

The Influence of Informal Language Learning Onacademic Writing among Secondary School Learners: Acase Study of Kawanga Day Secondary School

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Abstract

This study examined the influence of informal language learning on academic writing among secondary school learners at Mumbwa Secondary School. Reports from ECZ and other scholars highlighted increasing use of informal language in academic writing, prompting the need to investigate its causes. The study was guided by three objectives: to identify teaching methods used by English teachers to promote formal vocabulary, to determine factors influencing learners' use of informal language, and to explore remedial measures employed by teachers. A case study design was adopted, focusing on Kawanga Day Secondary School. The study involved 20 purposively selected learners from Grades 10 to 12. Data were collected through interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis of learners' exercise books, and were analyzed thematically. Findings revealed that teachers mainly used structural and contextual methods, such as reading comprehension, to teach vocabulary. Learners' use of informal language was largely influenced by social media, peer communication, and popular music. Additionally, remedial lessons were conducted once a week, which was found to be insufficient to fully address the problem. The study recommends that learners should actively develop their understanding of formal vocabulary and distinguish it from informal usage. It also recommends that teachers adopt more effective and consistent methodologies for teaching vocabulary and writing skills.

Keywords: Informal Language, Academic Writing, Vocabulary, Secondary School Learners, Writing Skills.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of informal language use, is synonymous to academic writing which thrives on formal language use. Academic writing largely relies on correctness and consistency in spelling use and syntactic formulation of sentences (Brown, 2000). Knowing that there are a myriad of sources that hinder correctness in the use of English language grammar amongst learners in secondary schools including influence of social media, variety of World English including the limitation of verifying spellings by looking up in the dictionary, there is need to establish from schools amongst teachers of English language and learners the potential facilitating factors for the use of informal English words in the academic writing tasks.

This use of informal language is a sign that learners have a long way to differentiate formal language from informal. Among the Secondary school terminal objectives of the senior secondary school syllabus is to develop a person able to use English language correct in all situations (Revised English Language syllabus, 2013). This is because English as a language that plays an important role as a communication tool, which is used as a communication tool by people in most countries in the world. In addition, English is widely used in terms of writing knowledge and technology of all faculties. According to Sekhar (2014) English language is regarded as the lingua franca of international business, economy, science &

technology. Therefore, to be able to develop knowledge, technology and communicate with people from other countries, English use has to a priority of every teacher of English and learners for their future communicative endeavors. This is the focus of this study. The Examinations Council of Zambia (2022) Chief Examiners report records that incorrect use of English spellings and informal English words contribute to poor performance of Grade 12 learners in their English language Paper one. This chapter presents the background of the study, problem statement, research Objectives, general objective, specific objectives, research question, characteristic of the phenomena, factors related to the phenomena, global Statistical Scenario, local Statistical Scenario, scope of the Study, usefulness of the study in the present scenario, operational Definitions, Chapterization and the chapter summary.

Background of the Study

English language is regarded as the lingua franca of international business, economy, science & technology (British Council, 2022). Therefore, to be able to develop knowledge, technology and communicate with people from far and wide, masterly offormal academic vocabulary of the English ought to be a priority of every learner for his/her future communicative endeavors. Townsend (2009, p.5) defines general academic vocabulary as “Words which are used across content areas, have abstract definitions, and are a challenge to master”. Similarly, Coxhead (2000, p.10), regards academic words as “Lexical items that occur frequently and uniformly across a wide range of academic materials”. At college level, academic vocabulary is included as part of their lessons.

Identification of wrong use of an English word takes place at two level; writing and speaking. Thus, among the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), writing and speaking which are often media of expression reveal much regarding one’s competences in the use of English language words. To this effect students who are learning to write are required to know how to find ideas and express them in writing correctly. Learners who have not yet internalized the correct use of vocabulary, their writing habits usually pay less attention to the types of words they use in written tasks, which most of them just pour ideas to complete tasks (Kaumba, 2019).

