PROCESS AND PRACTICE OF ACADEMIC WRITING AT TANZANIAN HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTION

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Abstract
This study investigated students' perceptions of academic writing in higher learning institutions: process and practices with a mixed-methods approach to explore how students in higher learning institutions perceive academic writing, their writing process, and practices that they underwent to achieve the literacies at the higher learning context. The research combined quantitative data from surveys to capture trends in students' perceptions of the writing process and practices, qualitative data from focus group interviews and documentaries from bachelor students at the Institute of Finance Management in Tanzania. The academic literacy framework informed the design and interpretation of both datasets, emphasizing how students' writing practices were linked to broader issues of power, identity, and access within academic settings. The findings showed students processed and practiced writing with challenges in plagiarism, citation and referencing awareness, lack of constructive writing feedback from lecturers, and mechanics issues in writing that result in producing texts below the required standards. Results further revealed that access to online materials and more practice in real writing as the factors that can support improving academic writing. At the same time, the English language background was the main factor that hindered academic writing practices.

Keywords: academic writing, perception, practice, process

Introduction
Writing seems to be one of the important skills expected of any student through the education literacy journey. This skill, which is one of the four basic language skills, continues to be important as the ladder of education advances to the extent that knowledge acquired and shared expressions depend on the writings of the learner, other scholars, or sometimes both. As the students advance into higher learning, where the emphasis hubs are on academic writing (Lillis, 2006; Mumin, 2022), writing practices, the cornerstone to academic achievement, is an inevitable inclination for students' academic assessment and accomplishments. In higher learning institutions (HLIs), writing needs to include a higher order of mental activities that differ from the prior level of education (Kabaran, 2022). Students are

required to process, produce and present scholarly written products for academic standards and purposes.

Academic writing (AW) is a cornerstone of HLI culture, integral to the learning process, assessment procedures, and scholarly communication across various disciplines (Hyland, 2006). It requires a synthesis of multiple skills, including critical thinking, structured argumentation (Cilliers, 2012), effective use of evidence, and adherence to disciplinary conventions and stylistic norms (Lea & Stierer, 2000; Ngaiza, 2022). Mastery of academic writing is crucial for students' academic success and plays a vital role in their professional and personal development. Despite its critical importance, many students in higher learning institutions find the academic writing process to be a formidable challenge (Harris, 2011; Musa, 2014; Ngaiza, 2022). This challenge can manifest in various forms, including difficulty in organizing thoughts, integrating sources, maintaining academic tone, and adhering to specific formatting and citation styles.

The process of students mastering academic writing in HLIs is complex and multifaceted. It involves understanding and applying various writing conventions, developing a coherent argument, integrating evidence, and engaging critically with sources. On the other hand, AW takes students' knowledge and background that is based on the writers' perceptions (Twagilimana, 2017). This process can be daunting for many students in HLIs, particularly if they come from diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds (Kabaran, 2022).

As students are enrolled in HLIs, they go into a new culture and level of education with prevailing norms, standards, demands, and conventional performances of expressing their ideas in plausible expectations in academic accomplishments (Ngaiza, 2022). All these new horizons exert some pressure on the students that join HLIs, a new style of learning, adjusting to the academic culture and discipline, after all, simultaneously (Komba, 2015; Musa, 2014). Students need to learn new literacy practices that in their new setting will enable them to function successfully in the higher learning instruction context, which mainly includes writing. Harris (2011) confirms that in this context, students are required to advance their previous style of presenting their ideas in a scholarly fashion and a framework that fits well with the academic or discipline requirements.

Studies on students' writing at HLIs have highlighted concerns with conflicting and contrasting requirements of writing on different courses and for different instructors (Harris, 2011; Hyland, 2013; Lea & Stierer, 2000; Nallaya, 2018). Students have cited experiencing difficulties in switching between diverse writing requirements and unpacking these requirements, which are often not made explicit. The disparity in understanding the writers' perceptions, the processes and practices that students at HLIs go through on the one hand, and the available support can exacerbate the difficulties faced by students, leading to frustration, disengagement, and suboptimal academic performance.

