

English as a Second Language Bridging Course: Implementation Dilemma

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Abstract: This study uses a qualitative design employing document analysis, personal narrative accounts and active participant observation to investigate the challenges in academic writing and speaking encountered by forty two prospective undergraduate Namibian students undertaking the English as a second language (ESL) bridging course at Great Zimbabwe University. The study, which is a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) based on the researcher's personal experience in teaching this unique group of students, aims to gain an insight into the type of errors students make in written assignments and the difficulties they have in classroom participation. The study further wishes to; establish how these challenges negatively impact on students' ability to communicate effectively during learning and to find possible ways of alleviating them. The study is based on Cummings' (1981) views about academic proficiency and Halliday's (1972) idea of communicative competence. The results revealed that; due to historical, political and pedagogical reasons; Namibian students face a lot of challenges in academic language both writing and speaking which subsequently impact negatively on their learning. There is a significant gap between their performance and the academic standards expected of them by the University due to limited proficiency levels in ESL. The study concluded that; there is an urgent need to provide these students with a wider range of academic and linguistic support measures in the ESL bridging course than is currently offered and, the one semester they are given to do the bridging course is not enough to improve their communicative competence to make them ready to embark on the B.Ed. programme.

Key words: academic proficiency, academic standards, bridging programme, prospective undergraduate students, support measures

1. Introduction

Great Zimbabwe University is one of the tertiary institutions in Zimbabwe responsible for the training and preparation of both secondary and primary school teachers through the Bachelor of Education Honours Programmes. These programmes are offered mainly to local students but, provision is also given to foreign students within the sub-Saharan region who meet the necessary academic requirements for admission into the University. Proficiency in ESL is one of the crucial entry requirements for all students since English is the main medium of instruction across all departments. For that reason, foreign students whose first language is not English are required to take a mandatory ESL bridging course which is designed to develop and improve their communicative language skills to enable them operate effectively in the mainstream B.Ed. Honours Programme.

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Forty two (42) prospective undergraduate Namibian students who are English Language Learners (ELLs) became the first group of international students to undertake that bridging course. However, research studies about the use of second/foreign languages as media of learning in African classrooms have indicated that many of the learners demonstrate low proficiency levels in the language of education particularly in English because of several reasons including; the quality of teachers, inadequate learning materials and limited opportunities to use English outside the classroom. This situation has in many cases militated against effective student learning resulting in poor academic achievement (Alidou & Brock-Utne, 2011; Brock-Utne, Desai, & Qorro, 2004; Kyeyune, 2010; Mwinsheike, 2002; Rubagumya, 1997; Rugemalira, 2005; Vavrus, 2002; and Webb, 2002; 2004). Namibian students studying at Great Zimbabwe University have not been spared in this scenario. This researcher, who was responsible for teaching the ESL bridging course to Namibian students, realized that they encountered a lot of challenges in writing and speaking because of limited proficiency in the language of learning. Marsh Outero and Shikango (2001) and Otaala (2006) confirm the above point by saying that, “many black Namibian have little or no exposure to English to enhance their capacity to pursue studies in the medium of English.” This awareness stimulated this researcher to embark on the process of this Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) by researching into own practices and those of students for the improvement of learning outcomes. The theory of language communicative-effectiveness was explored and became the basis of teaching and learning in the bridging course. Focus was placed on oral and written discourses because these are important skills in any learning situation. Spoken language is the medium by which much teaching takes place while writing is the mode by which students demonstrate their ability to articulate the learnt ideas. Lecturers use spoken and written language to; communicate with students, present tasks and academic content, engage in the learning process, assess learning, display knowledge and skills and build classroom life. Basically good performance in academic writing and speaking is indicative of the level of language competence learners have acquired in the learning process. In this study, written assignments were regarded as curriculum texts while students’ participation in spoken classroom discourse was considered an active engagement in pedagogic transaction. Both written and spoken discourses were thus subject to analysis. The results of this study are going to contribute to the body of knowledge about the challenges of, and solutions to effective instruction.

2. Conceptual Framework

This inquiry about communicative effectiveness in written and spoken discourses is based on Cummings’ (1981; 2000; 2001) view about academic proficiency which in this study is used synonymously with Halliday (1972) & Savignon’s (1983) ideas of communicative competence. Academic proficiency is a specific genre that learners require in order to cope with school knowledge. It refers to the degree to which an individual has access and expertise in understanding and using specific kind of language employed in academic contexts and is required to complete academic tasks (Cummings, 2000). It is characterized by content specific vocabulary, use of complex sentences and the processes of discussion including interpretation and analysis (Cummins, 2001). Communicative competence is the knowledge or competence about language and the capacity to use it appropriately in contextual communicative language use. It entails knowledge of rules and conventions which underlie the appropriate comprehension in sociocultural and sociolinguistic settings Hymes (1972). It applies to both written or spoken language as well as other symbolical systems (Savignon, 1983). Academic Proficiency is crucial to effective student learning and is an influential attribute of academic excellence. Implicit in these ideas is that, English is a