The use of correct academic language cannot be over emphasized as many formal and business writing situations demand that formal language is used. Furthermore, most universities often use academic vocabulary, because there are several tasks that use academic vocabulary such as academic assignments, journal article writing, speech presentations and writing a thesis that is needed for partial fulfilment of academic attainment. Academic vocabulary has a specific function rather than daily or general vocabulary to express academic communication but for the mere fact that it cannot be separated from the correct use of academic vocabulary (Townsend, 2009).

The learning of academic writing skills can be done by reading in one’s subject areas and developing awareness of how various types of texts are structured. During classes, students need to write to learn, take notes, study, think and process their ideas to integrate new ones. Moreover, students need to do writing tasks because this is how they are assessed. In order for students to succeed in academic writing and to immerse themselves in a language learning environment, they have to be equally competent in academic reading and writing (Evans and Green, 2007).

Unfortunately, learning academic vocabulary seems to be a challenge for many school going learners. A research has been found that most of the students in universities especially non-native speakers of English universities have some difficulties in using the academic vocabulary because of insufficient vocabulary knowledge, such as what words or types of words occur in this sentence, or where, when and how often can we use this word, based on

author's experience in Academic writing classes, students often get reprimands from lecturers, due to inappropriate vocabulary use (Evans and Green, 2007).

Problem Statement

Challenges of use of formal English language words (formal vocabulary) in academic writing tasks among secondary school learners in Zambia have been recorded by different researchers (Banda, 2019; Zulu, 2020, Kaliwanda, 2021). Additionally, the Examinations Council of Zambia Chief Examiners Reports (2019; 2020; 2021 and 2022) have consistently recorded that the incorrect use of English spellings and use of informal English words have contributed to poor performance of Grade 12 learners in their English language Paper one final examiners. In terms of performance the mean scores have been below 35% in all the cited examination years above. This defeats the objectives of the Secondary school senior English language syllabus that aims at producing competent users of the English language across situations (Revised English Language syllabus, 2013).

Although, academic writing using formal English language words at secondary school level amongst learners seems a difficult task, however it plays a critical role in socialization as they advance to tertiary level and in the interpretation of school academic subjects and other academic disciplines (Gasper & Shepherd, 2009). Mastery of formal and informal vocabulary is a skill that can be learned and developed with practice during school time. Furthermore, it is one of the foundations of academic engagement.

There are no studies locally that have been instituted regarding this problem, especially, in Kabwe District. Thus, the author wishes to find out more about the phenomena at Kabwe High School among secondary school learners who seem to pose this challenge, hence the study.

Research Objectives

General objective

To find out the factors that influence the students' tendency in using non-academic vocabulary in English academic writing

Specific objectives

- To establish methods that teachers of English language use to teach formal vocabulary use in writing skills
- To find out factors that influence learners' tendency in using non-academic vocabulary in English academic writing tasks
- To explore the remedial measures teachers of English employ to correct this phenomena amongst learner

Research question

1. What method do teachers of English language use to teach formal vocabulary use in writing skills?
2. What factors influence learners' tendency in using non-academic vocabulary in English academic writing tasks?
3. What remedial measures do teachers of English language employ to correct these phenomena amongst learners?

Characteristic of the Phenomena

Vocabulary Learning

Learning languages cannot be separated from vocabulary learning. Vocabulary supports speakers to express their opinions, ideas, and feelings in communication. Vocabulary is the

most important component of language because it affects four language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Related in to the importance of vocabulary learning is central to language acquisition, whether the language first, second, or foreign (Murcia, 2001). Generally, vocabulary is the knowledge of meanings of words (Hieber, 2005).

Factors Related to the Phenomena

Among the relatable factors related to the phenomena include learning English language as a Second Language. Usually, mastery of the Basic English grammar and types of vocabulary pose a challenge. Also limited scenarios where to use the English language contributes to the poor use and practice. Lea and Street (as cited in Chokwe, 2011) report that academics often complain of students who cannot write properly alluding to the literacy standards in schools and higher education institutions which are very low. Confirmation of this claim is made by Munro (2003) who argues that dealing effectively with students' literacy difficulties and poor academic writing skills, is a challenge that universities across the world have to contend with.

