A 'Vingerklip' View on Academic Writing among Masters' Degree Students: A Case of Research Proposals in the University of Namibia

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Abstract

Studying towards a postgraduate qualification is viewed as a booster that may usher employees towards management positions. We have found common **mistakes in research proposals for masters' degree** students in a department at the University of Namibia. Our presentation shows the shortcomings in the research proposals of postgraduate students and proposes interventions to address the challenges. We collected qualitative data through the observations of nine (9) Master of Education research proposals, which were conveniently selected. Our analysis showed shortcomings in research proposals submitted to the Department of Education at the University of Namibia. Moreover, there is a need for the introduction of a writing unit at the university to supply writing services such as academic writing, proof reading and editing. We recommend that regular practical training is offered on effective academic writing to postgraduate students. We also show the need for postgraduate students to be oriented towards the plagiarism policy and referencing style of the university. This calls for the re-thinking of ways that enable effective postgraduate student supervision, which may address the quality of student research output.

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INTRODUCTION

A postgraduate qualification is considered as an enabler towards graduates' chances of ushering into management positions. To make this transition, students need to improve their academic writing abilities. Academic writing is an essential skill for every university student to improve their educational achievement at graduate level (Sajid & Siddiqui, 2015). Several authors have identified writing as one of the most sophisticated and demanding jobs among the four macro-skills (Alharthi, 2021 & El Khairat, 2021; Veramuthu, & Shah, 2020). Furthermore, Lasaten (2014) emphasised that academic writing is one of the most difficult language skills to acquire. It has been discovered that mistakes persist even among university students, despite having been exposed to language classes during their academic journey (Lasaten, 2014). In academic settings, students lack critical structures of academic writing skills, namely, the use of concord, discourse markers, coherent writing, summarising, paraphrasing, academic literacies, as well as citing and referencing. Regarding references and citations, (Mahmood, 2020) found that several English non-native speakers face the challenge of proper referencing and citations in academic writing. The non-native English-**speaking masters' degree** students who are compelled to present their research proposals in English struggle more with utilising English for academic purposes. Both native and non-native English speakers find academic writing challenging (Mahmood,2020; Pardede, Lustyantie & Iskandar, 2023)**. It is expected that masters' degree students make significant contributions to th**e advancement of knowledge through their writing (Nothnagel, 2016). The contribution of **a masters' degree candidate to advance knowledge may be jeopardised if the student is** unable to present findings effectively in writing.

Academic writing is an essential aspect of postgraduate studies, which most students do not adequately have (Ooi, Hamzah, & Thien, 2022; Çelik, 2020). There are several academic researchers who have zoomed into the common mistakes experienced in research proposals at undergraduate and postgraduate level (Magsi, 2023; Junaid & Santaria, 2022). The identified challenges are seen in countries where English is used as a Foreign or Second Language (Manchishi, Ndhlovu, & Mwanza, 2015; Mohammed & Abdalhussein, 2015). As a result, quality academic writing of research proposals is a needed foundational skill towards effective and successful completion of research reports.

Statement of the problem

Masters' students sometimes experience difficulties with academic writing, which is essential for expressing ideas and arguments in a clear, succinct, and logical manner. According to Sajid and Siddiqui (2015), academic writing proficiency is a precondition to **promote research work in universities in Pakistan. Despite students' understanding of** other domains, few researchers have enough competency in the areas of clear academic writing (Can & Walker, 2011; Caffarella & Barnett, 2000). Alter and Adkins (2006) discovered that most graduate students in the social sciences struggled to produce useful academic work, underscoring the need for increased expertise in the area. This may **prevent the masters' students, who find it awkward to adjust to the pace of postgraduate** academic writing. This underlines the need for clear, accurate, and logical writing in

academic careers. Postgraduate studies are seen as a boost that may propel people to upper-management roles. There is paucity of academic inquiries in Namibia, which investigates the common mistakes in graduate research proposal writing. Therefore, this paper s**eeks to present common mistakes found in the research proposal of masters'** students in a department within the school of education at the University of Namibia.

