

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF INNOVATIVE RESEARCH AND KNOWLEDGE

ISSN-2213-1356

www.ijirk.com

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ACADEMIC WRITING TASKS IN KENYAN HIGHER EDUCATION: A PRAGMATIC APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

Academic writing is a common type of writing in many academic institutions. In higher education, the practice involves inquiry that uses research and writing to either form new questions or pursue existing enduring questions that would be of interest to the academic community. It is also viewed as a platform that provides learners with an opportunity to navigate through critical questions in their field of study. At the undergraduate level, the research inquiries and write-ups mainly rely on secondary sources of information. Higher education involves adapting ways that may lead to understanding, interpreting and organizing knowledge. Problems may arise in students' writing due to gaps between the expectations of the academic staff and that of the students regarding what this kind of writing involves. Bearing in mind that this type of writing has its own characteristic features and distinct style, we conducted a survey research from a corpus drawn from a twelve per cent random sample of all chartered Universities in Kenya. The collected data was analyzed with a view of determining the perceptions from both students and members of academic staff regarding most of the issues associated with the process of academic writing such as knowledge, authority, technical skills and linguistic competence. Guided by the principles of Gricean pragmatics, the qualitative and quantitative responses enabled the study to interrogate how perceptions in the entire process influence management of this very important aspect of learning in academic institutions. It is hoped that the views from this exploratory overview as well as findings and the discussions

thereof, will contribute some meaningful insights that will deepen the understanding and management of this discourse practice.

Key words: *Academic writing, perceptions, higher education, Gricean pragmatics, discourse practice*

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing is a particular style of writing that is characteristic of academic institutions. It is used by undergraduates, graduates and lecturers in the exploration of particular academic questions in essays, Post graduate dissertations and thesis as well as other academic papers (also called term papers). Although it shares many similarities with other types of writing, it also has its own characteristic features (Peters, 1994). Its discourse may also involve objective reporting of controlled research conducted either voluntarily or at the request of an organization. The academic papers that arise out of these ventures include: a term paper, meant for submission as partial requirement of a degree course; a thesis or dissertation meant for submission to an institution of higher learning in anticipation of an academic award; a research paper meant for presentation before a scholarly seminar or conference or an article meant to serve as a text book for educational institutions at various levels or one that can serve as supplementary reading text in such institutions. The academic papers popularly required of undergraduate scholars, who are the focus of this study, are the term papers sometimes referred to as academic essays (Crème & Lea, 2008). It is important to note that all academic papers have characteristic features that relate to both language and structure, giving the type of writing a distinct style. It is expected that such must be demonstrated by all scholarly writers. There are a number of factors that are crucial to correct writing of an academic work such as having an argument that is logical and coherent, supporting it with evidence from reading, adopting a formal style of writing and an appropriate bibliography, among others (Murray & Hughes, 2008).

However, as Lea and Street (1998) have argued, the question of students writing skills and the falling standards in writing is a persistent one. They further observe that since higher education involves adapting new ways of knowing, understanding, interpreting and organizing knowledge, problems may arise in students' writing due to gaps between the expectations of the academic staff and that of the students regarding what this kind of writing involves. Such a perspective is purely pragmatic where the concept of contextual meaning becomes critical as it may lead to students' perceptions. An understanding of what academic discourse entails is therefore critical because as Vacca and Vacca (2008) have observed, what may constitute academic discourse in one field of study may differ in another. Moreover, an understanding of the discrepancy between teacher expectations and students perceptions in academic writing is critical in enabling the teacher to formulate tasks that his or her learners can relate with in respect to linguistic competence, technical skills as well as knowledge and authority (Wolsey et.al, 2012).

The two major concepts of the Gricean pragmatics thus, speaker meaning and the cooperative principle, are critical to this study because in academic writing, communication effectiveness is usually governed by the context of the question due to the meanings that arise. The perceptions of the writer are critical since they determine how the discourse practice is managed. Such aspects in the current study are identifiable through the lecturers' responses.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study used a Survey design where a random sample of twelve per cent of chartered universities in Kenya was selected. This enabled the study to collect a broad range of data from respondents in the sampled universities who

responded to a questionnaire with both open and closed ended questions. Two lecturers from each of the sampled universities also responded to an open ended questionnaire. The target population comprised of the third and fourth year students from both public and private universities as well as lecturers from both categories of universities. The component of public and private universities provide diversity since the two types though chartered by the same government and having gone through similar evaluation for them to be chartered, have significant differences in terms of the clientele for each and provision of facilities. This perspective was useful during discussions of findings.

