



University level reading and writing take on new meanings with specialised learning compared to the types done in schools. As such, undergraduates have to learn to write in ways considered acceptable by lecturers and comply with writing conventions of the academic community at large. This action research is an ongoing effort to identify the strengths and weaknesses of undergraduates' academic writing in order to identify pertinent areas which require attention in formal instruction. In effect, the study is an attempt to demystify the notion of "poor English" among undergraduates in the specific context of academic writing.

The research involved the analysis of 388 undergraduates' assignments in five text-types: arguments, discussions, explanations, information reports (classification-type) and procedures (e.g. laboratory reports). The analysis

focused on macro-level organisational structure of texts and selected micro-level grammatical features relevant to the purpose of the text. For example, the use of modal verbs such as *can* and *should* is more important in arguments and discussions whereas passive voice is necessary for effective explanations.

The results showed that undergraduates are generally more familiar with the organisational structure of an argument and discussion texts although their ideas may not be effectively developed. The more difficult text-types are explanations and information reports, both of which are objective pieces of writing with no place for personal opinion. The undergraduates had difficulty formulating the purpose of the text and signposting main points at appropriate junctures of the text for the benefit of readers. The assignments do not lack details due to the easy access to facts

and figures from Internet sources but the details are not marshaled into a coherent whole, leading to the commonly comment given by lecturers - "the assignment does not (really) answer the question".

"Poor English" in terms of localised errors in tense of verbs and subject-verb agreement is frequent. More importantly, the study revealed that for subjective types of writing such as arguments and discussions, the potential of modal verbs, nominalisations and conditional clauses were not exploited to make convincing arguments. For objective types of writing such as explanations and procedures, the connection between events and steps were not made clear to readers using sequence connectors and other cohesive devices.

Nevertheless, more than half of the assignments analysed showed good use of relevant grammatical features and organisational structure to achieve the purpose of the text. These tended to be produced by undergraduates with better proficiency in English and who were in the third or fourth year at university. While undergraduates are capable of learning through trial and error and from immersion in the university environment, the development of academic literacy can be enhanced by explicit teaching to bring about better academic success. The findings of this action research contributed towards more focused instruction to build and enhance university students' academic writing skills.