To address the problem statement, the study seeks to address the following research questions: (1) What are the common shortcomings in research proposal among **master's students? (2) What are the proposed interventions to address the identified** challenges?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study adopted a linguistic error analysis that was founded in the 1970s by Corder, whose analysis focused on speakers of English as a Second Language. English is used in Namibia as a second language, and it is also used by the University of Namibia students as a second language. Magsi et al., (2023) showed that using linguistic error analysis, a qualitative approach fits the context of this study. It helps both teachers and learners to find the challenges and devise potential solutions to them (Iqbal, et al., 2021). Magsi et al., (2023) and Iqbal et al., (2021) define error analysis as a process of assessing errors made by the second language learners and then supplying the errors systems to teachers and teacher educators. The analysis provides an opportunity for postgraduate candidates to learn when correcting the identified errors provided. In this context, the candidates get immediate and yet impactful feedback on the proposals that they sent through workshops. This analysis could help both candidates and their supervisory teams. The later gets the mistakes and learns how to address them while the supervisors and academic writing lecturers could devise strategies that address these common errors by postgraduate candidates. Therefore, the theory of linguistic error analysis underpins this study.

Academic writing is a formal language of Latin origin that refers to the language and related practices that people need to study and work in English at the intermediate level of higher education (Gillett, 2011). It is an essential part of thinking and learning in universities, especially given the demands of the 21st century (Johannessen, 2001), **and writing tasks are "critical tools for intellectual and social development"** (Bruning & Horn, 2000, p.30). Thus, Sajid and Siddiqui (2015) amplify that developing academic English language improves writing competency of novice writers in settings where English is not a native language.

Grammar, punctuations, spelling, and other errors

According to Numan Khazaal (2019), academic writing is characterised by evidence-based arguments, precise word choice, logical organisation, and impersonal tone. It has a central theme, each part is connected to the main argument, and there are no digressions or repetitions. Sajid and Siddiqui (2015) pointed out deficiencies in use of tenses, errors in use of pronouns, articles, and punctuations as some of the English **language deficiencies that constrain majority of students' ability in academic writing.** Moreover, academic writing includes any formal written work that is produced in an

academic setting. It requires a formal tone and makes use of correct punctuation, grammar, and spelling. In academic writing, students must keep their writing straightforward and clear. They are to avoid any information that is not necessary to support the text.

Academic writing refers to a style of expression that researchers use to define the intellectual boundaries of their disciplines and their specific areas of expertise. Characteristics of academic writing include a formal tone, use of the third person rather than first-person perspective (usually), a clear focus on the research problem under investigation, and precise word choice. Ramasamy and Aziz (2018) stated that academic writing is one of the complex skills that requires mastery of the proper use of capital letters, grammar, and punctuations, among others. Furthermore, Saravanan, Palanisamy, and Aziz (2021) found that some of the writing difficulties among students are on word choice, vocabulary, and grammar. Both Ramasamy and Aziz (2018) and Saravanan et al., (2021) agree that grammar is one of the challenges students face in academic writing.

Authoring a research proposal in English as a foreign or second language can be challenging. This position concurs with the findings of Magsi et al., (2023), who confirmed that the postgraduate Engineering students in Pakistan found the use of **English challenging. Moreover, the candidates' mother tongue affected their writing** ability. In recent years, there has been publications on common mistakes in research proposals and research reports for postgraduate candidates (Abdullah, 2023; Çelik, 2020; Junaid & Santaria, 2022; Magsi et al., 2023; Ooi et al., 2022; Shahsavar & Kourepaz 2020).

Mistakes are common in countries where English is a non-native language to many students (Rahmanu, Winarta, & Susyarini, 2020). Namibia was not colonised by the **English except for a part of Namibia called, Walvisbay and the Guano islands of Namibia's** coast, which were annexed by Great Britain in 1878 (Namhila & Hillebrecht, 2022). Namibia was colonised first by the Germans for about 31 years from 1884 to 1915 (United **Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), 2017), then by the South** African colonial regime system which took over Namibia until 21 March 1990 (Silvester, 2015). For most part of colonial occupation, Afrikaans has been a medium of instruction in schools. English is used at the University of Namibia by most non-native English-speaking students.

