

A JOURNEY TOWARDS SELF-DIRECTED WRITING: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATE LANGUAGE STUDENTS' WRITING

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Writing is key to assessment in university contexts and hence students need to be empowered to effectively function in subject-specific writing environments. In this regard, it is important that students take charge of their own writing development. Hence, the concept of self-directed writing is relevant in this context. The aim of this article is to explore students' perceptions and practice of self-directed writing and to thereby also evaluate the use of an open-ended questionnaire, an existing self-directed learning questionnaire and student essays as sources of self-directedness in terms of writing. Through these surveys and document analysis diverse, but complementing, results could be drawn. The responses in this study reflect the importance of scaffolding and support provided externally (through lecturers, writing laboratories, facilitators and peers) as well as internally (through reading and continuous writing). Although self-directedness was not very prominently mentioned by the students in the open-ended questionnaire, evidence of a move towards self-directedness in writing was observed. Furthermore, the results of the self-rating scale of self-directed learning showed that most of these respondents regarded themselves as self-directed learners. The document analysis of the essays showed improvement from the first year to the third year. It is also clear that self-directed writing can only be achieved through the facilitation of writing about topics of students' choosing, promotion of metacognitive strategies around writing as well as adequate peer and lecturer support, feedback and assessment.

Keywords

Academic writing, self-directed writing, self-directed language learning, writing instruction, subject-specific writing instruction

INTRODUCTION

Writing can be described as an abstract, voluntary and conscious act (Vygotsky, 1986: 183). This act of writing is also considered an integral part of assessment at university level by means of formal assessment opportunities and academic essays. Vygotsky (1986: 181) notes that writing implies a 'high level of abstraction' in terms of language and that the 'abstract quality' of writing as well as the lack of sound of speech and an interlocutor can make it a difficult task. The process of acquiring writing skills starts before students enrol at university and continues after they leave, but the question remains whether, after certain writing interventions and scaffolding, students believe that they acquire the ability to become independent, autonomous and self-directed academic writers.

In this article, self-directed writing among university students is explored. In terms of self-directed writing, the university writing context in a linguistics module was investigated by means of a longitudinal study where essays written by students in the first year of study are compared with essays written by them in the third year. Writing does not exist in a vacuum and

the context for this study relates specifically to language learning in a linguistics module at a higher education level. The concept of self-directed language learning was, therefore, considered as the research takes place within a linguistics module. Finally, the literature regarding self-directed writing was reviewed, in order to find traces of self-directed writing from the empirical data.

The research in this article was driven by the following research questions:

- To what extent could self-directed writing be gauged by means of an open-ended questionnaire, a self-directed learning questionnaire and essays?
- To what extent would essays written in the first year and again in the third year show evidence of development towards self-directed writing?
- What circumstances would contribute to self-directed writing?

The empirical investigation in this study involved a comparison of essays written by a group of students in their first and third year of BA studies. In addition, these students also completed the self-rating scale of a self-directed learning questionnaire as well as an open-ended questionnaire. All of these were done to explore the nature of self-directed writing among students functioning in an Afrikaans linguistics context.

UNIVERSITY WRITING

As stated before, writing is an essential component of university teaching, learning and assessment. In this regard, assessment is not only done through writing in formal opportunities such as tests and examinations but also by means of academic essays. Creme and Lea (2008: 8) note that '[a]n essay is usually specifically designed for assessment purposes – the audience is assumed to be the actual reader, the person who will mark your work'. The kind of writing approached in this study also involved essays aimed at assessment as part of regular semester activities and not part of an examination.

Additional support is sometimes required in the acquisition or refinement of a range of writing-related skills. To this end, compulsory writing or academic literacy courses have been added to university programmes. In the context of this particular study, the focus was on a linguistics section of an Afrikaans language module where the development of research skills (and by implication writing skills) within the field of linguistics was one of the objectives of the module. The nature of academic language or discourses also provides a number of challenges, in terms of unfamiliar register and style for example, that need to be taken into account on the journey towards self-directed writing.

Compulsory writing courses are sometimes used to scaffold writing skills through the provision of process writing tasks. It is important to take note of concerns in terms of writing courses. For instance, Sherwood (2002: 1) criticises the notion that writing is approached at university as a 'well-structured problem' that can be solved with 'generic skills, readily transmitted from teacher to student'. In addition, Sherwood (2002: 2) argues that 'the nature of university composition instruction works against self-directed learning' and that this instruction tends not to 'accommodate individuals' needs and abilities'. This criticism supports the importance of the facilitation of self-directedness in terms of writing instruction. Sherwood (2002: 21) further states that students should be encouraged to 'take advantage of the opportunities for self-directed learning available in such settings as professional internships, directed studies, and writing centres, where they can confront the ill-structured problems posed by a particular

writing task under the experienced eyes and ears of a mentor'. As such, informal intervention opportunities, such as writing centres, should be promoted at university. The complex debate of the choice between generic and subject-specific academic literacy or writing courses is often resolved in terms of the realities of financial and timetable constraints. However, this not the focus of this study. This research considers the nature of academic writing and specifically within a linguistics classroom. As such, the nature of these types of discourses need to be investigated.