complex embedded language whose linguistic features many ELLs cannot easily acquire without adequate support measures. Consequently, several ESL learners often get into the learning situation without adequate mastery of the language of instruction making it very difficult for them to cope with the demands of academic learning especially in accessing the content of their courses. In support of the above, Linquanti (2013) purports that the needs of ELLs are distinct from their native counterpart because they start school with a deficit where a knowledge of five (5000) words fewer than their fluent English peers cannot allow them to function effectively. This study, based on real classroom experiences, is an inquiry into the challenges in academic writing and speaking faced by Namibian students. Their written assignments were analyzed to establish the type of errors and weaknesses students made, how these affected students' ability to communicate effectively and establishing ways of mitigating them. This was significant because, the most important goal of is to develop cohesive ideas that will communicate the writer's purpose to the reader writing (Ngwaru, 2002). The study further examined students' participation and contribution to class/group discussion to see their capacity to; follow a line of argument, present authentic facts about that argument, ask and respond to questions, their ability make effective individual/group presentation and to contribute to other students' presentations. This was substantial because active classroom participation and contribution (Abel, 2008) not only develop students' oral/aural and language communication skills but also allows them to demonstrate those skills in their interaction and co-operation with peers. The study revealed that performance in writing and speaking by Namibian students required massive improvement to cope with academic demands expected of them.

3. Zimbabwe-Namibia: Educational Collaboration Initiatives

The idea of educational co-operation in southern Africa has been discussed at political level to enhance regional capacity to develop and improve access, gender equity and quality in higher education. Policy documents such as the Southern African Development Community (SADC) protocol on Education and Training (1997), has been enacted to establish a legal and institutional framework to promote regional integration in specific priority areas of education, training, research and development. In 1997, SADC ministers, in higher education agreed that student mobility was critical in strengthening higher education systems and in helping to build the human capacity that contributed to sustainable development within the region. As a result, educational environments for students to study anywhere in the region as pronounced by the SADC Protocol on Education and Training were created with the hope that countries could benefit from the foreign experiences and expertise (United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization) (UNESCO) (2012). In the contexts of this study, both Zimbabwe and Namibia are members of the SADC which share a number of things in common although each in their peculiar way. Notably, both countries emerged from similar educational backgrounds characterized by inequalities in terms of access to and provision of quality education. With the advent of their independences in 1980 and 1990 respectively, both countries embarked on major education reforms to; improve the overall level of education in society, increase the education opportunity for citizens and to improve quality and equity of the education system. This situation saw Zimbabwe make great strides in the improvement and expansion of infrastructure, instructional and human resources, student funding, increase in student enrolment and improved quality of education across all education (primary, secondary tertiary) sectors. The result led to one of the greatest success stories in education Sub Saharan Africa had witnessed. Zimbabwe's education system particularly teacher training became the envy of many surrounding countries and this situation gave it a comparative advantage over other regional countries

including Namibia. However, it is important to note that although Zimbabwe's economy suffered detrimental decline after the year 2000, its education system according to The Southern African Regional University Association (SARUA, 2009) has remained high compared to that of its neighbouring countries. For that and other reasons, the improved education system made Zimbabwe places a lot of emphasis on regional collaboration and integration in the higher education sector. Therefore bilateral agreements and memoranda of understanding (Mous) with other southern African nations such as Namibia have been signed to enable nationals to undertake teacher training programmes in different disciplines. Partly, it is against this background that Namibia is interested in sending its nationals to undertake the Bachelor of Education (B Ed) programme in Zimbabwe.

4. Methodology

This is a classroom based qualitative research study (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Pitney & Parker, 2009) that took place between the August-November 2013 semesters at the Great Zimbabwe University in Zimbabwe. The study employed participant observations, document analysis and students narrative accounts to collect data. Forty two (42) Namibian students (albeit unaware) undertaking the ESL bridging course participated in the study. Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte (1999) define participant observation as "the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the researcher setting" (p. 91). Bernard (2006) adds that it is a data collection technique that requires the researcher to be present at, involved in, and recording the routine daily activities of the subjects under investigation. Participant observation was used because it addresses problems that are unavailable to other data collection techniques (Bernard, 2006). This researcher was responsible for teaching the ESL bridging course to Namibian students thus was actively and conveniently involved as the sole instructor and key instrument to the way classroom processes occurred. Twenty lessons were observed during the real natural teaching and learning situations through lecturer and student conduct, interaction and experiences. This is consistent with Denby's (2008) view that observing participants in their natural setting is an important feature of a case study. The focus of the observation was placed on student participation in class, their interactions with fellow students during group work and how they made their presentations. Observations were recorded in the field notebook. The researcher made a weekly audit of students' participation in all oral activities, summarized and analyzed the data for comparison with other data. Narrative inquiry was also used. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) and Josselson (2006, p. 4) view narrative inquiry as a distinct form of discourse that involves the gathering of narrative-written, oral and visual-focusing on the meaning that people ascribe to their experiences seeking to provide insight to the complexity of human life. It is based firmly on the premise that, as human beings come to understand and give meaning to lives (Andrews, Squire & Tambokou 2008), narrators are able to tell stories of their (educational) lived experiences and the habitual notions they have formed through experiencing specific institutional, organizational and/or discursive environments (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000). This technique was considered appropriate in this study because it focuses on the *how*, *what* and the *why* of the lived experiences, which in this case was concerned with the unfolding discussions held with the Namibian students. Using this technique also enabled the researcher to understand and elucidate the meaning of students' lived educational experiences in studying the bridging course. All the respondents were (at different times) invited to an informal discussion to give (verbally) their views about their understandings and experiences of the ESL bridging course. Their accounts were recorded in the field notebook and triangulation was achieved through the analysis and comparison of data from other research instruments (Chase, 2005, p. 658) such as

