Examining Fijian First-Year University Students' English Proficiency on CEFR Levels

PRASHNEEL RAVISAN GOUNDAR

School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Science
University of New England, Australia
prashneel.goundar@une.edu.au

Abstract

English is the main *lingua franca* among the various ethnolinguistic groups in Fiji. This results in a sociocultural problem when students enter universities from different high school backgrounds. To this end, this study analysed the level of difference in writing abilities at the beginning of the first year of study and at the end of the first-year program of undergraduate students. The goal was to generate new insights that could inform ongoing efforts towards ameliorating academic English language proficiency in Fiji. The study took place at a university in Fiji where 120 students were sampled at the beginning of the first year and at the end of their first year of university program. This study used the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to evaluate student writing skills and for the development of curricula to meet students' needs. The study employed quantitative research design to a longitudinal language testing research context. The CEFR was successful in gauging the student's preparedness for university study and work life. Out of the 120 students, it was observed that from the 62 students who were at the A1 level at the end beginning of the year progressed to levels B1 and B2. Out of 62, 21 moved to B1 where 41 moved to B2. Further, 49 students from A2 level also progressed as 44 of these students had B2 and another 5 made substantial improvement by moving up to C1 level. The findings of this study can be used in improving support systems to enhance the smooth transition of multilingual students from high school through university and into the workforce. The analyses have the potential to provide insights into how Fijian undergraduate students are performing compared to students in other countries and how the EFL curriculum might be adapted to students' needs.

Keywords: Language testing; CEFR; writing skills; proficiency; academic English; longitudinal study

Language Testing in Applied Linguistics—The Multilingual Fijian context

Fiji is located in the South Pacific, spreading over 300 islands with a population of approximately 900,000 (Fiji Government, 2018). Fiji is a former British colony making it a multilingual island nation with more than 10 languages which includes a number of dialects of the indigenous language, that is, iTaukei or Fijian (Goundar, 2019b; Goundar, 2020, p. 351), Rotuman, and a few Indian languages (Goundar, 2020, p. 351; Mangubhai & Mugler, 2003). According to Goundar (2023b), at present English functions as a *lingua franc*a, a language used for medium of instruction in schools and higher education, a language for business, employment opportunities and communication. Mother tongue in this context is simply a bureaucratic euphemism for non-English languages in Fiji as mother tongue generally refers to iTaukei or Fiji Hindi (Goundar, 2023b).

Fiji has a centralised educational system (Tuinamuana, 2005) whereby obtaining a pass in the English language is crucial to progress to higher education institutions. Students' English language score is added to another three subjects taught at Year 13, the final year of secondary level to calculate the students final mark (Goundar, 2023b). Cummins (2000, p. 53) holds the view that when students go to the university or the kind of employment they qualify for depends on how successfully they acquire a specialised language required to gain academic qualifications. Predominantly, language tests are used for entry into university programs, for deciding on a profession, government jobs or private sector jobs such as for lawyers, health care professionals, marketing agencies, communication officers, banking institutions as well as to satisfy immigration requirements for some countries (Cummins, 2000; Goundar, 2023b; McNamara, 1998; Shohamy, 2001, 2009). Language testing has emerged due to increase in worldwide migration (Bodis, 2023; Goundar, 2023b), and the consequent demand on immigration policies to require a prospective migrant to demonstrate proficiency in the language of the destination country before their entry into the country is approved (Shohamy & McNamara, 2009, p. 1). Proficiency in the English language plays a crucial role in Fijian society as it is essential for everyday living, academic performance, university entrance, employment opportunities and commerce (Goundar, 2019a; Hopf et al., 2019), among others.

Medium of instruction (MOI) is the language that is used in delivering lessons in the classrooms or the educational institution. English is the MOI in universities in Fiji (Goundar & Sharma, 2021; Mangubhai, 2002; Mangubhai & Mugler, 2006; Shameem, 2002), therefore having adequate knowledge of academic English will equip students to progress and complete their program of study with ease (Goundar, 2023b). This categorically reaffirms that the aim of testing students is to ultimately help them and not to inadvertently contribute to discrimination based on language proficiency (Goundar, 2023b). The findings of this study could be used in providing support systems to students so that their transition through the university phase and into the workforce is smooth. This research analysed differences in writing proficiency levels at the beginning of the first year of study and at the end of the first-year program of undergraduate students. It applied the CEFR to the study of undergraduate student writing skills in order to gauge its relevance and usefulness in a non-European multilingual context. Also, the study provides the students information and data to enhance their chances of success in subsequent years at the university.

Given the information above, the benefits of doing this study included enhancing student progression that will lead to successful completion of their three-year program, will ensure that the learners improve their writing abilities as well as allow universities to strengthen their support systems put in place.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following main questions:

    i. How do the first-year students perform in their writing proficiency test according to the CEFR levels at the beginning of their university program?

    ii. How do the students perform in their writing proficiency test according to the CEFR levels at the end of their first-year university program?

    iii. What significant changes were observed after using writing tasks for the development of curricula to meet students' needs?

    iv. What new theoretical insights can be gained from studying writing proficiencies of undergraduate students in Fiji using the CEFR?

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

In Fiji, language tests are conducted for teaching in primary and secondary schools and for emigration purposes such as the IELTS test and Cambridge examinations (Goundar, 2023b). Previous research in general in this field has yet to examine the writing proficiency level with which students enter university and the level they have progressed to within one year of commencing university study. There is also a lack of a standard framework in Fiji that can be employed in order to measure and evaluate proficiency level of students (Goundar, 2023b). Thus, this study used the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) writing language guidelines. The CEFR is one of the most comprehensive frameworks for language evaluation around the world and it has been adopted by language testing organisations worldwide (Goundar, 2023a; Taylor & Jones, 2006, p. 1). Language tests such as Cambridge ESOL, International Legal English Certificate (ILEC), Asset Languages and IELTS (Taylor & Jones, 2006) are aligned to the CEFR framework. Syllabus designers or language test providers are inclined to align their exam design to CEFR due to its transparency and coherence (Taylor & Jones, 2006). The CEFR has also been applied to several European languages. Therefore, even though the CEFR may not be perfect, it is probably one of the most comprehensive frameworks for language evaluation currently around. In addition, the global adoption of the CEFR framework in academic language testing assessments made it the ideal choice for this study. From the time it was introduced in 2001, researchers have yet to apply the CEFR to the unique sociolinguistic context of the South Pacific. Hence, this study will also be gauging the suitability of the CEFR itself for the intensely multilingual (or plurilingual) South Pacific context.

Hence, using CEFR as the metric, this study evaluated academic English written proficiency levels of a cohort of first year undergraduate students at the beginning of the university program and at the end of the first year of study. This provided insight into what are the differences as well as achievements in writing proficiency of undergraduate students in their first year of the three-year university program. Thus, the analysis of this study provides insights into whether the university students in question are on the appropriate path to completing their degree with adequate academic English language proficiency. In addition, results of the language test can be used to identify those students requiring extra support in written language skills.

Methodology

This study used quantitative research design in collecting and analysing data. The fieldwork component of this study comprised of academic English language tests with 120 participants with first year undergraduate university students in Fiji, with a view to evaluate their writing skills and make recommendations for policy makers. To this end, the fieldwork involved administering academic

English language tests, using writing interventions and using these to evaluate the students. Examples of writing tasks is provided in the preceding sections. Also, important to note is that there were no other influences on the students' development such as additional English classes outside of school, home tutoring or remedial classes at the university. The writing intervention tasks and feedback were the only medium in developing students' writing skills.

