalo and Maphalala, 2018). According to the University's language policy, this is done to ensure that students acquire effective academic language literacy in English and that students can communicate through spoken and written words in a variety of contexts, including social and academic contexts in their future careers (University of Zululand Language Policy, 2016). In North-West University the academic literacy module is taught in two semesters. In the first semester, it is done by all first-year students, and in the second semester, it is done by the students who are 'at risk' regarding their overall academic literacy, irrespective of their year of study. This is to help the students with all their modules and to help them identify what they are struggling with. The University of Pretoria established a language department to help students who are at high risk of failing owing to low levels of academic literacy or mastery of the academic language (van Dyk, 2019). The department has the responsibility to assess first-year students' academic and language literacy using a valid and standardised measuring instrument (van Dyk, 2019). This department also provides language support to students who are not capable of completing their courses within the time allowed, by teaching them language support courses related to their courses. This includes courses such as communication skills, academic writing and academic reading (Defazio, Jones, Tennant and Hook, 2019). This course of study is supposed to help students cope with university demands and challenges. I believe that such interventions by higher education institutions to teach courses such as communication skills, academic writing and academic reading through their language departments is a necessary strategy to assist students' academic literacy and to attain the learning and development goals set by each higher institution.

It is important to emphasise the relationship between academic language and academic writing as an aspect of academic literacy and a tool to assist students that need assistance with academic writing and literacy in post-secondary school education (Van Dyk, 2019). Academic literacy and academic writing are distinct from each other, in the sense that academic literacy involves the development of these five skills: reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing, from an analytical and interpretative perspective throughout a student's higher education career (Daminova, Tarasova and Kirpichnikova, 2017). Academic writing is more narrowly focused

on the student's writing knowledge, skills and ability. Both terms are interrelated as they are used in the contexts of academic instruction and language of instruction. Also, there is no guarantee that native speakers of an academic language will be proficient in their use of academic literacy skills (Daminova, Tarasova and Kirpichnikova, 2017). In fact, the component of academic writing is still the most challenging of the academic literacy skills for first-year students (Mutimani, 2016).

2.3.8 Reading and Writing

Reading and writing are often seen as the basic components of literacy (Mhlongo, 2014). Khumalo and Maphalala (2018) are of the opinion that reading and writing effectively at the university level are not simple tasks and if they are not developed adequately students may encounter academic challenges in university. As a result, students need to be assisted in developing their tertiary literacy practices. Khumalo and Maphalala (2018) further argue that reading tends to be disregarded as there appears to be an assumption that students can already read when they arrive at the university. The challenge though is that the texts that they meet at the university are far more demanding, embedded and extensive than those they have dealt with in secondary school (Mhlongo, 2014). Reading and writing are perceived as crucial components of academic literacy for various reasons. This is because literacy in academic settings exists within the context of a massive amount of written information and students access this information primarily through reading (Bharuthram, 2012). On the other hand, the importance of writing for shaping students' cognitive learning and academic development is well-established as it represents the principal method of assessment (Paxton, 2014). Bharuthram (2012) perceives reading and writing as equally important in university and believes that a student's success lies in mastering the two skills as one cannot exist well without the other. She further highlights the difference in the level of reading and writing in secondary against those required in a university. University reading and writing are much more complex and demanding than high school. It is important that universities expose students to a range of genres which include journal articles, policy documents, editorials, websites, narratives and monographs and assist students with those that may be new to them (Bharathram, 2012). They also must devise learning activities that lead students to engage critically with these texts, so as to improve their academic literacy skills (Devereux and Wilson; 2008). It goes without saying that students who have problems reading and understanding academic texts will

experience challenges with writing academically as well, thus it becomes imperative to not separate the two skills when trying to understand students' writing experiences (Bharuthram, 2012). Paxton and Frith (2014) describe writing as a more important skill compared to reading. This is because they believe that writing constructs knowledge rather than simply reading knowledge that is already there. Lillis and Scott (2007) share the same view as they are of the opinion that student writing is more important because that is how most university students are assessed, therefore without appropriate support, especially through academic literacy interventions that encourage academic reading and academic writing, students could experience challenges in university which could hinder their academic success (Mhlongo, 2014).

2.3.9 Academic Writing

Academic writing is more than just writing, it is about reading for understanding and the ability to deconstruct written text (Papashane and Hlalele, 2014). Academic writing refers to the reading and writing that occurs within a discipline, as tools through which to facilitate learning (van Schalkwyk, Bitzer, and van der Walt, 2010). It is through students' academic literacy that they can show proficiency in reading and writing academic texts aimed at contributing to the ongoing discussions in an academic field, taking into account students' identities, backgrounds, and cultures which they bring to the academic process (Chokwe, 2011).

Academic writing is therefore an extension of academic literacy which is proficiency in reading and writing in any academic subject (Li, 2022), and it also plays a vital role in university because a major part of a student's academic life is spent in writing academic assessment (Zhu 2004). Academic writing is the primary form of communication in university and plays a role both in students' understanding of their academic work and in the assessment of student knowledge that contributes significantly to their success in university. There are numerous conceptions regarding the nature of academic writing. This research agrees with Papashane and Hlalele's (2014) definition that academic writing is a tool for communication that helps in conveying knowledge that is needed in a specific field of study. I selected this definition because it details the importance of communicating to transfer knowledge. Papashane and Hlalele (2014) further state that academic writing is any writing given in an academic setting. Academic writing is a crucial skill that all university students require to ensure academic success as this skill requires a complete and active engagement with the facts and principles of

a specific discipline (Singh, 2015). Papashene and Hlalele (2014) note that English is the medium of instruction in many universities in South Africa and across the world; therefore, students need to learn to write in English for occupational and academic purposes.

While a university student should possess the ability to write and speak well to pass a course, writing remains a complex skill particularly for many first-year students (Chokwe, 2011). The difficulty in writing for English Second Language speakers (ESL) stems from various grammatical demands such as synthetic and vocabulary demands among others, often resulting in ESL students' inability to cope in the ways a native speaker could ((Tom, Morni, Metom, & Joe, 2013). In addition, students' ability to sustain arguments and synthesise ideas for academic purposes is important for academic success. Its importance extends to teaching the student how to think critically and objectively while developing their own ideas and putting them into well-structured writing (Altiwal, 2012). Therefore, it is very important to clearly state to students the requirements to write well academically and why they are writing academic texts in university addressing their writing challenges. (Leibowitz, 2000; Mbirimi, 2012). Academic writing at the tertiary level still poses challenges, for both first and second-language speakers of English. The problem is more of a challenge for students who are not native speakers of English, as these students often encounter grammar, vocabulary, language and language use difficulties (McKenna, 2010).

A study conducted at the University of Technology in Kuala Lumpur indicates that writing, especially academic writing in a second language is a challenging task for many students (Tom, Morni, Metom, and Joe, 2013). One of the main findings was that ESL students differ from native English speakers in their linguistic, cultural and oral presentations and that writing is less demanding for First Language students as writers are familiar with the language structure and are proficient in the language. Furthermore, compared to EFL students, ESL students are dependent on their teachers' guidance to assist them in their writing (Tom et al., 2013). Consequently, this factor could pose a challenge for ESL first-year university students' academic writing, especially when lecturers assume that students have the requisite literacy skills and are able to work independently.

A study conducted by McKenna (2004), set to determine language barriers for ESL students, argues that the legacy of apartheid and the dominance of Western literacy practices in South African education mean that students may not necessarily have easy access to the culture of academics. Thus, the students coming from literacy practices different from the dominant ones

in the education system struggle to crack the code used in the teaching and learning context. As a result, such students feel excluded from the academic community (McKenna, 2004). This idea is supported by Leibowitz (2005) who asserts that the lack of exposure to English results in students' uncertainty about using the language.

A study by the American Institute of Research (Baer, Cook, and Baldi, 2006) conducted a survey on the literacy skills of first-year university students, with the results indicating that over half of the students who responded lacked basic academic literacy skills, such as understanding and implementing simple instructions. Students face the responsibility of developing their writing skills, specifically in academic writing. However, many students have difficulty with academic writing for several different reasons (Bartlett, 2003; Odell and Swersey, 2003). When considering their own experience with students' literacies, both academic literacy lecturers and Writing Lab consultants at Stellenbosch University agree that first-year students find academic writing a challenge and often struggle to comprehend the instructions set for assignments (Stanford and Richards, 2018). The study indicated that in 15 years, there has been no improvement, and students still battle with academic writing.

In addition, Papashane and Hlalele (2014) also suggest that the academic writing process includes writing in clear sentences, that are error-free as well as having the ability to use ideas from others in one's writing without plagiarising. Plagiarism is defined as using another person's work or ideas without acknowledging the source (Harris, 2001). According to Ellery (2008), many students are unsure of what constitutes plagiarism and therefore become victims of unintentional plagiarism. This is a result of their secondary school years, where learners were not taught how to reference and in turn earned good marks for work they copied from books and the internet (Logue, 2004, Sisti, 2007; Walker, 1998; White, 1993). Students therefore enroll in universities without understanding what plagiarism is and without the prerequisite academic literacy proficiencies.

2.3.10 First-year university students' writing challenges

Numerous studies have been conducted and research papers written in the field of academic writing and the challenges that this genre of writing poses to first-year students. According to Leibowitz (2000), academic writing is often introduced in universities in South Africa through writing intensive courses for students in their first year of study. However, Thesen (1990) argues that these courses are only successful if methods and practices are merged with those of

other courses. In relation to this point, the University of Michigan has designed a first-year writing course that all students take at the beginning of their studies as part of the core curriculum, they then take an additional writing intensive course in their major subject (Redo, 2011). This writing course aims to assist students, particularly first-year students transition from secondary school writing to academic conventions of writing, which include knowledge about academic writing and referencing. Leibowitz (2000) noted that such interventions allow the students to relate the writing practices to the way writing is used in their discipline and possibly in their profession. This notion is supported by research conducted by Snow (2003) where it is pointed out that for students to succeed in university it is important for them to have control over their academic writing competencies. Academic writing plays an important role in socialising students into the discourse of subjects and disciplines in universities. However, with the transformation of higher education, many students especially those in many South African universities are struggling to maintain academic writing standards that are acceptable in higher education (Redo, 2011).

As indicated in a study at a Malaysian University by Singh (2015), the challenges associated with academic writing are faced by many first-year students globally, particularly those who are English Second Language speakers (ESL). Moreover, Rose (2005) states that academic writing in university still poses challenges for students, especially those who are second-language speakers of English as they have difficulties with the language and its rules. Makura, Skead and Nhundu (2011) point out that most of these students are from poor socio-economic backgrounds and communities characterised by high poverty levels, poor performance in matriculation examinations and a lack of basic infrastructure. These circumstances very often result in students being woefully unprepared for higher education, with poor academic performance and low rates of retention and throughput at universities being an inevitable consequence (Matomela, 2010). This notion is supported by Mbirimi (2012) who states that poor performance in academic writing is because of poor teaching of writing in schools, learners' socio-economic backgrounds and general under-preparedness for tertiary education. Further, some of the student's socio-economic status hinders them from excelling in high school. Some of the university students come from poor educational backgrounds where they have had no access to libraries or the internet. On the other hand, some of the students' parents were not fully involved in their children's education in high schools due to their being illiterate. Since some parents are illiterate, they do not understand the work that is brought by their children from schools and thus they cannot assist them (Chokwe, 2011). Furthermore, most of

the parents are workers who leave home early in the morning and only return late, tired. As a result, they have no time to assist their own children with schoolwork. Some of the uneducated parents appear not to see the importance of buying books and newspapers for their children to read. Consequently, because of this kind of upbringing, students persist in the same way, even at university (Mbirimi, 2012).

Mckenna (2010) points out that the key to whether a student succeeds or not relates to the literacy practices she/he brings from school or home environment therefore it is important to understand their literacy practices from an early age. To understand their literacy practices, one needs knowledge of the students' socio-cultural experiences. When secondary learners enroll in universities, they bring with them various literacy practices that may or may not be considered appropriate at the university level. Lebowitz (2000) also noted several challenges faced by first-year university students such as how academic writing differs from the academic discourse in secondary schooling. Students tend to continue to employ some of the elements of non-academic writing discourse when academically writing in university. Papashane & Hlalele (2014) are of the opinion that it is the nature of literary practices expected by a particular discipline that determines the failure or success of students. If students have not been scaffolded into the literacies of specific disciplines, they could receive comments from lecturers that certain discourses are unacceptable in academic writing (Mbirimi, 2012). Students therefore find it difficult to adjust to academic literacy conventions that are required in university that involve ways of thinking, reading, speaking and writing that are dominant in the academic setting (Neeley, 2012).

On one hand, Andreatta (2009) indicates that a minority of first-year students start university to find that their previous education did not prepare them well to meet university standards. On the other hand, most students find themselves lacking the important skills to cope with university studies (Andreatta, 2009). This view is also shared by Banda (2009) who points out that secondary school teachers often help learners to understand by teaching in their native language and this is attributed to the challenge of poor academic writing within the student population. Banda (2009) further states that students who speak English as a second language are at a disadvantage and will continue to seek strategies to mediate ESL academic writing and this will always put them a step behind from those whose mother tongue is English.

Furthermore, McInnis (2001) adds that universities assume that first-year students have been exposed to various methods of teaching and learning. Lecturers expect first-year students to

actively participate in their lectures. In this way, the university ignores some facts about first-year students' educational backgrounds and learning history, which is diverse. As a result, many first-year students, especially those who come from disadvantaged schools may struggle in the transition phase. Furthermore, Angelil–Carter (2015) explains that in secondary school learners are taught to regurgitate directly from their notes or textbook without using their own ideas. This poses a problem when they get to university, and they are encountered with issues of plagiarism.