Global Statistical Scenario

Research shows that student writing poses specific challenges in English Second Language (ESL) teaching and learning contexts across the globe with over 80% of high school learners' performing below par (Lea & Street 1998; Gambell, 1991 as cited in Chokwe, 2011; Ivanic & Lea, 2006; Lea, 2004; Lillis & Scott, 2007; Munro, 2003).

Local Statistical Scenario

In Zambia there is adequate evidence of the challenges of appropriate academic writing amongst school going learner sin secondary school. According to reports from the Examinations Council of Zambia Chief Examiners Reports (2019; 2020; 2021 and 2022) findings reveal that the incorrect use of English spellings and use of informal English words have contributed to poor performance of Grade 12 learners in their English language Paper one final examiners. In terms of performance the mean scores have been below 35% in all the cited examination years above.

Scope of the Study

The scope of this study is to analyze the level of appreciation of secondary school learners and teachers of English language when it comes to learning and teaching respectively, the use of academic vocabulary and non-academic vocabulary. This is focused on writing skills for secondary school learners in Grade 11.

Usefulness of the Study in the Present Scenario

Considering the great challenge of academic writing hitting negatively on the secondary school learners enriching them with vocabulary in the process of learning English is very important. The process of increasing vocabulary awareness is also required by them to understand how to use it in formal and non-formal scenarios. This study aims to provide direction for learners in secondary school with regards the use of English words correctly in formal academic writing and contextualize the difference between the use of academic and non-academic vocabulary. This is very crucial on their future endeavors. For example when they want to continue higher education or want to apply for work abroad, they certainly must have the skills to write letters that are academic in nature, and one of the most important factors in the letter is correct use of academic vocabulary. Hence this research can help and benefit them

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical Literature Review

Contextualizing Formal Language (Formal Vocabulary) Use in Academic Writing

Vocabulary learning is central to language acquisition and cannot be separated from communication. It enables learners to express ideas, opinions, and feelings effectively across the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Scholars such as Murcia (2001) and Hieber (2005) define vocabulary as knowledge of word meanings, which forms the foundation of language use.

Vocabulary carries meaning in communication, and the extent of one's vocabulary determines how effectively they can communicate in different contexts. Coxhead (2006) emphasizes that the more words learners understand and use correctly, the better they can express meaning. In academic writing, formal vocabulary is particularly important because it ensures clarity, precision, and appropriateness. For instance, writing formal letters or academic essays requires careful word choice to maintain a professional tone.

Concept of Vocabulary

Vocabulary refers to the set of words necessary for effective communication in both spoken and written forms (Nueman & Dwyer, 2009). It includes expressive vocabulary (used in speaking) and receptive vocabulary (used in understanding).

Other scholars such as Hanson and Pandua (2011) and Cahyono (2011) highlight that vocabulary is a core component of language proficiency, influencing how well learners listen, speak, read, and write. Cameron (2001) further explains that vocabulary plays a critical role in language acquisition.

From these perspectives, vocabulary can be understood as a fundamental aspect of language learning. It includes content words such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Learners with a strong vocabulary base are more likely to communicate effectively and succeed in academic writing.

Academic Vocabulary

Contextualizing Academic Vocabulary

Academic vocabulary consists of words that are abstract, technical, and commonly used in academic contexts (Townsend & Kiernan, 2015). Nation describes it as part of specialized vocabulary, often represented in the Academic Word List (AWL) developed by Coxhead.

The AWL includes words that frequently appear in academic texts across disciplines such as Arts, Science, Commerce, and Law, but are not part of everyday language. These words are essential for constructing well-organized academic writing.

Academic vocabulary enhances students' understanding of instructions and academic texts while helping them produce formal written work. Its use contributes to clarity, coherence, and the overall quality of academic writing.

Types of Vocabulary

Tokens: Tokens refer to the total number of words in a text, including repeated words. For example, a sentence may contain multiple tokens even if some words are repeated.