document analysis. It is a form of qualitative technique in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning around an assessment topic (Campus, 2011). Harvey (2012) adds that, document analysis is a process of analyzing any product including letters reports assignments mails and diaries for or insights into a research issue. Various techniques including content analysis are used. Content analysis involves a detailed and systematic examination of the contents of a particular body of material for the purpose of identifying patterns themes or biases (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001, p. 155). Using this method, students' written assignments were taken as important documents that revealed the writers' ability to articulate ideas well and to conform to standards of academic written discourse. Students' assignments were thus analyzed to: identify the type of errors made, establish how those errors affected students' ability to communicate effectively and to find ways of alleviating some of them. The focus of analysis was on cohesion or coherence.

5. The ESL Bridging Course at Great Zimbabwe University

The ESL bridging course at Great Zimbabwe University is a one semester long intensive mandatory course designed for international prospective students from non-English linguistic and cultural background. The students meet the academic requirements for entry into the university's undergraduate courses but their ESL proficiency requirements cannot be evaluated before the completion of the bridging course. The University Bridging Program is a study skills course that enables students to deal with complex academic issues including research and delivery of formal presentation on an academic topic, production of academic writing, taking notes from lectures and engaging in academic discussions. The course further seeks to activate students' presumed knowledge and skills necessary to enable them cope with higher level courses and to make a smooth transition into University undergraduate B Ed programs. Presumed knowledge in this study is what Great Zimbabwe University lecturers of different courses can reasonably expect all students enrolled in that course to know. In short, the bridging course prepares students for university scholarship by developing and promoting their language skills to enhance effective communication. Implementation of the bridging course is achieved through the medium of English. The course content includes critical listening, speaking, reading, and writing, aspects of grammar, business communication, appropriate register and vocabulary. Instructional methodologies employed include lectures, tutorials, class & group discussion, and individual & group presentations. To achieve the most from this course, students are expected to actively get involved in terms of; attending lectures and participating in all class activities. The classroom activities are intended to; consolidate and develop their speaking skills in academic ESL speaking situations, give practice in a variety of appropriate techniques and phrases that will help participants take part in discussions more confidently and effectively, and to provide practice in exchanging personal ideas on an interesting variety of discussion topics agreed by the lecturer and class participants. Assessment of this program entails a three hour written examination which students are required to pass with a fifty percent or better before they are eligible for B. Ed pre-service programme.

6. Academic Proficiency in ESL Learning Contexts

In Zimbabwe as in most other former British countries in the Sub-Saharan region, English has remained an important language in the school curriculum. It is a language of high status that services both as an official language and a language of learning and teaching (LoTL). Proficiency in the academic language of learning is therefore imperative for school learners. Cummings (2001) and Filmore & Snow (2000) see academic language as

the language used by education and is needed to function at the university level and beyond. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign languages (ACTFL) (2012) views language proficiency as the ability to use language in real world situations in a spontaneous interaction and non-rehearsed context and in a manner acceptable and appropriate to native speakers of the language. It is the kind of language used in reading texts, writing and speaking classroom discourses that are characterized by academic text structures and grammatical complexity (Bailey, 2007; Scarcella, 2003; Schlepegrell, 2004; Wong Fillmore & Snow, 2000). It exhibits what a language user is able to do regardless of where, when or how the language was attained. Research on academic skills needed by ESL students to function effectively at English-medium universities have focused on reading and writing skills, classrooms practices, pedagogy and many other issues. This study which investigates the challenges faced by Namibian students in academic writing and speaking studying the ESL bridging course at Great Zimbabwe University focuses on students' ability to use language to communicate effectively to access the course content. It is important to consider these concepts of academic writing and speaking in detail in order to understand the multiple variables that converge to make academic writing and speaking complex processes and daunting activities respectively.

