



Challenges of Teaching Academic Writing Skills to Students With Limited Exposure to English (*South Africa*)

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Issue

South Africa is one of a few countries in Africa with a sizeable number of traditional first language (L1) speakers of English. Recent estimates put the number of L1 speakers of English at 8.2% out of a population of more than 45 million (Statistics South Africa, 2001). The rest (91.8%) of the residents speak mainly indigenous African languages as their L1s. Although 11 languages have been designated official status, English is generally the de facto language of education, government, business, and socioeconomic mobility. Studies by De Klerk (2000) and Kamwangamalu (2004) have shown that Black South African parents see English as a means to better their livelihoods and that their families' proficiency in English is perceived to open the doors to prosperity. It is therefore not surprising that educated Black parents send their children to English-medium private schools where they are taught English by qualified L1 speakers (De Klerk, 2000). Similarly, it is not uncommon for parents to demand that their children in Black townships be taught through English as soon as possible (Banda, 2004). This situation is typical of other African countries where colonial languages have higher status than African languages (Alexander, 2005; Heugh, 2005).

However, this preference for English is not matched by proficiency in spoken and written English. Research has shown, on the contrary, that South Africa

Black learners even in these private English-medium schools have major difficulties with English academic writing conventions (Alexander, 2005).

The University of the Western Cape (UWC), where this study was conducted, was created in the 1960s by the apartheid government to cater for the Coloured (mixed-race) people. Since the 1980s, in part to defy the apartheid segregation laws, the university started enrolling Black students (Peck, 2008). Currently about half of the students enrolled at the university are Black L1 speakers of isiXhosa. Most of them or their parents originally came from the Eastern Cape Province to the Western Cape Province because the latter promises better prospects in terms of schooling and jobs (Bloch, 2007).

In relation to this study, my interest was in some isiXhosa speaking students who showed little or no English proficiency, as determined from the quality of their spoken and written English in my communication course. I became aware of a particular group of students that kept doing badly in my Year 2 English Communication course. Three of the students had already repeated the course twice. From their essays, which I discuss later, I determined that the students had a limited range of vocabulary, demonstrated poorly formulated linguistic and argument structures in English, and appeared to have difficulty distinguishing nonformal and formal (academic) styles of English. These are critical factors in determining whether a student will be successful at university level. Gee (1990) and Chafe (1982) discuss the difference between formal genres of discourse and nonformal or everyday conversational speech. Nonformal speech is often considered primary discourse and can be casually picked up in everyday conversational English. Formal English is considered secondary discourse and is usually learned through some form of apprenticeship in particular contexts (Devine, 1994; Gee, 1990, 2000). One would expect that after 12 years of instruction in English, students should at least be able to distinguish between conversational and formal English and would have enough proficiency in English to hold a sustained discussion. However, this is not always the case, particularly when reduced learner–teacher interaction occurs in English as a second language (ESL) contexts (Banda, 2007).

Using a sample of a selected group of students, this enquiry mainly aimed to explore the English discourse skills some students from isiXhosa language homes and communities brought to the university as well as the English proficiency they demonstrated at the 2nd-year level. With a particular focus on a selected group of 2nd-year students, I set out to explore the spoken and written English proficiency of the students as well as the strategies they adopted to improve their proficiency.



Background Literature

The measurement of language competencies is fraught with difficulties and controversies. Baker (1997) concluded that tests often failed to account for the different conceptual dimensions and categorisations of language competencies. Chafe (1982) and Gee (1990, 2000) noted that in ESL education contexts the problem becomes even more complicated because the measurement should consider competencies in conversational and in formal English. Acquiring spoken skills in an ESL situation is daunting enough, but it is more difficult to get apprenticed to formal and decontextualised English as used in academic essays. Learning formal English entails not only having the ability to speak English correctly in different registers, but also getting acculturated into the Western way of doing academic writing (Devine, 1994). These expectations pose problems for those African children who have had little or no contact with the Western ways of thinking and conducting academic writing. However in South Africa, English is predicted to remain the language of education for the foreseeable future (Pandor, 2005).

Lack of proficiency in English in South Africa is often associated with the apartheid legacy. The Group Areas Act that was created to keep ethnic groups apart ensured minimum contact by African language speakers with native White English speakers (Banda, 2000). With apartheid education also came insistence and active promotion of Bantu education through the mother tongue in Black schools. At the same time, the Nationalist Apartheid State tried to force the teaching of Afrikaans in Black schools. However, Blacks saw this as an attempt to deny them access to English, the language of power and liberation, as well as the means to communicate with the wider world (Chick, 1992). This response culminated in the now well-known Soweto Uprising in 1976, in which Blacks voiced their preference for English as the medium of instruction. The Soweto Uprising in turn led to schools being allowed to choose the language of instruction (Banda, 2000; Chick, 1992).