Matlala (2005) cites language barriers as one of the reasons many students face challenges with writing in university. Matlala (2005) argues that students' secondary school backgrounds have the potential to determine their success in university based on the language of instruction. Matlala (2005) further points out that the sociolinguistic conventions in universities put students at the lowest margin of academic discourse because they are not familiar with the academic conventions. Consequently, students are afraid to ask questions when they do not understand in lecture rooms. This is evident in McKenna's (2004) work, where she reports that students admitted to having shied from asking questions, because they felt they were not fluent in the language, and therefore they experienced difficulties on how they should ask questions.

In a study that set out to determine language barriers in university students, McKenna (2004) argues that the legacy of apartheid and the dominance of Western literacy practices in South African education mean that students may not necessarily have easy access to the culture of academics. Thus, students coming from literacy practices different from the dominant ones in the education system struggle to crack the code used in the teaching and learning context (McKenna, 2004). As a result, such students feel excluded from the academic community. This idea is supported by Leibowitz (2005) who asserts that the lack of time being exposed to English at home and school results in students' uncertainty about using the language and thus struggle to find the right words in English when writing their assignments and as a result, they tend to leave out points in their assignments. Thus, students' uncertainty about using certain words makes their writing assignments less detailed than they would have been if they were fully competent in the English language (Leibowitz, 2005).

Matuso (2016) is of the opinion that students' writing challenges can be traced back to a lack of academic literacy as students do not fully understand their academic writing assignment requirements. Paxton (2007) agrees with the notion that students who have not mastered academic discourse should be catered for in various ways to assist them in understanding it. In

her research, she found that some students draw strongly on a variety of speaking styles and genres from a spoken tradition that showed some about their society and roots. I find the research by Paxton (2007) relevant to my study as it sees the development of language through involvement in cultural, linguistic, and historical settings and my study hopes to examine the influences on first-year university students' writing challenges in university. Furthermore, many studies have indicated that students' cultures and identities are not valued in university lecture rooms (Boughey, 2002, Boughey, 2005, Mckenna, 2004, Mgqwashu, 2009, and Pillay, 2010). Students bring with them to the lecture rooms, their home culture, and experiences and when lecturers seem to ignore what learners bring with them to class, students feel separated from the university. Mckenna (2004) points out that in the South African context, literacy practices are historically constructed, where social class differences determine access to privileged literacies. Boughey (2002) agrees with her observation that students' literacy problems are rooted in their socio-economic status resulting in the lack of familiarity with the literacy culture. Archer (2010) supports this notion by pointing out the need to consider how students construct knowledge in particular ways depending on their background and identity. She says that many students write academic work in a language that is not their own and as a result, such students suffer an identity crisis, mainly because they do not identify with the writing as their own.

Leibowitz (1997) is of the view that many students experience writing difficulties in university because they are not familiar with what is standard academic conventions. By this, it appears that students tend to employ some of the elements of writing styles that are not academic, that they used in secondary schooling as they may find it difficult to adapt to academic writing conventions. Another challenge noted by Leibowitz (2000) is that most students tend to leave their writing assignments to the last minute. This therefore means that students submit work that may have not been edited and, in most cases, plagiarized (Leibowitz, 2000).

Angelil-Carter (2000) cites plagiarism and difficulties with referencing as one of the challenges faced in academic writing by many first-year students. Angelil-Carter (2000) outlines a few factors that may be the reason why first year students resort to unintentional plagiarism as students face difficulties in expressing themselves in an additional language and thus resort to using direct words from other authors (Angelil-Carter 2000). This could be due to the way language is taught in secondary school, where students are expected to reproduce chunks of work that were taught word for word (Angelil-Carter 2000). This view is shared by Mutimani (2016) who points out that indeed referencing poses a big challenge for first-year students who

still use their secondary school experiences of relying heavily on sources without acknowledging authors. This leads them to believe that if they regurgitate work word for word from different authors, they have mastered writing (Mbirimi, 2012).

Academic writing requires skills and an ability to cope with a sophisticated level of language, in order to avoid copying texts directly, to cite sources, and so on. The South African educational system has been described as being chaotic and characterised by corruption, poor academic performance, strikes and intimidation, incompetent teachers and a lack of qualified science teachers (Mohamed, 2012). The DOE has been accused of lacking the insight and the capacity needed to deal with the crisis in the educational sector (Mohamed, 2012). This can only have negative implications and consequences for the prospects of many students at South African universities, with widespread poor academic writing, not only among first-year students but also among most students in higher education in South Africa at present. The recognition of the need for previously disadvantaged students to raise their levels of academic competency, to enable them to cope with higher education, resulted in the introduction of the Peer Academic Support Programmes, which have the potential to encourage students to become actively engaged in their studies, in the manner suggested by Astin (1984). The findings support those of Cooper and Subotzky (2001), who maintain that historically disadvantaged students in South Africa experience the consequences of apartheid education, which enforced and imposed unjust inequalities upon most of the population, just as the other policies of apartheid did in practically all other aspects of their lives. The findings also coincide with those of McNeil (2005) and Mbabela (2012), who agree that because of the unequal education system, the country faces enormous challenges, such as challenges in academic writing. It emerged from the findings that the participants perceived that the use of English, as the medium of instruction at the university, presents challenges to first-year students. They maintained that most of the first-year students had been taught in their first language at their primary and secondary schools. The abrupt change at the tertiary level of education, at which all courses are taught in English, results in most students finding it difficult to understand and communicate effectively. However, the quality of education that most learners are receiving, even in post-apartheid South Africa, leaves a great deal to be desired. Learners are leaving school ill-equipped for the outside world because the education system places too little emphasis on schools that are well-staffed by trained, motivated, and dedicated teachers (Carless, 2015). It is widely acknowledged that the poor quality of education, received by most learners who intend to enroll at university, will contribute significantly to their encountering

great difficulties during their studies, making it exceedingly unlikely that they will be able to complete their courses within the prescribed time (Kaburise, 2010).

2.4 Conclusion

Academic literacy is an important part of a student's academic life in university. It is evident from the above literature review that many students in South Africa enter university having been ill-prepared in primary and secondary school and this affects their overall academic performance. The writing challenges that students experience is an indication of a lack of basic literacy skills. In conclusion, the chapter outlined the characteristics of writing and its importance. It also detailed the context of academic writing in South African schools. Furthermore, academic literacy, academic writing, and first-year university students' writing challenges were discussed. The following chapter will discuss the research methodology utilised in this study.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the theoretical framework and evaluated literature relevant to this study.

This chapter outlines the methodological approach, the paradigm, the research approach and the research design. A detailed description of the process of obtaining ethical approval, gatekeeper approval, recruitment of participants, and sampling follows. The chapter further discusses the process of data generation and data analysis methods. The storage and disposal of data, the issues of rigour, trustworthiness, credibility and the limitations of this study are explained before the chapter is concluded.

3.2 Research Paradigm

An interpretivist paradigm was appropriate for this study which sought to examine the influences on first-year university students' writing challenges. This is so because the interpretivist paradigm is rooted in people's own interpretation and understanding of their lived experiences. The interpretivist paradigm allows the exploration of people's lived experiences and perceptions through their own subjective interpretation of their world (Smith, 1993). Interpretivist researcher believes that there is no single correct route or method to knowledge instead, they should derive their knowledge and construct by in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Kuyini, 2017). Denzin and Lincoln (2007) argue that all research is interpretive and is guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied. According to Willis (2007), different people from diverse groups have different perceptions of the world and these differences can produce an in-depth understanding of individual experiences. Researchers within the interpretivist paradigm are of the belief that knowledge about reality is socially constructed and can only be understood through social interaction with people's shared language, meaning, and experiences (Myers, 2009). Gubrium and Holstein (2004) are of the opinion that the aim of an interpretivist paradigm is to engage with both the 'hows' and 'whats' of social reality and it is centered both on how people methodologically construct their experiences and their worlds and how this shapes their meaning of life.

I wanted to hear my participants' voices and tone as they shared their stories, through literate life histories, visual representations, and focus groups as this could help me understand their experiences and how they felt about it in the way they expressed it and this could only happen through a physical interaction with the participants (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011).

3.3 Research Approach

A qualitative approach aims to describe and understand the phenomenon studied by capturing and communicating participants' experiences (Bryman, 1988). In addition, the qualitative approach allows for learning about societal reality to explore multiple meanings of life, concepts, definitions, characteristics, metaphors, and symbols and analysing descriptions of things that may be new or under-researched (Leavy, 2015).

Morrow (2005) states that qualitative research is used to understand meanings, make observations and explore experiences, histories and values. Denzin & Lincoln (1998) assert that qualitative research emphasizes the process of discovering how social meaning is constructed, and how people make sense of their world and of experiences they have had in the world (Merriam, 2009). Most of the meaning in the study was conceptually attained, where the participants were able to offer examples, present information in the form of a focus group, and work together in examining their writing challenges. Qualitative research focuses on capturing, through word descriptions instead of numbers, the meanings people assign to their experiences and realities, instead of merely categorising data that the researcher predetermines (Creswell, 2009; Check & Schutt, 2012). In this study, I was interested in understanding the writing experiences of the students so as to understand their influences and why they are struggling with academic writing, and was asking that the participants capture their experiences and share them with me.

3.4 Research Design

This research took the form of a Narrative Inquiry through which I explored the influences on first-year university students' writing challenges through participants' narratives, to understand the factors that contributed to these challenges as this will better equip me to assist students. Narrative Inquiry recognizes that humans use narratives to understand who they are and to make sense of the world around them (Meon, 2006). In addition, Lieblich (1998) states that a

story is the identity of the individual who tells it, therefore it is important to understand the story as a lived experience that makes up the lives of both the individual and the society. Merisi (2017) opines that humans use narratives because storytelling is fundamentally how we communicate with one another and navigate through life experiences. Dewey (1938) states that narrative inquiry study captures the theory of experience be it personal or shared and the importance of experiences as a tool for understanding life experiences and education. The role of a narrative approach is stressed by Barkhuizen (2013) as he believes that narratives enable researchers to explore how language learners are situated in specific social, historical and cultural contexts, in which the main context is learners' lives. According to Connelly & Clandinin (1999), identities are developed through narratives, as humans make sense of our experiences, ourselves, and the space we are in, through stories that they are told. My understanding of space is that it is not only the environment in which the participants were in that could influence how the events in their lives unfold, other spaces in which they move and have been exposed to could also contribute (Clandinin, 2007).

Barkhuizen, Benson & Chik (2014) are of the view that the role of a narrative inquirer is to describe the lives of individuals by collecting and telling stories which will help us to understand the ways in which individuals place themselves and their activities in the world. What I was trying to understand in this study is the influence on first-year university student's writing challenges.

The retelling of their personal narratives could assist students with understanding themselves and their social conditions as well as their needs to improve their academic work (Tropea, 2011). In the context of this study knowing the students' stories assisted me to understand their writing histories and to ascertain their needs in relation to academic literacy. This will allow me to know how to assist them and others who follow in the future. Clandinin (1990) describes personal conditions as the participants' and inquirer's feelings, dreams and moral characteristics amongst others. Social conditions include people, living conditions and the environment that shaped the life of everyone. These social conditions may include the economic background of the participants, the education that they received in secondary school and the educational background of their parents or guardians. Lastly, the third commonplace is place. This commonplace recognizes that people construct meaning through experiences that exist in a place and time and McGarry (2016) is of the view that an inquirer engages with participants within a specific space. Thinking about our experiences requires us to reflect on the context in which they happened, how they happened and with whom. Thus, an inquiry may

take place in different research fields, where participants retell their stories while the inquirer gathers information, analyses it, and compiles field notes (Clandinin, 2006; Lessard, & Caaine 2012).

3.5 Field Texts

The narrative inquirer lives in the field with participants and recognizes that the field can be a constant dialogue which does not necessarily occur in chronological order when collecting data (Clandinin, 2000; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I live in the same area as the participants, so this allowed me sufficient time for our interactions and easy access to them. The inquirer composes field texts which can be collected from family stories, memory boxes and conversations to name a few (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and my field texts were literate life histories, visual presentations as well as focus groups.

I had individual conversations with my participants after they had signed the consent form, explaining to them the process of the study. I showed them my chart that I had created as a visual representation of my experience and feelings about writing in secondary school and university to help them understand what I needed from them. I explained to them that they did not need to create a chart but could bring a picture or pictures that best depict their feelings about writing. Five of the participants each brought two pictures of their visual representation and one brought only a single visual representation that he felt was enough to represent his entire writing journey and experience. I also wrote my own literate life history to see what information would come out of it and if it was going to be of any help to my study. I made copies of my literate life history and gave them to each of them to read and to also understand my history and how they can write theirs as many of them were confused at first as I was explaining to them verbally. I further explained to them that they would be focus group discussions that I would conduct which will be a discussion of the visual representations and their literate life histories and any questions and validation where needed. I gave the participants 2 weeks to find their visual representation and write their literature life histories as some of them had university assignments to prepare for and needed time to gather their field text. The literate life histories were submitted to me first as they were the first layer of the data and could explain the choice of the visual representation. After I had received the literate life histories the participants then submitted their visual representation in the form of pictures, with

brief descriptions of the visual representation. It was after analysing the participants' literate life histories and visual representation that the focus group discussions started.

