Full Length Research Paper

Assessment of the qualities of academic writing in senior essays of English graduates: The case of Dire Dawa University

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The main objective of this study was to assess the qualities of academic writing in senior essays of English graduates, the case of Dire Dawa University. In this study, qualitative method was employed to conduct the research. The participants of the study were all English Language instructors (advisors) who were involved in advising English graduates. The reason for taking merely advisors is that the researcher thought that they are most probably familiar to the students' writing problems than other instructors who were not involved in advising. Three data collecting instruments were used to carry out this study. Namely, document analysis, focus group discussion and semi-structured interview, and the results were interpreted and analyzed comparatively in order to answer the basic research questions. To do these, 50% (twenty one) senior essay documents out of forty two were interpreted and analyzed. Focus group discussion was performed with eight English advisors as well as to triangulate or to validate, semi-structured interview was employed with eleven instructors together with the participant instructors in the focus group discussion; and results were comparatively discussed and analyzed. As the results showed that almost all of the students' senior essays have problems when they have been seen in terms of academic writing. Based on the findings, it was suggested that students should learn the basic courses such as advanced and academic writings. Besides, they should take research courses at the university. It was also recommended that instructors should help them for giving feedback and valuable comments.

Key words: Academic writing, qualities, assessment and senior essay.

INTRODUCTION

The ability to write academic papers is widely regarded as one hallmark of higher education graduates. It is essential that university students should be able to write clearly on topics related to their research fields, and clearly write senior essays. However, as Hirayanagi (1998) and Takagi (2001) note, English as second language students often find it difficult to produce academic papers of good quality that can satisfy

universities' demand. Language difficulties are not the only part of the problems; often students are also unfamiliar with the convention of English academic papers.

Therefore, English as second language (ESL) writing programs should seek to elucidate/explain the macroscopic features of academic writing as well as the paragraph level and sentence level aspects of expressing ideas in a foreign language to handle such type of problems, especially at higher education levels.

There are increasing numbers of international students' studying at universities, where they are required to do academic writing in English (Dudley, 1999; Dong, 1998). However, academic writing is not easy for most students, especially for non-native speakers. It is more difficult for students who have different cultural, educational, and linguistic backgrounds (Casanave and Hubbard, 1992). Thus, although students have to struggle with resolving the difficulties both on an academic level and on conflicts due to cultural, educational and linguistic differences to meet academic writing requirements (Thesen, 1997), they cannot do it successfully. Due to these, failure of using quality academic writing in their senior essays occur and this may lead students to emotional stress, tension and slow academic development.

Furthermore, academic writing expects short, simple sentences, and conveying reasons. Fox (1994) confirms this statement with her own conversations of what most academic writers expect academic writing to look like: In its simplest form, an academic writing is just a clear, distinct thesis followed by the conveying reasons that support it, with either explicit or implicit attention paid to possible objections.

In addition to these, in its natural structure, the argument should sound assertive and confident, that it should be short, logical, and to the point, without irrelevant digressions, and that its tone should be polite and responsible rather than strident and badgering.

However, it is mostly difficult for ESL students to conduct academic writing which require critical thinking and analytical skills because the students' previous educations almost never require such thinking.

Thus, although academic writing requires critical and analytical thinking especially at university level, in the Ethiopian context, a considerable number of students did not apply this quality in the expected manner; and this is the gap the researcher has studied.

Accordingly, the researcher selected the problem "assessment of the qualities of academic writing in senior essays of English graduates" to identify the influencing factors, to indicate the qualities of academic writing as well as to show how to use these academic writing qualities in their academic senior essays papers.

Objectives of the study general objective

The main focus of this study is to assess the qualities of academic writing skills in senior essays of English graduates at Dire Dawa University.

Specific objectives

The specific objectives of this study are listed as follows:

1. To examine students' academic writing performance in terms of maintaining the main features of academic writing in their senior essays.
2. To identify which factors impede students' academic writing performance.
3. To identify and analyze the key problem areas of students' academic writing.

Research questions

To achieve the aforementioned objectives, this study tried to answer the following questions:

1. How successful are the graduating candidates on maintaining the main features of academic writing?
2. What are the impeding factors in writing final senior essays?
3. What are the key problem areas of students' writings in their academic papers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definitions of academic writing

One needs to understand that writing in universities in general and senior essay writing in particular require a part of writing, called "academic writing".

Although, academic writing might be defined in many ways, but there are some concepts that we need to understand about academic writing before we write our first academic papers.

Academic writing is writing done by scholars for other scholars. It is an essential part of thinking and learning in school contexts, particularly in the light of 21st century demands (Johannessen, 2001), and writing tasks are "critical tools for intellectual and social development" (Bruning and Horn, 2000, p.30). Therefore, now that students are in university they are the part of a community of scholars. Thus, as university students, they will be engaged in activities that scholars have been engaged in: they will read about, think about, argue about, and write about great ideas because being scholars requires that we read, think, argue, and write in a certain way or in a certain manner.