Understanding students' perceptions, practices and processes of AW is crucial for addressing these challenges effectively. Perceptions influence how students approach writing tasks, the strategies they employ, and their overall attitudes toward writing (Al-Badwawi, 2011; Hyland, 2006; Landauer & Rowlands, 2001). Students' positive perceptions can enhance motivation and engagement in the AW standards and requirements, as studies show that perceptions come first and have an influence on shaping what comes after (Hyland, 2006, 2013; Lea & Stierer,

2000; Nallaya, 2018). On the other hand, negative perceptions can hinder progress and lead to avoidance behaviours of which AW is inclusive (Lea & Street, 2006). AW that is produced at the HLIs in its entirety depends on the students' perceptions simply because perceptions are the process by which people select, organize, interpret, retrieve and respond to the information from the world around them (Hyland, 2013).

The processes and practices of students' perceptions of academic writing in the HLIs have not been explored extensively in the existing literature. Despite the significance of these perceptions, research in this area has been relatively sparse, with most studies focusing on educators' perspectives or specific instructional techniques rather than the students', the writer's viewpoints. This study seeks to fill this gap by exploring students' perceptions of academic writing in HLIs, focusing on the process and practices involved based on the following two research objectives. First, to investigate students' perceptions of AW in higher learning institutions and second, to examine challenges students face in the AW processes and practices in higher learning institutions.

Method

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, a parallel design "QUAL + quan" (Graff, 2016), combining quantitative and qualitative data to comprehensively understand students' perceptions of academic writing in higher learning institutions. The use of mixed methods allows triangulation, ensuring the reliability and validity of the findings. In this case, the two phases were planned and carried out to answer similar aspects of the research questions. Later, the researcher made conclusions inferences, and integrations based on the data from each phase. However, the dominant phase of this study was qualitative.

This study was conducted in Tanzania at the Institute of Finance Management (IFM) in Dar es Salaam campus, a public higher learning institution in a particular place where academic writing is perceived, processed and practiced. IFM was selected based on two reasons. First, it is the oldest higher learning financial institution in Tanzania (established by Act No. 3 of 1972), where different fields are trained with the existence of a variety of literacy disciplines. Secondly, the institute has no influence on language related disciplines or programmes (non-linguistic) and interactions among students in their different lines of work, i.e., banking, computer science, economics, information technology, insurance, and social protection joined together with communication skills courses that introduce and equip the students into AW dynamism.

Provided with the nature of this study, the researcher selected one hundred and twenty students from the six mentioned disciplines at IFM, i.e. twenty students from each discipline. Participants came from second year bachelor students in the 2021/2022 academic year who learned communication skills course where writing and per se AW are learnt in the first year of their studies.

Sampling

The sampling of the study was both purposive and randomly selected, which fits well in the mixed methods research. Students' departments and their second year of study at IFM were purposely selected. The heterogeneous diversity characteristic of the participants from these departments ensured the presence of

maximum variability within the collection of primary data as the reflection of studying disciplines' literacies. On the other hand, random sampling was applied in selecting participants for questionnaires and focus group interviews. Random sampling was created by making sure that each participant (student) in the population has an equal chance of being selected for the sample (Brown, 2006; Creswell, 2014).

In the first case, twenty students from each mentioned departments were selected. In this selection, the researcher selected ten female students and ten male students from each department, with the condition that they appear in the respective department register with the first ten even serial numbers of their registration. The researcher first asked for the participants' consent after noting their contacts and meeting with the selected ones.

The data for this study was quantitatively collected using questionnaires and for qualitative purposes, focused group interviews and documentary reviews. As for the case of parallel design of this study, there were two phases of data collection. The researcher first administered the quantitative response tools, followed by qualitative responses after one month. Before starting the actual data collection process, the researcher performed a pilot study using four linguists and twelve students randomly selected from two different HLIs. Data analysis was done using content analysis for qualitative and descriptive statistics for quantitative ones. The use of multiple data sources (surveys, focus group interviews, and document analysis) helped to triangulate the findings, thus enhancing the study's validity.