3.5.1 *Literate life histories*

Literate life histories refer to a narrative or account of a personal life (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). The first field text that I asked participants to engage with was to write their literate life histories, using my questions as a guide (see Appendix 5). Life histories allow participants' voices to be heard through the writing or where the researcher listens to the participants tell their life stories to make sense of and draw conclusions about past events that could impact on the present or the future (Reddy, 2000). They allow the participants to write their life stories about themselves, people, their memories and experiences about the past, present, and future and the way they understand their lived experiences (Campbell, 2022). Literate life histories afford the participants the ability to tell their stories and to better understand themselves, the relationship they have with others, and how these connections have shaped them. Through the participants' literate life histories, I hope to understand their writing journeys and how they have influenced their current academic writing challenges and perhaps be able to assist them.

To broaden my understanding of the participants' challenges with writing, I requested each participant to write a narrative of their writing experiences. I asked that they shed light on how they were introduced to writing from home to their primary and secondary schooling and to where they are now, and the way in which they feel their writing experiences have influenced their current academic writing challenges. I had written my own literate life history first, to understand my own writing journey and to get a sense of what exactly I was looking for from the participants' literate life histories. The literate life histories allowed me to broadly understand the participants' writing journeys. It also encouraged the participants to reflect on the ways in which they were taught writing when at school, their current proficiencies, and writing challenges.

Through these literate life histories, I could focus more on every individual, family and social structure and conditions, as the texts gave me a holistic view of their academic journeys and thus allowed me to fill in gaps between their past and present writing experiences and possible influences on their writing challenges. Narratives represent the basic form of communication and the way people make sense of their reality and understand it (Bruner, 1990). It is through these written narratives that prompted conversations about feelings and aided participants in

generating their thinking about the art-based presentations that they had selected and giving written narrations of their lived experiences of their writing developments from primary school until university, thus filling the gaps between their past, present and possibly future writing experiences. Literate life histories therefore assisted in responding to the study's research questions namely: 'What are the writing challenges that first-year students face in their writing practices at the university?' and 'What factors contribute to students writing challenges?' I gave the participant an instruction to write a life story about their writing journeys from primary school to university.

3.5.2 *Art-based field texts*

Art-based data collection techniques are inherently participatory methods used to explore the ideas and emotions of the participants to better understand their experiences that may be difficult to describe (Kallos, 2020). Eisner (1997) defines art-based research as the use of artistic forms of expression to portray an intended message and meaning in research. Art-based field texts such as artefacts, pictures, metaphors, drama, and music amongst others are used as ways of expressing what cannot be conveyed in the conventional language (McNiff, 2013). According to Mitchell (2007), art-based activities can be usual for several reasons, ranging from the artistic interest of many young people in engaging in creative activities, as it focuses on the learners themselves and their thoughts and feelings. A study by Eisner (2008) highlighted that people's daily existence involves visual and sensory dimensions, thus incorporating it in this study made it easy for the participants to understand the method because it is something they are exposed to daily. The synthesis of visual, tactile, and artistic characteristics in an art-based data collection method appears advantageous for a broader age range and different abilities for participants, for whom some may not be comfortable with more verbally focused methods (Angell, Alexander and Hunt, 2015). It thus offers inclusivity to participants who may be challenged by literacy-based approaches (Thomson, 2008). Art-based data methods can offer useful insights into a participant's world and ways of seeing their lived experiences while also developing a relationship between the researcher and the participant as the art sometimes speaks for itself and thus puts the participant at ease ((Wall, 2017). Moreover, a mix of data in research encourages participants to create new ways to interact with and to understand their social issues (Bagnoli, 2009). The use of visual representation such as pictures, drawings, and objects among other things becomes a natural extension of ideas of action,

agency, joint action and collaboration where both the participant and the researcher work together with regard to understanding and interpreting participants' stories (Toon, 2008). In my study, I used one art-based field text, namely visual representations. I chose visual representations because I was hoping that they allow participants to use their memories and reflect on past events around their early writing experiences. I was also hoping that visual representations would show social and historical significance in relation to their writing histories as their writing journeys could be influenced by their environment socially and historically (Vygotsky, 1978) and this feeds into my theoretical framework.

There are various arts-based field texts that could have been used in this study, such as drawings, metaphors, art making, collage, mapping drama or image theatre which could have elucidated the participants' hidden knowledge and writing experiences in forms beyond the spoken or written word. It was important to me to gather the data I needed for this study from my participants but also to empower them to express their challenges which could be difficult to do with spoken or written word as they may not feel comfortable sharing their challenges or may not be able to articulate them well and art-based texts assist in promoting meaningful dialogues and supports participants in expressions themselves with issues that may be insensitive or difficult to share (Sally, 2023). I chose visual representation because visuals are easy to find and pictures can tell a story just by looking at them. I also believe that, unlike other art-based methods, visuals can be interpreted easily and are rarely abstract or confusing for the researcher or other participants. A visual representation can assist the participants in thinking differently and deeply about their writing experiences and empathetically about others' experiences and how it has shaped their current lives and challenges as they choose a visual that best represents theirs.

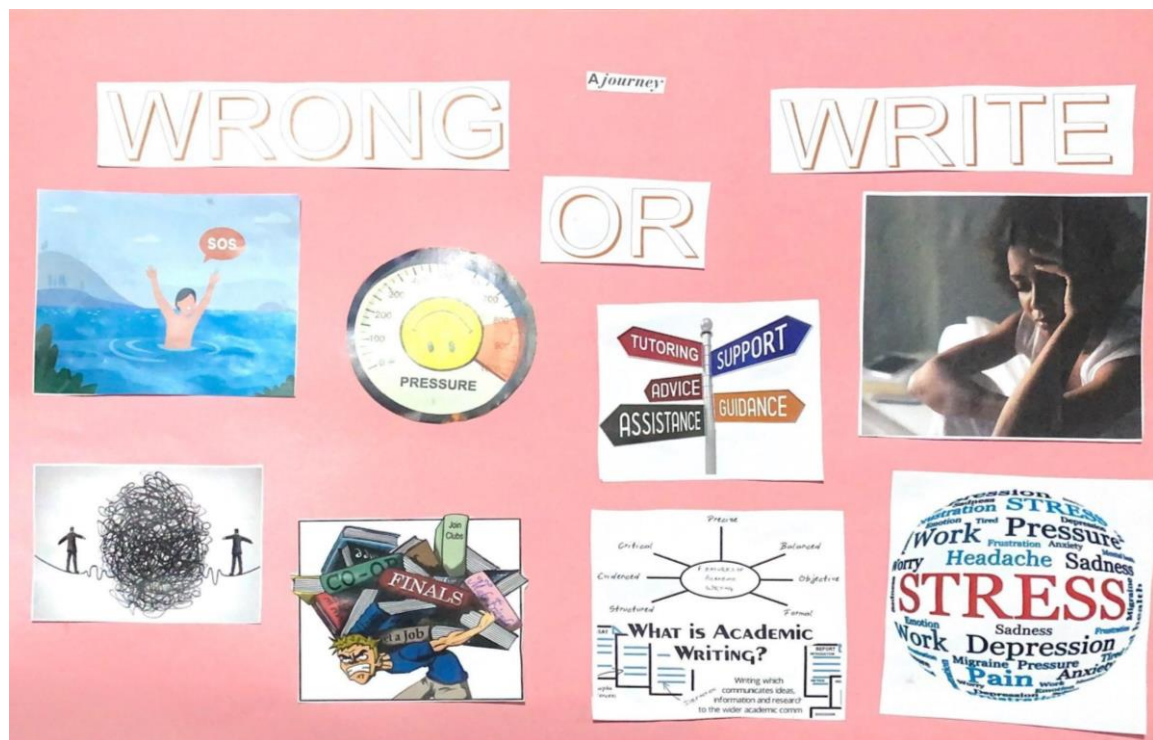
3.5.2.1 Visual Representations

Qualitative researchers observe and record visual representations that seem to suggest meaning to either the researchers or the participants (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). These visual presentations refer to the use of drawings, pictures, and other visuals that metaphorically represent one's experiences, feelings, and ideas that may be difficult to articulate in words (Van Laren, Pithouse-Morgan, Muthukrishna, Naicker, Singh, Chisanga and Meyiwa, 2014). In my study, visual presentations were the second field text to gather data. I asked the participants to bring any visual representations of their choice, such as drawings, pictures or objects which

represent how they felt about their writing abilities when they arrived at university, and how they felt about writing in the middle of their first year. Carpenter (2008) is of the view that visual presentations illuminate the meanings of experiences, provide structure and can serve as an alternative triangulating strategy in qualitative research. The visual presentations became the participants' metaphoric representation of their academic writing experiences, as the photos and other visuals assisted me in further understanding their literate life histories and reinforced what they had written (Mitchell, 2008). Participants brought two visual representations each, with one participant bringing only one.

I chose visual presentations to assist the participants in expressing their experiences and challenges of writing in secondary school as well as university. Visual representations allow for the exploration of layers of people's lived experiences resulting in a holistic communication of self while capturing the unspoken and sensitive experiences, as well as noting the different realities of individuals through different ways as opposed to listening to ready-made answers (Bagnoli, 2009). I found visual representations to be beneficial to my study as participants were able to bring pictures and objects that represented their feelings and experiences about their academic experiences and challenges, allowing participants to be creative in expressing their feelings rather than only in written form. Visual representations were an important part of the field texts, as I was hoping they would allow participants to think about their writing journeys as well as use the visuals to creatively identify their feelings about writing and the possible cause of them, which will in turn assist me in examining the influences of their writing challenges. Visual representations can be interpreted differently by different people which thus could provide inaccurate insight into the participants' stories and lived experiences (Leavy, McSorley and Bote, 2007). This was addressed by the written narratives which explained further the visual representation of the participants and shed light on their journeys thus allowing for my interpretation to resonate with the participants' journey.

The visual representations would then aid participants in generating their thinking about the focus group discussions. It is in the focus groups that each participant including myself had an opportunity to explain their chosen visual presentations giving insight to what each visual represents. All participants commented on each other's visual presentations and had the opportunity to question peers to encourage others to reflect on their choices. They also had the freedom to analyse peers' visuals, to reveal what might have been hidden to those who produced the representation.



Picture 1: Researcher's visual representation chart.

3.5.2.2 Focus Groups

Focus group discussion is a method wherein a researcher gathers a group of individuals to discuss a specific topic, with the aim of drawing from the complex personal experiences, beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes of the participants through a moderated interaction (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Hayward, Simpson, and Wood, 2004; Israel, Schulz, Parker, and Becker, 1998; Kitinger, 1994; Morgan, 1996).

Focus groups are a form of group interview with the aim of capturing the interaction between the participants based on topics by the researcher. Parker and Tritter (2006) stated that the main purpose of focus group research is to arouse a level of participants' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, understandings and responses. The link between people's views and their socio-cultural situation is crucial in understanding participants' experiences since most people derive their ideas, knowledge and understandings from their immediate surroundings and develop these from what they have experienced (Berkes, 2004).

The purpose of the focus groups in this study was to broaden and deepen what the participants had chosen as their visual representations and what they had written in their literate life histories. The group also allowed them to verbalise their literate life experiences. The focus groups assisted me in gathering information about participants' lived experiences as they

shared freely and not in formal interviews. The discussions were semi-structured focus groups, and I asked a few questions (see Appendix 4) to assist me in getting further clarity from what they wrote in their literate life histories, this also allowed me to gather the necessary information through further probing what was said. There was a total of 2 focus group meetings that allowed me to gather all the information I needed. The focus group meeting was recorded and then transcribed as a field text for the purpose of trustworthiness (Cohen et al., 2013). Recording and transcribing the focus group also ensured that rigour was achieved.

The focus group discussions were semi-structured. There was a total of 2 focus group discussions which were recorded. The first focus group discussion was the first time and the participants all met together for the study. To break the ice easily for the participants in the discussions, I started off the discussion by reading my literate life history. I had previously sent the participants my literate life history to give them an example of what I was looking for and how they could possibly write in theirs. Once I was done reading my literate life history, I gave the participants to comment on mine or ask questions. The participants then each took turns with reading their literate life histories while I and the other participants listened. I then allowed the other participants to comment and ask questions about each other's literate life history. This was to make the participants comfortable with one another and to better understand each other's writing experiences. My role was to listen and observe the participants' discussions and engagements while also probing questions where I needed clarity or further explanation about what was said in the discussion or what was written in the literate life history. The second focus group discussion was to discuss the visual representation that the participants had submitted. Each participant had a picture which was a visual representation of their experiences and feelings about writing. The participants took turns in explaining their visual representation and I was listening and observing, while also taking notes to compare what they wrote in their LLH and what was said in the focus groups to check consistency and credibility. I listened to the participants and allowed them to have their views, narrate their experiences and afforded others the opportunity to question their peers. Where appropriate, I shared my experiences and posed questions.

The interpretivist paradigm requires that all accounts be substantiated if they are to prove credibility. The data generated represented the actual realities of my participants as I was reading their literate life histories and then listening to them talking about those experiences, studying the visual presentations. The research paradigm that I employed also requires that all accounts be substantiated if they are to prove credibility. The data generated represented the

actual realities of my participants as I was reading their life histories and then listening to them talking about those experiences, studying the visual presentations.