A unique type of language is also used in academic writing. The type of language used in university writing is also described as *academic discourses* in the literature. The plural term is used due to the fact that the focus is here on a number of discourses maintained by individuals in an academic context (cf. Elbow, 1991: 138-140; Gee, 1989: 8-10). The concept of academic discourse(s) can be defined as the ways of thinking and using language which exist in the academy (Hyland, 2009: 1). Conversely, it is stated that academic writing cannot be defined as a single homogenous genre but rather a continuum of subject-specific literacies that must be used in different contexts (Hyland, 2002: 352). Hence, in the context of this study, writing is approached in terms of the subject field of linguistics. This approach implies that students' writing should or could follow existing styles and approaches in writing within this field. Academic writing is often regarded, especially in certain disciplines, as being neutral and unbiased (cf. Badley, 2009: 210; Hyland, 2004: 39). In this regard, Hyland (2005: 4) states that 'writing and speaking, acts of meaning-making, are never neutral but always engaged in that they realize the interests, the positions, the perspectives and the values of those who enact them'. Clearly, there seems to be disagreement in terms of what is often regarded as typical characteristics of academic discourses. If certain writing-specific aspects are provided in instructions for writing in a specific writing course, then the acquisition of these aspects could be tracked in terms of writing. Lillis (2013: 165) questions institutional criteria becoming 'the only or primary driving force in researching student writing' for the sake of a 'pedagogic assessment imperative'. It is important for students to be scaffolded (cf. Cotterall & Cohen, 2003: 158-160) in the instruction of writing by means of guided writing where lecturers provide examples or typical essay structures. It is nevertheless crucial for students to move beyond such prescriptive practices in a self-directed manner.

A final important aspect of writing is motivation. In terms of the context, Zimmerman and Bandura (1994: 846) note that 'writing activities are usually self-scheduled, performed alone, require creative effort sustained over long periods with all too frequent stretches of barren results, and what is eventually produced must be repeatedly revised to fulfil personal standards of quality'. With this in mind, it is relevant to note that, as with language acquisition in general, motivation is also an important variable when writing is considered. As such, Vygotsky (1986: 181) states that a 'child has little motivation to learn writing', while with talking, the context of a conversation tends to prompt speech and this unnatural nature of writing has an effect on approaches of writers to writing. It is hence important to keep this in mind in terms of writing instruction. In this regard, Zimmerman and Bandura (1994: 858) note that 'in promoting self-directed learning, students need to be taught skills and strategies for managing not only the cognitive aspects of managing learning but also methods in which to motivate themselves for academic pursuits in the face of difficulties or attractive alternatives'. Therefore, any approach to writing instruction should cover writing as well as motivation towards writing in order to reach some level of self-directedness.

To be able to reach contextualised self-directed writing, it is also important to explore the background to self-directed language learning.

SELF-DIRECTED LANGUAGE LEARNING

Self-directed learning can be defined as an approach to learning where students take charge of their own learning (cf. Knowles, 1975: 15; Tredoux, 2012: 3) and in this article the focus is on how this is realised in a language learning context. Williamson (2007: 68) goes as far as saying that '[s]elf-direction is the basis of all learning; be it formal or informal'. A widely-quoted definition of self-directed learning, by Knowles (1975: 18), describes the phenomenon as:

a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies and evaluating learning outcomes.

In addition, Merriam (2001: 9) states that three goals of self-directed learning can be identified: 'the development of the learner's capacity to be self-directed'; 'fostering of transformational learning'; and 'promotion of emancipatory learning and social action'. Bandura (1997: 233) even notes that '[t]he highest level of self-initiative in the exercise of self-regulatory efficacy involves learning on one's own subjects that are neither taught at school nor socially imposed'. Developing writing in a self-directed manner could therefore involve writing outside of the formal assisted university writing context. Thornton (2010: 161-164) mentions four phases of the self-directed learning cycle: planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating, with reflection being done throughout the process. This cycle can also be viewed in contrast to early linear self-directed learning models continuing on to more interactive models (Merriam, 2001: 9; Tredoux, 2012: 14-27).

Guidance by others is key on the journey toward self-directed writing. As such, self-directed learning can also be interpreted in terms of Vygotsky's notion of the *zone of proximal development (ZPD)*. Vygotsky (1978: 86) defines the zone of proximal development as 'the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers'. Self-directed language learning does not imply an isolated individual approach to learning, as teachers and peers still have an important role to play in the learning of the relevant cognitive, metacognitive and affective skills (Imants & Van de Ven, 2011: 334; Kania-Gosche, 2010: 3; Mohammadi & Mahdi Araghi, 2013: 75; Thornton, 2010: 158, 160-161).

The concept of self-directed learning has been discussed widely in terms of language learning. In this regard, the focus has for example been on second or additional language acquisition (cf. Bordonaro, 2006: 29-31; Mohammadi & Mahdi Araghi, 2013: 73; Thornton, 2010: 158; Victori & Lockhart, 1995: 223). Even in the context of writing at university level, it is relevant to consider the concept of academic language, as well as the acquisition thereof, as being similar to a second or additional language (cf. Gee, 1989: 7; Olivier & Olivier, 2014: 77).

In language learning the concept of learner *autonomy* is relevant (cf. Benson, 2007: 22-23; Cotterall, 1995: 219; Egel, 2009: 2023-2024; Gremmo & Riley, 1995: 156; Thornton, 2010: 159). Bordonaro (2006: 30) notes that language learner autonomy includes self-directed language learning together with awareness and reflection on the learning process. Conversely,

Dickinson (1978: 12) regards self-directed learning as a step towards autonomous learning. Finally, it is also important to note that autonomy cannot be regarded as a singular or permanent characteristic or state, as individuals may be in different states of autonomy in different contexts (cf. Thornton, 2010: 159) and therefore individualisation of learning is necessary. Self-directed language learning also implies students choosing appropriate learning strategies (Gremmo & Riley, 1995: 158; Victori & Lockhart, 1995: 223-224). In this regard, Egel (2009: 2026) notes that the 'shift in focus of language instruction from teacher-centered to the learner-centered has given learners the responsibility of their own language development' and in order to become autonomous, students should 'be able to diagnose some of their own learning strengths and weaknesses so that they can be able to self-direct their processes of language development'.