The study used academic language tests and, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe, 2009) to highlight the proficiency levels. The CEFR offers a variety of writing scales which provide the "opportunity for a common standard" (Kantarcioglu & Papageorgiou, 2012, pp. 86-87). Since, its introduction in 2001, the CEFR has yet to be applied to the unique soci-olinguistic context of the South Pacific. Therefore, apart from gauging the student's preparedness for university study and work life, I was also gauging the suitability of the CEFR itself for the intensely multilingual (or plurilingual) South Pacific context.

Sampling

The study took place at a university in Fiji. The first-year enrolment number was 400 students. 30% of the population was used as a sample, amounting to 120 students at the beginning of the first year and 120 at the end of their first year of university program. The average age of the students was between 18 to 42 years. These students were English L2 speakers but some use English as the home language too. The students participated on a voluntary basis through advertisements pasted around the campus as well as email invitations for participation. The development of the same group was tracked throughout the span of this longitudinal project, from May 2021 to February 2022. The age breakdown of the 67 females and 53 males who took the academic English language tests shown in Table 1:

Data Collection

The participants were required to sit two academic English language writing tests, one at the beginning of their first year and one at the end of the first year. This research was carried out as a longitudinal

Table 1 *Number and gender of participants*

Age	Males	Females	Total
18	8	25	33
19	31	24	55
20	7	9	16
21	1	3	4
22	2	-	2
24	-	2	2
30	1	1	2
32	1	-	1
36	-	1	1
37	1	-	1
38	-	1	1
41	1	-	1
42	-	1	1
	53	67	120

study by administrating a writing test in the second week of the first year (beginning) of their university program, followed by a second test at the end of their first year, namely, in the final week of classes in semester two of the year. The test was conducted at the beginning and at the end of their first year which lasted 1 hour. The writing tasks were not part of students' coursework, but part of the research that was explained to the participants in the consent forms and in the flyers. The students were keen to participate in the project. For all of them, the goal was to work on their academic English writing skills. There were three writing interventions and feedback was given throughout the yearlong study.

Tasks in the writing intervention involved students to write and submit to the researcher in their leisure time. I monitored the students during their leisure time when they did the writing tasks. The researcher provided feedback on each of the three interventions individually to the cohort after assessing them throughout the year. Feedback involved highlighting nonstandard forms of writing style or grammar, discussing ways of improving the writing pieces and suggesting resources on academic writing. To maintain anonymity, the test contained ID numbers of the students which eliminated factors of revealing their identity.

Writing Intervention Tasks

During the one-year longitudinal study, three writing interventions were administered: paragraph writing tasks, summary writing and academic essay writing tasks. In the first stage, students were given the language test, and their performance was evaluated using the CEFR to ascertain language abilities and levels of English language proficiency skills. The writing interventions then became the second stage of the project. The aim of Stage 2 was to improve the writing skills of students through various writing tasks. In the third stage, the second language test and CEFR took place to evaluate if the writing interventions were successful or not. Finally, stage 4 was an overall evaluation of the first three stages to draw insights that became part of conclusions and recommendations to inform policies on addressing medium of instruction and epistemic access at the undergraduate level of study.

Selected examples of writing intervention tasks include:

1. Paragraph writing: In a paragraph of 120–150 words, explain why reading critically is important at the university level.
2. Academic essay writing: using the reading prompt, in 250–350 words discuss what young people can do to reduce the problem of littering in the community.

Data Analysis

The researcher compared the writing proficiency level of first year university students using the *Common European Framework of Reference for Language* (Council of Europe, 2009) writing-specific aspects. After assessing the academic language test results at the beginning of the first year, data was classified into the different proficiency levels. The CEFR has a total of six levels as indicated in Table 2 below for the written language guidelines:

Findings and Discussion

The findings from the CEFR, first Academic English language writing test administered at the beginning of the year and the second Academic English language writing test administered at the end of the year are categorised into themes.

**Table 2** *Common European Framework of Reference for Overall Written Language Proficiency levels*

Language Proficiency Levels		Descriptors
C2: Mastery	Proficient user	Can write clear, smoothly flowing, complex texts in an appropriate and effective style and a logical structure which helps the reader to find significant points
C1: Effective Operational Proficiency		Can write clear, well-structured texts of complex subjects, underlining the relevant salient issues, expanding and supporting points of view at some length with subsidiary points, reasons and relevant examples, and rounding off with an appropriate conclusion
B2: Vantage	Independent user	Can write clear, detailed texts on a variety of subjects related to their field of interest, synthesising and evaluating information and arguments from a number of sources.
B1: Threshold		Can write straightforward connected texts on a range of familiar subjects within their field of interest, by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence.
A2: Waystage	Basic User	Can write a series of simple phrases and sentences linked with simple connectors like 'and', 'but' and 'because'
A1: Breakthrough		Can write simple isolated phrases and sentences

Note. Adapted from "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: learning, teaching, assessment," by Council of Europe, 2001, *Council for Cultural Co-operation. Education Committee. Modern Languages Division.* Copyright 2001 by Cambridge University Press.

Application and Assessment of the CEFR

The first-year undergraduate students sat the Academic English writing test at the beginning of the year and their writing was assessed through the CEFR. A total of 120 students participated in this study as explained earlier. Figure 1 shows the CEFR levels of the cohort at the beginning of the year after they took the first Academic English writing test. The gender divide data on the CEFR levels in Test One and Two is presented in Table 3. The CEFR has six levels (see Table 2) ranging from A1 to C2. Those who have level A1 and A2 are classified as Basic User, those who have B1 and B2 are categorised as Independent user, and those that have C1 and C2 are considered Proficient users. The findings from the first test revealed that from the six CEFR levels, 120 students attained only three of the levels that is A1, A2, and B1. At the beginning of the year, 62 students had A1 level. From Figure 1, the implication is that more than 50% of the students who entered university were at the basic users' level in English language writing. Since this study is the first to examine the Academic English writing levels of undergraduate students in Fiji, the empirical data in Figure 1 point to the need for rigorous and systematic research into English-language instruction at the high school level in Fiji, and what factors are impeding students from achieving suitable levels of written English proficiency.