6.1 Writing

Cummings (1981) delineated language competence into two categories-Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). BICS is the ability to use language to function in everyday situation while CALP is the ability to reflect upon and manipulate language in context-reduced circumstances such as formal classroom learning for purposes of conceptual development. Debra Bell (2012) sees academic writing as a type of writing students are expected to produce in response to content they learn about in academic contexts and has particular features and rules that distinguish it from other types of writing genres. Gonye et al. (2012) add that academic writing is a complex activity which can be looked at from different perspectives including; writing as a process, as differentiated from speech, as an aspect of academic literacy and socialisation and, in terms of the skills required producing it. It equips the learner with communication and thinking skills needed to participate effectively in educational learning environments. Nowacek (2011) says that successful writing is vital in the academy because it is the primary basis upon which students' work; learning and intellect can be judged, it is also a utility for all individuals and a medium in which writers are required to display their knowledge (White, 1987; Leibowitz, 2000). It can be used as a tool to provide feedback where the instructor can diagnose individual and general problem. Once students' academic skills in writing have developed, they are able to think critically and objectively while clearly conveying complex ideas in a well-structured, concise format. Intrinsic in the above statements is that, academic writing is a complex and indispensable skill that all school students need to develop the proper techniques in writing their assignments yet for students to succeed in a school or university, it is crucial for them to have control over the academic writing discourse Leibowitz (2000). However, while the above point is true, many ELLs students including Namibian students at Great Zimbabwe find it very difficult to acquire and integrate the range of diverse linguistic features comprising grammatical and morphological accuracy, use of a formal tone, principles of coherence, cohesiveness and effective systems each of which makes its own unique contribution to the writing process and the texts that get written (Cummins, 2001; Singer, 2004). Namibian students' situation is further compounded by the fact that they had to first to adjust to a new educational environment with languages, values, cultural and instructional practices different from their own before they could begin on their studies. This was an exceptionally big

challenge for them especially in the absence of systematic mechanisms. Biggs (1999, p. 123) adds that “the cultural background of many international students is thought to make it difficult for them to adapt to the style of tertiary teaching adopted in the host country. Consequently, students’ learning and experience with in writing assignments becomes dreadful.

6.2 Speaking

Academic speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving and processing information. Its form and meaning are dependent on the context in which it occurs, including the participants themselves, their collective experiences, the physical environment, and the purposes for speaking (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997). Voicing the same sentiments, Halliday (1976) argues that spoken discourse plays a central role at all levels of education because it is one of the basic medium of interaction and it is through talk that students actively engage in the pedagogic enterprise while and lecturers constructively assist. Speaking is crucial to increasing students’ intellectual development and to deepening student learning through sustained conversation. It has its own skills, structures, and conventions different from written language (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Carter & McCarthy, 1995; Cohen, 1996) because learners actively construct knowledge and develop understandings from their shared experiences via interaction with others (Driver, Asoko, Leach, Mortimer & Scott, 1994). Good speakers synthesize the range of skills and knowledge to succeed in a given speech acts and speakers’ skills and speech habits have an impact on the success of any exchange (Van Duzer, 1997). Speakers in a learning situation must manage discrete elements such as turn-taking, rephrasing, providing feedback, or redirecting (Burns & Joyce, 1997). The learner must also choose the correct vocabulary to describe the item sought, rephrase or emphasize words to clarify the description if the clerk does not understand, and use appropriate facial expressions to indicate satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the service. Other skills and knowledge that learners need include among others: using grammar structures accurately; selecting vocabulary that is understandable and appropriate for the audience, applying strategies to enhance comprehensibility, such as emphasizing key words, using gestures or body language; and paying attention to the success of the interaction and adjusting components of speech such as rate of speech, and complexity of grammar structures to maximize listener comprehension and involvement (Brown, 1994). These demands for fluency exerted a lot of pressure on Namibian students. Their limited proficiency levels would not allow them to use the target language appropriately to; actively participate in classroom, deliver meaningful oral presentations and to meet academic content standards of spoken discourse.

6.3 Related Studies

Several research studies carried out about classroom practices in various parts of the world (Cummins, 2001; Holmes, 2004) have revealed that learners who use a second language for learning face a lot of challenges in accessing the curriculum. Cummins (1981, 2001) and Krashen (1985) point out that poor performance in the language of instruction results in poor performance not only in other subjects, but also in overall poor performance in the second or foreign language. Bretag et al.’s (2002) research on ESL students in Australian universities revealed that international students from non-English speaking background found it difficult to contribute effectively in class discussions or tutorials due to poor grammar. Roy-Campbel and Qorro (1987) and Qorro’s (1999) studies in Tanzania revealed that when students have a firm grasp of their specialized subjects, that understanding gives them a firm ground on which to build the foundation for learning a second or foreign language, in this case English’s (Ngwaru, 2002; Thondhlana, 2000) studies about the challenges faced by ESL in

academic writing in Zimbabwe revealed that limited proficiency in the language of instruction was an overriding inhibiting factor in the learners' performance in essay writing resulting in poor overall academic achievement. This study, which investigated the academic writing and speaking challenges encountered by Namibian students in the ESL bridging course, is a contribution to the body of knowledge about curriculum issues and the best way to improve student learning.