An important strategy towards language learner autonomy is *self-assessment* (Harris, 1997: 12). In this regard, Harris (1997: 13) notes that, through self-assessment, students can 'locate their own strengths and weaknesses and then get them to think about what they need to do in order to get better marks' as well as individualise learning. Harris (1997: 15) also mentions the importance of self-assessment (together with self-editing) in the writing process. Victori and Lockhart (1995: 224) go further than just self-assessment in promoting metacognitive strategies in terms of self-directed learning, where students should learn about their own 'beliefs and expectations about language learning'. These metacognitive strategies are also critical in reaching self-directedness.

From the literature, it is clear that *metacognitive strategies* are important for attaining self-directed learning. Victori and Lockhart (1995: 224) define metacognitive knowledge, in terms of second language learning, as 'the general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning and about the nature of language learning and teaching'. Imants and Van de Ven (2011: 334) also note the importance of 'learning to learn' in self-directed learning as students should develop 'an interrelated mix of cognitive skills, metacognitive skills, and affective-emotional skills while executing their learning tasks, for example structuring, criticizing, reviewing, generalizing, making a plan, orientation on goals and outcomes, and regular checking and testing'. The way in which language learning is viewed may actually have an impact on the learning itself (Victori & Lockhart, 1995: 224).

Finally, it is also important to give an overview on how self-directed writing is understood in the literature, as the focus of this article is on writing.

SELF-DIRECTED WRITING

Self-directed learning is relevant for language learning in general; however, the focus in this article is on self-directedness in terms of academic writing at university level. Sherwood (2002: 2-3) notes the importance of self-directed learning with regard to writing and by implication the importance of the student writers' sense of self in addition to them learning at different rates and thinking along different lines. Furthermore, the importance of developing a sense of voice in terms of writing is evident.

The concept of *voice* can be regarded as an important element in gauging self-directed writing. Castelló *et al.* (2009: 1127) note that the notion of identity that can be 'linked to the writers' interest for imposing their own voice in text, seems strongly related to self-regulation in

writing'. Thonney (2011: 348) calls this aspect having 'a voice of authority'. Voice can be described as a trait 'that captures the sound of the individual on the page' (Elbow, 1981: 287). Writing instruction sometimes focuses on aspects such as personal pronoun use, especially in order to convey confidence and the writer's authority (Hyland, 2002: 353). Ivanič (1998: 272) notes how personal pronouns, specifically first person pronouns, are avoided due to 'the traditional belief that intellectual work is an impersonal activity' but also that '[u]sing "I" in association with the process of structuring the essay still leaves room for its content being presented as if it were objective and factual' (Ivanič, 1998: 307). In this regard, Hyland (2005: 148) notes that '[s]elf mention thus sends a clear indication to the reader of the perspective from which their statements should be interpreted, distinguishing their own work from that of others'.

Successful writing does not only imply adhering to a set number of criteria, but also relates to the purpose and value of a specific piece of writing. According to Lovejoy (2009:80), self-directed writing can be 'an opportunity for students to draw on their own resources, not only what they know and care about but also how they may choose to say it'. Similarly, Castelló *et al.* (2009: 1126) emphasise the importance of writers being aware of their own difficulties as well as how to solve them in the process of self-regulation. According to Lovejoy (2009: 86), 'students are more open to learning the forms and conventions of academic writing when they know that their writing is valued and integral to their development as writers'. In addition, Bandura (1997:232) states that '[a] sense of efficacy to regulate writing activities affects writing attainments' and therefore, towards realising self-directed writing, the purpose of writing should be clear and relevant.

In relation to the development of self-directed writing, Lovejoy (2009: 81-82) refers to Britton's focus on *expressive writing* as the first step in writing, and Peter Elbow's concept of *freewriting*. In this process, students choose their own topics and focus their writing on their own experiences. Lovejoy (2009: 83) suggests that students explore language and use 'language that is most natural and comfortable, as well as the varieties they know or have heard but may not have used as writers'. Hyland (2005: 190) also notes the advantages of letting students write creative texts. But in approaching academic writing, aimed at a wider academic community, the aforementioned type of writing is only a useful starting point or supportive tool in writing instruction.

The ultimate goal of writing at university at graduate level, apart from being an assessment tool, could be preparing students for the work environment after university but also to be able to do postgraduate writing. Merriam (2001: 8) notes the association of self-directed learning with adult education (cf. Williamson, 2007: 66). Kania-Gosche (2010: 6) suggests 'andragogy to support the self-directed learning' in the completion of dissertations. Thus, self-directed writing is also especially important when it comes to dissertation or thesis writing (Kania-Gosche, 2010: 1).

A final advantage of self-directed writing is gains made in terms of being more inclusive in the language class. Lovejoy (2009: 79) proposes self-directed writing as 'a way to build a community of diverse writers who share their knowledge and interests, and who strive for clear, effective communication'. This is an interesting line of reasoning, as Lovejoy focused on writing in the school context. The opportunities writing can pose in terms of the accommodation of diversity should indeed be explored further in terms of Afrikaans (or English, depending on the context of a specific class). Since academic texts are usually

generated in what is considered Standard Afrikaans, however, in the context of changing circumstances around the acceptance of other varieties of Afrikaans and the re-standardisation of these varieties (cf. Kotzé, 2014), self-directed writing might have a role to play. The aforementioned issues were explored in the following study.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research design

A longitudinal study was done by means of an open-ended questionnaire, the self-rating scale of a self-directed learning questionnaire as well as essays written by students in the first and third year of study.