Findings and Discussion

From both qualitative and quantitative findings, 92 % of students perceived themselves as members of an academic writing family with the tasks they engage in throughout their discipline writing practices and activities. Students responded that "… we are writing academically..." However, their written tasks, as observed from the documentary part of this study and the interview responses claims of their lecturers/tutors, were below the required standards. Students pointed the finger at the lecturer's labeling, comments and feedback on their written tasks that are not of the HLIs required quality.

The findings show that 68% of students perceived getting into the new and demanding writing culture of AW, where writing is standardised by the academic community on citations, referencing, and paraphrasing. Students perceived further that the literacy practices at HLIs need them to acculturate with the writing norms and requirements regardless of the complexities that the AW practices are surrounded with on its entire process, and feedback comments from tutors on their written task put students into the crossroads of whether their previous writing was academic or not.

Most of the students complained about the writing practices left to cope with disciplinary writing styles, acculturation, and typical literacy practices; at the same time, the course on AW writing in the Communication Skills Course was facilitated non-practical. Contrary to their perceptions of the adequate writing practices from their lecturers/tutors, written feedback on their written tasks seems inadequate and untimely in moulding the required AW standards of HLIs.

The process and practice of academic writing

The findings show students writing take-home assignments given in their respective courses, academic reports, and presentations. While AW requires careful preparations, planning and processing, students reported practising writing their given tasks with inadequate prior preparation, including the planning and drafting stage. Once they understand the given task through reading from specified sources, students immediately embark on the writing process. By skipping the preliminary writing phases, students produce a written draft below the expected and required standard.

Furthermore, the common practice of the AW process requires the writer to write and revise and write and revise again until one is satisfied that the writing expresses the exact idea of what he wants to say and the quality expected at their literacy level just after producing the first draft; findings of this study show most students ignore the effective writing process as well as the editing and proofreading stages that would have improved the written draft. The reason given was having too many demanding literacy activities in their respective disciplines, with limited time for the assignment and good AW practices. This inaccuracy seems to be the writing background syndrome, on the one hand, and the early stage of the new acculturation process into the HLIs writing learning headway as the leeway of the AL framework.

The study delved into the challenges students encounter during the writing process. As writing at the HLI involves developing and designing an idea, capturing mental demonstrations of knowledge and practising with subject genres, students find it challenging to capture the higher learning academic culture, coherence in writing, English language background, plagiarism trap, effective referencing, accommodating constructive feedback from lecturers or tutors, citation, and mechanics in writing. These challenges were reported from both the questionnaire and interview findings from respondents and were proved by the review of their collected written assignments. These challenges are presented in Figure 1 below.
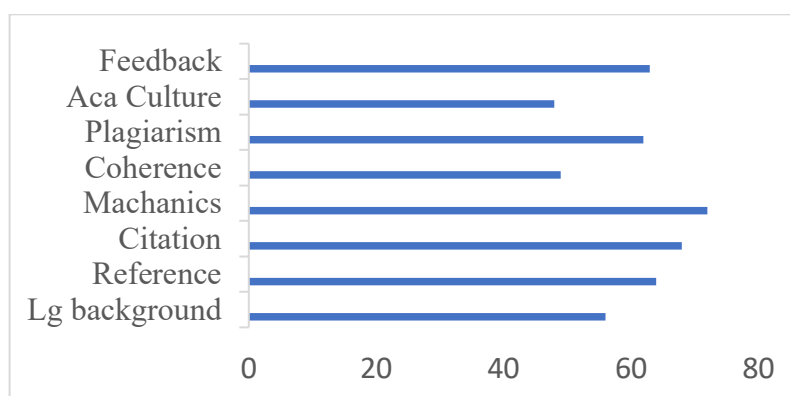