7. Results and Discussion

The results of this study were presented and discussed according to data collection instruments used.

7.1 Observation: Classroom Participation and Interaction

Findings from this section of the study revealed that, the majority of students had limited proficiency in the language of learning a situation which consequently prohibited them from; expressing their communicative needs well, engaging in interactive and meaningful discussions and accessing the curriculum. On the contrary, a few students with elaborated language proficiency were more confident, assertive and could actively participate in classroom/group discussions. Generally, student interactions were poor and passive since they were unable to make meaningful presentations on given topics due to reason cited above. Busia (1964) in Opoku-Amankwa (2009) laments how schools in Africa separated students from the life and needs of their community and recommends that "education should be rooted in Africa own cultural heritage and values and have relevance to African societies". Their inability to express themselves well to put across a desired message impacted negatively on their learning. Eventually, they maintain grave silence during class and group discussion (Cassels, 1983; Johnstone, 1985; Pollnick & Rutherford, 1993) add to the above sentiment by saying that, "learning academic courses through the medium of English poses problems for students whose mother tongue is not English". Allwright and Bailey (2004) purport that the use of an unfamiliar language as instructional communication deprive learners their usual communication and hence the opportunity to behave normally. Due to the issue of language proficiency, Namibian students became teacher-dependent; appeared to be uncritical of material they had been taught and lacked knowledge of the genres of academic speaking. Group discussions was challenging for students for several reasons including an inability to formulate a timely response, inability to formulate a linguistically correct response, inability to engage in back and forth dialogue with instructors or classmates and a feeling that their contribution is not important. During oral presentations, some students appeared to have been going through stressful experiences as could be evidenced through angry outbursts when they failed to explain their desired concepts. Other students got into a tendency of avoiding and evading questions after making their formal presentations because they were not fluent enough to express themselves clearly and comprehensibly. Their situation was further compounded by differences in the cultural and language background between themselves and their instructor. Where code-switching, a *valuable linguistic tool to explain concepts* could have been used, to make learning better, that was not possible due to the reason above. During group discussions and formal presentations, students seemed to have developed a self-perception of inadequacy and incompetence as evidenced from some of their statements (*our English is not as good as that of Zimbabwean students so it is really difficult to get what to say and how to say it*) Classroom participating (Dancer & Kamiounias, 2005) is an active engagement process which can be classified into five categories of; preparation, contribution to discussion, group skills and class attendance. Participation can also include students' questions and comments about the lecture (Fassinger, 1995b). Fritschner (2000) adds that the sixth level of student participation is through oral presentations.

Classroom participation and academic oral presentations require students to acquire the rules for organizing and delivering good presentations while mastering the appropriate language to achieve this goal. The ability to present ideas orally is crucial to university students' educational lifelong and career success. When students can discuss what they read, think critically and defend their positions, teachers and lectures get a clear picture of how well students understand and apply the knowledge. Students also reinforce their learning by articulating it and having a dialogue with their lecturers and peers. However, for students to do well in spoken discourse, there are several elements that are considered important to a learner's performance on a given language use situation. Bachman, (1990), Bachman & Palmer (1996) identify four such elements which they name as cognitive knowledge of second language, knowledge of how to overcome difficulties, knowledge of how to plan a task, topical knowledge and learners' affective reactions. It is therefore very clear that the ability to use language to communicate effectively requires both knowledge and competence and the capacity to use that knowledge in appropriate situations. Formal presentations meant that the presenters stood in front of the class to deliver their presentations on a given topic to other students who in turn would respond by giving their views about the worthiness of the presentation. Oral activities including group presentations were supposed to have been prepared prior to the day of presentation to allow the presenters time to organize themselves, improve on the spot and be flexible in responding to questions from fellow students either at the end of the speech or during the activity. This was difficult undertaking for students as (Ryan, 2000) puts it *“student cannot cope with the cognitive and linguistic demands made on them by the social and academic environment in which they were obliged to function for example where they had to listen at the same time write what they had comprehended — The amount of information they have to process in order for them to carry out the task is just too much for their absorption”*. In the same vein, Whisker (2000) points out that the development of good oral skills is necessary to participate in debates and discussion or to engage in problem solving and creative things. Limited knowledge of these rules puts learners at fringes of learning being less able to see meaning in texts, when compared with first language counterparts who have been exposed to inherent and informal methods of learning their language at an early stage (Howe, 1970; Johnstone & Selepeng, 2001).