Participants

This study involved a group of 16 undergraduate students. This number was determined by the fact that essays were only available for these specific students from their first year as well as their third year. Furthermore, all of these students completed the questionnaire used in this study. Students who did not adhere to these criteria or opted not to take part were eliminated from the study. It is important to note that in the first year, the research participants were part of a wider population of 145 students and in the third year, a population of 20 students.

Procedure

The empirical part of this study involved obtaining ethical clearance for this research and in this regard this research fell within the ambit of a wider project on language instruction in higher education. Ethical clearance for this research was granted by the North-West University's Research Ethics Regulatory Committee and the ethics number 00331-14-A7 awarded for this research. It is important to note that participation in this study was totally voluntary and informed consent was obtained from the participants. Furthermore, participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any point and responses were handled anonymously.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The collection of data in this article concerned an open-ended questionnaire, a self-rating scale of self-directed learning (SRSSDL), as well as two sets of academic argumentative essays relating to topics within the field of linguistics (written in the first year as well as in the third year of study).

Open-ended questionnaire

A short open-ended questionnaire was presented to the group of third-year students. The questions posed to the respondents included the following:

- How did you learn to write academically?
- What kind of support did you receive in terms of academic writing and by whom was this provided?
- How did you help yourself to acquire and do academic writing?

- Do you use what you learned about academic writing in your first year in your current context?

As this research focused on self-directed writing, it was necessary to compare the writing by the research subjects in their first year to writings in their third year. To this end a document analysis was done, by the researcher, on the essays written by the research subjects. Bowen (2009: 27) defines *document analysis* as ‘a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents’. In addition, Bowen (2009:32) notes that the analysis process, as also followed in this study, involves ‘skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation’.

In the document analysis of the first-year and third-year essays, a few general comments are reported first, after which some thematic trends are discussed. For the sake of comparison, both essays were very much descriptive in nature and between 700 and 1 000 words in length, with the first-year essay focusing on language norms and the application thereof in a field of work of the students’ choosing. The third-year essay focused on language contact and Afrikaans.

The self-rating scale of self-directed learning (SRSSDL), as developed by Williamson (2007), was used at the beginning of the semester to investigate self-directed learning among the research participants at third-year level. This instrument is described by Williamson (2007: 68) as ‘an instrument developed for measuring the level of self-directedness in one’s learning process’. The use of this questionnaire prompted the need to determine the reliability of the instrument in this study.

Reliability

Firstly, the reliability of the instrument was determined and hence Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were calculated for the five categories of Williamson’s (2007) questionnaire:

Table 1: Cronbach’s alpha coefficients for the SRSSDL questionnaire

Category	Cronbach’s alpha
Awareness	0.81
Learning strategies	0.47*
Learning activities	0.67
Evaluation	0.85
Interpersonal skills	0.75

In four of the five instances, the value was satisfactory with Cronbach’s alpha higher than 0.60, which is acceptable for exploratory research (cf. Hair *et al.* 2014:123). Despite the value for Learning strategies (cf. Table 1), the results are still reported considering the number of items and very few subjects. The descriptive statistics for the questionnaire is provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics for the SRSSDL questionnaire

Category	Mean	N	Standard deviation
Awareness	3.95	16	0.77
Learning strategies	3.78	16	0.90
Learning activities	3.79	16	0.90
Evaluation	3.81	16	0.88
Interpersonal skills	4.07	16	0.87

The prominence of interpersonal skills among the respondents is evident. The mean of the SRSSDL score for the group of respondents was 247.75 with a standard deviation of 23.45. This implies that the group shows a high level of self-directed learning – i.e. between 221 and 300 (cf. Williamson, 2007: 68).

FINDINGS AND RESULTS

The responses from the open-ended questionnaire translated from Afrikaans into English are provided below – the respondent number followed by the quotation number is provided in square brackets. When asked how the respondents learned how to write at university, the following themes were evident:

- Respondents learned through writing assignments with lecturer feedback:
 - ‘through assignments, feedback’ [Q5:2]
 - ‘I learned through feedback from lecturers in previous semesters’ [Q8:1-2]
 - ‘The guidance and teaching of guidelines by lecturers were implemented’ [Q2:3-4]
 - ‘Also all language modules, Afrikaans as well as English’ [Q3-4]
- Respondents learned/refined writing by writing:
 - ‘Through the process of assignment writing an academic writing style was developed.’ [Q2:1-2]
 - ‘The more I wrote, the more I learned’ [Q10:3]
 - ‘Through practice of writing assignments and researching sources’ [Q12:1-2]
 - ‘it is a case of trial and error’ [Q14:2]
- Writing was learnt through reading:
 - ‘reading of academic articles and books’ [Q14:1]
- Learning how to write was an ongoing process:
 - ‘I believe that it is an ongoing process’ [Q2:5]
- Academic literacy course interventions had an important role to play:
 - ‘For me handing in my writing assignments for AGLA121 [*module code for the academic literacy module*] was the beginning phase of my academic writing’ [Q1:1-2]
 - ‘AGLA in my first year helped me to correctly adjust my writing style for university. It provided me with a specific way of thinking about writing assignments’ [Q4:1-3]
 - ‘AGLA helped me a lot’ [Q3:1]
 - ‘AGLA provided a good foundation for an academic writing style at university’ [Q6:2-4]
 - ‘AGLA helped me’ [Q7:2]