The data that was collected which yielded both quantitative and qualitative views was coded, summarized and analyzed as per the objectives of the study. The Universities are coded as A-F and thus appear as UA for University A up to University F (UF). The respondents are coded with numbers, for instance the first respondent in university A is referred to as UA R1 (University A, Respondent 1), during analysis of qualitative views. Lecturers too are coded depending on the universities that they come from and their numbers for instance L (to indicate lecturer) with a specific number. Therefore, a second lecturer from the second university will be identifiable as UB, L2. The frequency results are presented in percentages, analyzed results are in form of graphs and tables while qualitative responses became useful during discussions of the findings. Our approach was based on a representative sample from which generalizations could be drawn.

3. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In Kenyan higher education, the practice of term paper writing is a common form of assignment given by lecturers to students pursuing undergraduate studies. According to Murray and Hughes (2008), such a writing task expects the student to delve deeper into a topic as a way of broadening their knowledge in a particular area. The skills acquired sharpen their analytical and communication skills eventually enabling them to become independent learners and professionals. The data collected for this investigation provide evidence for lecturers and students perceptions at the level of linguistic competence, technical skills, knowledge and authority.

On students' perceptions regarding academic writing, the study established that these are quite a number. They emanate from students' attitudes towards academic tasks as well as other external factors as seen through their responses while lecturers' responses indicate that factors such as students' preparedness also influence how they perceive academic assignments in higher education.

Some of the dominant students' perceptions are summarized and represented in the tables and figures below. They represent some specific aspects which are scored on a Likert scale of 1 -5 where 1 indicates a response of strongly disagree; 2 represents disagree; 3 indicates a neutral response; 4 indicates an agree response while 5 represents a response of strongly agree

3.1 RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

One of the perceptions of students is formed due to the academic writing component of documentation. The fact that there are many documentation styles and that a student is required to use a particular style consistently in a piece of writing seems to cause confusion for some of the students. This is compounded by the fact that the sources of information that they may be sourcing for the information from are likely to be in a different documentation style, for instance where a student reads a text that uses Chicago style yet is expected to produce a write-up in APA style. In such a case, they are likely to get confused and eventually perceive such assignments as difficult. This perception is captured in the few selected examples of respondents' views below:

UA, R 26: Documentation is a big challenge to most of us especially if you are to use APA like in our University and the books you are reading are not in APA

UB, R5: The different documentation styles are confusing. Why not use one?

UD, R 21: APA has so many confusing rules...

In the above views from the students, one can almost feel a sense of frustration in the students when it comes to the use of documentation. This study therefore proposes the need for deliberate efforts by institutions of higher learning to teach the technical skill of documentation to their students so that they are made confident in the use of appropriate references to their sources of information. Indeed one of the lecturers who responded to our questionnaire said:

UB, Lecturer 2: One big challenge for our students is the inability to retrieve Information from either a primary or secondary source and use it correctly when writing

This view is further accentuated by the quantitative analysis of students' views regarding the same as shown in the table below.

Table 1: Showing the Likert Scale scoring of students' perceptions towards documentation Styles

University	Likert Scale Scoring (%)				
	S/Disagree	Disagree (Code)	Neutral	Agree	S/Agree
A	16.3	20.4	14.2	24.4	24.4
B	17.9	30.7	15.3	7.6	28.2
C	17.3	13.0	8.6	34.7	26.0
D	3.3	30.0	13.3	36.6	16.6
E	0.0	15.0	27.5	35.0	22.0
F	18.7	12.5	12.5	33.3	22.9
Mean \pm SE	12.25 \pm 3.39	20.27 \pm 3.38	15.23 \pm 2.62	28.60 \pm 4.55	23.43 \pm 1.61

From the table, it can be observed that those who agreed at the two levels of agree and strongly agree are about 51 per cent. Considering that the margin of error especially for those who strongly agreed to the view is low, it seems that this is a very strong perception among students. It is also evident from the data that a significant number was even not sure what to say about the issue as indicated by the percentages of those who were neutral. There is also no significant difference in perception between students in private universities and those in public as can be observed from a comparison of universities A, C and E (public) with B, D and F (private).