3.6 Ethics, gatekeeper approval, recruitment of participants and sampling

To gain access to participants, I needed a gatekeeper's permission letter. To gain permission, a letter requesting access, as well as the project brief detailing the nature and purpose of the research was sent to the university registrar and the registrar granted me permission. I then applied for ethical clearance for the University Research Office (see Appendix 2). Upon gaining full ethical clearance and approval (00002972), the participants were recruited and given consent forms to ensure their agreement and participation in this study (see Appendix 1). In ensuring confidentiality and privacy, the participants were reminded that they would remain anonymous as pseudonyms would be used (see Appendix 1). They were reminded that their names, student numbers and the name of the institution would not be disclosed and that their participation was voluntary and should any of them want to withdraw at any stage of research, they were free to do so, without any negative consequences or explanations (Bertram and Christiansen, 2014). The participants were given codes such as 'participant A, B, C, D, E & F' to remain anonymous. The participants were also made aware that the data will be kept in a locked cupboard in my supervisor's office for five years, after which paper documentation containing their confidential information will be shredded and tape-recorded material deleted and the electronic copies will be permanently deleted.

3.6.1 *Recruitment of participants and sampling*

According to Bertram and Christiansen (2014), the sample size in a qualitative research method should be relatively smaller than that of quantitative research, because in qualitative research the research is often concerned with gathering in-depth understanding and are focused on meaning. My sampling of the participants was purposive because I made a deliberate selection of participants who were of interest to the study. The purposive sampling technique means that the researcher makes specific choices about which people to include in the sample. Bertram and Christiansen (2014) state that, in purposive sampling the researcher targets a specific group, knowing that the group does not represent the wider population, it simply represents itself.

The study was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic when the restrictions and lockdown regulations were implemented and all contact lectures were suspended due to these regulations, I could not meet the participants on campus. I had planned to select my participants from a core first year module from a particular campus, but due to the suspension of contact lectures, I was unable to do so and thus chose to work with 6 of my former learners whom I taught in secondary school who were first-year university students at the time of my data collection who were all part of the focus group discussions and contributed their literate life histories. I see these former learners of mine frequently as we live in the same community and more so at the time of the study because, they were studying from home. I am currently assisting these students with their academic work which meant that I was already in contact with them. This made it easy for me to ask them to participate. I met with each of them to ask them to be part of my research. Firstly, I explained my study and told them what it entailed and then I explained what was required of each of them. I made it clear to them that if they could not participate for whatever reason, that would not change the dynamics of our relationship, and that I would continue assisting them with their academic work. All the participants were born in Kwa Zulu Natal and are currently living in a rural area outside of Hillcrest, Durban.

The participants are black South Africans and five of them use IsiZulu as their home language while the other knows and understands IsiZulu, but Xhosa is their home language. Participants were aged between 19 to 24. Four of them are females and two are males. In addition, all the participants rely on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme and the Funza Lushaka bursary for their studies as they come from low socio-economic backgrounds.

3.6.2 The Sample

Information about the participants is summarised in the table below:

CATEGORY NO. OF PARTICIPANTS

Information about the participants is summarised in the table below:

CATEGORY	NO. OF PARTICIPANTS
Females	4
Males	2

African	6
Home language: IsiZulu	4
Home language: Sesotho	1
Home language: IsiXhosa	1
Raised by both biological parents	2
Raised by single parent	2
Raised by grandparent(s)	2
Low socio-economic background	5
Middle socio-economic background	1

Table 1: Profile of 6 participants.

3.7 Data analysis and feedback to participants

During the research process, I gave the participants constant verbal feedback on my interpretations of what they had written so as check and to verify if what I had written was a true reflection of what they meant. They were also given the opportunity to confirm the information I was reading out to alleviate misinterpretation of their stories. This also assisted in enhancing trustworthiness and authenticity, which is crucial in a qualitative study (Bertram & Christian, 2015). I needed to ensure that my findings represent negotiated representations between researcher and researched (Dodge, 2005). Moreover, in the conclusion of my study, a summary including data analysis and conclusions made, was emailed to all participants for information purposes.

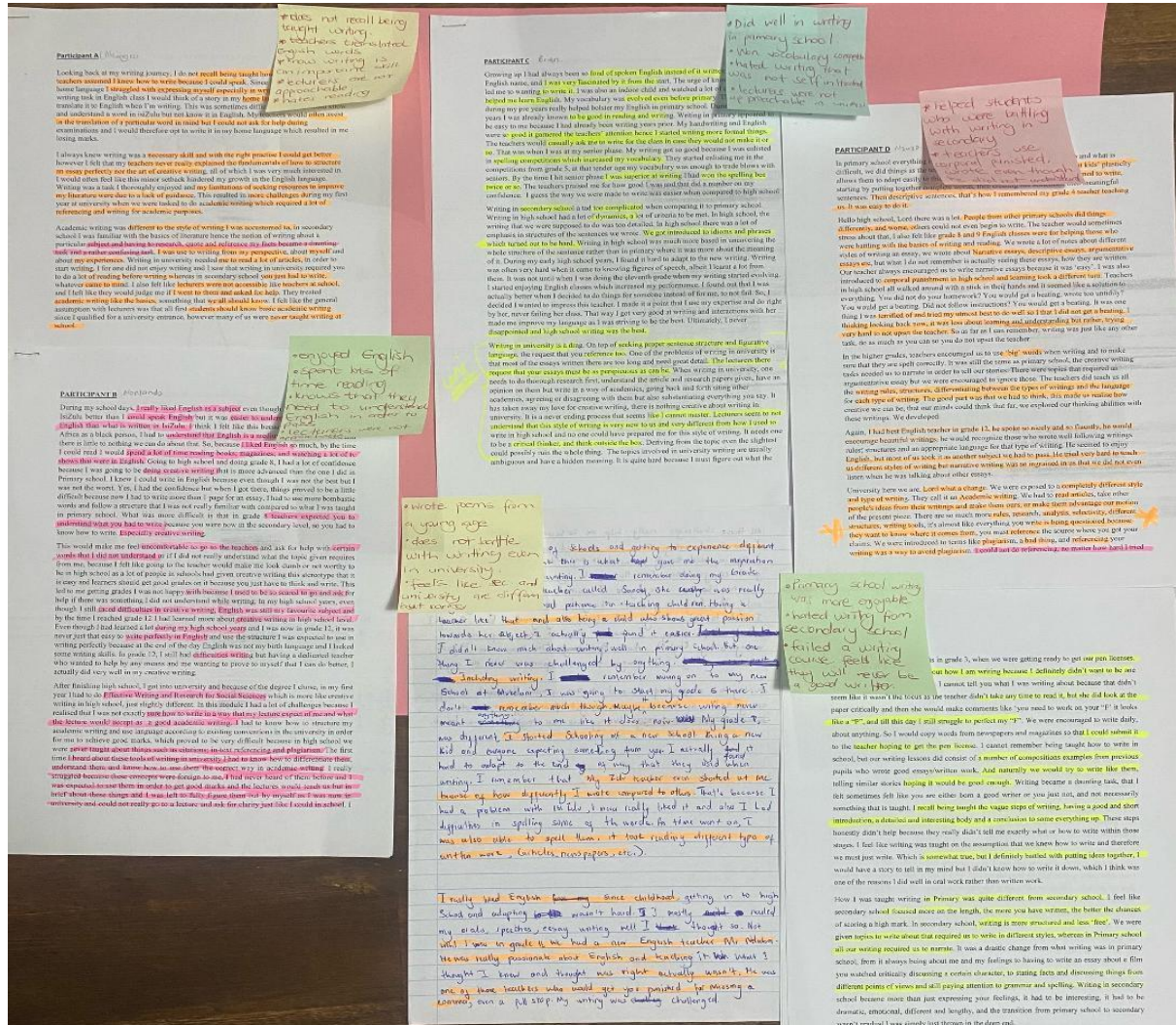
I used thematic analysis (TA) to analyse field texts. Thagaard (2003) described TA as a theme-centered analysis that is used for identifying, describing, analysing, and reporting themes and patterns within a data set in rich detail (Braun and Clarke, 2006). TA is a more accessible method as it does not rely on any pre-existing theoretical framework and can therefore be used within a wide range of frameworks (Braun and Clarke, 2006). TA can either be inductive or deductive. This means that the researcher can either draw themes from the theoretical idea (deductive) or from raw data itself (inductive) (Joffe, 2012). This study used an inductive TA

approach as the purpose of this study was to examine the influences on first-year university students' writing challenges thus, I relied on the data given by the participants for the analysis and did not begin with any preconceived ideas. I already had categories such as academic literacy, writing in schools and academic writing as overarching categories from which numerous themes could emerge. TA also makes use of coding to categorise data (Joffe, 2012). The coding process provides rich and descriptive data which can assist in broadening and providing credible data (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Coding is a method for developing analytic files and validating data across all participants of the research (Bailey, 2007). It is a process of assigning codes, words, or phrases that identify to which topics or themes of the data refer, and organizing the data in a way that is useful for further analysis (Bailey 2007). Coding is a method of data collection that ensures that the notes and descriptions are understood and written clearly such that they can easily be understood about what happened or what was said (Tracy, 2020). Coding can assist researchers in their notes so that they can easily identify where topics that were discussed or observed and thus group them into categories and themes. As the purpose of this study was to examine the influences on first-year university student's writing challenges, I already identified categories as mentioned above, and used these categories to develop themes. Using coding I was able to analyze the participants' data and break it down into new themes and sub-themes. Through this skill, qualitative text data is analyzed in multiple ways, which ensures trustworthiness, and then put back together in results that make sense in the context of the research (Tracy, 2020).

Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines for conducting TA, all data collected from the participants was analysed through 3 stages. The first stage of field text analysis was to analyse the participants' literate life histories. These narratives captured the participants' true feelings and viewpoints as their direct written words were captured for authenticity (Bertram and Christian, 2015). These written narratives also strengthened trustworthiness (Cohen et al., 2011). The participants' literate life histories answered both questions. In this stage of analysis, I was looking for the participants writing histories and experiences to understand their current academic challenges and to identify emerging themes and codes and thus put them under relevant categories. The written narratives that the participants submitted were then verified in the focus groups to broaden my understanding and to allow them to confirm whether the way their stories were interpreted resonated with them. While reading their literate life histories I was looking for ideas and/or descriptions that were common and/or different in each of their

literate life histories. I had each participant's literate life history on a chart and next to it, I wrote a summary of what I understood the participants had said in their narratives.



Picture 2: analysis chart of participants' LLH.

This helped me to highlight each description and to find any correlation with each participant's literate life history. Upon completing the summaries, I found many similarities in how writing was introduced to them from an early age, how their teachers taught writing, and how they felt about writing in primary and secondary school. From this process, I was able to identify themes, that emerged from the summaries.

The second stage of analysis involved interpreting and analysing participants' visual representations. These visual representations of how they felt about their writing abilities when

they were in secondary school and university. In the focus groups, the participants described their choice of visual representations and explained why they chose these. In these discussions, I was listening for coherence with their literate life histories and new information that they could not perhaps articulate in the narratives, which yielded a new theme. These visual representations assisted me in getting an in-depth understanding of their experiences and what they had written in their literate life histories as they were now expressing their experiences verbatim. I was thus able to identify another theme through these discussions and to verify a theme that I had identified during the first stage of analysis.

The third stage of analysis took place after the focus group discussions. After rereading each narrative and attaching the visual presentations to the appropriate participants' literate life histories and listening to the focus group recordings, I was able to identify one additional theme and coded it. This also helped me in verifying and cross-checking some of the information arising from each field text. I used focus group discussions to validate some evidence that the participants gave during the discussions. This strategy also enabled me to gauge areas of agreement and disagreement and thus give clarity where participants may have been confused. I went back to participants not only for further inquiry but also for clarity. I could ask questions to verify my interpretation of the participants' stories. Furthermore, the feedback sessions were transcriptions of recorded field texts, and the tables were shown to the participants so that they could verify whether my interpretations resonated with their narrated stories. The process also enabled the findings to represent negotiated representations between the researcher and the researched (Dodge, Ospina, and Foldy, 2005; Polkinghorne, 2007; Clandinin, 2013).

3.8 Storage of data and disposal of data

The data will be kept in a locked cupboard in my supervisor's office for five years, after which paper documentation containing confidential information will be shredded and tape-recorded material deleted and the electronic copies will be permanently deleted.

3.9 Trustworthiness and rigour

The aim of trustworthiness in qualitative research is to support the findings of the research and to prove that the research tools used will measure accurately what they are supposed to measure and to establish subjectivity and biases not to influence research the findings. (Holloway and

Wheeler, 1996). This is also because Narrative Inquiry allows the researcher to be a part of the research (Asante, 1998). The research paradigm, which was interpretivism, requires that all accounts be substantiated to be credible. The data generated represented the actual realities of my participants as I used their artefacts, and listened to their life histories as well as their discussions in the focus groups.

Holloway and Wheeler (2002) have defined the term credibility as the confidence that can be attached to the truth of the research findings. Credibility is important for narrative research as it recognizes that there are specific procedures employed, such as the line of questioning pursued in the data gathering sessions and the methods of data analysis should be derived, where possible, from those who have successfully utilized it in previous similar research projects (Shenton, 2004). In narrative research, credibility is crucial as it allows for accurate reflection of participants' original views of their own worlds (Graneheim and Lundman, 2004). Multiple data generation methods may be used by the researcher to maintain credibility and in my study, I used three data generation strategies which were literature life histories, visual representations and focus groups to ensure to verify the consistency in my participants' responses. Constant feedback is also crucial in strengthening credibility as it aids in providing further clarity, approval, and disapproval on what has been captured about participants' lived experiences as well as to improve the quality of the research findings (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). To maintain credibility, I documented detailed notes of the research process and have reported thereon.