- ‘The university “teaches” us to writing “academically”, in other words formally in paragraphs that are linked and follows structurally and semantically. A lot of emphasis was also placed on the argument structure.’ [Q9:1-4]
- ‘I learned in AGLA how to writing in my first year’ [Q10:1]
- ‘I learned through AGLA and in my first year’ [Q15:2]
- Subject-specific writing instruction:
 - ‘I learned about academic language through instruction and classes in AFLL [module code for the Afrikaans language module] and the study guide examples’ [Q1:3-5]
 - ‘the learning process in AFLL 111 helped me a lot. Lecturers also helped us’ [Q7:3]
- Learning about writing was done through peers:
 - ‘some of the seniors helped me’ [Q3:2]
 - ‘I learned ... in Afrikaans, where we had facilitators who could help us’ [Q10:2-3]

It is apparent from the respondents’ feedback that writing had not only been learned through scaffolding from others (lecturer feedback, generic academic literacy and subject-specific interventions and support by peers) but also through individual work (writing, reading and approaching writing as an ongoing process). Clearly, the concerns raised by Sherwood (2002: 1-2) regarding the lack of individualisation at university level might not be relevant to all the respondents in this study, but still needs to be kept in mind. It is important to note that more subject-specific individualised instruction could still be facilitated.

Apart from the focus on learning to write by writing, it is also important to acknowledge the relevance of moving towards developing metadiscourse or, in other words, writing about writing (Hyland, 2005: 16). Hyland (2005: 36) defines metadiscourse as ‘the cover term for the self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings in a text, assisting the writer (or speaker) to express a viewpoint and engage with readers as members of a particular community’. These self-reflective expressions are therefore also necessary in higher education.

The respondents were asked what support they received regarding writing instruction and the following themes could be identified from the responses:

- Feedback from lecturers and peers:
 - ‘The writing lab (maybe not enough) and feedback from the lecturers is very important’ [Q2:6-7]
 - ‘The lecturers looked at my writing before I handed it in and then gave feedback. The writing lab also helped and gave advice.’ [Q3:3-4]
 - ‘writing lab and AGLA in the first year’ [Q6:5]
 - ‘The lecturers at AFLL helped us a lot’ [Q7:6]
 - ‘The writing lab is available for support, but I did not use it’ [Q9:6-7]
 - ‘I received help and positive feedback from others as well as the writing lab’ [Q14:3-4]
 - ‘Yes, writing lab as well as AGLA in the first year’ [Q15:5]
 - ‘Help from fellow students, not always and sometimes only as a quick scan with comments’ [Q16:5-8]

- Clear assessment criteria acted as support:
 - ‘The lecturers assessed the writing with good criteria which was provided to us beforehand and this helped in the way in which I approached the writing assignment’ [Q12:3-5]
- Books and writing guides provided support:
 - ‘By reading books as well as resources on the university’s website’ [Q10:6-7]
- One respondent felt that no support was provided:
 - ‘Nothing’ [Q5:4]

The idea of support in learning how to write relates to scaffolding on others and it is evident that the kind and degree of support experienced by the respondents varied from no support up to guided scaffolding. Conversely, from the responses it is clear that feedback and clear assessment criteria seem to be good practices that should be continued.

In addition, the respondents were asked to what extent and how they learned to write by themselves, or by implication how self-directed writing was perceived. In this regard, the following responses were recorded:

- Self-directed writing was emerging with support and continuous practice:
 - ‘I am still learning how to write, but I think the following helped: feedback from lecturers, style of established researchers as guideline as well as looking critically at your own writing. Finally, I also believe that writing is a continuous process which should be developed as long as you write.’ [Q2:9-11]
 - ‘One learns by writing: in other words through practice. The more you write, the better you write.’ [Q13:3-5]
 - ‘I learned by writing myself and by reading lecturers’ comments. I would say that I write as good as I can and then look at the comments.’ [Q16:10-11]

In most cases, the respondents did not emphasise their own self-directedness, but rather focused on how they improved in terms of external factors such as reading, written guidance, feedback as well as support from lecturers and peers.

Apart from the open-ended questionnaire it was decided to investigate how the research population viewed themselves in terms of self-directed learning.

The table below shows the SRSSDL scores of the individual respondents as well as an overall impression of the comparison of the first-year and third-year essays (cf. Document analysis).

Table 3: Biographical information, SRSSDL scores and essay comparison per respondent

Respondent	Gender	Field of study	SRSSDL score	Third-year essay compared to first-year essay
1	Male	Languages	241	Improved
2	Male	Languages	273	Worsened
3	Female	Psychology and language	226	Improved
4	Female	Languages	279	Remained the same
5	Female	Languages	257	Worsened
6	Female	Communication studies	239	Improved
7	Female	Psychology and language	290	Improved
8	Male	Languages	260	Worsened
9	Female	Languages	221	Improved
10	Female	Languages	239	Worsened
11	Female	Languages	238	Improved
12	Female	Languages	236	Worsened
13	Female	Languages	237	Improved
14	Female	Psychology and language	283	Improved
15	Female	Psychology and language	236	Worsened
16	Female	Languages	209	Improved

Most of the respondents (N=15) scored a high level of self-directed learning (i.e. a score between 221 and 300), while only one respondent scored a moderate level of self-directed learning (scoring between 141 and 220). None of the respondents showed a low score (between 60 and 140). The high level of self-directed learning as described by Williamson (2007: 72) as ‘effective self-directed learning’ where ‘[t]he goal is to maintain progress by identifying strengths and methods for consolidation of the students’ effective self-directed learning’. In contrast, a moderate level is described as ‘half way to becoming a self-directed learner’ and here it is important that ‘[a]reas for improvement must be identified and evaluated, and a strategy adopted with teacher guidance when necessary’ (Williamson, 2007:72). From Table 3, no relation is apparent between the self-directedness scores and the improvement in writing essays.