Types: Types count only unique words in a text. Repeated words are counted once, reducing the total number compared to tokens.

Lemmas: Lemmas are root forms of words along with their inflected forms (e.g., jump, jumps, jumped). This method simplifies vocabulary analysis by grouping related forms.

Family of Words: Word families include root words and all related derived forms (e.g., act, action, active). This approach helps in understanding vocabulary depth and relationships.

Non-Academic Vocabulary: Non-academic vocabulary is informal and commonly used in everyday communication. Park (2010) notes that it involves relaxed grammar, simpler structures, and colloquial expressions.

This type of vocabulary often includes slang, phrasal verbs, and conversational language. While appropriate in speech, it is generally unsuitable for academic writing. Academic writing requires formal vocabulary, avoiding slang and overly personal expressions.

Key features of non-academic vocabulary include:

- Use of slang and informal expressions
- Frequent use of phrasal verbs
- Personal tone using first or second person

Types of Vocabulary

High-Frequency Words: High-frequency words are commonly used words that make up a large portion of spoken and written texts. The General Service List (GSL) includes about 2,000 such word families, covering up to 80–90% of texts.

Low-Frequency Words: Low-frequency words occur less often and include proper nouns, rare words, and less commonly used vocabulary. They contribute a small percentage of words in texts.

Specialized Vocabulary: Specialized vocabulary is used in specific fields or disciplines. It includes academic and technical terms necessary for particular subjects.

Vocabulary Usage: Vocabulary use is influenced by social, cognitive, and educational factors. Language variation can affect how learners interact with teachers and peers, as well as their academic performance.

Differences in vocabulary knowledge may lead to misunderstandings in reading and communication. Learners from different backgrounds may have varying exposure to language, affecting their ability to interpret and produce academic texts.

Vocabulary in Academic and Non-Academic Writing

Vocabulary in Academic Writing: Academic writing is formal and used in educational settings. It includes essays, reports, and research papers (Brown, 2004). Unlike informal writing, it avoids slang, contractions, and incomplete sentences.

Academic writing serves purposes such as reporting research, answering questions, and presenting arguments. It requires clarity, structure, and appropriate vocabulary.

Vocabulary in Paragraph Writing

A paragraph focuses on one main idea and consists of:

- Topic sentence (main idea)
- Supporting sentences (explanations/examples)
- Concluding sentence (summary)

Vocabulary in Essay Writing

An essay consists of:

- Introduction (topic and thesis)
- Body (main arguments)
- Conclusion (summary of ideas)

Other Formal Academic Writings That Utilize Vocabulary

Descriptive Writing: Provides facts or information, such as summaries and reports.

Analytical Writing: Organizes information into categories and examines relationships between ideas.

Persuasive Writing: Presents arguments supported by evidence and the writer's viewpoint.

Critical Writing: Evaluates different viewpoints and develops arguments based on evidence.

Types of Non-Academic Writing Utilizing Vocabulary

Non-academic writing is informal and intended for general audiences. It includes texts such as letters, articles, and messages.

Characteristics include:

- Conversational tone
- Use of slang and contractions
- Simpler sentence structures
- Emotional and personal expression

Factors Influencing Use of Informal Vocabulary in Academic Writing

Studies by Evans and Green (2007) and Nadera (2005) show that limited vocabulary knowledge leads students to use informal language in academic writing.

Other influencing factors include:

- Lack of exposure to academic vocabulary
- Influence of peers and everyday language
- Insufficient guidance from teachers

Teachers play a key role in helping learners develop appropriate vocabulary and avoid informal usage.

Theoretical Review

Social Constructivism Theory by Lev Vygotsky (1958)

Social Constructivism explains that learning occurs through interaction and experience. Key concepts include:

- Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)
- Scaffolding
- More Knowledgeable Other (MKO)
- Social interaction

The theory emphasizes that learners develop skills with guidance from teachers or peers. In academic writing, teachers support learners through scaffolding until they can use appropriate vocabulary independently.