Concord, tenses and spelling errors remain a concern in the presentations of most non-native English-speaking students. A study by Abiatal (2018) revealed that these are some of the mistakes that are common among Namibian learners of English as Second Language. This study revealed that learners made errors mostly on concord, tense, and spelling. However, this study targeted learners in a secondary school unlike our study **which focused on postgraduate students who are enrolled for a master's degree program** at an institution of higher education in Namibia.

Academic writing is one of the most difficult tasks for postgraduate students (Ooi et al., 2022). Thus, improving English skills, especially academic writing skills at postgraduate level is a prerequisite for promoting and expanding research activities at universities. Traditional English courses based on general English do not meet the

academic writing needs of postgraduate students, as many postgraduate students lack writing skills, especially the academic writing skills needed to help research activities (Sajid & Siddiqui, 2015). Furthermore, a frequently repeated concern is that university students are unable to explain themselves clearly, correctly, and sensibly in writing. Writing difficulties among students can be caused by a variety of circumstances. One of the reasons for this difficulty might be the complexities of the writing talent itself (Guatam, 2019; Nasser, 2016; Patience, 2020). Byrnes (2002) proposed that certain psychological, linguistic, and cognitive variables make writing a difficult discourse medium for most individuals in both native and second languages.

Literature review is another complex skill where an author is expected to synthesise, critique, or explain a series of literature. According to Shahsavar and Kourepaz (2020) candidates find it challenging to appropriately write a literature review section. For instance, Li, Makarova, and Wang (2023) stressed that literature review in English can be a challenge to non-native English-speaking graduate students.

Writing of academic arguments

Numan Khazaal (2019) notes that most postgraduate ESL students have many difficulties in writing academic English and do not have enough experience in writing academic assignments. This is due to distinct levels of linguistic and educational background. Moreover, academic writing has long been neglected in universities due to traditional teaching methods that ignore this type of activity (Al-Badi, 2015). Therefore, doctoral students at universities are required to write academic papers such as critical reviews, paraphrase exercises, summaries, term reports, and dissertations in English during their **studies, and they develop a high level of academic writing ability (Rabab'ah, 2001). All** of these is stated to follow the prescribed guidelines provided as a guideline by the university offering the postgraduate program.

Academic referencing

In academics, citing references is vital. Giving credit where it is due adds legitimacy to a **remark and demonstrates a writer's commitment to incorporating the perspectives of others. According to Damarell et al. (2005), citations strengthen a writer's arg**ument, illustrate a point, and help readers locate source information. When referencing documents in a text or work, it is necessary to cite them. Flinders University (2002) emphasises the importance of accuracy and consistency in identifying and locating referenced items. Citing references, according to Bowden and Di Benedetto (2001), is a talent that must be acknowledged. Faculty and librarians should collaborate to teach students about reference citation styles in academia. Collaboration between faculty and librarians can help students evaluate and properly cite sources of information, particularly those available in electronic format.

Citing information from research articles, books, theses, and dissertations **demonstrates a scholar's familiarity with th**e field and establishes a solid foundation of **knowledge on which to argue, claim, and justify (Swales, 2014; Petrić & Harwood, 2013;** Samraj, 2013; Hewings, Lillis, & Vladimirou, 2010; Thompson & Ye, 1991). Changing the roles of citations is also connected **with academic performance (Petrić, 2007). Citations**

serve more than just providing context and attribution for an idea.   They also allow a writer to situate himself or herself inside earlier research (Petrić & Harwood, 2013; Samraj, 2013). This can be accomplished using citations, reporting verbs, modal verbs, and adverbs.

Mahmood (2020) found that several English non-native speakers face the challenge of proper referencing and citations in academic writing. Writers in an academic setup, interact with each other's texts, and so there are frequent references to ideas, thinking, or research of other authors' writings (Numan Khazaal, 2019).

METHOD

A qualitative research approach of observational nature was adopted in analysing the research proposals in a selected department in the University of Namibia. A qualitative research design was employed to make meaning out of the data. The authors shared the nine (9) master's students' research proposals that were received by a departmental committee for approval. These proposals were conveniently selected. One of the advantages of conveniently selecting the nine proposals is that they required no cost, and were readily available (Rahi, 2017). Andrade (2021) revealed that convenience sample can be conveniently accessed by the researchers. Each of the three researchers read the readily available research proposals separately, highlighted the mistakes that appeared in the research proposals for master's students in one of the departments in the University of Namibia and met to discuss and reconcile the identified common mistakes, arranging them into themes, then a content analysis followed.