In order to supplement the aforementioned data, a document analysis of the first-year and third-year essays was also done.

Document analysis

The original assessment of the essays involved the use of an assessment grid (that included assessment in terms of research design, introduction and scientific discourse; development of argument – contents and formulation; findings and conclusion; handling of sources and bibliography; language and style as well as technical finishing). However, for the sake document analysis, the aim was to provide an impression of each essay in the first year and

third year in terms of the aspects in the assessment grid, but also specifically aspects such as voice which could show an attempt at self-directedness.

Table 4: Initial phase of the document analysis

Respondent	First-year essay	Third-year essay
1	This essay is presented very scientifically, with very good spelling and grammar. The introduction seems to follow a set recipe. No outright attempt at foregrounding an individual voice.	Fairly similar to the first-year essay but with a more streamlined introduction and conclusion. Some spelling errors are noted. Still no attempt at indicating individual voice.
2	The essay is well executed and polished in terms of language. Few minor spelling and referencing errors. No evidence of an individual voice.	To a great extent structural requirements were ignored (such as having a conclusion). There are also some issues regarding sources: correct referencing and reliability of sources. No evidence of an individual voice.
3	In terms of structure, language and referencing there are some errors. However, the essay is very engaging, almost being somewhat informal in some places.	The essay is rounded off quite well. Some sections are still a bit informal, however, a clear voice is discernible.
4	This essay is well presented and finished. In some areas more details could have been provided. No evidence of a specific voice. To an extent a lot of information is just listed.	This essay is similar in style to the first-year essay. Language and referencing perfect. Facts and quotations from sources are well introduced and integrated into the argument.
5	Some minor structural problems and a lot of spelling errors. Otherwise the essay is in order. No clear attempt has been made at highlighting the author's voice.	Great improvement in terms of language and basic structural requirements. Good integration with argument. But still no outright evidence of the author's voice.
6	In terms of technical and language requirements this essay is perfect. Apart from the introduction that seems a bit formulaic. In some instances statements could be substantiated better from sources.	Well-polished essay. The introduction seems to be a bit more informal with some evidence of an individual voice.
7	The language of this essay is quite good and has been approached very scientifically. The introduction starts with a definition, then a couple of guiding questions and a statement on what the essay is about. Some irrelevant information is included. Overall the argument drives the discussion in a sensible way.	The essay is well executed and there are no language or structural problems. The introduction and conclusion could have been extended a lot. The introduction and conclusion do show evidence of a clear authorial voice.
8	An argument is presented in this essay. However, there is no clear introduction or conclusion and a number of language errors are noted. A number of statements made are not substantiated. No clear	A few structural problems are observed. But in general the essay displays all the required aspects. Only a few language errors are identified. A clear introduction is presented and in this introduction an attempt has been

	attempt has been made at highlighting the author's voice.	made at introducing the author's voice. It is striking that a number of very long quotations without sufficient integration is used in this essay.
9	This essay shows quite a number of spelling and grammar mistakes. The argumentation line is clear. The author uses the personal pronoun in the introduction. Only a few sources were consulted for this essay.	The essay is well structured. Yet, there are some minor spelling mistakes. Information from a variety of sources were consulted and were integrated effectively in the argument. The personal pronoun is used in the conclusion to position the author in terms of the literature.
10	Quite a number of spelling and grammar errors are identified. The respondent even used a number of Afrikaans constructions that seem to follow English grammatical rules. There is little integration of material from sources with the presented argument.	Despite some technical issues this essay is well written with efficient integration of sources. The singular personal pronoun is not used, but the plural personal pronoun is used.
11	This essay, especially the first two pages, comprises of definitions and lists. There is little integration of information and technical requirements were ignored. Furthermore, a number of spelling and grammar mistakes are present and referencing is done incorrectly. There is no attempt at foregrounding an individual voice.	This essay shows a more logical structure than the first-year essay. Despite quite a number of spelling errors, at least technical requirements are adhered to. There is a clear increase in the use of different categories of metadiscourse.
12	Well-structured essay with no major structural or language errors. There are some attempts at portraying the author's voice. Sufficient introduction and conclusion paragraphs.	The essay is still well-structured, however, quotations are not as well integrated as in the first-year. Furthermore, a very short, basically incomplete conclusion paragraph is provided.
13	Some grammar and spelling errors are found in the essay and certain technical requirements were ignored. Nevertheless, in general a logical structure is in order. In a specific paragraph on the application value of a certain theoretical concept the author's voice is clearly identifiable.	Despite some minor spelling errors there is clear improvement between the first-year and third-year essays. This essay shows better integration of quotations with the general argument. An increase in the use of different categories of metadiscourse is also evident.
14	Generally a good essay with little grammar, spelling or technical issues. The introduction shows the formulaic character also observed among other first-year essays. The author's voice is not really prominent in the essay.	As with the first-year essay little grammar, spelling or technical issues are observed. Despite the lack of headings, the narrative structure of the essay makes reading quite easy. A number of very functional categories of metadiscourse are employed.
15	This is problem driven and well structured. Despite a few technical issues and the use of very few sources this can be considered a successful first-year	The essay is relatively well executed. A few spelling and technical issues are identified. But, the conclusion is very superficial and not only are sources

	essay. No overt attempt is made to make the author's voice obvious.	listed in the wrong format, but only a few were used.
16	This essay does not adhere to most of the technical requirements set. Integration of sources and a clear argument are evident. In terms of style, a clear unique voice is evident, however, the style of the narrative borders on very informal language and almost feels like informal spoken language.	In the third-year essay the style is very similar, however, now the essay is more structured in the same manner as the rest of the class. Not all statements are sufficiently supported from sources, but in general the argument is clear. Some technical issues are also identified.