Application of the Theory to the Study

Teachers should support learners in mastering academic vocabulary through guided instruction and interaction. Scaffolding helps learners gradually improve their writing skills, while collaboration with peers enhances learning.

As learners gain competence, teacher support is gradually reduced, enabling independent use of formal vocabulary.

Research Gap

Previous studies have highlighted the misuse of vocabulary in academic writing, often linking it to second-language learning and lack of guidance. However, there is limited local research

on factors influencing this issue among learners at Chitambo Primary School. This study aims to fill that gap.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter discusses the methodology that will be employed in the inquiry of data. In the views of Rajaseka (2013) research methodology is essentially an outline of the procedures through which researchers go about their work of describing, explaining and predicting phenomena. This chapter presents the research design which will be used to describe the kind of data to be collected and how. It also presents the research sight, the sampling procedure, sample size as well as the population. It also discusses the data collection instruments, the validity and reliability of the instruments. Data collection procedure is also discussed, data analysis procedure as well as the ethical considerations. The chapter closes with a summary.

Research design

Creswell (2012) states that a research design is the specific procedure employed in carrying out in a research process. It involves the collection of data, data analysis and report writing. Chola (2016) also contends that a research design is a frame work in the whole process of research aimed at pointing the researcher in the direction of that research.

Case Study Design

A case study design, according to Marczk et al (2005) involves an in depth examination of a single person or a few people. It provides an accurate and complete description of the case. Case studies also involve the intensive study of an individual, family, groups, institution or other level which are conceived as a single unit. The information is highly detailed, comprehensive and typically reported in narrative form as opposed to the quantified scores on a dependent measure.

Since this study endeavoured to generate facts regarding the influence of informal language learning on academic writing among secondary school learners at Kabwe high school, a case study design was thus favourably adopted. It was hoped that, this research design was ideal for this study as it allowed the investigation to focus on the specific case and understand trends in details.

Universe

Aday and Cornelius (2006), explain that, study universe, also known as population refers to a group to which information is desired and to which one wishes to make inferences. That is to say, study universe consists of all the members of the hypothetical set of people, events or objects to which generalization of the research study could be made. For this study, the population was drawn from one (1) secondary school (Kabwe secondary School) of Kabwe district of Central Province of Zambia.

Sampling Procedure

Sampling procedure refers to a process of selecting a number of individuals or objectives from a population such that the selected group contains elements representative of the characteristics found in the entire group (Orodho and Kombo. 2002). It is also said that, sampling procedures are used by a researcher to gather people, places or things to study. This study employed purposive sampling technique when sampling all participants: teachers and learners because purposive sampling leads to having a sample of rich informants with regard information for the study. As Kasonde-Ng'andu (2013) puts it, purposive sampling refers to

the selection of a group of people believed to be reliable for the study because of the rich information they poses and thus, it was used to select the teachers of English language and secondary school learners.

Sampling of the School

The researcher targeted secondary schools because of the secondary school learners focused on. Therefore, purposive sampling procedure was used to sample Kabwe Secondary School that had a record of poor performance in academic writing (composition writing) of its secondary school learners as evidenced by Examinations Council of Zambia and the School Assessment Records. Therefore, the DEBS office was requested for this information pertaining performance.

Sampling of Teachers of English language

Teachers who were engaged in this study were purposively sampled. The researcher requested the Head of Language department at Kabwe High school for teachers who had been teaching senior secondary school learners classes for a long time with the good experience of academic writing associated challenges among learners.

Sampling of Secondary School Learners

Learners who were engaged in a Focus Group Discussion were also purposively sampled. The researcher requested teachers of English language to select best performing learners, average performers and below average performers. These varieties were for purposes of recording perceptions from different learners of different abilities in academic by use of appropriate vocabulary so as to have representative views. This also became a well-balanced representative sample representing learners of different abilities from the entire population of learners at Chitambo Primary school.