The themes were arranged using priori (pre-existing themes) that were developed from the review of literature before examining the data (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). The pre-existing themes were taken from the reviewed literature. They are as follows: structural, referencing and grammar, spelling, punctuations were placed in one category. A content analysis was carried out for research proposals submitted to one of the Departments in the School of Education at the University of Namibia.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Nonadherence to proposal writing guidelines

There are guidelines that provide the structure and layout for writing research proposals in a graduate study setting. For instance, the University of Namibia's Higher Degree Policy provides structure that candidates should adhere to when writing a research proposal for a research report at postgraduate level. The researcher used the guidelines in the policy to assess whether the reviewed proposal adhered to the set guidelines. The researchers found errors related to the structure of the proposal. The proposals were read against the guidelines in the UNAM Higher Degree Policy.

The analysis revealed that some of the research titles go beyond the prescribed number of words. The UNAM Higher Degree Policy (2022) states that a maximum number of words for the research proposal title should not exceed 14 words. Despite the policy being explicit about the word count for a title, some candidates had research titles with words that amount to twenty. This diverts to what is prescribed in the policy. Thus,

it is expected that the candidates and their supervisor/s address this type of anomaly before submitting a proposal to the department for review.

Moreover, in Namibia, it is required that students write their academic work in British English. However, the research proposal and report cover page template provided by the Higher Degree Policy makes use of the word *Fulfillment*, an American English spelling, instead of fulfilment a British spelling. This leaves students in a state of confusion not knowing which English version to follow. Additionally, on the cover page of the proposal, the candidate is required to indicate whether the research proposal is in partial *fulfillment* or in *fulfillment* of the study. There seems to be a misunderstanding of the difference between partial fulfilment and in fulfilment as some students used these terms without considering their meanings. The phrase in partial fulfilment is when a candidate does coursework and a thesis to be awarded a qualification. While, in fulfilment is when a candidate is does a Master of Philosophy by research only. In this case, a candidate is only expected to complete a thesis. To elaborate this, the UNAM Higher Degree Policy (2022, p. 53) states that "Indicate in fulfillment when there is no coursework and in partial fulfillment when there is coursework".

Additionally, we observed that the limit to the number of pages that a research proposal should adhere to was not taken into consideration. Some candidates submitted research proposals that did not contain the required number of pages as indicated in the Higher Degree Policy. For instance, a master by thesis candidate is expected to write not more than eight (8) pages inclusive of the cover page and reference list. Whereas candidates doing a masters' by coursework, are expected to write a proposal not exceeding ten pages inclusive of the cover page and reference list (UNAM Higher Degree Policy, 2022). This is a non-adherence to the given guidelines pertaining to the structure of the proposal. As a result, such a research proposal may create a complicated and lengthy research journey for the candidate as the proposal will be rejected and sent back and forth between the supervisors and the departmental committee. As it is, when such errors are identified, they are communicated to the supervisor who then requests the candidates to revise and resubmit the proposal. This process thus creates delays in completion of the research activity.

Some candidates were observed to not being able to to write an appropriate literature review section in the research proposals. This agrees with the study by Shahsavar and Kourepaz (2020), who stressed that some candidates were not able to synthesise, critique, or explain when writing literature review. Too often, candidates merely write summaries of research which they claim to be literature review. Instead, literature review should go beyond summaries and present a critical analysis of literature. An effective review of literature goes beyond summarising literature to analyse, synthesise and evaluating the literature critically. For instance, Snyder (2023) posits that synthesising literature is about showing evidence at a high level while unveiling the gaps in literature and further research. This provides a clear understanding to the readers while showing that the candidate has engaged deeply with the literature.

There are also cases where the candidate has not followed the research proposal guideline. Furthermore, some candidates have not adhered to the prescribed font type and size as well as line spacing. The policy has explicitly stated that "In all cases the

research proposal should be Times New Roman, font size 12, double-spaced and on one side of the paper" (UNAM Higher Degree Policy, 2022, p. 28).