3.10 Limitation of the methodology

COVID-19 was the biggest limitation of this study. When I started off with this research, I had initially planned to have eight participants but had to drop them to six as I felt it was going to be difficult to have focus groups with eight people and adhere to COVID-19 regulations. I had to also select participants whom I see regularly, which, as explained earlier, is why I opted for my former learners who are from the area in which I teach as I was not privy to participants from different areas and possibly different ethnicities. Another limitation was that all the participants were my former learners from the secondary school where I teach and when I approached them to be part of my study, I was concerned that they would feel obliged to agree.

Since this research was during a time when students were studying from home, this was a new way of learning for all my participants who had previously mentioned how they were

overwhelmed with their own studies and time management. I thus afforded them enough time to think about this study and opted to meet at a time convenient to them.

3.11 Conclusion

This chapter explained the research process by justifying the choice of the research paradigm and approach. I then described the methodological choice of the narrative inquiry. Following this was a section on the three field text generation methods used. It is in this section that I explained the process that I followed in the study. An explanation of my analysis followed by recruitment of participants and sampling. The ethical considerations and trustworthiness were discussed as well as the challenges that I encountered during this study.

In the discussion of findings chapter that follows, I present the key findings.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the analysis of data by elaborating on the findings through a discussion. The chapter presents a thematic analysis of all the data pertaining to the two research questions that underpinned this study. The chapter employs all the data collated from the three research instruments discussed in chapter three. As indicated in the previous chapter, 6 participants wrote their literate life histories and the written histories were useful for the purpose of data analysis. All the participants each gave their visual representations which were accompanied by a brief description of the visual representation. The participants all took part in a focus group discussion which integrated all the field texts to get a clear explanation of what each participant wrote in their literate life history and for them to further describe their visual representation as well as to listen to each participants' contribution in the focus group, thus giving each participant an opportunity to ask me or each other questions or seek clarity where needed.

This chapter presents the three main themes that were derived from the generated data and includes a discussion of these themes. The themes identified assisted me in examining the influences on first-year university students' writing challenges as they unpacked the writing challenges facing first-year students and identified the first-year's perceived influences. The first theme: Socio-cultural-economic backgrounds addressed the participants' backgrounds, their home circumstances, the schools they went to, and the environment they grew up in. The second theme: School writing versus academic writing in university, addressed the differences and/or similarities of school writing and how the two have influenced their current academic writing challenges. The third theme: English as a medium of instruction for ESL learners, identified the English language as an influence on first-year university students' writing challenges as all of them came from schools that taught English as a second language and thus were rarely exposed to it. The sub-themes that were derived from this theme were: challenges with English as ESL students and lecturers using English as a medium of instruction indicated that participants not only struggled with English as a language but the style of lecturing and lecturers use of English as a medium of instruction during lectures was something that the participants were not familiar. This is because their teachers in both primary and secondary school used code-switching and explaining to them in their mother tongue. These themes and sub-themes feed into the topic of writing challenges as they addressed the difficulties the

participants experienced in university which influenced their academic writing challenges. The themes are presented to achieve the purpose of the study and are underpinned by the research questions: *What are the writing challenges that first-year students face in their writing practices at the university?* and *What factors contribute to students writing challenges?*

4.2 Theme One: Socio-cultural-economic Backgrounds

4.2.1 The influence of family socioeconomic status and early exposure to literacy

The data from the focus group discussions and literate life histories indicated that four out of six participants believe that their family socioeconomic status was part of the reason they did not do well in school as whole. For example, they noted: ‘Any form of learning was done in school, I have never written homework at home, it was always done at school so that my friends can help me, this is because there was no one to help me, my mother came home late every day and she was always tired’ (Participant C); ‘I think if I came from a family that exposed me to books and reading from an early age I would have become a write (sic)’ (Participant A); ‘The smarter kids always come from rich families, they had all the stationery and it was easy for them to enjoy school and do well in it’ (Participant B) and ‘you cannot just start in secondary to be a good writer, the crèche and primary school you go to at an early age helps shape good writing skills’ (Participant E). It is clear that participant E believed that her family’s socioeconomic status had a negative impact on her literacy practices as a child because her family could not afford to take her to those schools that she deemed better and she felt would better equip her for university. If these findings are true, they are in line with Thomson’s (2018) findings who found that students who came from schools that were quartile⁸ 3 and above performed better than those from the lowest quantiles in the university.

Participant C’s views were also reinforced by his first visual representation which is a picture of a child indoors looking out of the window.

⁸ A category model that groups schools according to the funding each school receives from the government. Schools in lower quintiles are normally poor and need the most funding from the government.



Participant C's first visual representation

The participant stated that the visual representation symbolizes participant C being sad about his mother not being home to assist him with his school work which could have impacted how he felt about homework and school as a whole and could have had a negative attitude towards it because he had to deal with it alone.

In the focus group, Participant E appeared certain that her home environment played an important role in introducing her to literacy which is why she did not struggle with reading and writing at school. She notes that even though she did not enjoy reading at first, her mother always made her read to her while she was cooking or busy with something at home. *'my mother is a teacher, even when I did not have any school work to do, she would make me at least read something to her from my school books, that's how I remembered I had homework sometimes'*. Participant E smiled and laughed while saying these words during the focus group discussion which indicated to me that it was a pleasant memory for her. The fact that she mentioned that her mother is a teacher could indicate that she understood the importance of exposing her to literacy at an early age. She could have been better equipped to help her with her school work and to provide the necessary means to assist her child. Furthermore, the fact

that Participant E comes from a middle-class family means that her family could afford to take her to better schools or pay for extra classes if she was struggling with anything academically.

Participant F seemed to think that home and school played equal roles in developing his literacy skills. He believes that his parents played their part in exposing him to literacy at an early age by reading to him and helping him learn how to read before going to school. In his LLH he noted *'I could read before I got to formal school, my teachers always applauded me for that'* and in the focus group discussions; *'I won two spelling bee competitions in primary school, my teachers helped me a great deal with writing that's why I believe home and school expose to literacy is important'* (Participant F). Even though Participant F started school knowing how to read he understands that his teachers also had a positive impact on his early literacy knowledge and that they were able to build on his prior knowledge. Participant F's comments revealed that parental role in a child's life plays a determining factor about the literacies of their children prior to school literacy. These findings are in line with those of Antilla (2013) who found that children's overall literacy development and readiness for school is shaped by their parents who are the first teachers as they play an important role in determining their children's preparedness for formal school and thus influences the literary success throughout their secondary and tertiary education. These findings relate directly to this study's theoretical framework which emphasizes that the school environment is crucial to learners' literacies in the later years (Vygotsky, 1978).

4.2.2 The influence of primary and secondary schooling environment

The data from the LLH and focus group discussions revealed that three out of six participants noted that their primary and secondary did not adequately prepare them for university. For example, one participant noted: *'My primary and secondary school did not have a library, I have never read a book outside of the ones our teachers gave us and took back at the end of the lesson'* (Participant A); *'Reading and writing were not skills I knew well, the teachers always made the best readers read to read in class and only focused on the well-written piece to the class and never corrected us that did not do well'* (Participant B); *'My primary and secondary school was under-resourced, there were many times where we didn't have teachers and the impact of that is showing now'* (Participant C). This view was reinforced by Participant's A visual representation and in discussing it she noted: *'My school was poor and the class was overcrowded, teachers did not even bother coming to class at times'* What the

visual representation symbolized was that Participant A's class was overcrowded and not clean. In the picture, there are many children in class and some learners are sitting on the floor. This speaks to the nature of disadvantaged schools where there is not enough furniture and necessary resources for the learners to use.

Perhaps Participant A's choice of her visual representation was a depiction of the sadness and discomfort she had for school as she had learned in an unsanitary and filthy environment and could not have been prepared for any schooling in such an environment.



Participant's A first visual representation

The lack of functional libraries in schools impacts directly on the lack of interest to read on the part of students attending these schools and, inevitably in the inability of many of them to read well. Many of the pupils who qualified to go to university still battle to understand what they are reading, which is an important skill that is critical to unlocking the door to acquiring knowledge in university and the world beyond, Ramphela (2009). The importance of a library to learning in general and to reading in particular cannot be overemphasised. A library and a student cannot functionally exist without each other. This means that for a student to succeed academically, he or she should read regularly and have an interest in printed reading material. Libraries should provide access to these much-needed materials. This view is supported by Pretorius (2002) who also argues that the schooling system needs to be conducive for learning

for learners to succeed academically. Too little initiative seems to be taken on the part of the education authorities to promote basic school functionality and availing necessary resources for all learners. The success rate of former Model C schools is largely due to them having functional libraries, among other resources (Mhlongo, 2014).

4.2.3 The influence of codeswitching of teachers in secondary schools

Code-switching is defined as the practice of selecting or altering linguistic elements to contextualize talk in interaction (Mortega, 2022). The data from the focus group indicated that five out of six participants noted that they encountered challenges at university because their former school teachers used to code switch during teaching and learning, whereas lecturers at the university lecturers and tutors only use English for lecturing purposes. For example, participants noted: *'There was never a time where my teachers did not use isiZulu in the lesson, so hearing English through the lecturer is new to me'* Participant C; *'Even our English teachers explained certain things in isiZulu when we did not understand the English and it was easier that way'* (Participant B); *'I think if lecturers can sometimes explain certain things in isiZulu, I could be better'* (Participant A). These views were reinforced by Participants D and E who in their LLH noted: *'Lecturers do not understand that English isn't our mother tongue and I think they should accommodate us or have translated (sic) because sometimes they speak too fast as well'* (Participant D); and *'When teachers codeswitched it made me comfortable to answer or ask questions because I knew that I too can codeswitch'* (Participant E).



Participant D's first visual representation

Participant D's visual representation was a picture of a group of children with an adult looking at something. They were all touching it and appeared happy with what they were seeing and doing. The participant selected this picture because to him it indicates that everyone had close contact with the teacher and could understand what was supposed to be done and perhaps ask immediately if they were confused and the teacher would understand as they all appear to get along and understand one another in the visual representation. This indicates that in secondary school,

participant D and his classmates understood the teacher because she codeswitched and accommodated them as second-language speakers of English.

4.2.4 The influence of attending former Model C schools

The data from the focus group discussions indicated that one of the six participants noted that attending English HL crèche and primary school better equipped him for university literacies. Participant F noted *'I think my crèche and primary school were a strong foundation for me because I did English as a Home Language and I have never really struggled with it even in secondary school'* (Participant F). What I gathered from Participant F's comments was that attending an English medium crèche and primary school made him confident and comfortable with English language competencies, even when he was no longer in a former model C school. Perhaps he was aware that former Model C schools had educators who were better qualified and who spoke English as a home language. Participant F also seemed to correlate academic literacy performance to early literacy in terms of fluency in English. It is also possible that attending former Model C Schools already put them at an English literacy advantage. If these findings are true, they are in line with the findings of Spaul (2013), who found that the schools that were attended by whites during apartheid are today usually better equipped, as they often have teachers who are more effective than those that served and continue to serve blacks.

The affluent classes have access to well-built and better equipped schools while the poor and the working classes continue to have the opposite. According to Masitsa (2010), nothing much has changed in this regard since the 1994 political milestone in South Africa. He further asserts that the town and city schools had and continue to have access to better motivated teachers and well-resourced libraries and laboratories. It is therefore not surprising that many black parents have attempted to send their children to the 'better' schools, which are the former Model C schools (Mhlongo, 2014). The availability of the resources in former Model C, such as well-

resourced libraries and big classrooms that are not overcrowded contributes considerably in preparing students for the level of education after secondary school (Mhlongo, 2014).

4.3 Theme Two: school writing versus academic writing in university

4.3.1 Secondary and university school writing experiences

The data from the LLH indicated that participants A, B, C, & E enjoyed writing in both primary and secondary school. They all wrote that English paper three which deals with creative writing was their favorite paper out of all three English papers they had to write in secondary school. Participant A noted *'It was that one paper I never needed to study for and I knew I was going to pass very well.'* It appears that Participant A took English writing in secondary school for granted as something that she could pass easily, and did not pay much attention to it. This is despite the findings of Al-Hammadi and Sidek (2015) who found that a vast majority of secondary students do not understand the purpose of writing tasks and how important these tasks are to develop their writing skills and thus lack proficiency in writing. What participant C made clear with regards to writing at school was *'With creative writing, you just had to narrate whatever story that comes to mind, it wasn't difficult or anything you needed to study for'*. Participant B is of the same mindset as participants A and C as she stated that *'It was impossible to fail writing; the teacher could not mark you wrong for telling your story'*, Participant B.

In terms of writing at school, of concern was that participants A, B, C, and E made no mention of another style of writing in their LLHs. They spoke only about writing stories and narrating whatever came to mind when they were in school. They noted: *'Writing was like telling your friend a story about your life, which was simple'* (Participant, A); *'Any topic we were given gave us room to write whatever that came to mind'* (Participant, B); *'Everyone knew how to tell a story, so writing it down was not difficult'* (Participant, C). It is likely that the above-mentioned participants were not exposed to different styles of writing as well as different skills needed when writing, such as to analyze, criticize, and evaluate texts. It is important to note that the CAPS document for English FAL in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase clearly stipulates that learners from grades 10 to 12 must be able to analyze and evaluate written texts and thus be able to infer knowledge from it and write their own texts to show understanding (DoE, 2011). Although the writing activities outlined in the CAPS document do not go beyond transactional writing, these activities however stress the importance of learners

being competent in writing, reviewing, analyzing, discussing, evaluating and critiquing texts, and none of the participants indicated this. All participants viewed writing as a mundane task that they could easily pass. The CAPS document (DoE, 2011) clearly outlines the different cognitive levels for assessment as literal, reorganization, inference, evaluation, and appreciation. These cognitive levels put great emphasis on differing questioning styles which should enable learners to be exposed to and acquire a range of writing competencies. Although the CAPS document stresses the importance of learners being taught all the different cognitive levels, the participants did not seem to have been exposed to all these levels, which is likely why participants A, B, C & E stated that they enjoyed writing in secondary school and excelled in it. This is evident in Participant A's visual representation which shows a learner who has her hand raised in class and is smiling, which indicates that she knows what is being taught, and perhaps wants to give the teacher the answer.