The second largest cohort was of the students at the A2 level, at which one is still classified as a basic user. A total of 49 participants achieved the A2. From the 120 students, 9 students were able to attain the B1 level at the beginning of the year. The findings from Figure 1 illustrate that the majority of the students who entered the university are classified as basic users at levels A1 or A2. The CEFR was effective in this study to gauge the different levels of first year undergraduate students as it explained the users' capabilities at a particular level when they started their higher education. At the end of the students one-year program, as depicted in Figure 2, from the 120 students, a total of 90 students attained B2 level that is of independent user.
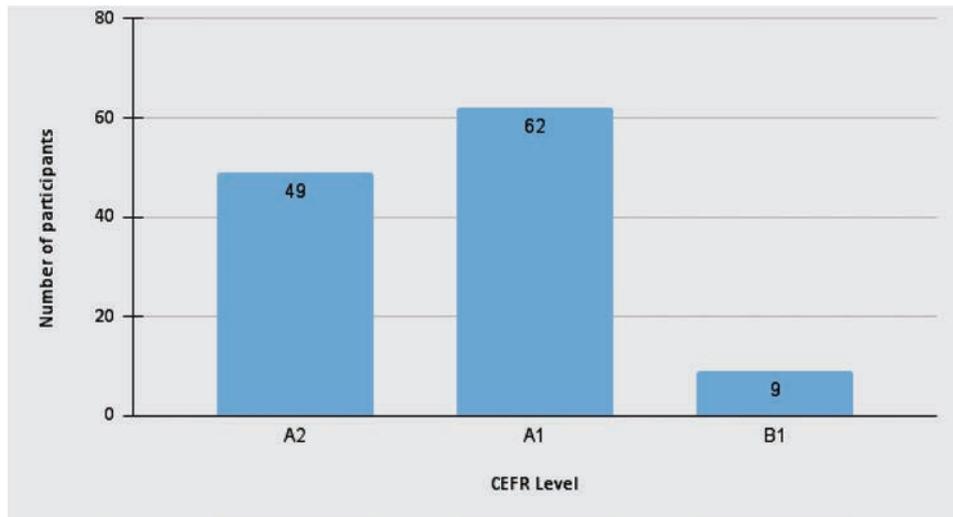
Figure 1 *CEFR Level of Students at the Beginning of Year*.
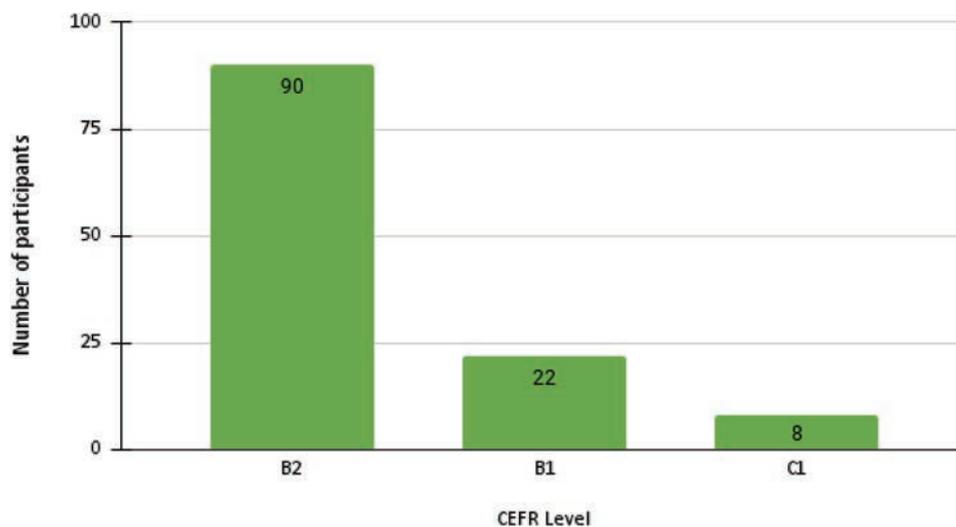
Figure 2 *CEFR Level of Students at the End of Year*.

A significant revelation from the data illustrates that 8 students were able to achieve C1 level which is categorised – as "proficient user." Only 18% of the participants were at B1 level; however, these students displayed progress from their earlier levels in Test One as shown in Table 3. The findings of this study provide evidence that the university students in question are on the appropriate path to completing their degree with adequate academic English language proficiency.

In elevating the individual progress of students, it can be observed from Table 3 that from the 62 students who were at the A1 level at the end beginning of the year progressed to levels B1 and B2. Out of 62, 21 moved to B1 where 41 moved to B2. Further, 49 students from A2 level also progressed as 44 of these students had B2 and another 5 made substantial improvement by moving up to C1 level. This progress is noteworthy as they have moved three levels up during the one-year study thanks to the writing-related interventions.

There were 9 students—8% who did not make a major progress. For instance, of these 9 students who had B1 level, 6 (5%) moved to the next level – B2. On the contrary, 3 out of these 9 moved to C1 level—3% of the students who had B1 level at the beginning of the year. This individual progress is

a crucial find as it illustrates that the support systems provided in this study will enhance the smooth transition of multilingual students from high school through university and into the workforce. Table 4 provides the gender divide data of the 120 participants CEFR level at the beginning of the year—Test One and the level at the end of the year—Test Two.

At the beginning of the year, there was almost an equal divide of students who achieved the A1 level, 27% females and 25% males were recorded at this level. At the A2 level, more females—25% attained this level compared to males at 16%. It was observed that females were higher in number than the males at the B1 level, the females were 4% whereas the males recorded 3%. From the data of Test Two, it can be concluded that the females progressed better by the end of the year when compared to the males. Female students at B2 level were 41% while males were 34% at the same level. However, at the C1 there was equal number of males and females, both had 3%. This attests the writing inventions supported their progress. The support systems included the writing inventions administered throughout the year and the feedback on each of the writing tasks.

Academic English Writing Conventions

Participants in test one who took the test at the beginning of their first year of university displayed weaknesses in both punctuation and spelling. In fact, these were the major weakness in students'

Table 3 *Individual Progress of Students from Beginning of the Year to End of the Year*

	Test One			Test Two	
CEFR Levels	Number of Students	Percentage	CEFR Levels	Number of Students	Percentage
A1	62	51%	B1	22	18%
			B2	40	33%
A2	49	41%	B2	44	37%
			C1	5	4%
B1	9	8%	B2	6	5%
			C1	3	3%
	120	**100%**		**120**	**100%**

Table 4 *Gender Divide Data on CEFR Levels*

Gender		Test 1			Test 2	
	CEFR Level	Number of Students	Percentage	CEFR Level	Number of Students	Percentage
Female	A1	32	27%	B1	14	12%
	A2	30	25%	B2	49	41%
	B1	5	4%	C1	4	3%
Female Total		67	56%		67	56%
Male	A1	30	25%	B1	8	7%
	A2	19	16%	B2	41	34%
	B1	4	3%	C1	4	3%
Male Total		53	44%		53	44%
Total	**120**		**100%**		**120**	**100%**
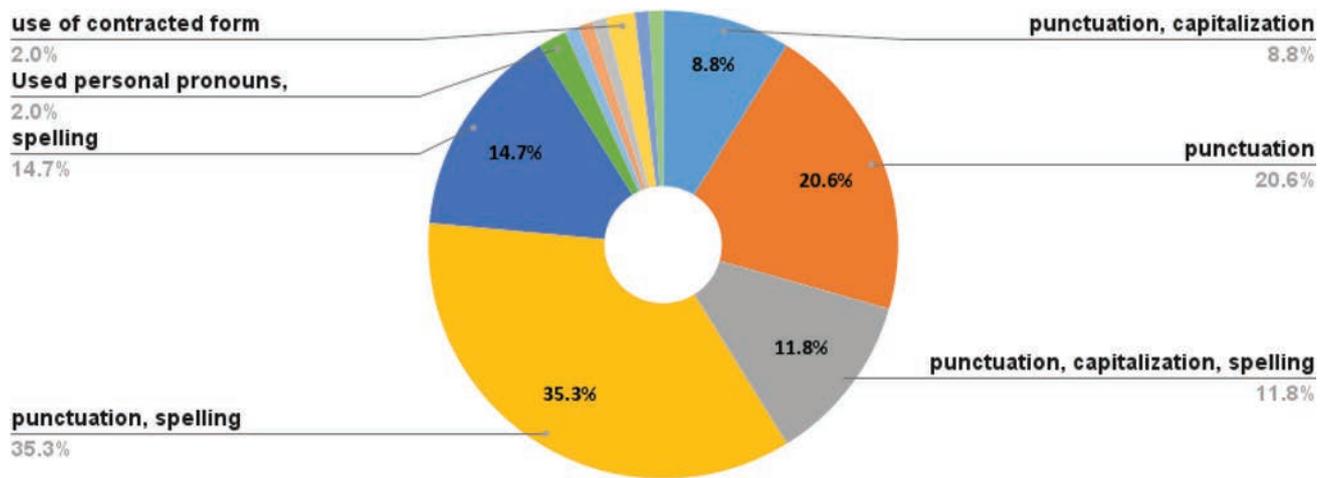
Figure 3 *Writing Style of Students at the Beginning of the Year.*