The document analysis showed mixed results, varying from a decrease in quality to great improvement (cf. Table 3 and 4). Any decrease in quality could possibly be ascribed to the fact that support was provided in the form of facilitators in the first year, while in the third year the respondents basically completed the essays totally on their own. In terms of the assessment criteria, of the 16 essays, six of the third-year essays were worse than in the first year, one respondent's essays were fairly similar in quality, while for most respondents (nine instances) the essays showed great improvement. It is important to also look closely at specific aspects that showed improvement and therefore aspects such as voice, use of quotations, format of the source list, essay argument structure as well as other more general improvements are also considered.

As stated in the literature overview, the concept of a writer's individual voice is very important. Ivanič (1998:134, 272) notes that the use of the first person pronouns are not typical of scientific essays. In this regard, the following evidence was derived from the essays as examples of the use of the personal pronoun:

- In **my** opinion this statement is very important when it ... [E1.3:6-7]
- **I** think language contact is good and extends ... [E1.3:80-81]
- In this essay **I** will briefly refer to ... [E7.3:9]
- **I** am going to explain these concepts using practical examples from the South African context. [E7.3:10-11]
- In this essay **I** am going to explain the influence ... [E8.3:40]
- For the last part of this essay **I** will focus on the ... [E8.3:194]
- Firstly **I** will pay attention to ... then **I** will focus on ... [E9.1:32]
- **I** agree with Lawrence ... [E9.3:67]
- ... different influences have formed the mother tongue **we** know today [E10.3:10]
- In this discussion **we** read how early contact ... [E10.3:27-28]
- Even if effective communication is the most important norm, **I** feel that if there is [E11.1:156-157]
- The question **I** am asking ... [E15.1:41]
- **We** have heard so many times ... [E15.3:5]
- **I** am going to discuss all these topics ... [E15.5:9]

As Ivanič (1998: 307) notes, the use of 'I' is 'not a straightforward measure' and does not imply being withdrawn or objective and hence might not imply authorial voice. However, the use of personal pronouns are recorded here and relevant instances are discussed. For example, research participant 7 added a sense of authorial voice in the introductory paragraph by using the personal pronoun when stating 'I am going to explain these concepts'. This addition of the personal pronoun could be interpreted as an attempt at displaying the research participant's

authorial voice – as also noted in Table 3. However, this phenomenon may only be cosmetic as there were no other markers of this nature in the rest of the essay. Research participant 8 also used the personal pronoun in the introduction and again in the body of the essay, but reverted back to using passive voice in the conclusion and thus avoiding any personal pronouns by writing ‘The conclusion can be made from the discussion that’. Research participant 13 actually used the personal pronoun in a paragraph in a first-year essay, where an application was made in terms of the theoretical content discussed in the essay and the participants envisaged line of work. In this reflective section, the author’s voice is clearly discernible. Interestingly, in terms of the literature Castelló *et al.* (2009:1127) did not find much use of personal pronouns in their study.

Another aspect that was observed was the move from purely listing related quotations and statements from sources in paragraphs to carefully selected quotations (also often paraphrased in the third year) and combination of facts introduced by theme sentences. From this observation of the essays, it seems that effective paragraph writing based on the wider argument structure is something that can develop over a three-year period (as was the case for research participant 4).

The source list also proved to be an interesting aspect of the essays. In some instances, great improvement was evident from the first to the third year (research participants 3); however, for some, the mistakes observed in the source list increased in the third year (research participant 15). In most instances, only a few minor errors such as the use of spacing, capital letters, spelling and general formatting were identified in both essays.

In paragraphs such as the introduction, there seemed to be a shift in focus from a more formulaic listing of what should have been done in the essay to a more problem-based individualised approach. Research participant 6, for example, started the first-year essay with a quote defining one of the key terms, followed by listing each of the aspects dealt with in the essay. Yet, in the third-year essay, this research participant integrated the aspects discussed in the essay in terms of the wider research context and a specific research question in the introduction. Conversely, research participant 7 had a unique approach in the first year by introducing the concepts handled in the essay by means of a number of questions. But in the third-year essay, research participant 7 reverted to merely listing items to be discussed. Research participants 12 and 15 also showed a move from fairly well-structured conclusions in the first-year essay to less complex, almost unfinished conclusions in the third-year essays.

Other improvements on a more structural, textual and technical level included:

- a move from single sources for statements towards reporting multiple references (research participant 4);
- improvement in terms of the basic requirements for the introduction, conclusion and referencing (research participant 5);
- use of clichés (such as ‘die lig laat sien’) in the first-year essay and avoiding such constructions in the third-year essay (research participant 7);
- use of incorrect expressions (such as ‘kan aan twee redes toegestaan word’ instead of ‘kan aan twee redes toegeskryf word’) in the first-year essay and not repeating similar characteristics in the third-year essay (research participant 10);
- a greater awareness of specific spelling conventions, such as:
 - *sms* (research participant 7, first-year essay) – *SMS* (research participant 7, third-year essay),

- *afrikaans* and *engels* (research participant 9, first-year essay) – *Afrikaans* and *Engels* (research participant 9, third-year essay);
- increase in the use of different categories of metadiscourse (cf. Hyland, 2005: 49) (research participants 3, 5, 10, 11 and 13); and
- moving from long direct quotations from single sources to summaries and paraphrased statements from multiple sources (research participant 10).