Academic Referencing

Both in-text citations and the reference list are crucial in academic writing. The UNAM Higher Degree Policy and the School of Education subscribe to the use of the latest APA referencing style. We observed that some candidates did not adhere to the latest American Psychological Association (APA) guide. The latest APA guide is the 7th edition. Some of the common mistakes found in the research proposals include the use of the place publications in their reference list when citing books. The APA 7th edition notes that the place of publication is not supposed to be provided.

Also, the APA 7th edition does not list all sources that are more than three and follow with the use of *et alia* (*et al.*) which means, and others. However, some of the candidates listed all the authors before introducing *et al.* It is expected that the first time a candidate cites more than three authors they immediately use *et al.* and provide the full list of manes of authors in the reference list. We also observed the inappropriate use of *et al.* (and others). For example, one candidate cited a source written by two authors, yet the candidate proceeded to use *et al.*, which means and others.

Moreover, the APA 7th edition does not use "Retrieved from anymore" when referencing online sources, however, some candidates were found to have used "Retrieved from" in their list of references. Additionally, in some cases, the sources were not listed in alphabetical order and hanging indention was not applied. In some instances, the references used in-text did not appear in the reference list. Also, we found that some sources listed in the reference list were not used in the text. It is noteworthy to say, flaws in referencing such as these suggest a type of indirect plagiarism.

Moreover, APA rules state that when there is an author or authors that have published more than one work in the same year, they can be identified as follows: for example, Penduka (2023a) and Penduka (2023b). Some candidates seem to have difficulties in citing multiple sources published in the same year by the same authors. For example, one candidate cited the source as follows: Penduka (2018c) (*source used for elaboration*) but there is no Penduka (2018a and 2018b). This seems to signal that this candidate has simply copied this source cited in a text that he or she has read or either does not know at all why the a, b and c are used with in-text citations.

The parenthetical citation uses the ampersand (&) while the run on writes up uses 'and'. We observed that candidates used the ampersand (&) in a run-on sentence without parentheses and they occasionally used 'and' between the parenthesis as well as in the reference list to divide the last author in the list. Furthermore, we also observed incorrect forms of providing direct quotes and the in-text citations of sources. For instance, some candidates cited as follows: (Kondja, 2018: 21) instead of (Kondja, 2018, p. 21). Some direct quotes were provided with quotation marks, however, no page numbers of where the direct quotation was found were provided. We also observed instances where quotation marks were not used correctly. A student was observed to have had open quotation marks, but no end quotation marks to signal the end of the direct quote were provided. The discussion above confirms what Mahmood (2020) found.

Grammar, punctuations, spelling, and other errors

Some candidates used the wrong tense in their research proposal. For example, some candidates wrote their proposal as if they were reporting something that had already taken place. The proposal should be written in a futuristic term because at this stage candidates are proposing what they are going to do during the actual process of the study.

Some candidates inappropriately used grammar rules and punctuations. This supports the finding of the study by (Ramasamy & Aziz, 2018). One such example is the use of the Oxford comma such as the one used here: tables, chairs, and chalkboards. Occasionally, some candidates used the exclamation mark in their proposals.

Some grammar and spelling errors were also found in the proposals. The spelling ranges from wrongly spelled words and the mixing up of British and American English. Thus, the university is should consistently commit to the use of one version of English. The University of Namibia subscribes to the British English version. Most grammatical errors detected were related to inappropriate use of concords (subject-verb agreement).

There has been inconsistency in the use of capital letters, which is in line with what (Ramasamy & Aziz, 2018) found in their study. Additionally, acronyms or abbreviations were not correctly used. For example, an abbreviation may be written without providing the full form of the acronym. La**stly, some candidates' writing gave an impression that they had read some sources. For instance, when a candidate writes as follows: "Studies indicate that ...", but ends the statement without citing any source/s. This may signal** that a candidate is either making things up without necessarily reading the literature that he or she claims to have read.