writing style, with more than 35% of the sample finding punctuation and spelling difficult as illustrated in Figure 3. Twenty percent of the sampled students had difficulties primarily with punctuation. Overall, the numbers revealed that 55% of undergraduate students in their first year were weak in punctuation. Another key finding in the students' writing skills was difficulties with spelling, at almost 15% of the sample. In all, 12% of the students were weak in three areas—punctuation, capitalisation, and spelling.

The following examples taken from the students' tests illustrate the findings from Figure 3:

Atypical use of Punctuation

1. … the hours were ***excellent whereas*** less… [there should be a comma after excellent]
2. ***Nowadays*** the old generation…… [comma after nowadays]
3. ... that may arise if life is taken for ***granted*** or simply they see…. [there should be period after granted and a new sentence should start after that as the idea drags on]
4. …. was done, ***see them now***, they are well mannered. [two separate sentences needed here]

Nonstandard Spellings

1. excelent [excellent]
2. parasytes [parasite]
3. neglegible [negligible]
4. writting [writing]
5. ecademic [academic]

Considering the gender divide data in Table 5 for writing styles of students at the beginning of the year, it can be stated that males are weaker than females in punctuation and spelling. The females had 32% of participants in this category whereas the males had 38%. On the contrary, females—11% need more help than males—6% with capitalisation and spelling. Interestingly, both genders were clear with word order in sentence as 2% was recorded for each. It should also be noted that punctuation is a concern for females as they had 27% which was much higher than males at 15%.

There were some notable improvements that the students made in their writing styles at the end of the year. Participants who are weak in both punctuation and spelling decreased from 35% at the beginning

Table 5 *Gender Divide Data on Writing Style at the Beginning of the Year*

Writing Style at the Beginning of the Year	Gender			
	Female		Male	
	Number of Participants	Percentage	Number of Participants	Percentage
capitalisation, spelling			1	2%
punctuation	15	27%	7	15%
punctuation, capitalisation	6	11%	3	6%
punctuation, capitalisation, spelling	4	7%	8	17%
punctuation, spelling	18	32%	18	38%
punctuation, use of contracted form			1	2%
spelling	7	13%	8	17%
use of contracted form	2	4%		
Used personal pronouns	1	2%		
Used personal pronouns, punctuation	2	4%		
word order			1	2%
word order, punctuation, spelling	1	2%		
Total	**56**	**100%**	**47**	**100%**
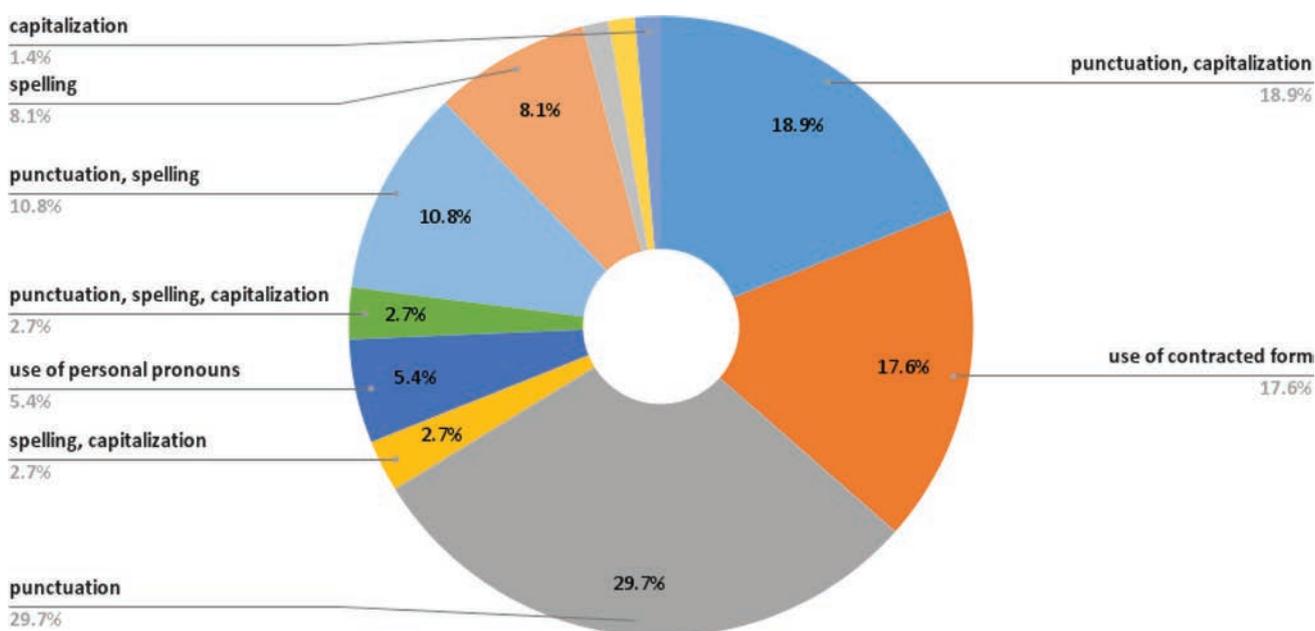
Figure 4 *Writing Style of Students at the End of the Year.*

of the year to 11%. On the contrary, there was a slight increase in students who were only weak in punctuation. In test one the statistics showed 20% but at the end of the year in test two, it moved up to 29%. Therefore, more writing tasks and feedback needs to be provided to these students.

As illustrated in Figure 4, students also improved on their spelling from the beginning of the year. For instance, in test one 15% of the participants were weak in spelling, by the end of the year it dropped

Table 6 *Gender Divide Data on Writing Style at the End of the Year*

Writing Style at the End of the Year	Gender			
	Female		Male	
	Number of Participants	Percentage	Number of Participants	Percentage
capitalisation	1	3%	1	2%
capitalisation, spelling	1	3%	2	4%
punctuation	6	17%	16	40%
punctuation, capitalisation	8	23%	6	15%
punctuation, spelling	5	14%	3	8%
punctuation, spelling, capitalisation	1	3%	1	2%
spelling	3	8%	3	8%
spelling, use of contracted form	1	3%		
use of contracted form	8	23%	5	13%
use of personal pronouns	1	3%	3	8%
Total	**35**	**100%**	**40**	**100%**

by almost half to 8%. Whereas the use of contracted forms increased to 17%. On the contrary, a drastic improvement in the students writing style was observed in punctuation, spelling and capitalisation. The students who were weak in these areas at the beginning of the year was 12% which at the end the year decreased significantly to 2.7%. In examining the gender divide data—Table 6, it is clear that the females improved more on punctuation compared to the males. Females recorded 17% while males had 40% in punctuation.