Furthermore, academic writing is a way for students in all content areas to make meaning for themselves (Bereiter and Scardamaria, 1987) as well as to learn how to think and communicate in their particular domains. For

example, writing is an important means through which students begin to think more like teachers, trainers and scientists.

As academic writing should present the reader with an informed argument, there are many things that must be expected from the students while they are writing their academic senior essays to make it argumentative. They are also to think more like teachers, trainers, and scientists because if their paper fails to inform, or if it fails to argue, then it will fail to meet the expectations of an academic reader.

As a whole, "academic writing aims at being 'objective' in its expression of ideas, and thus tries to avoid specific reference to personal opinions. Thus, your academic writing should imitate this style by eliminating first person pronouns … as far as possible (Arnaudet and Barrett, 1984; Hyland, 2002).

Therefore, it implies that using specific personal pronouns and first person pronouns in academic writing is not advisable.

The general purposes of academic writing

The basic qualities/features of academic writing have many purposes to write academic papers. It is essential to make knowledge conscious, to help remember facts, to analyze concepts, and to construct new knowledge; especially, students used writing to translate concepts into their own language, more from gathering facts to the analysis of them, and adjust themselves to the task demands of specific courses and fields" (Alister and Cumming, 2006).

Academic writing may also be assigned for a variety of educational goals: assessing knowledge, promoting critical thinking, stimulating creativity, encouraging discourse as part of a professional community, and supporting cognitions (Bandura, 1993; Johannessen, 2001).

However, a successful university paper will demonstrate that its writers can use the knowledge and methods of the discipline in which it has been assigned to reveal something that is true. Furthermore, scholars in all papers use credible evidence to support the truth they found. Accordingly, academics suggest that we present our references, assertions, and arguments in neutral, serious and non- motional language.

Furthermore, academic writing involves a primary focus on academic discourse genres and the nature of academic writing tasks, to help socialize into the academic context. Thus, according to Horowitz (1996), academic writing "insures that students' writing falls within the perceptions and acceptability of writing behaviors dictated by the academic community."

Similarly, Silva (1990a) argues that academic writing aims to create the conditions under which actual university tasks are done, and involves the close examinations and the analysis of academic discourse formats and writing task specifications.

Therefore, the researcher understands, that writing is a production of prose that will be acceptable in academic context by academicians, and learning to write is a part of becoming socialized to the context of academic community- finding out what is expected and trying to approximate it (Silva, 1990b). The writers, thus, should be aware and well oriented primarily towards fulfilling the standards and the requirements to succeed in academics; especially for graduating class students.

As can be understood from the discussion earlier mentioned, academic writing allows students to become competent writers in their specific fields. However, the reality is that such types of activities may not be practicing thoroughly for some university students, especially for students of universities while they are writing their academic senior essays. Thus, as the case is true for many students in the university, students of Dire Dawa University English graduating class might be faced with the problems of writing while they are writing.

Features of academic writing

Academic writing in English is linear, accurate, clear and understandable, which means it has one central point or theme with every part contributing to the main line of argument, without vagueness or repetitions. It must be distinguished from other formal styles of writing such as official and business letters (Jordan, 1986).

However, many students are still confused about how to write good academic papers of various kinds in English. As a result, the researcher wants to inform the features of good academic writing for students who are academic writers. Academic writing is to some extent: complex, formal, cohesive, coherent, objective, explicit, hedged, and responsible. It also uses language precisely and accurately.

Complexity is one of the features of academic writing. Written language is relatively more complex than spoken language. Written language has longer words, it is lexically denser and it has a more varied vocabulary. It uses more noun-based phrases than verb-based phrases. Written texts are shorter and the language has more grammatical complexity, including more subordinate clauses.

According to different linguists, one of the most interesting and important aspects of language acquisition is the students' development of an ability to produce and understand complex sentences of various kinds. Lees (1960) puts his assumptions towards the most important issue, one distinguishing human language from many other symbolic systems.

According to this author, the complex sentence consists of an independent clause and at least one dependent clause. Dependent clauses are linked to independent clauses with subordinating conjunctions;

and subordinating conjunctions which indicate the nature of the relationship between the independent and dependent clauses. Thus, as senior essay is one of the major parts of academic writing, it is complex enough. However; some students are missing the concept of complexity in their senior essay writings.

In academic writing context, formality is a must to raise the standards and qualities of academic writing because it is the other element among the qualities. Jordan (1999) states that "academic writing" must be written in a proper formal style. Hamp-Lyons and Poole (2006) also define "academic writing" in terms of formality. They said that academic writing is a formal piece of paper for which credit has to be given to the writer and that the work will contain specific grammatical patterns, organization and an argument. This means that in academic writing, the writers should avoid colloquial words and personal expressions.

Academic writing needs good flow of ideas, or it is necessary to have good use of linking words to join the ideas within and between sentences and paragraphs, and an excellent usage of 'signposting words' to show the development of our argument.

Accordingly, Carter (1999) states that "a text is perceived as coherent when it makes consistent sense, with or without the help of devices of cohesion". He defines cohesion as "the demonstrable pattern of the text's integrity, the marks of its 'hanging together".