Despite improvements, the essays themselves did not necessarily show evidence of self-directed writing. It is clear that individuals that may consider themselves self-directed learners might actually choose to stick to writing formulas they are used to. It might be necessary to also consider the instruction and assessment associated with the writing.

DISCUSSION

Evidence of self-directedness in terms of writing is also clear from the responses and essays, as many respondents showed a clear voice or identity throughout the writing (cf. Castelló *et al.*, 2009: 1127; Elbow, 1981: 287; Hyland, 2002: 353; Thonney, 2011: 348). The respondents were aware of their capabilities but also of their difficulties in writing (Castelló *et al.*, 2009: 1126; Lovejoy, 2009: 86). The role of expressive writing (Lovejoy, 2009: 81-82), writing outside of university (Kania-Gosche, 2010: 1) and the role of writing in terms of inclusivity (Lovejoy, 2009: 79) were not obvious from the empirical study.

Some respondents also mentioned the prominence of supplemental instruction facilitators and writing laboratory consultants in the writing process. In this regard, it is important to note that the university has a system where senior students are used in certain modules as facilitators for supplemental instruction in addition to classes. The role of facilitators in supporting students has also been highlighted in terms of academic literacy by Tredoux (2012: 27). These individuals fulfil the same role as the counsellors described by Gremmo and Riley (1995: 161) in that they are not lecturers but act in a facilitating role. Similarly, Kania-Gosche (2010: 3) proposes that writing lecturers should use their own writing as examples in modelling good practice.

Students must be able to understand clearly why metacognitive strategies are involved in language learning (Victori & Lockhart, 1995: 232). As such, opportunities must be created for students to reflect on the writing process as well as the process of learning how to write.

Individualised writing instruction seems to be very important (Sherwood, 2002: 21; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994: 858). In this regard, Victori and Lockhart (1995: 232) refer to learning 'tailored' to the student and the need for a process of 'the gathering of extensive individual data, individual needs analysis and enhanced self-knowledge combined with personalized, supportive counselling' (cf. Gremmo & Riley, 1995:158). Therefore, in future similar studies and writing intervention, more individual data would be required in order to support writing.

Finally, it is also noteworthy that, as a practical solution to many of the above-mentioned challenges, electronic learning management systems for example still pose many opportunities for collaborative and scaffolding preparation towards self-directed writing skills. In this study, despite the fact that a learning management system was used for handing in the essays as well

as for the assessment, no apparent advantages of learning management systems were evident from the empirical study and more research is required in this regard.

CONCLUSION

The importance of self-directed writing is highlighted by the prominence of writing in teaching, learning and assessment at university level. In this context academic discourses is used in subject-specific environments. Within this article, the literature regarding self-directed language learning provided a sufficient theoretical background for this study in terms of support by peers and mentors, student autonomy, selection of learning strategies, self-assessment and metacognitive strategies. Finally, it was also important to explore the concept of self-directed writing and in this regard the concept of voice, awareness of authors of their capabilities and limitations, the usefulness of expressive writing and inclusivity were considered.

The empirical part of this article involved a longitudinal study conducted by means of an open-ended questionnaire, the self-rating scale of a self-directed learning questionnaire, as well as essays written by 16 students in the first and third year of study. The responses to the open-ended questionnaire emphasised the importance of scaffolding and support provided externally (through lecturers, writing laboratories, facilitators and peers) as well as internally (through reading and continuous writing). Furthermore, in terms of support, the importance of feedback, clear assessment criteria and written guides were evident. Although self-directedness was not very prominently mentioned by the students in the open-ended questionnaire, evidence of a move towards self-directed writing was observed.

The results of the self-rating scale of self-directed learning (SRSSDL) showed that most of these respondents regarded themselves as self-directed learners. In spite of this, no specific relation was observed in terms of their performance in the essays. In addition to the two questionnaires, a document analysis of the first-year and third-year essays was also done. Most of the essays showed improvement from the first year to the third year. Yet, it is a concern that in some instances the quality of writing decreased. Importantly, aspects associated with self-directed writing were observed in the essays.

Apart from limitations such as the small sample size, it is important to note that this study involved four instruments (an open-ended questionnaire, the self-rating scale of self-directed learning and two essays), taken from students who were functioning at a specific point of their self-directedness continuum. Clearly, an instrument such as an essay is also not necessarily the most effective tool to determine self-directedness in terms of writing. However, the combination of the three types of instruments does show evidence of self-directedness.

Follow-up research could involve a larger corpus of essays that could be used for comparison. Assessment criteria aimed at self-directed writing practice could also be refined. In addition, a specific self-directed writing questionnaire can be developed in order to explore writing specifically.

In order to promote self-directed writing, the following suggestions – based on the literature review – could be addressed by lecturers. Lecturers should:

- allow for greater learning individualisation in terms of writing on topics selected by students and at own rates;

- create opportunities for self-assessment of writing;
- ensure that the focus of writing instruction is not only about surface elements but also developing voice;
- guarantee that feedback is encouraging and clear;
- not ignore the value of expressive writing;
- embrace different language varieties; and
- extend writing centres to provide peer-based support on the journey on becoming self-directed writers.

In conclusion, it is important to note that self-directed writing was evident in this study through the facilitation of writing about topics of students' choosing, promotion of metacognitive strategies around writing as well as adequate peer and lecturer support, feedback and assessment.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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