With the use of contract forms in academic writing, the females still need to improve on this as they had 23% in this category while the males stood at 15%. Females used less personal pronouns in academic writing—3% when compared to males who used it frequently—8%. The data from Tables 5 and 6 and Figures 3 and 4 indicate that writing style of undergraduate students improved in the one-year period. However, there are still components that need individualised attention such as the use of contracted forms and personal pronouns.

Omission from Content

In evaluating content of the writings, test one at the beginning of the year established that students had omitted key elements from their sentences which affected coherence. Four major areas outlined in Figure 5 are the syntactic subjects and word classes such as prepositions, verbs, and auxiliaries. After the students sat the test at the beginning of the year, 33% missed out on using verbs in some of their sentences, whereas 19% missed out on prepositions from their sentences. Data showed that 19% of the participants omitted the use of be verb and 15% did not include subject of their statements.

Some of the examples from Figure 5 are stated below:

1. In order for them to have a bright **[….]**, they must think of what they are…. [omission of object]
2. Library simply **[…]** a room or set of rooms where books and other materials…… [omission copula—be verb]
3. Finally, **[…]** the library opening hours male members had 72%...... [omission of adverbial]
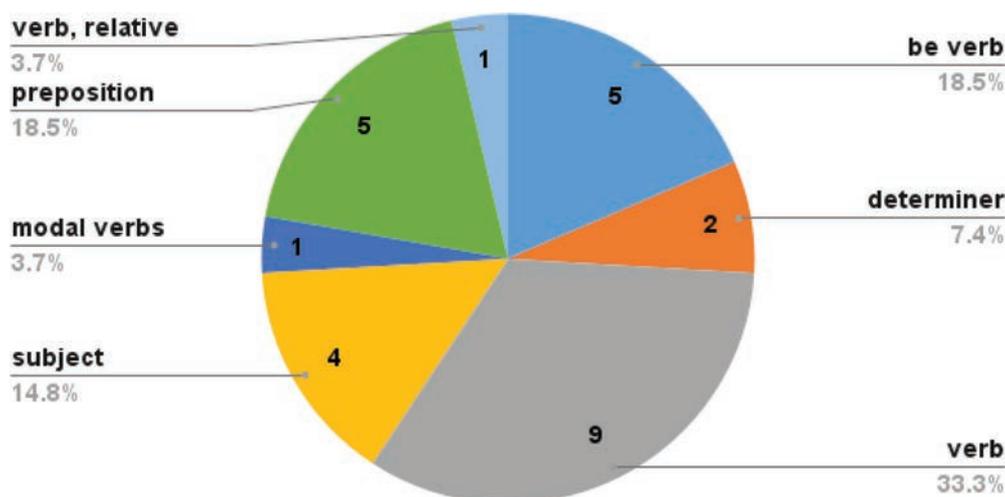
Figure 5 *Types of Omission from Content in Test One.*

4. Compared to the previous generation, they **[…]** not skilful…. [omission of copula—be verb]
5. The overall **[….]** of the survey, females are the ones that are improving…. [omission of subject]

The gender divide data on omission at the beginning of the year indicates that males are more conscious of using modal verbs and determiners compared to females. As observed from Table 7, females recorded 6% in modal verbs and 14% with determiners while the males did not have any omission in these categories. The females also had more omission with prepositions—27% than males—8%. On the other hand, more males omitted using verbs in their sentences compared to females. The males had 42% in comparison with females—27%. Another key observation from the gender divide data was that males omitted the subject of their sentences more than their counterparts. Females recorded 6% omission with subject of the sentences while the males had 25%.

A considerable improvement was shown at the end of the year as the number of omission areas were reduced from the students' writings. As illustrated in Figure 6, in Test Two the students only made omission in three areas which were prepositions, determiners and verbs compared to seven areas in Test One.

As indicated in Figure 6, only one student made verb omissions whereas in Test One 9 students made omissions in this area. According to Table 8, a higher number of females had omission with preposition than males. The females were at 66% in comparisons to males—50%. For determiner, males were slightly higher than females, they had 50% whereas females had 17%. However, overall, both genders improved on omission by the end of the year.

It demonstrates that the writing tasks given throughout the year had an impact on the content of the students. Finally, the result showed that 6 students missed out on prepositions in their writings which implies that the importance of using prepositions in sentences still needs to be emphasised.

Lexical Categories

By analysing the writings from Test One, the data revealed that a few lexical categories or word classes are recurring. The participants were confused about which particular word classes were suitable in a

Table 7 *Gender Divide Data on Omission at the Beginning of the Year*

Omission at the Beginning of the Year	Gender			
	Female		Male	
	Number of Participants	Percentage	Number of Participants	Percentage
modal verbs	1	6%		
verb, relative pronoun	1	6%		
determiner	2	14%		
subject	1	6%	3	25%
be verb	2	14%	3	25%
preposition	4	27%	1	8%
verb	4	27%	5	42%
Total	**15**	**100%**	**12**	**100%**
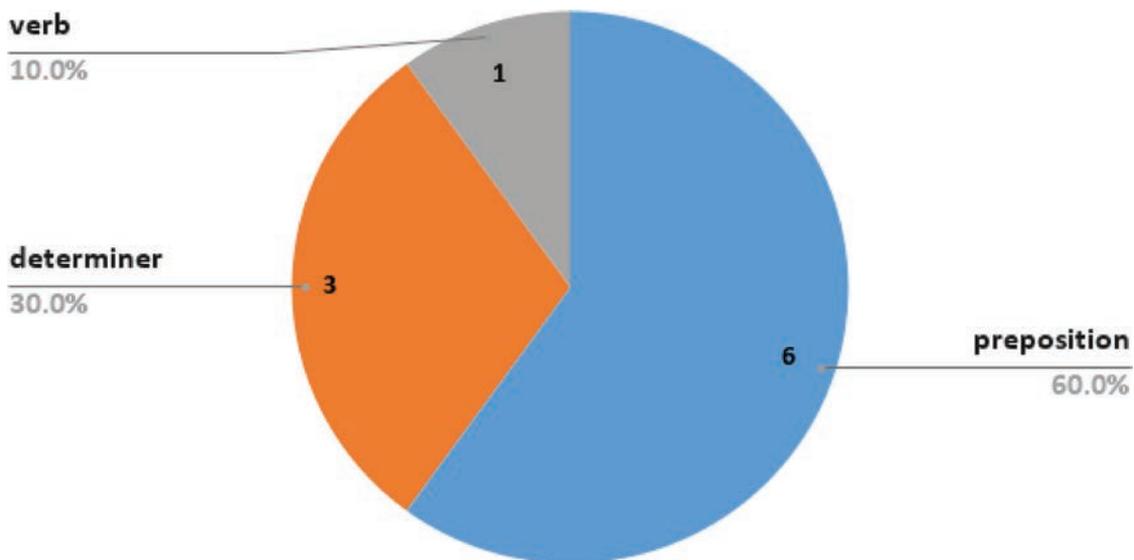
Figure 6 *Types of Omission from Content in Test Two.*

Table 8 *Gender Divide Data on Omission at the End of the Year*

| Omission at the End of the Year	Gender			
	Female		Male	
	Number of Participants	Percentage	Number of Participants	Percentage
determiner	1	17%	2	50%
preposition	4	66%	2	50%
verb	1	17%		
Total	**6**	**100%**	**4**	**100%**

sentence. This confusion manifested mainly as the unwarranted use of prepositions, verb forms and determiners recurring frequently in the students' writings. Prepositions was the highest lexical category that students had a problem with. In total 28 out of 82 students which is 34% of the population were unable to use prepositions correctly or used them redundantly. Figure 7 shows that 9% of the students were confused with either using determiners and prepositions or using prepositions and verb forms appropriately. Another 10%, that is 8 students from 82 did not use verb forms properly. Whereas another 9% of the population did not use determiners correctly in their writings. Figure 7 shows the distribution of various lexical categories and the number of participants who had confusion with each or multiple categories.