According to Carter (1999), coherence implies that the text must make sense and cohesion means that it must be appropriately structured and interlinked by suitable signposts and linking words. From the afore-mentioned explanations it can be understood that cohesion implies the interconnection of words, phrases, clauses and sentences as well as paragraphs through markers of additions whereas coherence implies the presence of consistent sense and flow of ideas among paragraphs.

Moreover, in composition writing in colleges and universities, students are always expected to present their views objectively, approach a topic from a balanced perspective, and support their views with appropriate information to make this view credible.

Students are usually instructed that the reader needs to be convinced of the validity of the writer's positions and that of the onus of persuading the reader is on the writer (Leki, 1995). Furthermore, Arnaudet and Barrelt (1984) specifically address the issue of author's objectivity in second language (L2) academic writing. In their text, they also present and discuss syntactic structure that serve to promote the authors' objective and balanced position in argumentation, that is, the use of passive construction, citation of relevant sources, hedging devices, and concessive clauses.

Swales and Feak (1994), who also assert that writers need to maintain objectivity in their writing, focus on appropriate use of pronouns, impersonal passives, and hedged claims.

However, it does not mean that in academic writing, we are not expected to express our arguments and opinions; but it means that our arguments and opinions should incorporate the objective and impersonal style.

Explicitness, in academic writing really needs to focus on a clear introduction, body and conclusion in our academic paper. The progression of ideas and paragraphing must be clear. We also have to present a reasonable number of substitute points of view, and to achieve a sense of argumentation.

Anderson and Poole (2001) recommend that when we write our academic paper, we should have an introduction, body and conclusion. They believe that the introduction has to start with an obvious statement of the problem, and wage the readers with all essential data that is to follow.

Anderson and Poole (2001) also argue that the body "should be an attempt at a progressive solution to the problem said in the introduction". They believe that the conclusion should present the results of the investigation and wage a solution to the problem that has been set. Furthermore, the conclusion can be used to recommend further areas of investigation.

As such, Anderson and Poole (2001) generally emphasize the significance of clear organization in the academic text; the researcher also feels that academic writing is created to have an argument that must be clear and be developed throughout the conclusions.

Academic writing uses vocabulary accurately. In accuracy, we have to have high standards of grammar, word choice, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation. Brown and Hood (1998) believe that spelling and punctuation are writing sub-skills. They wage many examples, exercises and strategies to refrain from having mistakes that generally cause confusion.

In addition, Jordan (1986) also provides many examples and exercises that reveal the importance of grammar, vocabulary, spelling, and punctuation in academic writing. The misuse of tenses changes the meaning and spelling mistakes causes confusion. They also distinguish the differences between some verbs that leads to confusion; for example, 'lend' and 'borrow', 'rise', 'arise', 'raise' and 'increase', 'make' and 'do' and 'say' and 'tell' as a part of taking care of word choice and the use of words.

Therefore, as can be seen from the aforementioned explanations, to write an academic paper accurately, using appropriate punctuations, tenses, spellings, vocabulary, as well as especial words is essential.

Hedging is the expression of tentativeness and possibility in language use, and it is crucial to scientific writing where statements are rarely made without subjective assessments of truth.

In this regard, Hyland (1994) claimed that "hedges allow academics to take a rhetorical stance, to downplay their statements and anticipate audience responses by the degree of certainty" (Hyland, 1994: 478). Hedging has been a subject of interest to

linguists, and has been used to refer to devices which qualify the writer's expression (Skelton, 1988).

Essentially, it represents an absence of certainty and is used here to describe any linguistic item or strategy employed to indicate either a lack of commitment to the truth value of an accompanying proposition or a desire not to express that commitment categorically.

The term does not therefore include other attitudinal markers or devices which convey the writer's conviction; items are only hedges in their philosophical knowledge or epistemic sense and only then when they mark uncertainty. Some writers have suggested that hedges are a means of signaling distance between a speaker and what is said or to convey purposive vagueness in writing (Myers, 1989; Channell, 1994).

Despite this interest however, there has been little work into how hedges work in academic genres based on analyses of adequate sense and we know virtually nothing about the expression and function of hedges in scientific writing.

In academic writing, writers must be responsible for and must be able to provide evidence and justification for, and any claims they make. They are also responsible for demonstrating an understanding of any source texts they use. However, most students engage in very little discussion of what they have read, how to write, or how to interpret, analyze, or otherwise respond to texts, that is, they simply emphasis on recall of factual information than analytic reading or independent writing while they are writing their senior essays (Wade and Moje, 2000; Connors, 1997; Cuban, 1989).

Therefore, as can be understood from the aforementioned explanations, it is a must to provide evidence and justifications during writing. It is advisable for university students to be responsible during writing academically; and it is essential to put their arguments and counter-arguments with their claims as well as with their supportive evidence in their original papers.

To make it productive, instructors should help students memorize the content to be tested, at the expense of time they might otherwise spend giving students opportunities to read and write like scientists, historians, mathematicians, and other kinds of scholars (Hillocks, 2003).