In Namibia it is required that student write their academic work in British English. However, the research proposal and report cover page template used the word **'fulfillment', an American English spelling, instead of fulfilment a British spelling. This** leaves candidates in a state of confusion whether to follow the British English that is prescribed by the university. Table 1 provides a version of recapitulated data related to common errors found in the student proposals of the master degree students.

Proposed interventions to address academic writing challenges

The second research question sought to establish proposed interventions to address the identified academic writing challenges that were identified in the reviewed proposals. For instance, the Higher Degree Policy is a structure of the university that is approved by legally constituted structures such as committees. Therefore, it is pivot for students to strictly adhere to the set requirements. Supervisors should also ensure that the proposals should not proceed to the next stage if they do not adhere to guidelines. For example, the title that goes beyond the prescribed 14 words should not proceed to the departmental committee for approval. Candidates and their supervisors should also **adhere to the limits of page numbers for proposals depending on which masters' program** they are enrolled for. If it is by coursework, the proposal must be 10 pages long and if it is by thesis, the proposal must comprise 8 pages. Regarding the use of American English words on the the cover page, the university should ensure that the Higher Degree Policy document is written in British English. We observed that the Higher Degree Policy

is not specific to which type of English students are to use. It simply states that research is to be written in English. This is a broad statement considering there are many varieties of English to date. It also utilises American English words. This creates a confusion and brings about the spelling mistakes observed in this study. Thus, this paper advises that that the writers follow the prescribed English variety to avoid confusing students.

Table 1: Presenting the recapitulated data

No	Type of Errors	Elaboration of errors
1.	Nonadherence to proposal writing guidelines	-Proposals not adhering to guidelines. -Proposals that go beyond the required number of pages. -Exceeding word limit in a title. -Inappropriately written Literature Review. -Nonadherence to font type, size and spacing.
2.	Referencing	In-text citations: -Wrong use of et al. For instance, the person uses et al although there are only two authors. -Wrong use of the ampersand (&). The ampersand is sued although the citation is not in parenthesis. - In case of multiple citations, the authors are not entered in descending or ascending order. -The author writes expressions such as some authors yet the author has not cited any author. -Sources used in-text but not listed in the references Reference list: -**Use of 'and' in the reference list instead of an ampersand (&)** -Reference list not in alphabetical order -Sources listed in the reference list but do not appear in-text -Nonadherence to latest APA referencing style
3.	Grammar	-Wrong use of subject–verb agreement (concord) -Wrong use of tenses
4.	Punctuations	-Missing punctuations -**Missing out quotation marks ("…") in direct quotes.** -Missing Oxford commas
5.	Spelling	-Misspelled words -Inconsistencies on use of American English vs British English
6.	Abbreviations and acronyms:	-Not written out in full on first use

Regarding referencing, both candidates and their supervisors must strictly follow all necessary features of references. All cited references should not be older than ten years, students must adhere to this rule unless there is an exception. All in-text cited sources must be cited in the reference list and vice versa. The referencing must strictly adhere to the lates APA edition to the letter.

Both candidates and their supervisory team must ensure that they adhere to the rules of grammar, tenses, correct use of punctuations as well as proper use of capital letters. The use of correct tenses and punctuations collate with the findings of Sajid and Siddiqui (2015). Once these are not followed, the quality of writing is compromised. Both agents, the students, and supervisors, must cross check the proposals before they agree

to send it to the next level for review. This may improve the quality of written proposals, which may spill over to the writing of research reports.

CONCLUSION

Academic writing skills are critical components in the process of postgraduate study such **as studying towards a master's degree qualification. The analysis carried out on the proposals for a selected masters' qualification revealed that research proposals** lack critical features of academic writing skills namely, structure, referencing, use of concords and discourse markers, use of proper tense, coherence, and punctuations. Thus, these may hinder timely completion of the qualification.

It is recommended that regular training interventions such as tailormade workshops are organised for both students and supervisors. The training should be based on feedback provided by the reviewers of research proposals. Also, there is a need to introduce a writing unit that will provide writing services such as academic writing training, proofreading, and editing. Also, students may organise writing bootcamps with their peers. Finally, the postgraduate students as well as supervisors should be orientated on the plagiarism policy. It is also recommended that research proposal error analysis should be organised for both candidates and supervisors.

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