It is therefore important that institutions of higher learning recognize that since documentation is a critical component of academic writing, the earlier their students get comfortable with it, the faster they will settle down and become more accomplished scholars. Borrowing from Grice's (1975) maxims, writers (as communicators) can only achieve the maxim of quality through expressing information for which they have evidence (Schiffrin, 1994). This underscores the role of documentation as an important component of this genre of writing.

Another major perception that students have is that research assignments are not so seriously considered in Kenyan Universities since in their view, lecturers do not read them. Many students seem convinced that grades

are just given arbitrary by their lecturers. Figure one below is a representation of this perception as obtained from students' responses in this study.

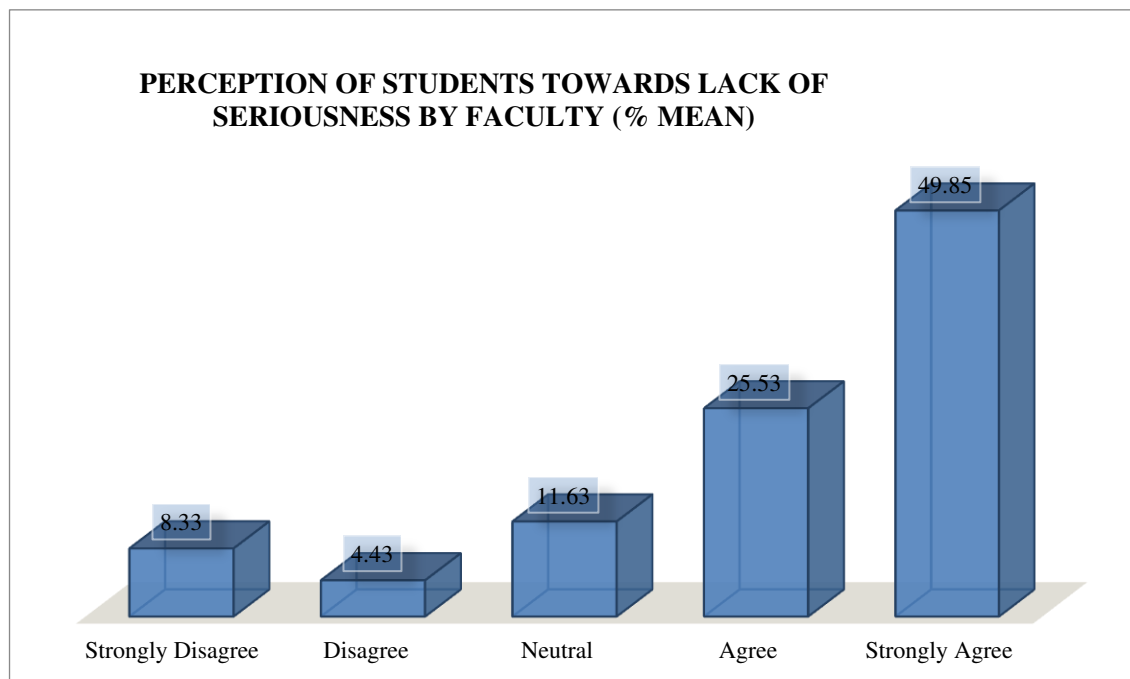


Figure 1: Showing the perceptions of university students towards lack of seriousness of faculty towards academic assignments

It can be clearly observed that among those selected for this study, a significant percentage agrees to the view that faculty does not regard this component of study seriously. A mean of 76 per cent of those who agreed combined with those who strongly agreed to this view, is quite significant. This perception makes so many students not to regard assignments as an opportunity for academic development but rather as a form of punishment. Below are some responses from the student corpus under study:

UC, R 10: Lecturers should give feedback as an indication that they read the work, not just award a grade that does not mean anything

UE, R6: Some lecturers give irrelevant questions and one wonders how it relates to the topics that are taught in class

UD, R5: Lecturers give assignments to avoid teaching. Some of them want you to come and present what you have read. This way, they avoid teaching

UC, R 2: Lecturers should not be tired of emphasizing the importance of assignments...