METHODOLOGY

One of the main steps in conducting a research is to collect data that enable the researcher to reach suggested solutions for the problems identified. This chapter presents the research design, participants of the study; sample size and sampling techniques, data gathering instruments and methods of data analysis.

Research design

The selected research problem allows the researcher solely to use the qualitative data collecting method because as different scholars stated, if the nature of the research is basically about

document analysis, it is necessary to use qualitative design only. For instance, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) stated that the qualitative data which are collected through document analysis, focus group discussion, and interviews enable refining and explain the given data clearly.

In other words, the reason the researcher used merely qualitative design is that the study is necessarily focused on document analysis and focus group discussion; as well as semi-structured interview as a supportive course; and these allow merely qualitative design. Besides, as the nature of the research is principally qualitative, figures or numbers are not necessary, so both quantitative and mixed methods were not used for this study.

Participants of the study

To perform this study, the researcher purposively used eleven English instructors who were involved in advising English language graduating class students for both focus group discussions and interviews in order to get tangible evidence for the study. The reason for taking all of the advisors only is that the researcher thought they are most probably familiar to the problems identified than other English instructors who were not involved in advising students. Therefore, the views, beliefs and experiences of instructors obtained from both focus group discussions and interviews about students' academic writing problems towards senior essay writings were identified, interpreted and analyzed from field notes.

Sampling size and technique

Dire Dawa University was selected to be the setting of the study. The reasons are:

1. The researcher has information about the presence of the available documents there.
2.. As the setting is closer to the residence of the researcher and researcher's advisors, the researcher has the opportunity to get valuable comments from them easily and to ask necessary information about a given problem.

There were a total of 42 graduating class students whose senior essay papers were used as the subjects of the study. Among these, the researcher selected 21 that is, 50% of them through systematic random sampling technique as a sample representative of the study for document analysis. Besides, all of the eleven instructors (advisors) who were involved in advising were called for focus group discussion using comprehensive sampling technique, but only eight of them participated and shared their experiences.

In order to triangulate the results gathered through document analysis and focus group discussion, the researcher used all of the eleven advisors who participated in the focus group discussion for semi-structured interview using comprehensive sampling technique, too. As a result, all of them participated in semi structured interview.

Data gathering instruments

As researching and examining a tangible evidence requires intensive involvement of the researcher and researched (Valerie and Magdalena, 2008), this study employed document analysis and focus group discussion as a major data gathering tools and instructors' interviews as supporting tools to get a direct insight into real practices concerning the assessment of the qualities of academic writing in senior essays of English graduates. Thus,

according to their relevance to this study, the three major principal tools such as document analysis, focus group discussion and interviews were used as follows.

Document analysis

The first major data collecting method used in this study is document analysis. As Stemler and Bebell (1998) stated, document analysis is a technique which can generate both valid and reliable data from documents; and according to them, it is a technique for understanding and analyzing the mission statements of people's selected documents.

As a result, it is important to examine the English language graduating class students' senior essays to assess the qualities of academic writing in which students used in their senior essays as well as to assess the challenges which affected students while they were writing their academic papers. Thus, the researcher analyzed twenty one selected senior essay documents which were done by Dire Dawa University English graduates to conduct this study.

The researcher used systematic random sampling technique to select and to analyze students' senior essay documents because different scholars stated that it is easy and helpful to do activities in ratio. Accordingly, students' writing problems in their senior essays were identified, discussed, interpreted and analyzed from the field notes and data collection instruments based on the qualities of academic writing through the given criteria (see the criteria and instruments from appendix –A).

Focus group discussion

Focus group discussion is a qualitative data collection method in which a researcher and some participants meet as a group to discuss on a given research problem. According to Bloor et al. (2002) focus group discussion is an effective data collection tool for assessing a broad range of views on a specific topic. The effectiveness of this tool emerges from group interaction among participants. Thus, from this point of view, a focus group discussion was carried out for one hour and half between the researcher and instructors who were involved in advising English graduates senior essays to conduct the study efficiently. Then, all of the necessary issues and experiences which were raised in that discussion about the given research problem were interpreted from the written field notes using the instrument indicated in the appendix-B.

Semi-structured interview

Formally, interview was not planned as a major data collecting tool for this study because the researcher thought that the necessary information can get through document analysis and focus group discussion. However, as a supportive tool, the researcher needs to validate instructors' responses through interview. Therefore, all instructors who participated in focus group discussions were also interviewed for the study using the data collection instrument indicated in the appendix-C.

Data collection procedures

The data of this research study were collected based on the following phases. Firstly, the titles and contents of students' senior essays were collected; and the problems were identified. Then, the detailed problems gained from senior essay documents were identified and analyzed separately for the study. Next, the views of respondents gained through focus group discussion were collected and interpreted; then, the results gained from instructors interviews were collected, assessed and interpreted with evidence. Finally, the results gained from all data sources were triangulated comparatively.