Figure 1. Students' challenges in academic writing

The data in Figure 1 indicates that writing mechanics and citation, which relate to essential components of AW process and practices, are the most compelling challenges among students in HLIs, with 72 and 68 percent respectively. This identity was evident from students' reviewed tasks of all the disciplines surveyed in this study. It seems possible that these results are due to students' English language background, as they pointed out, and low level of mastery of writing technical rules

and conventions. This result was followed closely by referencing 64 percent, constructive feedback on their written tasks with 63 percent responses, and plagiarism with 62 percent challenges. Meanwhile, the academic culture ranks as the least challenging aspect with 48 percent. These findings provide support for attention that AW writing is a scholarly formal style of writing used at HLIs which is nurtured by the AL practices (Lea & Stierer, 2000). In the writing process, skills, identity, socialisation and meaning making are expected of the students' written practices. Thus, writing literacy among students needs to be developed strategically and successfully as academic literacy practices, which include reading and writing within disciplines of a HLI, constitute fundamental processes through which students learn new subjects and develop their knowledge about new areas of specialisation.

Across the study findings, both qualitative and quantitative data show students practising writing with a lack of confidence and writing skills for their written tasks. As they perceive AW, they select, organise and interpret the writing process and come up with the product of their perception, thus producing written tasks below the required standards based on their lecturers'/tutors' comments observed in their written assignments and reviewed collected tasks respectively. In this view, students responded that in such a social context and provided AW is a new culture to them, they end up in a moment of irresolution and find it difficult with academic conventions and nervous whenever the writing process of any assignment comes in.

The findings show students' AW with little writing collaboration among themselves in the writing process. Students lack the positive value of their peers' alliance while accomplishing their written tasks. The responses show that students did not perceive the usefulness of their fellow students as they are of the same level and background in their respective disciplines. However, practising writing collaboration would have helped students improve their written drafts and avoid minor mistakes and errors that were evident in their written tasks during students' documentary review.

Another important finding of the writing practice at HLIs is that students reported having little writing practice while learning writing topic in the Communication Skills Course, the only topic that introduced the AW at this level. As writing skills are a practice-oriented achievement that gears to the required writing standards, several possible explanations exist for this result. First, the nature of literacy in academic contexts and social practices that are essential in writing skills are generalised or not monitored effectively. Secondly, the bulky Communication Skills course content hinders effective writing practices. Thus, meaning making, identity, and power of AW among students are faded by other disciplinary courses like accounting, banking, coding, statistics, and programming, to mention a few. Another possible explanation for this is the fact that the acculturation pace, the AL approach aspect, for students to master AW takes place slowly to the extent that the learning outcome expected from the writing avenue on the one hand of their studies was halfway to mastery of the writing process.

Regarding understanding the complex skills and social practices involved in academic writing, students need guidance as well from lecturers and tutors on the proper access to AW online materials and more actual practices in real writing activities with timely and constructive feedback. Furthermore, collaborating writing

among students is needed in their disciplinary conventions and stylistic norms as the factor that can support and enhance improving AW among students' competencies required for successful AW in the HLIs. In enhancing students' academic success and satisfaction throughout their specialisation, the key approach is to comprehend how students perceive and navigate the demands of academic writing. These results provide valuable insights that can inform the creation of the required writing standards of students for AW while at HLIs and beyond. These findings support the study by Ntereke and Ramoroka, (2015), whose study was on the effectiveness of AW activities and instruction in an Academic Literacy Writing Course at the University of Botswana.

Conclusion

The study aims to explore and understand students' perceptions of academic writing in HLIs, focusing on the writing process and practices involved while writing in their respective disciplines. As students are exposed to the new writing culture from the time of enrolment and their previous writing background, students get into dilemmas regarding their writing feedback from the academic community, leaving the acculturation process to take place in writing standards and requirements of higher learning. The literacy level entraps students to perceive themselves as doing AW while the actual practice and identity of their writing products are below the expected standards of their level of study.

The findings also raise some pertinent issues of students' standard writing practices that emerged through students' responses such as English language background as the main factor that hinders AW practices among students. Efforts are needed to improve language competence from the prior levels of education to the HLIs level. Nevertheless, this does not presume that students need to learn AW together with other disciplinary literacies, conventions and stylistic norms to improve the language mastery that can help the writing process and practices in organizing thoughts, integrating sources, maintaining academic tone, and adhering to specific formatting and citation styles.

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