7.2 Students' Narrative Accounts

Students' responses were guided by the following major statements: (1) Languages spoken at home, with friends and on university campus. (2) Their family's socio-economic and educational background (3) their proficiency levels in the English language (4) current educational experiences (5) reasons for lack of active participating in classroom discussion (6) challenges faced in interacting with Zimbabwean counterparts (7) how their social life positively or negatively effect of social life on their learning (8) academic and social assistance needed. As the discussion unfolded, other questions emerged and students had the latitude to articulate all concerns relating to those questions. The intention was to allow diversity of opinions. Responses to the languages spoken at home/friends showed that; students were from different ethnic groups and accordingly, spoke different languages although they came from the same country. This was seen as a deterrent to effective group interaction especially outside of normal classroom situations when students would try to reflect upon what had transpired during the lesson. The position was not in harmony with the view that if properly utilized, experiences outside the classroom is believed to enhance learning by providing students with opportunities to practice skills of investigation, study, clarification and problem solving in everyday situations. A few students who had a good command of English came together to discuss issues that had emerged during the lesson. Responses to the issue of

family socio-economic status and educational background revealed that, back in their country of origin, students come from typical categories of African family circumstances which are basically devoid of the necessary resources for family upkeep. Accordingly, this scenario determined/s the family's level of education and the type of schools to which their children went. It was noted from students report that the majority of them attended poorly equipped rural schools where the quality of education was compromised. Most teachers in rural schools were said to be under qualified or poorly trained hence also struggled to teach using the target (English) language. This state of affairs impacted negatively on student learning. Three students said they went to what could be termed affluent private schools which were well resourced in terms of the quality of teachers and instructional materials. It was evident that these students were very different from the rest of the students because they had had intensive exposure to English thus acquiring a good command of English that enabled them to articulate ideas well. They also were confident in whatever they were doing during lessons and would dominantly participate in class/group discussions. Ten students said they went to what they termed moderately resourced government schools. On average, these students were slightly better than the rest of the students who went to rural schools. Their proficiency levels were low but at least they had some ideas about what to say in a discussion although they were not expressive. However, many of the students who thought their language was not good enough to actively participate in the discussion expressed the hope that they would learn and definitely improve. When students were asked why they always remained silent even if they were expected to contribute, one student said: *"when we remain quiet in class, it does not mean we have nothing to say but we are afraid that you Mrs Ngwaru will see how bad our English is"*. Another student said, *"The way you teach madam Ngwaru is different from what my secondary school teachers did. They explained things in our mother language and would put a lot of notes on the board for us to copy — now here you say we should listen and take notes, this is very difficult."* Yet another student remarked *"Madam, don't you know that urban life is associated with affluence and sophistication while rural life is characteristic of poverty and ignorance?"*. I was quite surprised to see such differences between Europe where I had been during my formative years and Africa, a place which my mother called home. The student who made this remark was one of the few very good students who had a good command of the English supposedly acquired (as this researcher later discovered) during her formative years in the United Kingdom where she interacted with first speakers of the English language. It is evident from the above statements that students had different previous educational backgrounds which strongly reflected on the amount of linguistic input gained. The implication here is that during their school days, most students faced a double barrelled task where on the one hand, they grappled to comprehend the medium of instruction and on the other hand they had to acquire the content presented to them. Consequently, many of those who went to what they thought were not good schools completed their A-level when their mutual intelligibility in ESL was still low making it difficult to enable effective communication. These were the same students who lacked the confidence to participate in class for fear that they would be condemned by the lecturer and other students. As a result, students remain gravely silent in class even if they knew something and could have shared it with others. Responses to the issue of proficiency levels, lack of participation/interaction in class and with Zimbabwean counterparts and failure to make quality presentations were all attributed to limited language competence. The majority of students concurred that they had a lot of difficulties in expressing themselves in English while a few indicated that they did not have problems. Students attributed their low proficiency levels in English to their families' socio-economic status. The quality of teachers who taught in rural areas was also said to be a contributing factor to students' poor proficiency in English because they too grappled to use the target language. When responding to the issues of their current educational

experiences in Zimbabwe, many students concurred that their situation at the institution was not very conducive to effective learning due to a number of factors including, among other things; limited social interaction with their Zimbabwean counterparts, inadequate knowledge in using the library to access reading materials, inability to express themselves to find desired information and failure to comprehend what the lecturer was saying owing to differences in pronunciation and intonation. This situation made their studies very difficult and one student said *“It is so frustrating and I always think of going back to Namibia”*. When asked what they thought should be done to ease their situation, Most students agreed that there was need for the lecturer to speak slowly to ensure understanding, to write on the board every single word that was said to ensure correct spelling and pronunciation, and also to explain the meanings of difficult words and give examples of their synonyms. Administratively, the majority of students agreed that they needed re-orientation to familiarize themselves with library use and that their Zimbabwean counterparts be encouraged to use English particularly when they (Namibians) were among them (Zimbabweans). Some student also thought they were being shunned by the library staff and other Zimbabwean students because of poor language. The sentiments that were brought into picture revealed that the orientation, which should have made students familiar with their new educational environment, might have been haphazardly done leaving students to make do with what was possible. It is clear from students’ remarks that they were uncomfortable with their situation and needed a lot of encouragement to take part in social/class activities to improve their communication skills. This is in agreement with Baker & Westrup (2003) who add that most students are likely to develop shyness and lack confidence when speaking in a language they are not conversant with. They go on to say [learners] may have little idea about what to say, they may not know the words to use, or they may not be sure how to use the grammar” (p. 16). This finding is similar to that reached by Han (2007) who indicated that one of his students in the interview said, “I will only participate if I know what to speak”. In all cases, their limited proficiency levels became an overriding factor in every situation resulting in their failure to effectively function in the classroom. This finding is similar to that reached by Thaher (2005) who reported that students are afraid of being laughed at or of being criticized by others due to inaccurate pronunciation. They need expert assistance and practice in using the target language in order to bring them to better levels of proficiency. Oral presentations proved a complex activity that required the students to constantly and frequently practice speaking. Qorro (1999), Brock-Utne (2005) add that international students were seriously handicapped when it came to using English as a language of instruction. Only a few students were involved in active participation and discussion while the majority just sat and maintained grave silence or copy the work put on the board. If the lecturer’s handwriting is not legible students do not ask but simply copy words incorrectly since they are not able to distinguish correct from incorrectly spelt words.