UD, R 12: Lecturers should mark research assignments and give feedback so that students learn from them

This kind of perception is unfortunate especially since the world over; the domain of academia is dominated by a research component both for learning purposes and as a way of sharing acquired knowledge. If this attitude has to change amongst our young scholars in Kenya, lecturers might need to help students improve in writing by borrowing from the Pragmatic concepts of meaning, context and communication in their academic discourses (Schiffrin, 1994). This way, discrepancies between teacher expectations and students perceptions of the academic

writing task will be eliminated through the teacher formulating tasks that have meaning, are within identifiable context, consequently ensuring that learners can relate with them (Wolsey et.al, 2012).

Similarly, as one lecturer observed, “The attitude of lecturers too need to change if they will help their students to grow in academia” (UB, L1). He or she argues that when students are nurtured in that kind of an environment (one where there is no seriousness); they tend to form anti-academic behaviors and attitudes which eventually ruin their academic aspirations. This study argues that such a catastrophe can be avoided through lecturers handling academic assignments with the respect that the field deserves so that upcoming scholars will acquire the rigor required in academia.

Moreover, lecturers argue that this perception could also be resolved through systemic adjustments such as universities adopting research projects as requirements for attainment of a degree award. It is important to note that some Universities in Kenya have already adopted this strategy though at times it faces the same negative attitudes from students to a level that it is known to have affected students’ completion rates. Some of the observations regarding this issue are captured in the responses below:

UE, L1: Universities should emphasize the critical role of research and writing in scholarship and therefore seek to build these in their students

UD, L1: Probably making a research project a mandatory part of the undergraduate training will make students change their perceptions and see the practice of research and writing as a critical component of their training

In this study too, observations and analysis of respondents’ views revealed that negative perceptions by students with regard to academic writing are significantly shaped by their writing abilities. The table below presents the frequency distribution of students’ views regarding the way they perceive their writing skills and how it impacts the practice of academic writing

Table 2: Showing the Likert Scale scoring of students’ perceptions towards their writing abilities

University	Likert Scale Scoring (%)				
	S/Disagree	Disagree (Code)	Neutral	Agree	S/Agree
A	12.2	18.3	8.1	22.4	38.7
B	5.1	7.6	30.7	28.2	28.2
C	21.7	30.4	4.3	21.7	21.7
D	0.0	3.3	6.6	43.3	46.6
E	20.0	12.5	15.0	35.0	17.5
F	6.2	10.4	10.4	43.7	29.1
Mean ± SE	10.86±3.53	13.75±3.90	12.51±3.92	32.38±4.02	30.30±4.39

The total frequency mean of those who agrees to the view that writing skills do impact how students perceive academic writing tasks is about 62 per cent which is significantly high especially when it is compared to that of those who disagreed with the same view who constitute about 24 per cent. These results call to attention, the critical role played by writing skills, a view to which even the students agree.

According to Schiffrin (1994), some written discourse markers are linguistic features such as complete sentences, rich lexis, and use of idea connectors as well as orthographic features like punctuations, all of which contribute to ensuring that the message is packaged as intended. A good writer uses complete sentences that contain subordination and frequent modifications, observes all the rules of grammar and uses a formal approach. This shows that the writer has taken time in the construction of the message. These are some of the characteristics that lecturers look for from the academic writing tasks given to their students. However, this is not usually the case as captured by the views below which are from some of the lecturers who responded to our questionnaire.

UA, L2: Most students in our Universities have very poor English abilities. They cannot express a complete idea without injecting some Kiswahili words even when making a class presentation. This is so frustrating and I keep wondering how they will survive in the market place

UF, L1: I keep wondering what kind of English is taught in our secondary schools because students who come to university are so weak in both written and spoken discourse...

A student also observed:

UD, R6: Most of us have weak grammar and most lecturers keep complaining that is affecting the way we write our assignments

It is no wonder that a survey conducted by the Daily Nation (2013) revealed that most corporate organizations are using a lot of money in retraining fresh graduates in an effort to equip them with soft skills such as communication skills and report writing so that they can fit in well in the market place. The observations above from both students and lecturers provide an inkling into where the problem lies and this study argues that institutions of higher learning can provide solutions if they consciously engage and manage these issues while the student is still undergoing training. We suggest that the field of academic writing could contribute a lot in helping resolve this. A report by the World Bank points out that employers in Kenya have raised concerns with the level and relevance of a broad set of socio-emotional skills and cognitive skills amongst job applicants and recently hired workers. This concern can be attributed to the fact that these skill gaps affect firms' competitiveness as well as productivity (Sanchez, 2018).