Methods of data analysis

To analyze the collected data, a thematic crossover analysis was used since it is essential to present the data from the interviews, focus group discussion and document analysis. Onwuegbuzie et al. (2010) crossover analysis enables researchers go back and forth many times and present an analysis of data gathered through different tools thematically. Therefore, the researcher used the following procedures to analyze the collected data. First; the results obtained from sample senior essay documents were interpreted and analyzed in terms of the qualities of academic writing and based on the criteria given in Appendix A to D with evidence; second, the results gained from focus group discussions were interpreted and analyzed from field notes with supportive evidence. Then, the results obtained from English instructors' interviews were discussed and analyzed. Finally, results obtained through the aforementioned data sources were triangulated comparatively to validate the study. Here, odd ideas which were gained from some instructors have been written separately with evidence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents data collected through document analysis, focus group discussion, and semi-structured interviews on the major findings comparatively. Data gathered through these instruments are characterized in some categories.

The analysis of the main problems of students' senior essays in terms of the qualities of academic writing obtained from students' texts and the ideas participant instructors in both focus group discussion and semi-structured interview were developed. Here, as most of results found from three of the instruments indicated that almost of all papers did not fulfill the qualities of academic writing.

Although the styles of the analysis were different, in all the three major instruments, the main features of academic writing, whatever language errors, the factors affecting students' academic writing performance, the major weaknesses of students' writings and the major sources of the problems were analyzed with tangible evidence. Generally, the results showed that some emphasis is given for the qualities of senior essays in undergraduate level by both students and advisors.

For both focus group discussion as well as semi-structured interview, all the advisors who were involved in the previous work were called to participate in the discussion, but by their own reasons, only eight of them attended in the focus group discussion. However, all the eleven advisors had participated in the semi structured interview. The results the researcher found among document analysis, focus group discussions and semi

structure interviews are almost similar. As a result, the researcher analyzed the results found comparatively.

The evaluation of senior essays in terms of features used in academic writing

In academic writing, writers have to be very good in capturing the attention of the readers so that their texts should be academic to the scholars and should reach the final target. To do so, maintaining the main features of academic writing is very important.

However, as the researcher observed most of the students' senior essays were not written based on the main features of academic writing. Besides, as all of the participants in the focus group discussion indicated, their students did not use or maintain the main features of academic writing in their senior essays appropriately. They said that the only features they tried to include in their writings are cohesion, coherence, and objectivity even if they were not that much satisfactory.

Similarly, in the semi structured interview also majority (six out of eleven) of the instructors remarked that students were not maintaining the qualities of academic writing in their academic papers. For example, among the aforementioned instructors, instructor B stated his feelings as follows.

Truly speaking, it is hardly possible to say that our students used/ maintained the main features of academic writing appropriately in their senior essay papers. The main reason here is that students themselves did not pay attention about their papers and they did not want to write any formal writings. The other reason is that the time given to do their scholarly work did not allow them to obey the ethics of academic writing and they did not get enough materials to read in the campus. Finally, students have lacked in vocabulary power and the science of research and they did not want to engage themselves in the complexity of academic writing. (Instructors' responses on semi structured interview, October 2014)

On the other hand, instructor D argued in such a way that:

In general, majority of our students maintained a few features of academic writing although some problems such as syntax errors, tenses problems, coherence problems, lack of using appropriate hedging and clear citations are the difficulties. Furthermore, the qualities of our students' senior essays writings were also affected by lack of provision of relevance and appropriate rationality. This begins from the onset of topic and setting selection. (Instructors' responses on semi structured interview, October, 2014)

However, the remaining instructors indicated that their students were not successful on maintaining the main features of academic writing in their senior essays. Here, instructor A strongly indicated that it is very difficult to order them to write scholarly academic papers. He said:

It is very difficult to expect a scholarly academic writing from these students who were beginners; but this is simply to help them know the structures and the contents of 8 senior essay writings (Instructors' responses on interview, October, 2014).

As can be seen comparatively, in both focus group discussion and semi-structured interview, instructors gave almost similar responses on their students' whether they maintained the main features of academic writing or not. According to their responses thus, their students did not maintain the main features of academic writing in their senior essays. Additionally, their instructors did not also enforce them to write scholarly academic papers since they consider that they were beginners.

To check the degree of instructors' involvement in the students' works, the researcher asked them about their criteria of evaluation. Among the instructors who participated in the discussion, five of them such as A, B, D, F and G have similar ideas with regard to their criteria of evaluation; but the remaining three instructors have different criteria. Five of them said that they do not have their own criteria of evaluation. They simply evaluated based on the manual of the university without considering the criteria of academic writing. In the first point of discussion, instructor F indicated as follows by representing others:

We evaluated roughly in terms of the criteria of the university's manual. They said that we saw the papers simply to check whether they can fulfill the criteria of the university's manual or not rather we evaluated to check the features of academic writing. In other words, we simply evaluated them to check how much the papers fulfill the contents of senior essays. As a result, Students did not fulfill the criteria of academic writing. However, they wrote plagiarized papers which were cheated from the previous works. Thus, while they were writing, they simply copy all of the contents regardless of checking whether the points are necessary or not. The reasons may be: one, they did not know what an academic writing is; two, they might not know the elements of academic writing; three, they had not taken enough courses with regard to it; and finally, they have not gotten any awareness about how to write academic papers (Instructors' responses on focus group discussion, October, 2014).