7.3 Document Analysis: Written Assignments

This study analyzed written assignments to establish the type of errors and weaknesses made by Namibian students in academic writing. Brown (1994) defines an error as a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker reflecting the interlingual competence of the learner. If an error is grammatical, it does not pertain to grammar (Kiser, 2009). An analysis of eighty four assignments written over a semester revealed that Namibian students have a number of fundamental elements where they need strong support in order to develop good writing skills. Notably, students’ assignments lacked; clarity and conciseness, organisation and structure, correct grammar, spelling, vocabulary and punctuation. Additionally, students lacked adequate knowledge of the mechanics of writing. Their assignments were devoid of diversity in grammatical structures and sound vocabulary. These errors

and weaknesses cumulatively impacted negatively on the quality of assignments students produced. While the errors made were many and varied, this study presents and discuss the categories of errors and weaknesses which were significantly outstanding namely organization and structure, grammar, spelling and punctuation.

7.4 Organization and Structure

Students' assignments revealed lack of good organization and structure. This interrupted the smooth flow of ideas and distracted the reader from the important points. Students failed to articulate their ideas concisely and to make cohesive sentences because paragraphs did not have a clear topic sentence that had to be developed by linking it to the main idea. Sometimes issues discussed in one paragraph would resurface in yet another paragraph resulting in a lot of unnecessary repetition. This was not consistent with the view that writing good academic assignments requires students to come up with developed, complex and creative ways of structuring ideas. Accordingly, well-organized and structured paragraphs that support the topic should be crafted. Those paragraphs should introduce the topic sentence, develop the main idea and make the work coherent. The formal refined structure varies considerably based on what is written. Organization begins with an outline of the work to be written because helps ensure the end product is cohesive, logical and effective. In a single paragraph, or larger work, a simple outline includes a beginning or lead, supporting sentences or sections and a conclusion. Most students did not have the ability to organize and structure their written work and these and other elements had a cumulative effect on the quality of assignments students produced. Below are extracts of two paragraphs where a student became repetitive due lack of organization;

Extract 1, one get information and idea on how to answer exams questions by reading. By reading you put or collect different ideas and put them together as one. If a student can read she can get what is required from her.

Extract 2, a university student required to read for their own goods when they finish their own studies, They may be asked to read for their colleges at work. They have to read in order to get information and ideas. Reading is needed for a university student to get information because everything is connected to reading.

7.5 Grammar

The ability to convey meaning proficiently in written texts is a critical skill for academic and professional skills (Crossley & McNamara, 2010) Knowledge of the grammar of a language of communication in this case English is an important element because it allows students to articulate their views and opinions clearly and concisely in academic assignments. The language used must be of appropriate level where sufficient sophisticated vocabulary should be used. Lack of correct grammar and appropriate vocabulary in academic writing can destruct any effort to produce quality texts no matter how well-organized, articulate and effective the structure and arguments in a written work can be. Below is an excerpt of a student's assignment on the topic: "*Experiences in studying the ESL bridging course*".

My thought was that my English is poor compared to others. It took me about a month without communicate with Zimbabwean even in the lecturers I was not comfortable a lecturer asked me to said something in front of the class. Moreover I shocked one day when my lectuere asked everyone to prepared something so that he/she can present it infront and we was stand for three minutes. That was terrible day for me, when I standup I was sweating and shivering like nobody's business. English for communication taught us variety of things that we was not know in our life. In addition I was not know how to wrote a letter of complaint and now the lecture taught me well.