These are some examples of the different atypical use of lexical categories from Test One:

1. For example, when travelling on the bus, if **a** older person does not get a seat………
   [determiner: an]
2. … in the Fiji library clearly show the progress of the facilities **on** the library. [preposition:
   in]
3. To begin with, our world **have became** more advanced and modernised by the influence
   of white people. [verb form: has become]
4. Moreover, young people **at** nowadays are having issues because they are not following….
   [preposition: needs to be omitted]
5. In **[….]** good section, again females got more percentage than male members. [article:
   the]

In Test One, the gender divide data in Table 9 revealed that both genders had difficulty with prepositions. There was equal divide between the two genders, males had 35%, whereas females had 34% in the preposition category. The males were less confused about using determiner than the females. In this category, males were 5% compared to 12% of females. With verb forms, males seemed to be aware of which form to use as they were 8% while 13% of females were confused with which verb form to use.

Considerable changes can be observed in the students' performance at the end of the year. As Figure 7 indicates, 82 students were having difficulty with using the appropriate lexical category in their sentences.
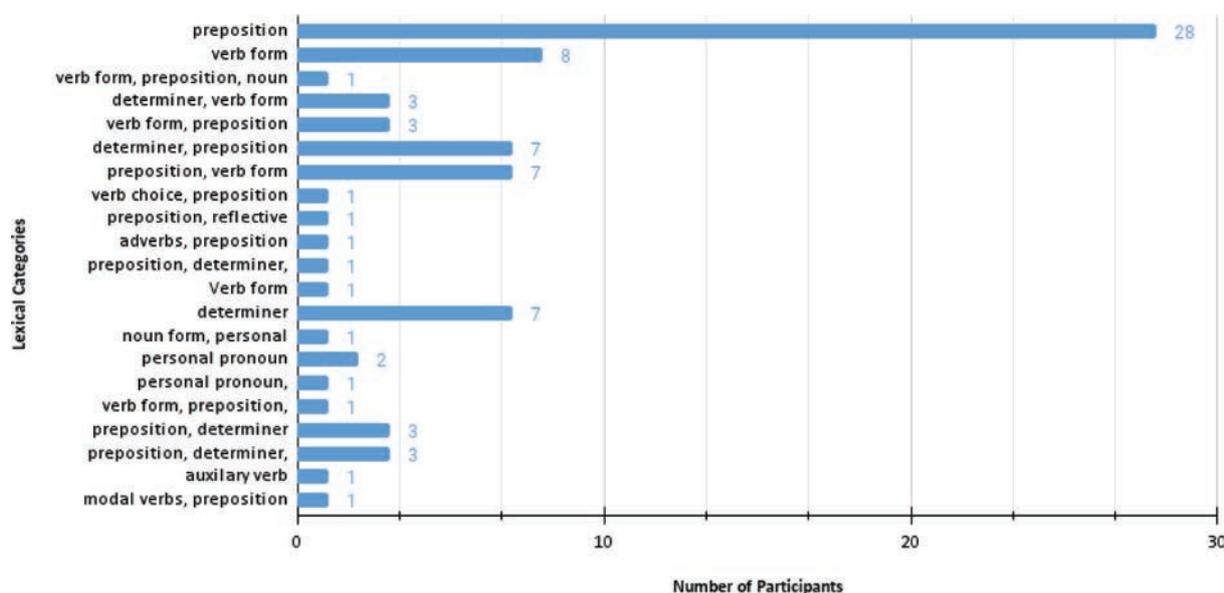

Figure 7 *Frequently Confused Lexical Categories in Test One*.

However, at the end of the year this figure dropped to 37 students in total. Further, at the beginning of the year there were 21 lexical categories that recorded individual students' atypical use but at the end of the year there were seven categories. Along with these achievements, the number of students who found prepositions confusing also declined. From 28 students, only 13 students had difficulty using prepositions in their sentences.

Figure 8 provides a breakdown of the different lexical categories that occurred in Test Two.

Table 9 *Gender Divide Data on Frequently Confused Lexical Categories in Test One*

Frequently Confused Lexical Categories in Test One	Gender			
	Female		Male	
	Number of Participants	Percentage	Number of Participants	Percentage
adverbs, preposition			1	3%
auxiliary verb			1	3%
determiner	5	12%	2	5%
determiner, preposition	6	13%	4	11%
determiner, verb form	1	2%	2	5%
modal verbs, preposition	1	2%		
noun form, personal pronoun	1	2%		
personal pronoun			2	5%
personal pronoun, preposition	1	2%		
preposition	15	34%	13	35%
preposition, determiner, verb choice	1	2%		
preposition, determiner, verb form	1	2%	3	8%
preposition, reflective pronouns	1	2%		
preposition, verb form	5	12%	5	14%
verb choice, preposition			1	3%
verb form	6	13%	3	8%
verb form, preposition, noun form	1	2%		
Total	**45**	**100%**	**37**	**100%**
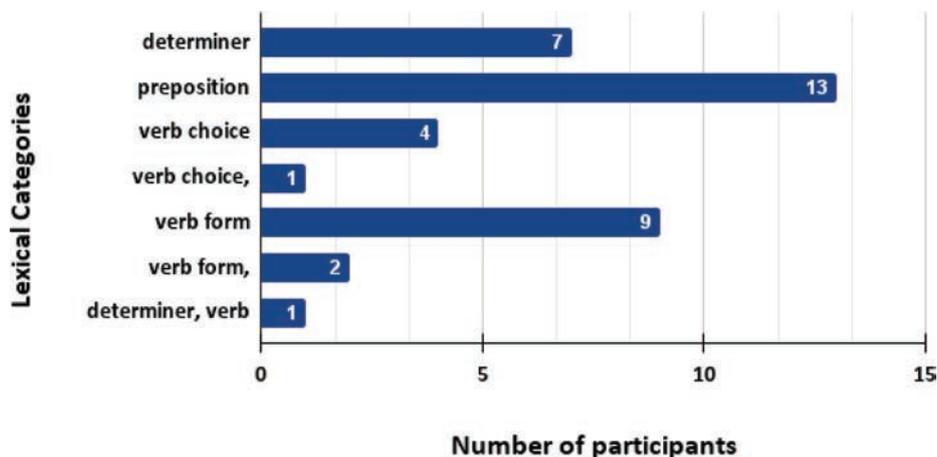
Figure 8 *Frequently Confused Lexical Categories in Test Two.*

Table 10 *Gender Divide Data on Frequently Confused Lexical Categories in Test Two*

Frequently Confused lexical Categories in Test Two	Gender			
	Female		Male	
	Number of Participants	Percentage	Number of Participants	Percentage
determiner	3	13%	4	29%
preposition	7	30%	6	43%
verb choice	4	17%		
verb choice, preposition	1	4%		
verb form	6	27%	3	21%
verb form, determiner	2	9%	1	7%
Total	**23**	**100%**	**14**	**100%**

After sitting Test Two at the end of the year, the gender divide data in Table 10 indicated that males had improved on verb choice as no data was recorded. However, females were 17% in this category. Males need to work on determiners as they were 29% in comparison to 13% females. On the same note, females require more practice with the use of verb forms as they had 27% while males were 21%. Overall, males dominated progress in confusion with lexical category usage as there were 14 males compared to 23 females at the end of the year.