On the contrary, the remaining three participants argued that they have their own criteria of evaluations. For this, instructor G declared his experiences as follows. He said:

We have additional criteria of evaluation although they may not fulfill the full criteria of academic writing. Among

the criteria we used, checking whether our students have included scholarly written works or not, whether their works are objective or personal, and do their works have findings or not are the majors (Instructors' responses on focus group discussion, October, 2014).

Thus, as can be seen from the aforementioned views of the instructors in the discussion, majority of the instructors have evaluated their students' senior essays roughly without considering the criteria of academic writing.

As a result, students have written their senior essays merely for the purpose of graduating as well as to fulfill the requirements of the university. Due to these reasons, the qualities of academic writing such as complexity, objectivity, formality, cohesion and coherence, hedging expressions, explicitness, attribution and citations were not correctly applied in the students' writing.

Furthermore, as the researcher checked from their papers and as the results obtained from the participants indicated that undergraduate students are not doing the academic papers well, and the advisors are not evaluating them well, too.

Lack of objectivity in academic texts

The language of academic written texts should be independent from the writers and the readers. An objective tone can be achieved through using impersonal language because the main emphasis here is on the information that you want to give and the arguments you want to make rather than you (Buchanan, 2008).

Besides, it also added that in academic writing, writers are expected to express the arguments and opinion, but our arguments and opinions should incorporate the objective and impersonal style that is the significant feature of academic writing. The arguments and opinions should imply impartial and sound judgment through the use of rational, impersonal and unemotional language.

As can be observed here, however, students' writings were full of personal expressions because they explained ideas through using personal pronouns. The words they used are also emotional. For instance, student C said:

"As I indicated in the above table, majority of the students agreed that their teachers provide them with pre reading activities" (Senior essay document/paper 23, p. 8).

Here, the aforementioned evidence clearly showed that students have not used the impersonal tone in their academic texts while writing. Instead, they used dependent expressions such as *I, we, I think, I believe and others.*

Additionally, among the eleven participant instructors, nine of them claimed that the majority of their students were expressing their ideas personally. As they said, *I think, in my opinion, I want to say that and others* are common in their academic expressions. Therefore, it can be argued that students have problems of using personal expressions while they were writing their academic senior essays. Thus, according to their advisors and other scholars' views, to avoid such types of difficulties, students should avoid the personal language in their writings, and use passive rather than active constructions, and use impersonal phrases like, "it is believed that", "it has been asserted that", and other related impersonal expressions.

Failure to use hedging expressions

While writing academic texts, it is necessary to make decision about your stance on a particular subject or the strength of the claims you are making because it is so important to decrease the degree of certainty. However, most of these students were not using the hedging expressions in their academic senior essays.

Students normally face difficulties of using hedging words, phrases, and clauses while they write their academic papers. As a result, instead of using the hedging expressions such as it may be said that, it could be the case that, it might be suggested that, there is very hope that, certainly, definitely and others, they said that *I think, I can say that, I can conclude* that and others in their academic senior essays. However, as Skelton (1988), it is a must to use hedging expression as it is crucial in scientific writings where statements are rarely made without subjective assessments of truth and has been used to refer to devices which qualify the writer's expression.

Problems related to citations and attributions

It is obvious that in academic texts, the writers have the responsibility of paraphrasing and summarizing the ideas what they read, and should acknowledge the sources of the information or the system of citation. The reasons are: one, using the ideas of others/ other people is a basic issue for academic writing; two, as academic writing is based on sources, using the academic works built by others are very important for academic writers.

According to Spack (1988), the most important skill a student can engage in is "the complex activity to write from other texts", which is a major part of their academic experience. As a result, any academic text we read or writer should contain the ideas of the other writers as well as your own. In these students' senior essays, however, ideas were not properly cited. Student O indicated his/her citation as follows:

"-----in male dominated educational settings, male dominance is significant problems for females. It is significance because it has impacts on girls' verbal participation in all forms of academic interaction, ---------- sex, and groups despite their verbal superiority" (Senior essay paper 29, p. 2-3).

As the above quotation gave evidence that the student researcher quoted the complex ideas from others. He/she had quoted the sources, and he/she also has tried to indent the ideas, but he/ she indented incorrectly because it is impossible to use both the quotation and indentation at the same time-double quotation. It is totally impossible in academic writing. Thus, in the academic writing context, the possibility is either to quote the ideas if they are below three lines or indent them if the ideas are beyond three lines. Furthermore, students also used many citations indicated from different sources inappropriately. For example, student T cited the source as follows:

According to Leonard, E. and Huesmann stated that" television and movies aspects youngster of all ages of both gender at socio economic levels of intelligence and evaluation (Senior essay paper 3, p.1).

This evidence shows that the writer did not use the specific year and country. Besides, the idea is incomplete and also is not explicit. The other student also remarked in such a way that:

The information collected from electronic sources defines the term realism saying that "realism is alarm that describes only manifestation of philosophical realism; the belief that realism exists in independently observer weather in philosophy itself or in the applied arts and sciences" (http://en.wikipidea.org/wiki/realism) (Senior essay document 15, p.1-2.).