The above extract shows a lot of weaknesses and grammatical errors. Notable weaknesses include unintelligible sentences that the student write, the poor punctuation that prohibits the comprehensibility of the

intended message and the omission of necessary words for example the helping verb *the* and the definite article *a*. On other aspects of grammar particularly the verb forms that succeeds infinite word “to” and subject verb agreement such as we were. Other weaknesses of this in this excerpt include omissions of certain helping verbs as in the case of I shocked instead of I was shocked. “Without communicate” — this was a common error noted in many students assignments. Students lacked knowledge of the appropriate use of verb forms that made their written texts read well. In this case, the verb succeeding the word “without” should be in progressive form (communicating) but due to lack of proper knowledge of grammatical rules, students just use the simple present form of the verb making the sentence awkward. Other ungrammatical phrases such as “to said, to wrote, not know, to prepared” were also very common in most assignments because students did not know that the infinite “to” is followed by a verb in the present form and not in the past form. The above discussed errors clearly indicate that lack of knowledge of the correct rules of grammar renders the understanding of the writing skill particularly the difference between good and poor discourse. This is typical of Crystal’s (2004) point that, Grammar is the structural foundation of an individual’s ability to express oneself. It can help foster precision, detect ambiguity, and exploit the richness of expression available in English. And it can help everyone — not only teachers of English, but teacher of anything, for all teaching is ultimately a matter of getting to grips with meaning (Crystal 2004).

7.6 Spelling and Punctuation

Preseicely on 22 August 2013 is the day we started with our leason for English of communication course at Greate Zimbabwe University at 14:00 o’clock moday at learning center of Great Zimbabwe University. Fortunatily. Our lecturer for English of communication arived on time, Mrs Ngalu, a very big woman, almost light coulored in compelection with in between hieght not to short and not that much longer. After all she had start teaching us. She had introduce what is English as a second lanuguage why it is placed in school as a comporsly lauguage and the conversional of english.

The excerpt above is fraught with spelling (underlined), and punctuation errors which cumulatively impact negatively on the quality of assignment. The student does not have adequate knowledge of the phonological sound system of the words yet learning to spell words is important to vocabulary development and helps to strengthen the connection between the letters and their sounds. The correlation between spelling and reading comprehension becomes high because both depend on proficiency with language. The more deeply and thoroughly a student knows a word, the more likely they will identify it, spell it, describe it, and use it appropriately in speech and writing. It should be noted from the excerpt above that while the major goal of the English writing system is not merely to ensure accuracy written words but to convey meaning. If words that sound the same (seek, sick) were spelled the same way, their meanings would be difficult to distinguish. Punctuation is used to organize or divide written text in order to make meaning clear. Poor punctuation detracts the reader from the overall presentation of the writing and may give the impression that the writer has failed to edit and “polish” their work. In the above excerpt, the student does not only have no knowledge of the punctuation marks but also has serious problems in using them correctly resulting in fragmented and disjointed sentences. The reader cannot actually decipher meaning has been written. Good punctuation means following certain conventions, but it can also be a powerful tool in “packaging” the written text and in controlling the way the text is read and understood. In a written argument, punctuation can be used to enhance the point students are making.

As a result of these and other errors, students’ were not able to write intelligible sentences due to uncertainty

of English syntactic structure. It was noted from students' writing that, good writing skills were not adequately developed and the result was lack of coherence and comprehensibility in the written assignments. This is consistent with (Paavola, Lipponen & Hakkarainen, 2004; MacLellan, 2001) who reiterate that writing is a complex process that is influenced by several factors including the teachers' and students' own language proficiency levels, experiences and approaches to teaching, students' approaches to learning, student support, learning capabilities, curriculum, assessment, and prior learning.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper sought to examine the challenges in both academic writing and speaking faced by Namibian students undertaking the ESL bridging course at Great Zimbabwe University. The idea was that it is through SoTL that reflective practitioners can develop new knowledge and understanding about teaching and learning. This new knowledge is significant because it may lead to the development of educational practice (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). The results of this study revealed that; most of the forty two Namibian students were unable to produce quality academic written and spoken discourses. The study also highlighted that errors and weaknesses in students' assignments consequently impacted negatively on the quality of assignments in particular and students' academic performance in general. Their inability to communicate effectively in writing and to take an active part during lectures is influenced by a range of social, historical economic and pedagogic factors entrenched within the broader social context in and outside the learning situations. Most of these problems emanate from; their limited proficiency in the language of learning, lack of knowledge about the conventions and styles of academic writing, lack of practice in academic discussions and from being in educational environments that have different culture of instructional practices. In addition, students' learning practices were affected by the fact that they also had to adjust to many issues including forming new social networks and communicating with local students and familiarizing with library use. This scenario undoubtedly posed a lot of demands which if not quickly averted would result in poor academic achievement. Students may also be demoralized and lose interest in studying in a country other than their own. In view of these findings, this study recommends that:

- Academic writing should be taught explicitly and consistently across different curriculum areas to give students adequate practice in the writing process.
- Various subject areas need further exploration/attention if students have to be successful in their learning.
- Lectures at Great Zimbabwe University conceptualize and adopt pedagogies that support students in acquiring the necessary English language skills for effective learning.
- In turn, students should also make a lot of effort to listen to/and/or read academic discourse and texts, and practice the skills of academic writing.
- The library staff, lecturers and students exercise patience and tolerance when dealing with foreign students whose English pronunciation was different from their own.

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