After the elections in 1994, the new South African constitution and the national Language in Education Policy have allowed parents to determine the language of schooling for their children. However, the effects of Bantu education—which many scholars have dubbed *gutter* education because they view it as intentionally keeping Black people in the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder—are still being felt (Heugh, 2007). According to Chick (1992) and Heugh (2005), English in Black schools is mostly taught by underqualified teachers who have had little or no contact with L1 speakers of the language (see Chapter 4 in this volume; Makalela, 2004a). The result is that, as Chick (1992) and Banda (2004) noted, Black children in community schools are often not adequately prepared in primary school for education in English at secondary and

university levels. The teaching of English as a subject in many Black schools is still a matter of great concern in postapartheid South Africa.

Keating (2008) has reported that township schools in the Western Cape had the lowest matriculation endorsement—a qualification which would allow them university entry. She found that of the 7,085 Black students in the Western Cape Province who took the exams in 2007, only 320 passed with endorsement (i.e., satisfied the minimum government conditions to study for a bachelor's degree at university), and only 2 had A aggregate (Keating, 2008). It has to be remembered that examinations for Black students are almost entirely in English. In other words, in addition to the problem of lack of resources and qualified teachers, the poor results are indicative of the poor teaching of English in the Black schools. Indeed a number of researchers (see Alexander, 2005; Heugh, 2007) have laid the blame for the high dropout rates and poor school results by Black children on the lack of proficiency in English.

In this chapter I attempt to show that when such students enter university, they often not only lack proficiency in spoken English but also are unaware of the set of criteria and demands for presenting academic English writing. The lecturer then judges these students against these demands as constituted by the unspoken literacy of the institution. The revered literacy of academia in South African universities is essentially English based and characteristically associated with proficiency in essay-type English literacy practices. This, in turn, is characterized by explicit impersonal English language use (Devine, 1994; Gee, 2000).

Like at other English medium universities in Africa, the unwritten rule of institutional discourse practices at the university dictates that students use formalized standard English (or an approximation of it) in their spoken presentations of course materials, but more so in their academic writing. The problem is that Black students often find that their spoken and written discourse skills fall far short of the norms and standard of English expected by the university establishment (Devine, 1994). The situation is further worsened by the fact that lecturers fail to explore the second language learning contexts as a way to apprentice their students into the English dominated institutional discourse practices found at universities in most African nations.



Procedures

Even though there were other students struggling with English in my class, in this study I focused on 10 students who grew up and did their primary and secondary education in the former apartheid-created “homeland” of Transkei in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa.

As I previously stated, my first interest was to find out their English proficiency levels when they entered university. This information would enable me

to explore their prior experiences with English and gauge the English discourse skills they had learned in Black primary and secondary schools, which are geared toward tertiary education in English. In this regard, I conducted one-on-one interviews with each of the 10 students on their experiences with spoken and written English at home and at primary and secondary schools. The idea here was to explore the English and academic writing skills they brought with them to university.

Second, these students tended to make similar errors relating to writing and argument style and to misplaced vocabulary (e.g., overreliance on dictionary definitions, which were not always compatible with the applied linguistics ones). I discovered that this could in part be explained by the fact that they belonged to study groups, which they had formed as a way to improve their chances of passing the course by pooling their knowledge together. Although some members of the groups showed reasonable proficiency in spoken English, their writing skills tended to show very little in terms of the kind of academic discourse skills required in university English essay writing. There was no doubt in my mind that there was negative influence in the groups and that without my intervention the whole group would keep failing. I was also mindful that the kinds of problems these students were encountering mirrored those evident in some members of their class.

I designated one group Mola's group. At the time of the study, there were five members in the group. I learned that initially the group had eight members, but three decided to leave because they felt they were not benefiting academically from the group. I called the second group Leti's study group. It also had five members. All 10 students were female, and their ages ranged from 19 to 23. They all said they came to the Western Cape Province after secondary school education in the Eastern Cape Province. Because participation in this exercise was voluntary, not all students were always available at a time. For example, I never had more than four students per group during the focus group discussions.