There is also the argument that since written discourse does not provide the writer immediate feedback the way spoken discourse does to a speaker, the writer must always imagine the readers' reaction and ensure that they are appropriately taken into consideration during the writing process (Schiffrin, 1994). Writers keep adopting and improving these skills as they continue to write. Reading also exposes a writer to a variety of expressions that continue to shape their language and writing competences. Eventually, they are able to present their thoughts as clearly as possible and in the most effective manner, they create clear write-ups that have unified elements, cohesive paragraphs where thoughts logically flow, have content that is relevant to the topic, use correct transitional devices and use words that are appropriate to the audience, subject matter and occasion. (Hodges et al, 2004). All these aspects are pragmatically understood and analyzable.

However, this study observed that the reading culture amongst students is wanting. Consider the views from respondents below:

UD, R5: Reading text books is not a popular culture among students because the information one is looking for is usually not direct as in the internet...

UF, R18: Reading for term papers has made me realize that I can be a writer

UC, R31: Must I read texts, what about the internet...it is so simple and straight forward

UB, L2: Students who read widely develop writing skills by imitation and experience

Lecturers too observed that there are benefits associated with reading and so students with negative attitudes should revise their perceptions. Soles (2005) have suggested that reading and reflecting upon well written examples of academic writing are part of the process of learning how to write effectively. A further observation is that good writing of academic assignments requires critical evaluation of the sources that one is reading: a reader must evaluate their sources for credibility, accuracy and reliability among others. These skills enable them to not only gain knowledge but also enhance the ability to communicate the same with others through writing. The lecturers' views below support these assertions.

UD, L1: A student who does not read fails to expose themselves to vocabulary, grammar and necessary raw materials that would build him as an academic writer

UE, L2: A student who reads more gets to learn from other writers thus perfecting his own skills

Students' perceptions towards academic writing are influenced by unethical practices of writing. Besides the commonly known practices of plagiarizing and copy rights, there is an emerging one which seems to be really gaining momentum among Kenya's young scholars. It involves purchasing of written assignments or contracting other people to do assignments for them. This study sought to establish whether the view was prevalent among the university students and the findings are astounding. Consider the figure below:

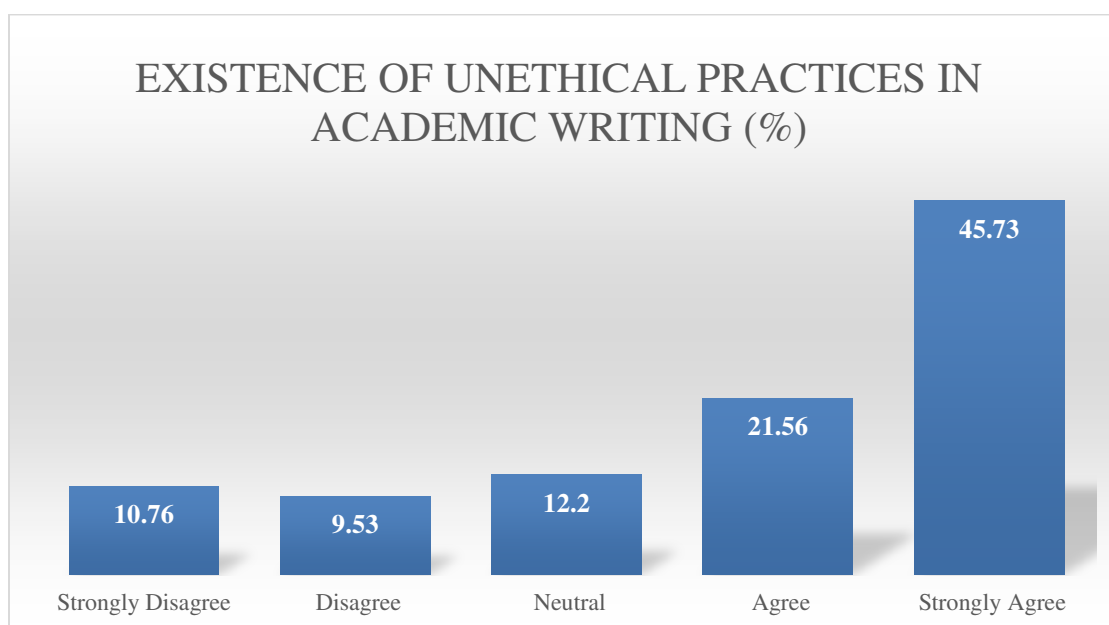


Figure 2: Showing the existence of unethical practices in academic writing among Kenyan students