Participant A's second visual representation

What I noted is that Participant A's visual representation contradicts what she said in the focus group discussions. She said *'The writing we do in university isn't like what we were taught at school'*, Participant A. When I asked her about the contrast between her visual representation and the focus group discussion, she stated that the visual representation is her feelings about writing in secondary school and not university. The possibility of participants A, B, C, and E's

lack of exposure to the different styles of writing despite them being a requirement in the CAPS document could be indicative of their teacher's inadequate knowledge and inability to expose them to a range of writing styles. 'Our teacher always encouraged us to write a narrative essay because most of us did well in them' (Participant, A); *'Narrative essays were the only essay style writing I have ever learnt, I knew there were other styles but I thought you only write what you are comfortable with'* (Participant, B). *'My teacher told us about argumentative and discursive and other styles of writing but encouraged us to only write reflective or narrative essays'* (Participant C). Nessipbayeva's (2012) findings of a study in Almaty state that many EFAL teachers' content knowledge of the subject is inadequate, and the teachers find it difficult to understand the policies and textbooks they are using in their teaching. This notion is supported by Rosyida and Ghufroon (2018) who are also of the view that incompetent teachers in schools develop a tendency of only focusing on aspects that they themselves find easier to teach and thus can complete the syllabus quickly and they do not consider learners' problems and subject policies.

The LLH also revealed that four out of the six participants only enjoyed writing in primary and secondary school and not in university, the focus groups with six of the participants revealed that participants D and F did not have any issues with writing both in secondary school and university. Participant D noted *'Writing in secondary school was okay, and academic writing in university is different but it is an extension of that'*, while Participant F noted; *'I had an English teacher who loved English and wanted us to love it too, so when it came to writing he made sure he checked our work thoroughly because he did not want any mistakes'*. This view is in line with social constructivism theory, and as this theory operates from the premise that children's environment has an influence on their school performance and their school environment determines their performance in their later literacies (Vygotsky, 1977; Rose, 2004). It also reiterates the importance of MKO as Participant F noted that his teacher had a positive impact on him enjoying English and doing well in it. It thus speaks of the scaffolding done by his teacher who supported him where necessary and when it was time to remove the support the participant was able to work independently and understand university literacy even when his teacher is no longer there. The views of both participant D and F can be attributed to the fact that they both went to the same secondary school and they both achieved level 7s (80-100%) in English FAL in their grade 12 year. Participant F made mention of the fact that his English teacher loved teaching them English which made him enjoy the subject. Participant F noted: *'My English teacher lived and breathed English, and that made me love it'*. Participant

F's statement is supported by Omar, Ahmad, Hassan, and Roslin (2018) who believe that the teachers' competency is important because it will have positive effects on the learners' academic development and skills to ensure quality learning.

In contrast to their writing in secondary school, participants A, B, C, and E appear to have battled with academic literacy in university. They all stated that even though they enjoyed writing in secondary school, in university they found academic literacy challenging. Participant A wrote, *'I am shocked now that I am failing anything to do with writing'*, while Participant C used the words *'confused'* and *'complicated'* when writing about her academic literacy experiences. This participant who believed it is impossible to fail writing at school wrote *'Academic writing is a lot different to secondary school writing, everything you write can be wrong'* (participant C). The participants (A, B, and E) comments about suddenly struggling with academic writing in university when they did not have any challenges in school are in line with Mhlongo's (2014) findings, who found that many new students enter university without a sufficient academic literacy level that is expected in university.

Even though participant C wrote in his LLH that he struggled with academic writing he did not mention this during the focus group discussions. Perhaps he thought that he did not need to mention it again, even though participants A and E mentioned that they struggled with academic writing and he could have concurred with them or added a similar input to what they said. Another reason could be that he was intimidated by Participant D who confidently stated *'Writing is okay, in fact, it is manageable, I have not had any difficulties with it'*. Perhaps Participant C did not feel comfortable sharing his experience in front of other participants as focus groups are not as confidential as LLH. Perhaps I was at fault for not probing and encouraging additional discussions to understand and unpack what the participant was trying to say.

Participant C's visual representation was of an image of a stick man who seems to be thinking and is sad. There are lines above his head that are going in all directions and inter-crossing one another.



Participant C's second visual representation

Participant's C narrative of his visual representation also indicates that he found academic writing challenging as he noted, *'The confused stick man represents me, and the scribbles and arrows pointing all directions at the top is academic writing, it is something that seems so foreign to me, and I never know where to start with it'*. Participant C's visual representation reinforces what he had written in his literate life history, as it clearly indicated that he is struggling with writing even though he did not voice that out in the focus group discussions. The narrative of his visual representation also indicates that he found academic writing challenging as he noted, *'The confused stick man represents me, and the scribbles and arrows pointing all directions at the top is academic writing, it is something that seems so foreign to me and I never know where to start with it'*. Participant C's visual representation reinforces what he had written in his literate life history and it shows that he is struggling with it and views it as something that he does not even understand even though he did not voice that out in the focus group discussions. Participant C's visual representation could also indicate that he feels like he is the only one struggling with academic writing as there is only one stick man. This could also be the reason why he was reluctant to speak up in the focus group as his feeling of being alone in the struggle with academic literacy could have been validated by the fact that participants D and F noted: *'I do not think academic writing is difficult, it is just different from*

what we were used to in secondary' (participant D) and *'It's like all the modules we do, different from secondary school but nothing I cannot handle'* (participant F). Participant C's reluctance to speak up could also be a contributing factor to why Participant C is struggling with academic writing. Participant C noted: *'It's not easy asking for help here, it's like you are the only one struggling, unlike at school where we could all ask as a class'*. The fact that Participant C does not speak about his challenges and possibly seek help from any of the MKOs could be an attitude he has adopted in university which will not help him overcome his challenges with academic writing. This view is supported by Mutimani (2016) who found that many students fail in university because they are afraid to seek help from their lecturers.

In an effort to further understand participants lived experiences of their writing challenges, I probed participants during their focus groups discussions about what they thought was the cause of their academic writing challenges and their responses included a variety of responses such as *'I think my biggest problem is vocabulary and grammar, I sometimes know what to write but I do not have the English words for it'* (Participant A). While the LLH revealed that Participant A enjoyed writing in secondary school and excelled in it, the focus group discussions revealed that Participant A struggles with vocabulary and grammar which is concerning because both grammar and vocabulary are fundamentals of writing. This could indicate that the writing that Participant A did in secondary school was not adequate to equip her with the necessary skills she needed for writing in university. Similarly, participant B noted *'For me it's spelling, I was used to my teachers helping me translate words in isiZulu to English'*. What I gleaned from both participants A and B's responses is that they equate good writing to spelling and grammar. This view is supported by Afrin (2016) who found that spelling and grammar play an important role in writing as correct grammar and spelling provide students with the ability to deliver their thoughts clearly and freely. Yet what is important in academic literacy is the skills acquired in formal schooling as well as the ability to read and write effectively in a particular discipline in a university context (Mhlongo, 2014).

Participant E seemed to be emotional throughout the focus group discussions. She kept sighing and noted that she struggled with everything. She did not specifically say what she found challenging but she noted *'Mina nje konke kuyangihlula konke, ngathi isiChina'*, which translates to *'For me everything is difficult, it all sounds like Chinese'*. What I noted about Participant E is that she seemed to have lost all hope in understanding academic writing and had lost confidence in herself. Participant E's LLH also indicated that she has given up and feels like she will never understand anything in university. In her LLH she noted: *'I could not*

understand any of it no matter how hard I tried and asked for help, it never made any sense' (Participant, E). It seemed as if she had accepted that she would never understand academic writing. While other participants were able to state specifically what they thought were the causes of their academic writing challenges, participant E seemed to have a negative attitude towards it and felt defeated by it. It is possible that Participant E's negative attitude could be the reason why she does not understand academic writing. If this is true, it is in line with Jabali's (2018) findings which found that most students who show a negative attitude towards writing are unlikely to attain proficiency in it.



Participant E's first visual representation

Participant E's visual representation was a picture of a young person's hand gripping the finger of an older person, who does not seem to be holding the younger person's hand back. The visual representation and narrative indicated that the participant was trying to understand and show affection (love) to academic writing, but it did not love (hold her back). Like adults, whom children trust to show them the way and show them affection, the adult's hand seems to not grip the young person's hand, which is Participant E's hand, which thus leads to her not

understanding academic writing. Participant E's narration of her visual representation included: *'Me, wanting the love and attention of academic writing..., it's letting go of me!'* The possibility that Participant E was giving up and losing all hope was suggested by the fact that the child was also holding on with one hand and not both. Participant E's LLH further confirmed her feelings in the visual representation as she noted: *'I really wanted to understand academic literacy, I did all I could, I asked for help, read what I was told to but I still don't understand it, I have given up and I am okay with it'*. Even though Participant E said she was okay with not knowing academic literacy, her tone and facial expression in the focus group discussions did not show that. She was reserved and quiet and did not want to contribute much after her presentation, which showed that not knowing academic literacy does bother her. Participant E's lack of participation and utterances worried me as she seemed stressed and defeated by everything. I felt like her constantly saying she's fine and has given up but is still in university shows a sign of stress and sadness with the lack of help she is getting. I believe that if she does not get help or speak up it may lead to depression. University puts pressure on students, especially first-year students, who are a group experiencing a critical transition from being school children to being adults (Davies, 2020). This combined with social changes, exam pressures, and other internal or external challenges people face can put university students at risk in terms of their mental health. According to Beck's (2020) cognitive theory of depression, individuals who achieve low grades or battle academically are likely to become depressed as they may develop low self-esteem and because of their tendency to have negative thoughts about themselves and their future. Moreover, university students who have a negative view of themselves may be reluctant to engage in new challenging academic work and give up when they feel inadequate (Davies, 2020). Participant E could also be feeling overwhelmed and lack motivation and therefore decides to give up.

4.3.2 Challenges with reading and how they impact on students' writing

The data from the LLHs and focus groups indicate that three out of six participants (A, B and E) noted that they encountered challenges with reading. Participants note; *'The books and articles we have to read are difficult to understand'* (Participant A); *'There's always reading we have to do, and it's very hard'* (Participant B); *'The reading is challenging because it is not just basic English we are used to, but academic language too, which you also have to understand'* (Participant E). It appears that participants (A, B, and E) do not have an adequate

understanding of the English language which could be the reason why they find reading difficult. Participants' comments revealed the gap between secondary school literacies and university literacy practices have not been bridged, resulting in participant feeling underprepared and confused. This view is in line with (Boakye, Sommerville, & Debusho 2014) who found that ESL first-year universities lack adequate reading competencies which under-prepares them for university.

Participants' comments (A, B and E) revealed that the quantity of reading in university also posed a challenge as they noted; *'One of my biggest challenges is reading, it is too much'* (Participant E); *'The articles are always pages and pages long'* (Participant A) and *'I don't think I have read something from start to finish, it's impossible'* (Participant B). It became clear that the quantity of reading materials had contributed to the participants' challenges. Perhaps it was far less than what they were used to in secondary school which could possibly mean that they had not acquired the necessary academic reading skills needed in university. These findings are reinforced by Chokwe (2011) who indicated that university students need to develop necessary reading and writing skills in different disciplines to improve their academic reading skills.

In addition, the following comments were made about challenges with academic reading *'This type of reading I have never come across, its challenging'* (Participant B). Such opinions were reinforced by participants (C, D, and F) in the focus group as well, as they noted: *'The reading is different and very difficult here'* (Participant C); and *'the books and articles are boring, long and very difficult to understand'* (Participant E). The participants' comments revealed that there is a possible gap in terms of their reading abilities as most of them used words like 'difficult' and 'hard' to describe their feelings about reading in university. This could be explained by the fact that university literacies may require an in-depth understanding of the English language that the participants might not possess. These findings are reinforced by those of Kapp (2012) who found that students in university battle with reading because they do not have the required level of reading skills for university as they were inadequately developed in their lower schooling years.

4.3.3 Challenges with referencing and citation

Referencing refers to a system used in the academic field to acknowledge ideas and work that originates from various sources. (Robertson, 2013). Academic writing students are required to

obtain, understand and analyse information from different sources such as textbooks, articles, journals or any published materials (Tyson, 2012). In addition to providing credits to various authors, referencing must show readers what the writer knows about the topic and to assist them in locating the sourced materials (Lipson, 2003). Failure to reference properly will lead to plagiarism which is a serious problem in academia (Wallwork, 2011). Thus, referencing is a crucial aspect of academic writing.