I had focus group discussions with the two groups, and I recorded audio data during one group's tutorial session on one class assignment. The idea was to find out what went on during the preparations for an English essay assignment. From these discussions, I was hoping to come up with intervention strategies which I would announce and implement for the whole class. As already noted, I was aware that the other students in the English communication class had similar problems and resorted to the same academic mediation strategies as the students under scrutiny. There were 108 students in the communication class, and about half of these were Coloured (mixed-race group) students who came mostly from schools on the Cape Flats in the Western Cape Province, where Afrikaans is the most common L1.

I also collected a sample of pieces of writing from the selected group. I wanted to use the students' written work in English as evidence and as a backdrop to

discuss the interview, focus group interview, and tutorial data findings. The sample was collected in the second week at the beginning of Year 2 of the students' university studies. The interviews and focus groups took place in my office and all the data were collected with permission of the students. The following sections briefly outline the procedures I used.

STAGE 1: COLLECTION OF CONTINUOUS WRITING SAMPLES

A few weeks into the academic year, I collected a piece of writing from each student. The errors found in these short essays would provide the initial data on which some of the questions in Stages 2 and 3 were based. The short essay itself was done by the whole class as part of the class continuous assessment. I also marked and evaluated it as I would any assessment of this nature. The tasks asked of the students are described later. Suffice to say that students were evaluated on their English writing skills pertaining to their knowledge of academic English as a genre; sentence and argument structure; range and quality of English vocabulary; texture, cohesion, and coherence in English; and so on. This stage also enabled the initial assessment of the strategies ESL students used in formulating and developing arguments in their essays. The strategies would be verified in subsequent interviews and focus group discussions.

STAGE 2: ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEWS

In this stage I conducted one-on-one interviews with selected students. In this case, it was with students whose short essays I had analyzed. I could have used different students, but I wanted to have individualised narratives regarding students' learning and writing experiences in English. Mohan (2003) argued that interview data could be used as evidence of students' literacy practices. However, in this case, I also had evidence from students' academic writing in practice as described in Stage 1, as well as focus group discussions, which I describe later. Thus, students' narratives about their own successes and failures with regard to learning and writing in English formed part of the evidence.

Because some students had difficulties expressing themselves in English, I decided to have an unstructured interview with open-ended questions. My classroom experience had shown that tightly focused and structured questions would restrict students' capacity to formulate answers. During these unstructured interviews, even those with limited English vocabulary had something to say because the open-ended questions allowed them to qualify and clarify issues. The loose interview schedule also allowed students to talk freely with minimum interruptions. As is evident in my discussion of the results, this technique proved useful in tapping into the students' thinking processes and hence the strategies they used in their academic writing.

However, I did not allow students an unfettered range of discussion topics. I guided them toward broad, but specific areas of thematic concerns. When new

insights emerged, I engaged with the interviewee to clarify and elaborate. The broad themes covered in interviews related to some of the following: learning experiences, classroom practice and the medium of instruction in primary and secondary school, the student's preferred medium of instruction, and strategies the student used for English academic literacy mediation in isiXhosa sociocultural contexts.

This procedure sometimes provided conflicting information about the classroom practices in primary and secondary schools as well as the students' learning experiences at the university. Therefore, I used focus group discussions to try to clarify conflicting information.

STAGE 3: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION

I arranged focus group discussions to verify and cross-check some of the information arising from the essays and particularly the one-on-one interviews. In essence, I used the focus group discussions to validate some of the evidence collected during individualised interviews. This strategy also enabled me to gauge areas of agreement and disagreement and thus get an indication of the ESL students' shared experiences while learning and writing in English. I have developed a particular interest in the efficacy of translation and study groups in ameliorating English academic writing in Africa. My interest was to have an idea what goes on during the process of translating and in the study groups. Although some students said translation and study groups helped them with their academic writing in English, other students indicated that they did not benefit from these groups. In particular, some students seemed to blame their teachers of English in isiXhosa and classroom translations of lessons for their lack of academic English proficiency.



Results

Before analyzing the interview and focus group data, in this section I first analyze the students' written work to find out their written academic skills in English at the beginning of Year 2 of university education. The topic for their writing was the following:

In not more than two paragraphs, describe each of the situations below considering transactional and linear models of communication.

(a) Mercy writes a letter to Vusi.

(b) Tim writes a letter to the Cape Times newspaper.