It can be argued that it is not a real form of citation because citing only the websites in academic writing is not enough; additionally, the ideas are vague. Moreover, the participant instructors argued with regard to their students' poor capacity of citing sources. Especially, in the focus group discussion, among six instructors, instructor H strongly argued as follows:

This is a series problem which is facing our students while writing their academic papers. Even it is very challenging to give a full awareness for them how to use because as we instructors observed that although they have been learned, they cannot use practically. As a result, while they are writing, they could not refer scholars' ideas properly. Additionally, they could not paraphrase others ideas in a proper manner (Instructors responses on focus group discussion, October, 2014).

Thus, from the aforementioned responses, it can be

understood that students were poor in referring to scholars' ideas from different sources while writing academic papers; and as to their advisors, to solve the problems; it is required to give them full and practical exercise in daily classrooms.

Factors affecting students' academic writing performance

The researcher assessed that there are many factors impeding students while they write their academic senior essays. In his understanding from their evaluated texts and as all of the instructors participated in the discussion indicated, the main factors are: lack of common understanding about the issue of academic writing and research skills, lack of practical skills of using sources, absence of word power and lack of language skills, time constraints, and lack of funds and resources for research purposes (Instructors' responses on focus group discussion, October 2014).

According to the respondent instructors A, B, G, and H, these might be occurring because of the following reasons. One, lack of giving the priority by the university, two, giving less recognition for senior essays, and three, the presence of negative attitude towards senior essays by considering that it does not bring something new to teaching and learning process.

On the contrary, instructors C and E claimed that the main sources of the problems are; the students' poor background knowledge about academic writing, their poor attainment of university writing courses, and absence of academic writing courses.

On the other hand, the rest two instructors, D and F contradicted that the sources of the problems depend on the location or exposure of students and the knowledge of their teachers including today's instructors. As they thought that the environment and the basic knowledge as well as the characteristics of the teachers are/ were the basic sources of students' knowledge.

Therefore, the researcher can conclude that all of the factors which were mentioned by instructors are the real sources of the problems.

Similar responses were also stated on the semi-structured interview. Here, instructor G strongly indicated that:

The main factors that reduced our students' academic writing performance are lack of knowledge about the issue of academic writing, time constraints, lack of especial training concerning the ethics of academic writing, and research ethics are the majors (Instructors' responses on semi-structured interview, October, 2012).

According to the ideas mentioned earlier by the experienced advisors, therefore, the major factors affecting students' writings were; lack of writing experience, lack of the knowledge of the issue of

academic writing, lack of knowledge of scientific research writing, time and financial constraints, and lack of general language skills.

All in all, as can be seen from the aforementioned in-depth analysis through three of the instruments, almost all of the students' senior essays did not fulfill the qualities of academic writing, and instructor/advisors do not evaluate their papers based on the criteria of academic writing; although their methods of evaluation are different in nature.

Conclusion

According to the findings of this study, then, there are different types of problems students face in producing academic senior essays. In this regard, the major problems are lack of the necessary writing skills and using good command of target language in carrying out academic papers adequately. It appears then that there is a gap between what is required of in the academic senior essays and what students actually can do in order to meet those requirements. What is more, as the instructors stated, the students have missed the "features of academic writing" in particular and English language in general because of their past poor background knowledge and poor training. Moreover, the detailed major findings obtained through the aforementioned techniques are reported below.

1. According to the findings, students were generally found less successful in maintaining the main features of academic writing and fulfilling the writing requirements and expectations of the instructors while they were writing their academic senior essays. They also appeared unable to demonstrate or implement those features of good academic papers while writing.
2. Furthermore, the results showed that students faced the following difficulties such as; lack of available material/ resources, shortage of time, lack of fund for research purposes, lack of research skills, lack of awareness about the qualities of academic writing, absence of word power, and lack of language skills while they were writing their senior essays.
3. Similarly, as results indicated, most of the papers were not grammatically correct; but full of redundancies; most of the documents were plagiarized; sources were not properly cited; and the sources cited were not written in the reference section; and results were not written based on objectives and research methodology.
4. Moreover, as the results tended to indicate, the instructors, even though they may not appreciate the students' failure to use good English, come to accept that language errors are unavoidable and as a result, they tolerate errors as long as the errors do not affect understanding of the content students want to convey is significant.
5. Additionally, as results instructors indicated imply

that the sources of the problems are; the students' poor background knowledge about academic writing, their poor attainment of university writing courses, and absence of academic writing sources.
6. Finally, the results clearly indicated that giving them special training on formal academic writing and helping them to practice through providing them a good feedback are solutions which make the students productive writers.

Furthermore, as shown from the results, too little is done to bridge the gap in terms of helping students develop their academic skills and general knowledge of basic research.

Thus, it appears that more should be done in this area since success in university studies is closely linked with academic writing ability.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings in this study, the following recommendations are made.