The data from the LLH indicated that five out of the six participants struggled with references and citations which is evident from all their responses when they noted 'referencing became a daunting and confusing part of academic writing' (participant A); *'In secondary school we were never taught about citation and referencing...these are foreign things to me'* (participant B); *'I cannot do referencing and citation no matter how hard I tried'* (participant D); *'I always know when my assignment comes back, there will be a comment about incorrect referencing, I have given up at this point'* (participant E) and *'Referencing and citing is complicated and it is what makes academic writing difficult'* participant C. Such opinions were reinforced by participants (A, B, C, D and E) in the focus group as well as they noted, *'I think once I master referencing I will be fine'* (participant E); *'lecturers assume we know how to reference but we have never been taught'* (participant B); *'I find referencing challenging because I have been thoroughly taught how to reference'* (participant C) and *'citation is still challenging for me, I do even know where to start'* (participant A). Participants comments on both their LLHs and focus group discussions revealed the possibility of not being thoroughly guided by lecturers on referencing and citing as participants B and C two both stated that lecturers assume that they know how to reference and cite *'Lecturers assume we know how to reference'* (participant B) and *'I just wish lecturers could teach referencing in great detail like they do other things'* (participant C). Lecturers may believe that it is not their responsibility to teach referencing and citing as it may not form part of the curriculum in university and some lecturers may be not clear on referencing themselves, thus could not teach it. If this is true, it is in line with Rezeki's (2018) findings which found that students in university find referencing and citation challenging because citation materials and referencing guidelines are not explicitly included in the curriculum and its requirement is not strongly imposed by lecturers. Although participant B and C indicated that they have been introduced to the topics of references and citations in some of their modules, these aspects of writing still pose a challenge to them. Perhaps being introduced to them for the first time in university could be the source of their difficulty.

Considering that Yasuda (2004) points out that citation and paraphrasing skills are the most difficult aspects of writing.

Participant B's visual representation was a picture of a young boy sitting at a study desk next to a stack of books, with one book open in front of him and he is laying his face down on it. He seems to be overwhelmed and possibly crying. He is holding a sign over his head with the word 'help!' which indicates that he needs serious help, possibly help with the pile of work next to him. The picture and narrative indicated that the participant was overwhelmed with the work. Participant B's narration of her visual representation included *'Me...frustrated and crying trying to do work at university and struggling...'*. The picture shows a person who seems to have given up and is calling out for help which suggests that the participant was in serious need of assistance with his academic work. Participants explained that they find referencing, in the form of both in-text citations and compiling lists of references, very difficult. As a result, their assignments often fall foul of the regulations concerning plagiarism, owing to their being unable to paraphrase or acknowledge sources correctly. Most of these participants come from the rural and township areas of the Kwa Zulu Province, where the academic development of the indigenous people was severely compromised by Bantu Education before 1994 (Tire & Shabalala, 2006).



Participant B's second visual representation

Participant B's visual representation depicted the pessimism of the participant who seems to acknowledge that he needs help but the body language of the young boy in the picture seems to be defeated by his studies and thus feels helpless.

What I gleaned from this participant's comments was that he has not received much assistance with knowing how to reference which could explain the urgent need for help. *'Lecturers seldom give us assistance with references but always stress the importance of including references but don't tell us how to!'* (Participant B). Participant B's comment could be an indication that lecturers did not teach referencing in class. Perhaps the reason why lecturers might have not taught participants referencing was due to time constraints as they needed to catch up with the syllabus. It is possible that lecturers are not aware that Participant B and other students require help with their academic work. Perhaps Participant B has not communicated this with her lecturers. Participant B's visual representation could be an indication of the gap that exists between secondary school and university literacies, which leads to her facing challenges and possibly feeling overwhelmed by the amount of work.

4.3.4 Challenges with lecturers' teaching styles

Five out of the six participants A, B, C, D and E preferred their secondary school teachers' teaching styles to their university lecturers felt that lecturers were not as approachable and helpful as their secondary teachers. A participant noted *'Secondary teachers made sure we all understood what is being taught'* (Participant B). This view was reinforced by five of the six participants (A, B, C, D and E) in their literature life histories, as well as three who noted, *'teachers in secondary school taught with when teaching writing and other subjects and they involved us, unlike most lecturers who rarely interact with the students.'* (Participant C); *'It was easier to approach your secondary school teachers when you did not understand something'* (participant E) and *'I think if lecturers taught like our teachers, it would be better less serious and intimidating'* (participant A). Participant D noted in his LLH that *'I think the fact that teachers in high school code switched a lot also helped with understanding the work'* (participant D). Participants A, B, C, D and E believe that the teaching styles of their secondary school teachers, which were dynamic, and learner-centered made their teaching styles better than their lecturers and thus helped them to understand their work better. These findings are reinforced by the findings of Simovic (2014) whose study found that 68% of learners preferred

the learner-centered teaching method because it is more interactive and helpful than the teacher-centered method which is usually used in universities.

Participant E's second visual representation of being taught writing at school was a picture of a male teacher standing behind young learners in the classroom who seemed to be busy writing. The teacher is leaning towards the learners who are writing. The teacher could be monitoring and facilitating the work that the learners are doing. The fact that all the learners are writing and seem to be concentrating on what they are doing could indicate that the teacher has assisted them, and they all know what they are doing because none of them seem confused. What the picture told me was that the teacher is always there to assist the learners not only when teaching but also makes one-on-one time to monitor and assist those learners who experience challenges and need further explanations. The picture further suggested that learners themselves were productive and confident when they knew that the teacher was around to assist when they needed him. Perhaps behind the learners' productivity and focus on their work was that they understood and enjoyed their schoolwork.

Participants' views show that they have not been thoroughly prepared for how lecturers teach and they attribute their lecturer's style of teaching to their academic writing challenges. It appears that the South African school curriculum failed to prepare participants for how they will be taught in university and they became over-reliant on their teachers. This could indicate that the teaching methodologies in schools may be too teacher-centered which is why in university students struggle with doing their work independently as they rely greatly on their teachers.



Participant E's second visual representation

Participants seem to realize the role their teachers played with regard to making school work manageable and how the teacher's assistance helped them to pass secondary school.

Participant E noted that she was always asking questions when she did not understand the work. *'I was always at the teacher's desk seeking help, that way I knew exactly what was needed to be done'* (participant E). Participant E's comment revealed that she was very reliant on her teachers to explain work further and that her teachers played a determining role in making her schoolwork easier by providing constant support and scaffolding. These findings are in line with those of Mupa (2015) who found that primary and secondary teachers play a pivotal role in assisting those learners who are struggling. Thus, participant E's metaphor shows a teacher next to a learner possibly assisting her, which is assistance she is no longer receiving in university from her lecturers and could be the root of her academic challenges. It became clear that participants A, B, C, D and E secondary school teachers' teaching styles had a role to play in their students' academic performance. Participants' teachers seemed to provide ready-made material to the participants, possibly to assist the participants with progressing to the following grade throughout their schooling years which made them over-reliant on their teacher. These findings are reinforced by the findings of Tom et al. (2013), who found ESL students are overly dependent on their teachers for information.

The participants' comments indicated that academic writing posed as a challenge, and they seemed to be aware that lecturers could assist them. The varied nature of visual representations and comments from literate life histories and focus group discussions seemed to have a common thread of challenges with academic writing in university. Perhaps these challenges stemmed from the fact that participants had not adjusted to the university literacies in general.

4.3.5 Computer illiteracy

Another challenge that emerged from the data concerned the difficulties that first-year students experienced while attempting to acquire the level of computer literacy needed to study effectively in university. 3 of the participants came from rural backgrounds and had no prior knowledge of computers when they arrived at the university. In the focus group discussions, Participant B noted 'I have never needed to type anything on a computer before coming here and now everything must be typed' and 'I did not know how to use a computer before university or even look for anything online' (participant E). These responses as well as their LLH indicated that before even dealing with the problem of academic writing, the participants had difficulties using a computer which is an important part of the university academic life. This made it difficult for them to search for study material, type their assignment, and submit them online, as they had not been exposed to computers in secondary school. This view is reinforced by the findings of Dzamesi, Manu and Owusu-Ansah (2020) who found more than 30% of the students in a university in Ghana cited computer illiteracy as a reason for poor academic performance. Participant C nodded and agreed while the other participants were sharing their experiences with the lack of knowledge of computers but were hesitant to give input in the focus group discussion. This was of concern because he noted a computer illiteracy challenge in his LLH as he noted 'I knew computers but not well enough to type and search for things, but my friends helped me with typing'. He could have not struggled as much as the others because he had supportive friends or he was not comfortable sharing his experience and was perhaps embarrassed by the fact that he was computer illiterate. Although only 3 out of the 6 participants acknowledged that a lack of computer literacy posed great difficulty for them, 2 participants explained that the computer literacy course that is compulsory assisted them with knowing more about computers and how to type assignments in a way that the university wanted. It is obvious that students, who are not familiar with the use of computers when they

arrive at university, will encounter difficulties of the sort associated with admitting large numbers of students from rural backgrounds, making it imperative to provide support to these students to enable them to study successfully.

4.4 Theme Three: English as a medium of instruction for ESL learners

4.4.1 Challenges with English as ESL students

As indicated earlier, the university in which this study is conducted in requires the use of English as the medium of instruction. Even though English is a second language for all 6 of the participants, the university expects all students to have competency in English to be eligible for enrolment. Three out of six indicated in the focus group discussions that they were below average in English participant (B, C and E) stated that they experienced language challenges in university. Participant B stated *'I am unable to express my views well when I am writing and sometimes when I am speaking'*. Participant E had a similar view and stated *'I have realized that my English writing skills are poor, I did not know this in secondary school by now I have understood that I cannot write well in English.'* Participant E expresses how she had no idea that her writing skills were poor and only realized this in university. It is possible that she had confidence in her abilities in secondary school, where the level demanded was lower; in university, she may have experienced a steep increase in the level demanded and her confidence took a drop and affected her ability to write well.

Evidence from LLHs and focus group discussions indicated that four out of six participants A, B, C and E encountered challenges with writing English from as early as primary school. A participant noted *'I have never liked speaking and writing in English, it was difficult'* (participant A). During the focus group discussions participant, A further noted that *'It is very difficult to think and then write something in a language that you are not familiar with'*. This view was reinforced by Participant C who noted *'Whenever we had to write especially in primary, I always wrote in IsiZulu first and then try and translate everything, it was not easy'* (participant C) and *'I used to ask my teacher meanings of words that I knew in my home language to translate them for me'* (participant B). These responses showed that participants A, B and C were more comfortable with writing in their home language rather than English and could have possibly done better academically if they wrote in their home languages. If this is true it is in line with Bean (2003) who found that writers feel more confident when writing in their home language because it is a language that they are familiar with and they are not

limited to expressing their ideas freely. This mindset seems to have been carried into the students' tertiary studies.



Participant D's second visual representation

Participant A and C both attended rural schools from primary to secondary school and felt like they were inadequately equipped by their schools in terms of English. They noted; *'I used to be an A student for English, but now I am not coping with it in university'* (Participant A); and *'I think people who do well in English are those that come from white schools'* (Participant C). Participant A mentioned the type of school she went to and how it put her at a disadvantage compared to others who went to different schools. Participant C seemed to correlate his lack of exposure to English in secondary school to him not doing well in university and believes that the influence of school literacy practices in the universities put him at a disadvantage as he had attended township schools. Participant C represents those students whose background or upbringing influenced their academic literacy negatively.

4.4.2 Lecturers using English as a medium of instruction

The data from the literate life histories revealed that three out of six participants (B, C and E) noted challenges with lecturers only speaking English when lecturing. For example, participants noted; *'They only speak English, even when speaking one on one, I am not used to that'* (Participant B); *'If they explained certain things in IsiZulu maybe I would understand'*

(Participant C); and *'Isingisi njalo, kuyakhathaza shame'* which translates to: *'They always speak English, it's tiring'*. It became apparent that participants' school teachers used their mother tongue often when they were teaching them. Perhaps to assist them when they did not understand or when they did not want to confuse them. If this is true it is in line with Siddiqui, Syed and Sahito's (2022) research findings state that ESL students are often confused when lecturers consistently use English as a medium of instruction, and they end up not paying attention to what is being said.

The data from the LLHs revealed that participants C and E noted that being taught in IsiZulu throughout their primary and secondary schooling may have been a factor that contributed to their current academic challenges as they noted; *'University was the first time that I had to speak English entirely, I have never needed too'* (Participant C); and *'I learnt everything in IsiZulu, reading, speaking and writing in secondary, the university was very different and difficult for me'* (Participant E). Participants C and E's comments indicated that they encountered challenges adjusting from IsiZulu being a primary mode of communication to having to be taught in only English.

What became alarming is that Participant A seemed to blame her secondary school teachers for the challenges she was experiencing with academic literacy, she noted; *'My teachers taught me all my subject in isiZulu, I think they themselves struggled with certain words in English'*. What I understood from Participant A's comments was that he believed that his teachers may be responsible for destroying the possibility of developing his competence and good performance in English. According to Kapp (2012), poor language teachings by teachers stem from their own poor proficiency in English, which leads to poor acquisition for most ESL learners. What is of importance is that Participant A understood that ESL teachers' own English proficiency was limited and that could have been one of the causes for her academic literacy challenges. Similarly, Participant E noted that being taught in IsiZulu in pre-school and primary school impacted her English literacy skills negatively in secondary school and more so in university, as lecturers used English as the medium of instruction. On the other, participant F seemed to feel that her exposure to English as a medium of instruction in primary school assisted her with understanding academic literacy in university. She noted; *'It was not easy, but I did not battle with any of the work, I think you just need to apply yourself to pass'*, (Participant F). Perhaps her primary schooling is suggestive of the quality of English literacy and the teachers to which she was exposed to. It became clear that the participants' schooling system had an influence on their academic literacy and their academic performance.