I found that students were overreliant on primary discourse and unable to go beyond everyday English style. Although some students showed familiarity

with the conventions of academic writing in English, others failed to present their arguments in an explicit and formal manner. Most of the short essays of this group had meandering reasoning; their ideas were chained together with disjointed arguments. For example, Babe's arguments were all contained in one long sentence with different ideas joined by *and* and other connectors.

It can be both transactional or linear model **because** Mercy can become a sender **and** the receiver of the information first, **just** when she finished to write the letter she will re-read it to check there is no spelling mistakes, for herself **on the other hand after** she had done it all the checking she will sent it to Vusi, using a medium **and** Vusi become a Receiver, **and** giving feedback if it need it.
(S3—Babe)

The strategy seems to be accumulation of points rather than writing a coherent piece and following up on logic. The samples provide evidence of rote learning. In some cases, students merely attempted to recite the notes I gave in class. This strategy of “remembering” the class notes restricted their grammatical choices, which in turn limited the manner in which they expressed their ideas. Consider Leti's piece:

(a) Linear model—Mercy use a traditional model. One way communication, occurs when someone instructs. The feedback will delay because Vusi will take time to respond to Mercy. The focus is on channel.

(b) Its is a Linear model because there is feedback if it is it will delay. It is an one way communication. Focus is on channel, Sender sending message is active recivers are passive. It can also a transactional because if cape Times can respond immediately by using telephone. It can be one two way Communication, Emphasis on decoding and encoding message. shared decision-making.
(S7—Leti)

Leti made very little effort to go beyond the notes. Unfortunately, she could not remember the order in which the notes were given. Perhaps for lack of English vocabulary, she failed to come up with appropriate words to connect the different chunks of sentences so that her short essay would make sense.

Mola tried to be creative in her answer by coming up with her own version of events. She adopted a narrative style and tried to apply the two models of communication to the story. Clearly she showed a lot of promise and demonstrated the kind of independent thinking required at the university. However, her inadequate command of English let her down.

Both models, linear model, Mercy was writing a letter to Vusi and Vusi was not there with him and she will not get feedback on the time because she was writting a letter, that letter will delay there is also one way. Mercy only passed the message to Vusi by a letter she did not tell Vusi. Transactional model Mercy

is writing a letter to Vusi there are two way, Vusi will receive that message by letter and respond to Mercy and she will also get feedback. Maybe they were sitting together and they did not have a chance to talk they just write a letter so that Vusi can respond to that letter and not make noise because we did not see where are they. (S16—Mola)

Another strategy was to put the concept in brackets in hopes that the reader would see the link (nonverbally) between the concept and the sentences before and after it. This kind of hybrid communication combining verbal and nonverbal cues might work well in spoken communication situations but not in essay writing, which requires exposition through words. Semi's short essay illustrates this strategy. *Transaction* is appended between statements, and *linear* is left hanging at the end. The link between these concepts and what comes before and after them is not explained.

(a) This is both transactional and linear model. It is linear because if Vusi is not speaking facial with Mercy. It is transactional because if Vusi receive the letter then Mercy will give feedback.

(b) It is the Linear Model and also transactional model because the feedback is stressed, Anyone who is dealing with letters at Cape times have to respond to Tim's letter. (Transactional)

Although Tim write the letter now no one respond as he write and thinks, no feedback at the moment is one way (linear) (S4—Semi)

In all the short essays just excerpted, sentences were either too short or too long, and the ideas were glued together mostly with *and*, *because*, and commas. The essays also showed lack of concord and incorrect tense, word choice, pronouns, and word order. These elements all led to a breakdown in meaning. I also noticed that the use of modals such as *would*, *may*, *should*, and *might* was rare. The result was that students were unable to realize and develop a particular argument. No doubt this writing deficiency related to students' lack of English vocabulary. I also noted that the students' writing showed virtually no nominalization. Nominalization would allow the more skilled writers in class to create nouns out of verbs and come out with a tight packaging of information. This usage would have enabled them to compare and contrast the two models within a paragraph without losing meaning and without necessarily having to package the discussion into two successive paragraphs.

The high number of spelling mistakes indicated students' lack of experience with written English generally. This factor again supports my argument that the students tend to overrely on spoken informal English, where producing speech rather than correct spelling is the focus.

In short, the discourse patterns and sentence structures exhibited in the excerpted essays not only resemble the features of spoken informal English, but

also generally show the lack of proficiency in English of the students concerned. My interview data confirmed this finding.