The respondents who agree (some very strongly) that this practice exists are a significant mean of about 67 per cent while those who view the issue contrary are just about 20 per cent. The study further sought to find out why and how these unethical practices manifest themselves and below are some of the views from the students:

UA, R46: Some students pay others to do assignments for them. Students should be discouraged from such practices right from when they join university

UB, R21: ...Plagiarism is rampant among students. Many are too lazy to read or do not have time so just copy from internet

UD, R11: Sometimes I am told I have plagiarized yet I thought they were my own ideas, I don't understand! Therefore having someone more knowledgeable doing the assignment for me will save me from such trouble.

UF, R38: I do not think that term paper writing adds any value: most of us look for people to do it for us or we copy from each other

UD, R20: Some students pay people to do assignments for them. I think such people are criminals because they kill the desire for reading growth in such students...

While the quantitative data accentuates the presence of unethical practices, the qualitative one provides the details of those practices: what they are and how they are practiced. It is evident that students cheat their way through education by corrupt means which needs to be addressed so that graduates' award become a true reflection of their abilities and competences. The fact that this is a global challenge is not enough reason to leave it unattended. As Stark (2003) has observed, students should be taught to carefully design research topics that are manageable and easy. The tasks given should be interesting and aimed at stimulating fascination because this way, they are likely to not only learn more but also enjoy the process.

The lecturers too observed that this is a challenge that needs concerted efforts of all stakeholders in higher education if it has to be eliminated. This is with an understanding that since term paper writing is inherently about meaning in context or communication that focuses on intentions (Schiffrin, 1994), it provides good training for students to be analytical and critical thinkers. It should therefore be encouraged among our upcoming scholars. One of the lecturers observed that such an ill is a reflection of society where *"the label is more important than the labeled: grades are valued than how one attained them"*(UE, L1). This challenges our society to discuss about what is more valuable, is it the degree certificate or the knowledge and skills in the certificate holder?

The study also captured perceptions that arise from the view that student' face difficulties while using the digital library. This is because most university libraries in Kenya source more for E-books and E-journals instead of the printed books. The E-resources are more affordable for them since the resources purchased are limitless as opposed to printed sources that must be paid for individually (Galco, 2001). The table below presents the perceptions of students with regard to the digital library.

Table 3: Showing the Likert scale scoring (%) on whether or not students face difficulties when using the digital library

University	Likert Scale Scoring (%)				
	S/Disagree	Disagree (Code)	Neutral	Agree	S/Agree
A	14.2	18.3	16.3	24.4	26.5
B	7.6	20.5	15.3	20.5	35.8
C	13.0	17.3	13.0	26.0	30.4
D	3.3	13.3	20.0	40.0	23.3
E	15.0	15.0	15.0	20.0	35.0
F	12.5	22.9	20.8	20.8	22.9
Mean ± SE	10.93±1.85	17.88±1.43	16.73±1.24	25.28±3.10	28.98±2.31

It can be observed that slightly above half of the population sampled for this study perceive the platform as a challenge: those who agreed and those who strongly agreed that the digital library is difficult to use constitute a significant mean of 54.26 per cent. Some of the reasons cited by students that complicate this challenge are lack of computers and lack of training on how to access the platform. Below are some views that concretize the students' perceptions:

UF, R24: Digital resources in the library are usually not accessible due to poor internet access...

UB, R10: Our library has no books. They tell us to use E-books but I don't know how to access them and was told I cannot use a phone yet that is the only electronic gadget that I have

The lecturer's view regarding the E-library is that this is the future for many universities especially as the population grows and the clientele becomes diverse (some are working or are international students). They however cited some situations that make the digital library just a mirage for some universities. Consider the following views from students:

UF, R1: I like using the internet because it has everything and it's so easy to just copy and paste...

UC, R21: The library has outdated books and accessing the digital books is difficult. The library staffs are not helpful and so I find going to the library as a waste of time.

UD, R16: The digital platform in our university is so unreliable; locating books that are useful is a problem

UE, R27: We use internet because it is easier and faster otherwise books are difficult to read...