Thus, universities need to make provisions in their Academic English curriculum to prioritise the teaching of lexical categories, its usage and functions in a sentence. Detailed explanation and tasks should be assigned to using prepositions, verbs and determiners in writings for first-year university students.

Oversight of Grammar Rules

The major challenge for first-year undergraduate students is maintaining the subject-verb agreement rule. The data from Test One disclosed that 90 out of 120 students were unable to follow the subject-verb agreement rule. Two pivotal points can be made using the data in Figure 9. The findings indicate that either English as a second language for the first-year student is a factor contributing to this figure, that is 75% of students. It could also be that a lack of emphasis on English language grammar rules in Fijian secondary schools is leading to this data. Apart from the rules regarding subject-verb agreement, some students were not able to distinguish the rule for most/many, much/more, which/so and how/what.

The following are some examples from Figure 9 that indicate the infelicitous usage of grammar rules students had in their writings:

1. Male members ***has*** 72% while female members ***has*** 44% only. [subject-verb agreement]
2. This ***mean*** that female is more favourable than male in the range of service. [subject-verb agreement]
3. …… the relationship between old and young people is that old people focused more on their world and study ***which*** they got good grades. [so]
4. The second case, ***technologies has*** been introduced and its been upgraded every now and then. [subject-verb agreement]
5. Furthermore, it ***impact*** mostly on the relationship between old and young ones. [subject-verb agreement]
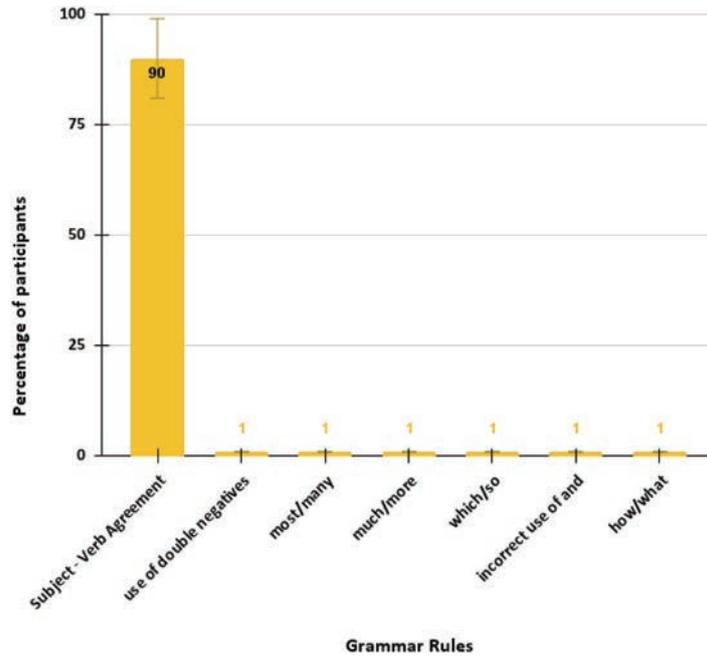
Figure 9 *Oversight of Grammar Rules at the Beginning of the Year.*

Table 11 *Gender Divide Data on Oversight of Grammar Rules at the Beginning of the Year*

Oversight of Grammar Rules at the Beginning of the Year	Gender			
	Female		Male	
	Number of Participants	Percentage	Number of Participants	Percentage
how/what	1	2%		
incorrect use of and	1	2%		
most/many			1	2%
much/more	1	2%		
subject—verb agreement	48	90%	42	98%
use of double negatives	1	2%		
which/so	1	2%		
Total	**53**	**100%**	**43**	**100%**

In comparing the gender divide data depicted in Table 11, subject—verb agreement is of concern for both genders. In this category, the females had 90% and the males had 98% at the beginning of the year. The data also indicates that females need to pay more attention to grammar rule than males as they had 2% with atypical use of how/what, much/more, use of double negatives and which/so. However, males did not record any students in these categories.

Compared to the beginning of the year, substantial improvement was noted with the grammar rules at the end of the year. As presented in Figure 10, only 49 students which is 41% of the total population used nonstandard subject-verb agreement rule.

From 90 students who had difficulty with subject-verb agreement at the beginning of the year, the figure when down to 49 which is 41% of the total population. There were 27 females and 22 males in this
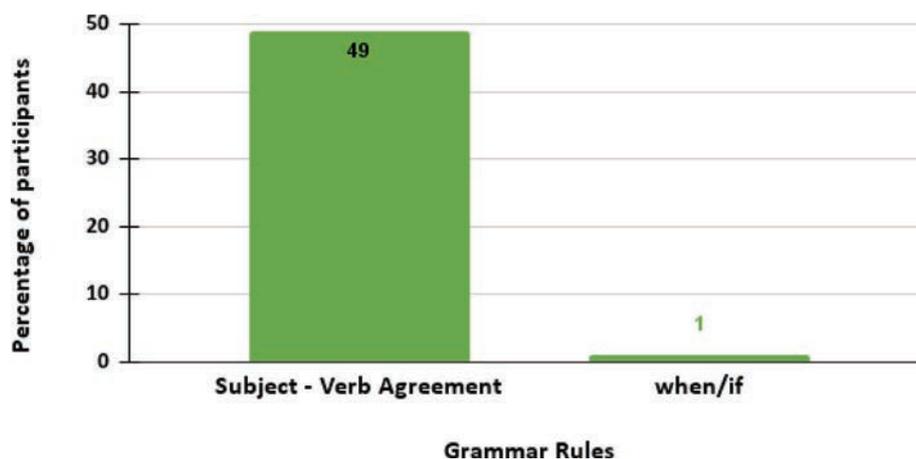
Figure 10 *Oversight of Grammar Rules at the End of the Year.*

Table 12 *Gender Divide Data on Oversight of Grammar Rules at the End of the Year*

Oversight of Grammar Rules at the End of the Year	*Gender*			
	Female		**Male**	
	Number of Participants	**Percentage**	**Number of Participants**	**Percentage**
subject—verb agreement	27	96%	22	100%
when/if	1	4%		
Total	**28**	**100%**	**22**	**100%**

category as illustrated in Table 12. It can be inferred from the gender divide data that both males and females, need to improve on learning the rules of subject—verb agreement in sentences.

Finally, even though a significant improvement was made in students' grammatical rules especially with the use of subject-verb agreements in sentences, more writing tasks need to be incorporated in the Academic English courses. Also, secondary schools in Fiji and more importantly the Ministry of Education can relook at the English language curriculum to implement more coverage of subject-verb agreement exercises.