The first thing that came out of the interviews was the lack of apprenticeship to formal aspects of English writing. In fact, students seemed unaware of the difference between formalized English language as required in academic contexts and casual, everyday English. They seemed to struggle to hold a decent discussion even in everyday English. The students suggested that the reason for their difficulties was the English teaching practices in their earlier schooling. Although the policy is to use English as the medium of instruction from Grade 4, teachers continued teaching in isiXhosa or in isiXhosa–English mixed code until the end of secondary school. Thus, in their everyday interaction with their primary and secondary school teachers, the students never had the opportunity to practice the kind of English that would be required at university. The only time they had sustained instruction in English was when they entered university. Leti's description of her experience is revealing:

My experience is that I learnt everything in Xhosa so even if it was in English so now I regret it it's difficult to speak English because I didn't grow up speaking English. I only met English in Varsity it is not nice people. Who are looking at us will say you can't speak English but you are in University (Interview with Leti)

It also seems that the students' primary and secondary school teachers avoided teaching the formal aspects of English. Chick (1992) said this situation tended to occur because some teachers were themselves unfamiliar with the formal aspects or grammar of English. Instead, the teachers focused on English literature, which they in turn translated into isiXhosa in the process of teaching.

In most Black schools they do that [teach English in isiXhosa] more especially in teaching English novels but at the end of the day we end up not being fluent in English. (Interview with Xabi)

Noma put it more succinctly:

In my school, mine was a terrible English teacher. She used to write, read to us a novel, then she will explain in Xhosa. So you have no, you don't even listen because you know she's going to explain it in Xhosa, so, and then there are going to explain it after that we don't even care what we are reading because we she's going to tell it in Xhosa. (Interview with Noma)

This practice denies students the chance to engage with English orally and thus practice construction types in the language. Secondly, I want to argue that this also explains why students have difficulty translating material and transferring knowledge between English and isiXhosa (see also Banda, 2007). The

argument is that students have had few opportunities to translate and interpret texts because this was done for them by the teacher. As Banda (2007) has argued, this has implications for the efficacy of study groups in which students do their discussion in isiXhosa or isiXhosa–English mixed code and then write their essays in English.

When I asked students about why they seemed unable to write essays of acceptable standards even after I had given them guidelines, they suggested that the problem lay somewhere in the translation between isiXhosa and English. They also seemed not to understand why even though they were able to converse in English, they were unable to get it right in their writing, as noted in the following discussion:

[= = means speech overlap]

Babe: Sometimes you know, you know something, but you, you. I can say you ask something from us, but we didn't, we didn't understand your question. We write = = another thing, only to see that you want something else we didn't know.

Lecturer: = = another thing

Semi: Only to find that we know the answer, but we didn't understand the question.

Babe: Sometimes . . . we can speak it well but we can't write it, we don't know how to write it in English. (Mola's study group)

It seems also that students misinterpret instructions so that even though they think they are discussing the question in isiXhosa before translation into English they are in fact discussing dictionary definitions rather than applied linguistics ones. Consider the following extract of Leti's focus group.

Leti: My problem in English you think but you can't find the good word then you end up leaving the information because it will be poor, it can't make sense.

Xabi: I think they are helping us to understand the question because you are alone in the exam room = = and sometimes most of us we have short memory we can not record all.

Lecturer: You said in your study group you normally discuss essays in Xhosa before translating them into English. Does that help you pass the exams?

Manga: No, because when we are in exams you see new words that you have not discussed and there is no one to [help you] translate. There you are just by yourself.

Leti: I think the study groups helps but not in the exams because you are alone and the problem of language, you only use one language [English] in the exam

a completely different language [from isiXhosa or isiXhosa–English code-switching, which are used in study groups]. (Leti's study group)

The problem here is that they are unable to shift style from the informal isiXhosa or isiXhosa–English code-switching to standard English language as required in the education contexts.

In general it can be said that students' lack of proficiency in English is a source of irritation and frustration for them. The confidence they have discussing essays in isiXhosa or isiXhosa–English code mix outside the classroom often comes to nothing as they are faced with examinations which they have to write in standard English.

Related to the problem of translation is the problem of inability by students to manage formal English discourse. It is clear from the above that learners confuse everyday dictionary meanings with formal applied linguistics concepts. Learners seem unaware that transfer of knowledge between isiXhosa and English is not simply a matter of translating labels for the same concept. Mohan (2003) argued that a concept can hardly be said to be the same concept if it fits into one taxonomy in the L1 and a different taxonomy in the L2. Similarly, I want to argue that this study shows that a concept is not the same concept if it means one thing in informal contexts and another in formalized academic contexts.