According to the students who gave their views, there is need for universities to find out how they can enhance the academic experience of their students through enabling them to use the digital library which is easy and more credible than some of the sources that they refer to. Growth in Information Communication Technology (ICT) has created contributed to availability of electronic resources in many formats. Weir (2012) argues that newly published e-books will, outnumber printed books among new publications by 2020. However, this does not necessarily mean that print resources will disappear completely. He also points out that Amazon now sells more e-books than paperbacks. This clearly demonstrates a shift from the traditional print books to electronic books. They should also support their students to avoid some short-cuts like 'copy and paste' which eventually leads to ethical violations such as plagiarism. Libraries have intensified information literacy campaigns to help students improve their skills in academic writing. The role of information literacy is to create lifelong learners. It helps transform students into successful movers, shakers, designers, explorers, educators and leaders (Alewine & Canada 2017). The students' responses also suggest an attitude of laziness when it comes to reading, an issue that needs to be addressed. Soles (2005) observes that the best method of learning is through 'doing' but that also studying the techniques of those who have mastered the skill that we are trying to learn and imitating them is a useful strategy. This is achieved through reading various types of texts especially those rated as credible, and this is what digital libraries provide.

Lecturers too gave observations that indicate that university libraries have a critical role in supporting the academic experiences of the learners. Their responses suggest that libraries exist to support academia and so library staff may sometimes need to be proactive in this supportive role as seen through the few responses below:

UC, L2: Most students rely on goggle and they think that is what is meant by the digital resources. They think that only the few books on the library shelves are available...

UE, L1: Many Universities especially public ones due to their numbers do not bother to educate the students about the digital library. So, they may have the resources which no one is using

UD, L1: Universities must ensure that they have adequate technological infrastructure if they want their students to go-E in terms of accessing library resources

Another perception captured through this study arises from the fact that many universities teach some general course(s) that are meant to prepare the students to adjust to the academic life of reading (research) and writing as expected of them in higher education. While public universities generally offer only one such course, the private ones offer two or three of such courses. This study sought to establish the necessity of including courses that train students on language and academic writing skills in the curriculum, with a view of finding out whether students and lecturers think that such training is necessary and if so, how does it impact the writing abilities of students. Below is a table that presents the students' responses on how they perceive this matter.

Table 4: Showing the Likert scale scoring (%) of students' perceptions on whether or not courses that train students on academic writing should be included in the curriculum

University	Likert Scale Scoring (%)				
	S/Disagree	Disagree (Code)	Neutral	Agree	S/Agree
A	4.0	10.2	4.0	20.4	61.2
B	12.8	0.0	10.2	15.3	61.5
C	17.3	13.0	8.6	13.0	47.8
D	0.0	3.3	10.0	13.3	73.3
E	2.5	17.5	5.0	32.5	42.5
F	6.2	6.2	2.0	43.7	41.6
Mean \pm SE	7.13 \pm 2.69	8.36 \pm 2.63	6.63 \pm 1.40	23.03 \pm 5.09	54.65 \pm 5.17

It can be observed from the findings of this study that quite a significant percentage of the students sampled for this study perceive those courses as a necessary training that enhances their writing experiences at the university. To give emphasis to the quantitative data above are some qualitative views from students as indicated below

UA, R9: Good writing shows somebody's worth and I want to become the best that I can be...

UB, R14: The English that we learn in secondary school is not sufficient to support us in writing academic papers. I therefore found English and writing courses useful. I thought I knew all the grammar that I needed but going through an English course made me realize how much I did not know

UC, R5: A big challenge for me when researching was knowing what to use and what to leave out. While I had learnt strategies such as paraphrasing and summarizing, I cannot say that I knew how to use them but the expository writing course made the difference...

I am now able to write essays and I must say I am a better student now.

UD, R43: Good writing skills can make a graduate more appealing to an employer and so students should be taught how to research and write well even though initially they may not be for the idea...

UE, R6: Reading and writing on given topics challenges a student to improve in creativity and in expressing information learnt

UF, R30: Learning how to write well makes a student to perform well eventually...it sets them above the others who cannot even express what they think

Lecturers too gave views regarding how they perceive courses aimed at enhancing linguistic and writing skills. Some of their views include:

UC, L 2: Besides the writing courses, institutions should be organizing seminars and workshops which will help the students to see the value of writing especially if they get opportunities to listen to experts with different industry experiences

UA, L 1: Since it appears that our students' language competences are wanting, Universities should come up with compulsory courses that teach English (since it is our language of instruction). Most public universities are silent on this matter.