Conclusion

This paper discussed on the application of the CEFR to the study of undergraduate students writing skills in order to gauge its relevance and usefulness in a non-European multilingual context. It presented the findings and discussion from Academic English writing tests sat by first year undergraduate students, and it analysed the level of difference in writing proficiency level at the beginning of the first year of study and at the end of the first-year program of undergraduate students in order to contribute towards the amelioration of academic language proficiency in Fiji. Further, this paper presented the gender divide data, provided students' information and data to gauge their likelihood of success in subsequent years at the university. In elevating the individual progress of students using the CEFR, it was

observed that from the 62 students who were at the A1 level at the end beginning of the year progressed to levels B1 and B2. Out of 62, 21 moved to B1 where 41 moved to B2. Further, 49 students from A2 level also progressed as 44 of these students had B2 and another 5 made substantial improvement by moving up to C1 level. The progress is noteworthy as they have moved three levels up during the one-year study thanks to the writing-related interventions. This implies that students will likely be successful in their subsequent years of study at the university. Policy makers ought to incorporate more writing tasks in their curriculum for the first-year university program to ensure that students have adequate practice in developing academic English writing proficiency.

The findings from the first Academic English language writing tests administered at the beginning of the year and the second Academic English language writing test administered at the end of the year there are still components that need individualised attention such as the use of contracted forms and personal pronouns. Overall females improved more than males on tense infelicitous at the end of the year as there were 12 females compared to 18 males in this category. Nevertheless, more emphasis needs to put in academic English courses on the use of tenses as indicated by the data of this study. It could also be that a lack of emphasis on English language grammar rules in Fijian secondary schools is leading to this data. In the lexical categories, the data points out that secondary students are not well versed with using prepositions. Thirty-four percent of the population were unable to use prepositions in their write up at the commencement of their undergraduate program. Further, 44% of the students were confused about using the verbs have/has in the sentences when they joined the university. On the same note, females require more practice with the use of verb forms as they had 27% while males were 21%. Although more writing tasks that relate to word class needs to be incorporated in secondary schools as well as first year Academic English courses.

Another key conclusion that can be drawn from the results is that universities need to make provisions in their Academic English curriculum to prioritise the teaching of lexical categories, its usage and functions in a sentence. Detailed explanation and tasks should be assigned to using prepositions, verbs, and determiners in writings for first-year university students. Subsequently, with oversight of grammar rules category, the findings illustrated that 90 first year undergraduate students were unable to follow subject-verb agreement rule. In this category, the females had 90% and the males had 98% at the beginning of the year. A considerable amount of practice should be put in place in secondary schools to combat this problem. At the end of their first year of study, this figure went down to 49 from 90 students who had difficulty with subject-verb agreement at the beginning of the year, 41% of the total population. This is laudable but more writing tasks related to grammar rules need to be implemented in both secondary schools and academic English language courses in the university.

To sum up, higher education institutions can adapt these writing tasks in their first year Academic English course as students find it helpful and are able to build their academic English writing skills. These skills are crucial for their progression in the three-year university program.

Funding

Ethical Approval

Prior to data collection, Human Research Ethics clearance was obtained from the University of New England Research Ethics Committee (Approval number: HE21-086) to satisfy any possibility of ethical issues such as confidentiality of information, dissemination of personal details as well as deceiving of the participants. Further, Human Research Ethics approval was also obtained from Fiji National University, approval number CHRS 7-20.

Availability of Data and Materials

Not applicable

References

Bodis, A. (2023). Gatekeeping v. marketing: English language proficiency as a university admission requirement in Australia. *Higher Education Research & Development, 42*(7), 1579–1592. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2023.2174082

Council of Europe. (2009). *Relating to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR): A manual*. Language Policy Division. https://biblio.ugent.be/publication/4270320/file/4270333

Cummins, J. (2000). *Language, power, and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire*. Multilingual Matters.

Fiji Government. (2018). *Fiji Bureau of Statistics Releases 2017 Census Results*. https://www.fiji.gov.fj/Media-Centre/News/Fiji-Bureau-of-Statistics-Releases-2017-Census-Res

Goundar, P. R. (2019a). *Asian Social Science*, *15*(6), 96. https://doi.org/10.5539/ass.v15n6p96

Goundar, P. R. (2019b). Outlining the Language Policy and Planning (LPP) in Fiji Taking from Fiji Islands Education Commission Report of 2000. *English Language Teaching*, *12*(7), 61–67. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v12n7p61

Goundar, P. R. (2020). Bridging the gap for English language testing study in Fiji: proposing an evaluation of the writing proficiency level of pre-first year and post-first year undergraduate students. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, *11*(3), 351–358. https://doi.org/10.17507/jltr.1103.02

Goundar, P. R. (2023a). Application of grounded theory methodology using CEFR in the field of language testing. *Review of European Studies, 15*(1), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.5539/res.v15n1p1

Goundar, P. R. (2023b). *Writing skills for undergraduate students in Fiji: Tackling educational inequalities, facilitating epistemic access in Fiji:* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of New England].

Goundar, P. R., & Sharma, S. (2021). Pacific during the COVID-19 of Fiji and New Zealand. https://doi.org/10.5539/par.v11n1p1

Hopf, S. C., McDonagh, S. H., Wang, C., & McLeod, S. (2019). English language and literacy proficiency of students in an urban Fiji primary school. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, *32*(2), 223–238. https://doi.org/10.1080/07908318.2018.1541999

Kantarcioglu, E., & Papageorgiou, S. (2012). The Common European Framework of Reference. In C. A. Coombe (Ed.), *The Cambridge guide to second language assessment* (pp. 82–88). Cambridge University Press.

Mangubhai, F. (2002). Language-in-education policies in the South Pacific: Some possibilities for consideration. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, *23*(6), 490–511. https://doi.org/10.1080/01434630208666482

Mangubhai, F., & Mugler, F. (2003). The language situation in Fiji. *Current Issues in Language Planning*, *4*(3–4), 367–459. https://doi.org/10.1080/14664200308668058

Mangubhai, F., & Mugler, F. (2006). The language situation in Fiji. In *Language Planning and Policy in the Pacific* (pp. 22–113). Multilingual Matters. https://doi.org/10.21832/9781853599224

McNamara, T. (1998). Policy and social considerations in language assessment. *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, *18*, 304–319. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0267190500003603

Shameem, N. (2002). Classroom language use in a multilingual community: The Indo-Fijians in Fiji 1. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, *23*(3), 267–284. https://doi.org/10.1080/07256860216388

Shohamy, E. (2001). *The power of tests: A critical perspective on the uses of language tests*. Longman.

Shohamy, E. (2009). Language tests for immigrants: Why language? Why tests? Why immigrants? In G. Hogan-Brun., C. Mar-Molinero., & P. Stevenson (Eds.), *Discourses on language and integration: Critical perspectives on language testing regimes in Europe* (pp. 45–60). John Benjamins. https://doi.org/10.1075/dapsac.33.07sho

Shohamy, E., & McNamara, T. (2009). Language tests for citizenship, immigration, and asylum. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, *6*(1), 1–5. https://doi.org/10.1080/15434300802606440

Taylor, L., & Jones, N. (2006). Cambridge ESOL exams and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). *Research Notes*, *24*(1), 2–5. https://www.lsenglish.com.tw/pdf/cambridge_essol_exams_and_the_cefr.pdf

Tuinamuana, K. (2005). International policy convergence in higher education: An analysis from the periphery. In P. Ninnes & M. Hellsten (Eds.), *Internationalizing higher education* (pp. 199–214). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-3784-8_11