Sample Size

According to Kulbir (2006), a sample size is a small proportion of a population selected for observation and analysis. It can also be said to be the number of participants selected from the universe population to constitute a desired number of participants needed for the study. Therefore, this study targeted Kabwe Secondary school with the cumulative total population of teachers of English language between 15 and 20. However, due to the qualitative nature of the study that only requires rich informants to be engaged in interviews and Focus group Discussion that take up limited participants, thus the researcher sampled not more than 10 participants in order to avoid having a sample size beyond the qualitative sample threshold. The sample size was 30 that is 10 teachers of English language and 20 secondary school learners.

Sampling Area

The sampling area for this study was all senior secondary school learners from grades 1- to 12. All registered learners were targeted in this sampling area.

Sources of Data

The sources of data for this study were two: *Primary* (respondents: teachers of English language and learners) and *secondary* (document performance records).

Method of Data Collection

Kasonde-Ng'andu (2013) defines data collection methods as tools that help the researcher to collect necessary information from participants. In order to collect appropriate data for this study three instruments were employed. These were: semi-structured Interview guides, Focus group discussion guide and document review check list.

Semi- Structured Interview Guide for Teachers of English Language

Data from teachers was collected through a one-to-one interview session. Kombo (2007) asserts that, an interview is a conversation or interaction between the researcher and the research respondents. Interviews are an effective way of collecting data because they involve a one to one contact with the subject. This facilitated in capturing data from many teachers. Amin (2004) adds that, interviews have the strength to limit inconsistencies and also save time as they bring the researcher and interviewee face to face.

Focus Group Discussion Guide for Secondary School Learners

In order to collect data from secondary school learners, a Focus group discussion was used. This was hoped to help learners open up and be motivated by their colleagues' presence and express themselves fully by giving as detailed responses as they could.

Tools of Data Collection

The tools for data collection used in this study included: semi-structured interview guide, focus group discussion guide and a document review checklist.

Tools for Data Analysis

Data analysis is the critical examination and scrutiny of the coded data in order to make deductions and inferences, (Kombo and Tromp, 2006). To this effect, the following tools were used for data analysis:

Data Analysis from Interviews and Focus Group Discussions

Data from interviews and focus group discussion was firstly, screened. Then sorted and coded. It was later was packaged according to common themes then they were analysed thematically in relation to available literature reviewed and the theory that guided the study.

Limitations of the Study

The limitations being factors that hinder the full execution of a study as espoused by Creswell (2012), for this study, the limitations included, appropriate time to meet all the targeted teacher respondents as the researcher conducted the study at the time when the school was conducting its End of Term Tests, so it was difficult to meet all the teachers at once, since they had started reporting to work during the time for invigilation. The same happened to learners.

Difficulties Faced by the Researcher

The researcher encountered a few difficulties during the execution of the study. Among them include: late clearance by the DEBS office to go to the study school. This almost frustrated the researcher as time was running out to conduct a study and compile a final report.

4. CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the influence of informal language learning on academic writing among secondary school learners. The findings reveal that while vocabulary plays a

central role in effective academic writing, many learners struggle to distinguish between formal and informal language. This challenge is largely influenced by exposure to informal language through social media, peer interactions, and popular culture, which increasingly shapes learners' communication habit. The study also established that although teachers employ conventional teaching methods such as structural approaches and contextual learning through reading comprehension, these strategies are not always sufficient in addressing learners' persistent use of informal vocabulary. Additionally, remedial measures provided by teachers, though helpful, were found to be limited in frequency and depth, reducing their effectiveness in improving learners' academic writing skill. From a theoretical perspective, the study confirms the relevance of Social Constructivism in understanding how learners acquire and use language. Through interaction, guidance, and scaffolding, learners can gradually develop the ability to use appropriate academic vocabulary. However, this requires consistent support from teachers and meaningful engagement in structured learning environments. Overall, the study highlights that improving academic writing among learners requires a combined effort. Learners must take responsibility for expanding their formal vocabulary, while teachers need to adopt more effective, interactive, and sustained instructional strategies. Addressing the gap between informal and academic language use is essential for enhancing learners' writing competence and overall academic performance.

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