It is therefore the contention of this paper that supporting students to build their writing skills besides understanding of the content in their area of specialization is critical to academic excellence.

3.2 THE PRAGMATICS OF ACADEMIC WRITING: A GRICEAN APPROACH

Pragmatics is the study of how communicators engage with the concepts of meaning, context and communication. Gricean pragmatics deal with meaning in context where two main aspects have come to be known as the key tenets of the theory: speaker meaning and the cooperative principle. Grice (1975) argues that we interpret language on the assumption that the sender has observed the four maxims of quality, quantity, relevance and clarity. The maxim of quality also known as truthfulness ensures that the communicator expresses only that which they believe to be true and only that which they have evidence for. Quantity focuses on the brevity, conciseness and preciseness of a message but not to an extent that obscures meaning because then it would violate the maxim of manner whose focus is on avoiding obscurities and ambiguities in a communication. Quality thus would be looked at as emphasizing on economy of words but with an emphasis on clarity. The maxim of relevance aims at ensuring that participants make contributions that are logically fitting into the subject of discussion. This is a critical component of academic writing and as Ramage, et al. (2012) has observed, logic and clarity are key components in argumentative writing (which is the heart of academic writing). We can thus conclusively argue that the four maxims fit in very well with expectations of academic discourse. A student who observes them would avoid the pitfalls that many student writers fall into. As observed from the findings, many negative perceptions can be managed through an emphasis on the maxims while writing.

Grice's (1975) approach of cooperativity demands that interlocutors have some form of collaboration if they have to engage in a meaningful communication. The maxims enable users to be relevant, truthful and in a sense avoid redundancy (Geurts & Paula, 2015). For instance, the maxim of quality will expect that a communicator is committed to the belief of his or her utterances which is a key factor in academic writing. In their view, the presumption of cooperativity creates a commitment on the part of the communicator (in this case the writer) which enables the receiver to infer that this is supposed to be the truth. This understanding leads to what Grice (1975) refers to as "conversational implicatures". Observance of this principle is critical if students are to create pieces of writing that have quality, are factual, have relevant details and are effectively communicating to the reader. They should bear in mind that the lecturer's (who happens to be their reader) implicatures will influence the grading of this piece of writing. It must thus be correct and accurate.

Grice's (1975) theory of the cooperative principle and its maxims though first designed to analyze verbal speech has a lot of implications for the written domain since this too is a linguistic communication where collaboration between writers and readers is shared and expected. According to Geurts and Paula (2015), analysis and explanation of a communicator's commitment to the maxims of truth, quality and quantity, can adopt an

audiences' (in this case the lecturer) point of view. Thus, in the context of responding to academic questions, the student who is the writer many times has to interpret the question the way the lecturer expects.

Geurts and Paula (2015) have further observed that although Gricean pragmatics focuses on illocutionary acts such as assertions, it is obvious that they can be extended to other linguistic acts such as the production and interpretation of words, grammatical constructions and intonation contours. Since written discourse does not provide the writer with immediate feedback about how his or her message is received, they must therefore imagine the readers' reaction (Schiffrin, 1994). This can be achieved through making use of those other linguistic features for instance complete sentences, rich lexis, idea connectors and orthographic features like punctuations to ensure that the message is packaged as intended. This way, the quality, quantity, clarity and relevance of the message will infer exactly as intended by the writer and will be received with the intended implicatures by the reader. This way the purpose of writing will be achieved.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study proposes that determining the perceptions of students and lecturers with regard to academic writing and understanding how they can be managed is an important aspect of learning in higher education in Kenya and beyond. The cooperative principle is a useful benchmark for students' written work. Many scholars view academic writing as a transaction and when students view themselves as participants in the transaction of communicating with their readers, they will deal with it with the seriousness that it deserves.

Another observation of the study is that research and writing is a critical component of learning in higher education. Institutions charged with the mandate of teaching such students should therefore be deliberate about ensuring that these skills are nurtured among the learners and that unethical practices are eliminated. Students too can be trained through involvement in simple research projects and dissemination of such findings for instance in conferences so that they appreciate the role of research in their scholarly development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researchers are grateful to all Universities who allowed them to access the respondents and to the respondents for willingly responding to the questionnaires and freely providing invaluable insights that have made this work possible. Special thanks also go to the management of Pan Africa Christian University for financial support that has facilitated dissemination of the findings.

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