To get a better understanding about what transpires in the process of translating knowledge between isiXhosa and English, I invited the two study groups to my office for a tutorial recording. In the next section I describe what transpired in Mola's group tutorial to discuss the application of John Searle's Felicity Conditions.

I was pleased that the students had prepared for the meeting with me. The problem, however, was that they had looked up the dictionary meaning of *felicity/felicitate*, which was given as *congratulate/congratulation*. Before seeing me they had then translated and discussed in isiXhosa the definition of *congratulate/congratulation*. They appeared surprised when I implied that they did not understand the concept and were not applying it correctly.

The problem was that students then started to discuss and give synonyms and to offer examples and reasons why people congratulate each other. Felicity conditions as a concept in applied linguistics and sociolinguistics requires a general explanation of how the condition is applied, and not a definition.

Lecturer: All right? = = So we are talking about felicity conditions, all right. What was—what's the first felicity condition for *congratulating*?

Mola: Congratulation.

Lecturer: Congratulation?

Students: Yes.

Lecturer: Yes, so what do you say to that, congratulating? [Pause] So all you need to say is that, “What is the condition, for people or somebody to congratulate somebody [else]?”

Semi: To say “congratulation” to that and that.

Lecturer: Yeah, yeah, but that’s not really answering the question.

Noma: When somebody come to say “congrats.”

Lecturer: No, we need a more general explanation, so? = =

Semi: = = Passing.

Lecturer: But, those are examples.

[Students mumble inaudibly.]

Mola: Let’s say, I could win = =

Lecturer: = = winning, that’s . . . not a condition.

Babe: Not a condition?

Lecturer: No.

In the next 30 minutes, I tried to explain and illustrate the concept of felicity conditions. At the end of the tutorial I gave them additional exercises and invited them back the next week for further discussion.



Reflection

One conclusion I draw from this study is that some Black students come to university with low proficiency in English—the medium of instruction—and that their academic writing skills are inadequate for the demands of higher learning discourse practices. What this study also shows is that these same students suffer inequalities in education, as they do not have easy access to powerful English-based discourses in society. Ironically, given the inequalities of the past, it is students from communities and schools that suffered material and resource neglect under apartheid who find themselves in a precarious situation. Their communities by and large offer very little contact with L1 speakers of English or material support to enable them to practice spoken and written English. Yet these students find that accessing powerful academic discourses in English may be their ticket out of the poverty and squalor that characterize such communities, limited by circumstances they have little control over. For example, the students in the study have had very little experience with how English is used in different contexts, hence their problems with distinguishing between conversational and formalized English.

Until this particular study, I did not appreciate the full extent to which the issue of informal speech versus formalized academic writing affected some of my students. Afterward, I became more sensitive to the academic writing problems Black students experienced and the efforts they put in to try to alleviate them. As a result, I made several adjustments to my teaching as well as the kinds and number of assignments I gave. I discuss some of these in the following section.

However, the first thing I did was to sensitize and warn my students to be aware that academic essays use a different kind of English than the one used in informal speech. I also warned other lecturers about the dangers of unregulated study groups. These groups could be a source of errors and also could undo the academic writing skills inculcated in students by the lecturer. The exercise taught me that students left on their own in unregulated study groups could produce, reproduce, and maintain errors, perhaps leading to the fossilization of errors in their spoken and written English.

I warned students to be aware that translation and interpretation have linguistic and cultural dimensions because taxonomies or classifications, Mohan (2003) argued, differ among languages (and cultures) and also within different registers in the same language. Merely translating labels between English and isiXhosa is not always enough. Ordinary dictionaries do not always give applied linguistics concepts. The dictionary might give them what the word means in ordinary English, but not how it is applied in English linguistics. Specifically these are the strategies I adopted:

1. I doubled the number of written assignments. This approach was meant to give students more experience in writing academic essays. This increase gave students more chances to improve on their writing as well as their grades.
2. I stopped taking academic writing for granted. I went through point by point what I expected in each essay. I also infused some English grammar into my communication courses.
3. In some cases, I directly intervened in the composition of study groups by ensuring that there was one student proficient in English. Here, I want to point out that some of the proficient students did not want to be involved in any group as they feared being dragged down by the rest of the group. This strategy proved difficult to implement.

However, on the whole, students reacted positively to my suggestions for improvement.

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