1. From the results of the findings, it can be understood that two or three writing courses in university are unlikely to prepare these students for their academic paper writing. This may imply that it is vital to offer more writing courses both at the preparatory and university level which have specific relevance to academic writing requirements.
2. The researcher again wants to recommend that students should learn courses such as developing academic writing and reading, seminar presentation, and should gain special training about how to develop/improve formal academic writing. Moreover, they should gain a good feedback from their instructors while they are learning in the classroom.
3. Additionally, some works on academic writing at high school and preparatory school should be done by English teachers because they should know the basic features of academic writing. Next, research courses should be clearly given at the university independently, that is without other courses.
4. Finally, it can be recommended that students should gain resources and budget to do their academic papers. Additionally, the given time to do their academic papers also should be considered.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A: Document Analysis

Guiding questions

1. Do the students senior essays:
❖ Have good originality of ideas and thoughts?
❖ Show adequate understanding and use of information from assigned sources?
❖ Use effective and appropriate words and phrases?
❖ Maintain varied sentence types?
❖ Have clear linkage between each section of the paragraphs?
2. The main features of academic writing:
❖ Did students use/maintain the main features of academic writing (complexity, objectivity, formality, explicit, cohesion, coherence, hedging expressions, and clear citations) in their senior essays in a proper manner?
3. Impeding factors:
❖ Do students have problems of language power, practical skills, and research skills in their writing?
❖ Do students have problems of money, time and resources in writing their senior essays?
4. The key problem areas of students' senior essays:
❖ Did students use accurate language in their papers?
❖ Did they use grammatically correct sentences?
❖ Did they cite scholars' ideas correctly?
❖ Did they use hedging expressions and impersonal language?

Appendix B: Focus group discussion
Guiding questions

Date: _____ time: _____

Venue: _____ no of participants: _____

Time started: _____ time ended: _____

1. How do you see (view) your students academic senior essays? Can fulfill the qualities of academic writing? If yes, how? If no, what lacks?
2. How do your students use and maintain the main features of academic writing in their academic papers?
3. In what way do you evaluate your students' senior essays? Do you have your own criteria? If yes, please mention?
4. What are the major factors that impede your students while they are writing their academic papers? How do you handle them with your students?
5. What are the major problem areas of your students' senior essays? Citation? Grammar? Plagiarism? Lack of

originality of ideas? Lack of clear linkage b/n paragraphs? Lack of using scientific words and phrases? Lack of accuracy and fluency? Or others? Please mention clearly?

Appendix C: Questions for Instructors' Semi-structured Interview

Dear Instructors:

The purpose of this interview is to gather information for research purpose about your students' senior essays writing qualities and problems in terms of academic writing. Therefore, please answer these questions according to your criteria of evaluation.

1. How successful are your students on maintaining the main features of academic writing (i.e., complexity, objectivity, explicitness, hedging, responsible, cohesion, coherence, and others) in their senior essay papers? Are they using appropriately?
2. To what extent do you tolerate language errors in your students' senior essay writings? Why?
3. What are the factors that impede your students' academic writing performance? How do you handle them?
4. What are the major weaknesses or limitations of senior essays produced by students in line with your criteria of evaluations and expectations?
5. What do you think are the sources of the problems?
6. What do you suggest should students do to improve their academic writing skills?

Appendix D-The Selected Senior Essay Documents

S/N	Senior essay titles	Pages
1	The performance of English first year students on the course sophomore English at Dire Dawa university(1)	29
2	The impact of violence films on the young children increase of Hussein Gire and wilwal school(3)	31
3	Assessing the factors affecting students listening comprehension(5)	37
4	Women participation in education in Somali regional state(7)	32
5	The thematic analysis on Chinua Achebe's Novella: Arrow of God (9)	23
6	Analysis of writings written on the walls of classrooms(11)	34
7	Analysis of social realities references on the Novel 'Things fall apart by Achebe(13)	36
8	Analysis of contracts as a literary technique in A Achebe's A man of the people(15)	33
9	The factors affecting students reading skills in Sabian secondary school(17)	28
10	Major character analysis/Hamer vs non Hamer(19)	28
11	The use of language in advertising with special reference to mega advertising enterprise(21)	21
12	An assessment on needs of pre reading activities in teaching reading comprehension with particular reference to Sabian secondary school, grade (23)	32
13	Factors that influence students reading comprehension in grade nine Sabian Secondary school(25)	32
14	Challenges of intercultural communication in selected dormitories in Dire Dawa (27)	40
15	The involvement of female students in the classroom interaction in the case of Dire Dawa university(29)	64
16	Factors affecting students speaking skills in English classes: the case of sabian secondary school, grade 9(31)	39
17	The role of communication in female genital mutilation prevention : the case of Dire Dawa administration council(33)	29
18	Using student centered teaching method in Dire Dawa secondary school(35)	28
19	Reviewing journalistic aspects of Afar's cultural communication " Afar Dagu" (Qafar taaqu)(37)	32
20	The thematic analysis on "Buchi Emecheta's" Novel(39)	56
21	The impact of writing skills on the students' academic performance with particular reference to 2nd year English department, Dire Dawa university(41)	42