

AN INVESTIGATION INTO ESL STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING NEEDS: THE CASE OF AGRICULTURE STUDENTS IN EGERTON UNIVERSITY, KENYA.

ABSTRACT

This research is aimed at establishing academic writing needs of first year undergraduate agriculture students in an English as a Second Language context. The research was motivated by the need to design subject-specific teaching materials for the Communication Skills (CS) course in one of the Kenyan universities. The study was informed by concepts of discourse communities, audience expectations and language use from social construction theory, and insights from the principles of needs analysis and genre research in ESP. These concepts were used to develop a conceptual framework for pinpointing the writing requirements within the terms of the institutional culture. Research methods used included questionnaire surveys and investigation of institutional documents. An analysis was also done of samples of students' actual writing to determine their linguistic and communicative competence. The results of the study indicate that in the first year, students do not study one discipline called 'agriculture'. Instead, they study a wide range of courses half of which consist of basic courses in the sciences from which specific disciplinary requirements can be distinguished. It was also established that students are expected to produce an extensive variety of types of written work all of which are assessed and account for their final grades. The research also shows that students' proficiency in writing in content areas is limited and that they lack awareness of the conventions of scientific writing. There is also evidence that students do not always appreciate the nature of the tasks they are asked to undertake or the audience addressed. The research suggests that there is need for CS lecturers to work closely with subject-specialists to establish explicit disciplinary writing requirements. Regarding examination questions, the study suggests that in order to make any teaching relevant, the course should mirror the kind of tasks realistically required of the students in the various courses in the exam context. Students also need to understand that the organizational aspect of writing is a communicative and not just a mechanical process. The thesis is divided into ten Chapters. Chapter 1 gives the background to the research area, including the history of the Academic Communication Skills Project in Kenyan universities. Chapter 2 is a review of literature that relates the present study to past research in ESP in general and academic writing in particular. Chapter 3 looks at theoretical and practical issues in ESP while Chapter 4 presents the methods and sources of data for the study. Chapter 5 is an analysis of institutional documents collected in Kenya. Chapter 6 contains analysis and results of questionnaires. Chapter 7 presents the views of the Communication Skills lecturers. Chapter 8 gives the results of the analysis of undergraduate examination questions and Chapter 9 presents an analysis of features of first year undergraduate students' writing. Chapter 10 summarizes the research, draws conclusions, implications for Academic Communication Skills teaching and makes recommendations for further research.