Participant F's first visual representation

Participant F's visual representation was a picture of a young lady carrying a school bag and a file, walking up steps filled with motivational words. The lady in the picture is walking up right and confidently to the top of the steps. This serves as an indication of participant F's feelings about academic writing as she compares her academic writing experience as something that she needs to think about, analyze, plan, try, and do, to succeed. This reinforces that academic writing is a process that Participant F has understood and is on her way to mastering it.

4.4.3 Lack of language support

Apart from the challenges faced in content delivery and assessment work, focus group results showed that all six participants lacked adequate English language support in university. The comments below from the six participants indicated that the participants needed support in the English language. For example, participants noted that *'If you struggled with a subject in school, you could always go to the teacher and ask for help'* (Participant C); and *'everything was spoon-fed to us in secondary school, I know if I struggled like this in school, I will eventually get it'* (Participant B). This opinion was reinforced by Participant A in the focus group who noted: *'There is no immediate support here, when you fail that's it. In school,*

teachers used to make us repeat a task if we did not do well until we passed' (Participant A). It becomes clear that lecturers are not well equipped to assist students who struggle with language-related challenges, the participants viewed lecturers' responsibilities as teaching content knowledge and assisting them with language related challenges (Balfour, 2017). Perhaps lecturers are unaware of how they can assist students' language challenges as each student comes with different knowledge and different challenges. This view is in line with Vygotsky's (1979) ZPD concept which operates from the premise that to fill in a gap between what the student knows and does not know, the lecturer must be aware of what the student's prior knowledge.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter narrated the findings of participants' academic writing experiences. Three field texts generated from participants' data were analysed to examine and understand participants' lived experiences regarding their academic writing challenges and the factors that contributed to these challenges. The findings revealed that ESL had challenges about academic literacy in university, with some recognising that they were not adequately prepared for university academic literacy. Overall participants seem to be aware of some of the factors that contributed to their writing challenges and believe that with the necessary interventions from lecturers and universities, they can improve their understanding of academic literacies and in turn increase academic performance.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the influences on first-year university students' writing challenges at a university in Kwa Zulu Natal. I conducted research using narrative inquiry, interpretivism, and scholarly articles to understand first-year students' academic writing practices and experiences. This chapter presents conclusions based on the findings of the research in relation to the literature that has been reviewed. The limitations of the study are evaluated, and recommendations are also outlined.

5.2 Main findings

The presentation of the research findings is shaped by the two research questions that guided the study.

5.2.1 What are the writing challenges that first-year students face in their writing practices at the university?

The findings from the research suggest that participants faced challenges in terms of academic writing, academic reading, referencing and citation and lecturers' teaching styles.

The findings from literate life histories and focus group discussions revealed that all participants noted to have challenges with academic literacy, particularly academic writing for various reasons. While some came from secondary schools not aware of what to expect in university, they assumed that writing in university would be like writing that they were taught in secondary school. This revealed that students were not adequately prepared for academic writing in secondary school and indicates the gap that exists between secondary schooling and higher education (Angelil-Carter, 2000). This finding is like Chokwe (2001) who found that students' under-preparedness from secondary school is more likely to affect them in university.

Another finding to emerge from this study was that most participants faced challenges with reading for academic purposes, unfamiliarity with referencing and citations and the different teaching styles between their lecturers and secondary school teachers. The implications of these

findings were that participants had not been developed sufficiently in understanding the university literacies. It also appeared as though students had not received the necessary support from their lecturers, and this negatively affected their academic writing skills development.

Findings also revealed that some lecturers were not giving adequate support to first-year students, especially on matters such as academic writing and references, which posed as a challenge to most of the participants. The responses showed that even though lecturers constantly set assignments that needed the participants to understand academic writing, the students were not given support or even taught academic writing and referencing. Based on social constructivism, the theoretical framework of the study, the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) should continue scaffolding students in their academic writing tasks.

As indicated in this study, most participants do not have adequate writing backgrounds to cope with academic writing in university, having gone through under-resourced rural and township schools. Whilst that was a challenge, some participants had a distorted perception of their literacy competencies, which made them reluctant to fully participating in academic literacy support activities.

5.2.2 What factors contribute to students writing challenges?

The second aspect of this study focused on the factors that contributed to students' writing challenges.

This study indicates that most participants encountered challenges with writing in English and felt that because they did English as a second language, they were at a disadvantage because of how they were taught writing. They are of the opinion that they would not face some of the challenges that they face now if they were better prepared by their primary and secondary English teachers. They also believe that while some of them are passing academic writing courses, they are of the opinion that they would not be faced with certain challenges if they attended former Model C schools or schools that teach English as a Home/first Language in primary and secondary school as this would have helped them understand English better. The implication of this finding is that the primary and secondary school curriculum and educational policies need to be in line with the university curriculum in terms of the medium of instruction in the school and the nature of literacy activities that all learners are exposed to from different schools, along with the role such activities, schools must understand that they play a crucial

role in preparing learners transition to the university literacies even if they are taught English as a first or second language.

Findings also reveal that some English Second Language students are failing to understand the university academic discourse as they come from backgrounds where their school teachers frequently code switched to assist them with understanding during teaching and learning, which is something university lecturers do not do at an English-medium university. Some participants noted that there is a lack of code-switching by the lecturers and tutors at the university and this had contributed to their challenges of understanding of academic literacy and their poor academic performance.

Academic literacy contends that developing writing competency in higher education is but a part of a larger socialisation practice in which students are assisted to develop appropriate academic literacy. According to scholars in the field, academic literacy involves the ways of writing, reading, thinking and communication, within a broader context of the disciplinary value system. As such, the activities at the writing center are but a part of such socialisation, as it only develops partial aspects of academic literacy. The success of its activities rests on the collaboration of other stakeholders in specific disciplines and professions. Students must be able to transfer competencies gained in one context to be fully functional in another.

5.3 Recommendations

It is important for university tutors, lecturers and university institutions to realise that students enter university without any experience in writing academically. It is therefore important to provide students, especially first-year students with as much scaffolding as possible. This could include, having a core academic literacy module to assist first-year students to ensure that they understand how to read academic articles and to write academically. It is important for all course packs given to students to include a document on referencing and plagiarism to gradually initiate students into understanding academic culture and conventions. Whilst students need all the assistance that they can get, student tutors and lecturers also need to have writing workshops organised for students so that they are made aware of their writing challenges as well as students' needs and how they can be of assistance. Using student mentors and having walk-in centers that are always available and accessible to students can also be of assistance when lecturers are not there and cannot help immediately.

5.4 Limitations

Like most studies, this study had its share of limitations. An important limitation of this study was the possibility that the data generation methods may not have reflected the true feelings and lived experiences of each participant. Some participants might have been uncomfortable, embarrassed or hesitant to share their feelings, especially during the focus group discussions. Some may have been presenting a persona or responding to shock and be different from the others. This was evident when the participants sometimes gave conflicting responses across the data-generating methods. While the three data generation methods aimed to mitigate this limitation, it is clear that I needed to reassure the participants that there was no right answer and they could just be themselves and be honest.

Another limitation involved a display of misunderstanding of the term ‘academic literacy’ by some participants, as they seemed to understand it as English literacy, and only mentioned their experiences with English, and not any challenges they could have experienced with understanding their home language in school or home environment. Perhaps their confusion stemmed from the fact that all universities use English as a medium of instruction and not understanding their academic work linked to them not knowing English well. I tried to clarify that academic literacy included proficiency in their academic work and not just knowing the English language.

5.5 Areas for future research

Building on this study, a study looking to improve time spent on teaching writing at primary and secondary school rather than is currently the case. Teachers who are teaching at primary and secondary school levels should approach writing as a critical and core aspect of students’ education where they expose learners to intensive writing activities throughout their schooling years in preparation for university. Research could also be undertaken to examine how universities can help limit these academic writing challenges experienced by first-year students to help alleviate students’ writing challenges by finding ways that can contribute to the successful teaching and learning of academic writing.

Further, studies could focus on and build on the many studies, both locally and internationally, done on peer tutoring by fellow students who are knowledgeable in academic writing techniques and can teach those techniques to peers.

5.6 Conclusion

Academic writing remains a challenge for many students, especially first-year university students. This research was able to understand the factors that contribute to first-year university writing challenges. The results showed that there is an urgent need for intervention from The Department of Education, through policy and teacher development as well as Higher Education institutions to help with the transactions of secondary school learning and to university literacies.

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APPENDIX 1 – PARTICIPANTS’ CONSENT FORM

INFORMED CONSENT LETTERS FOR PARTICIPANTS

Education Faculty

College of Humanities,

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Edgewood Campus

Dear Participants

INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

My name is Zanele Mkhize and I am a MEd candidate studying at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Edgewood campus, South Africa. I am conducting a study on A Narrative Inquiry examining the influences on first year university students’ writing challenges.

To gather the information, I am interested in having conversations with you.

Please note that:

- Your confidentiality is guaranteed as your input will not be attributed to you in person, but reported only as a population member opinion.
- Any information given by you cannot be used against you, and the collected data will be used for purposes of this research only.
- Data will be stored in secure storage and destroyed after 5 years.
- You have a choice to participate, not participate or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalized for taking such an action.
- The research aims at exploring the teaching of writing in grade 10 English Home Language, multilingual classrooms and as we work closely together your input and insights will be useful to me.

• Your involvement is purely for academic purposes only, and there are no financial benefits involved.

• If you are willing to be a participant, please indicate (by ticking as applicable) whether you are willing to allow the conversations to be recorded by the following equipment:

Willing Not willing

Audio equipment

Provide artefacts, Literate life history & Focus groups

I can be contacted at: [REDACTED]

My supervisor is :

Dr B Campbell who can be contacted on 031 260 3468 or Campbell@ukzn.ac.za

For any queries regarding this study, you may contact Research and Higher Degrees Edgewood via email at RhdEdgewood@ukzn.ac.za or call 031-260391.

Thank you for your contribution to this research.

DECLARATION

I..... (full names of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the contents of this document and the nature of the research project, and I consent to participating in the research project.

I understand that I am at liberty to withdraw from the project at any time, should I so desire.

SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT

DATE

.....

.....

APPENDIX 2: ETHICAL CLEARANCE



15 August 2021

Miss Zanele Mkhize (212537990)
School Of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear Miss Mkhize,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00002972/2021

Project title: A Narrative Inquiry examining the influences on first year university students writing challenges.

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 18 June 2021 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid until 15 August 2022.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

All research conducted during the COVID-19 period must adhere to the national and UKZN guidelines.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/dd

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses:  Edgewood  Howard College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX 3: FOCUS GROUP & LITERATE LIFE HISTORY QUESTION

Myself and my participants will write a literate life history AND focus group discussions were guided by the following questions:

1. What are your earliest memories of writing?
2. How were you taught to write?
3. Who taught you?
4. How did you feel about writing?
5. Did you battle?
6. Did writing in secondary school differ from primary school?
7. What writing were you in secondary school?
8. Who taught you?
9. How did you feel about writing in secondary school?
10. What did you battle with the most?
11. How were you introduced to writing in university?
12. How did it differ from writing in secondary school?
13. What was the most challenging aspect about writing in university?
14. How do you feel about writing in university?

APPENDIX 4: IMIBUZO YE-FOCUS GROUP & NE-LITERATE LIFE HISTORY

Mina nabasizi bami sizobhala sizoba nexoxo ngamaqembu siphinde sibhale ama-literate life histories abelandela lemibuzo elandelayo:

1. Ikuphi okukhumbulayo ngokubhala kwakho kudala?
2. Ufundiswe kanjani ukubhala?
3. Ufundiswe ubani?
4. Ukubhala kwakukwenza uzizwe kanjani? How did you feel about writing?
5. Ubenkinga ngokubhala?
6. Ukubhala esikoleni samabanga aphansi kwakuhluka kanjani nokubhala kumabanga aphezulu?
7. Iziphi izinhlobo zokubhala owazenza esikoleni samabanga aphezulu?
8. Wafundiswa ubani?
9. Yini eyayikuhlula kakhulu ngokubhala?
10. Waqala kanjani ukufundiswa ukubhala e-university?
11. Kwakuhluka kanjani ukubhala kwase sikoleni samabanga aphezulu nase-university?
12. Ikuphi okwakukuhlula kakhulu ngokufundiswa ukubhala?
13. Wawuzizwa kanjani ngokubhala e-university?

APPENDIX 5: TURNITIN CERTIFICATE

FINAL MED

by Zanele Mkhize

Submission date: 19-Jul-2023 02:54PM (UTC+0200)
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**UNIVERSITY OF
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**INYUVESI
YAKWAZULU-NATALI**

**A NARRATIVE INQUIRY EXAMINING THE INFLUENCES ON FIRST YEAR UNIVERSITY
STUDENTS' WRITING CHALLENGES**

BY

ZANELE MKHIZE

(212537990)

**DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL PULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF EDUCATION IN THE COLLEGE HUMANITIES SCHOOL OF
EDUCATION STUDIES**

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

SUPERVISOR: DR B. CAMPBELL

JUNE 2023

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APPENDIX 6: LETTER FROM THE EDITOR


Pinetown

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

EDITING CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE.

This serves to inform that I (Minenhle Nxumalo, an independent proof-reader and editor) have fully proof-read and edited the dissertation titled:

**‘A NARRATIVE INQUIRY EXAMINING THE INFLUENCES ON FIRST
YEAR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS’ WRITING CHALLENGES’**

**BY
ZANELE MKHIZE
(212537990)**

To the best of my knowledge, this research is free of any spelling and grammatical errors. I am of the view that the quality of the language meets generally accepted academic standards.

Please do not hesitate to contact me for any queries.

Kind regards,


.....

Minenhle Nxumalo

Email: 