

## **A study of four (4) classes of the Botswana International University of Science & Technology (BIUST) students' second language writing practices**

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Language is not only the product of culture, but also a symbol of culture (Ming-Mu & Cheng-Chieh, 2006). Second language teachers should therefore, pay more attention to the diversities of cultures, identify key cultural items in every aspect when they design a language curriculum, and apply appropriate teaching strategies to learning activities to help students to bridge the culture gaps. For example, undergraduate students are expected to possess excellent English language and higher order thinking skills such as logical and critical thinking as well as analytical and innovative skills (Pineteh, 2012; Jacobs, 2007). From the interview with instructors, will find out if this is true with their students' writings.

The study highlights some of the writing practices identified on the assignment's scripts given to the students. The study aims to assist technical communication educators in the Botswana to adapt bilingual and translanguaging scholarship to support their students in their writing, where the predominant population is ESL writers with varying degrees of English language fluency.

### **1. Institutional Description:**

I am a lecturer III at the University of Michigan a public research university in Ann Arbor, Michigan founded in 1817. It is the oldest institution of higher education in the state. The University of Michigan is one of the earliest American research universities. I am in the department of Technical Communication which is one of the departments in the College of Engineering Michigan, branded as *Michigan Engineering* which was founded in 1854. The Program in Technical Communication prepares engineering students to communicate, lead, and innovate in an increasingly global and digital environment, ensuring that all students in Michigan Engineers have the communication skills necessary to succeed in their professional lives. Michigan Engineering's curriculum emphasizes learning by doing and collaboration. All first-year engineering students take Engineering 100, a course designed to simulate real-world

engineering in collaboration with Technical Communication where students are taught technical writing and communication. In this course, students work in a team to build a product that applies their introductory technical, writing, communication and teamwork skills. *Because it's never just about the tech.* Engineers need to share their solutions, motivate their team, persuade stakeholders, and work across their organization, all with the goal of solving complex, messy, and wicked problems to improve the human condition. Through its courses, instruction, and mentorship, the TC Program empowers students to succeed in the complex communication responsibilities they will face in their future engineering careers. The writing courses are housed under the Technical Communication Department. These courses are prerequisites for other courses in engineering. TC's mission is to *help students write, speak, and learn better*, to help prepare them for both their future work and the work of the future.

My involvement with writing courses started in 1998 when I taught English Language Arts in high school and in 2008 in my country Botswana. Later, I transferred to a community college where I taught first-year college writing as a lecturer. In 2014, I was hired as a full-time faculty member, at the Botswana international University of Science & Technology (BIUST) a STEM university and shifted focus from just teaching general first-year writing to teaching Technical Writing and Professional Communication. In 2019, I decided to pursue my studies and ventured into a PhD in Language Literacy & Sociocultural Studies with a minor in Writing & Rhetoric at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. After I completed my studies last year May, I was hired by the University of Michigan – the Department of Technical Communication in the College of Engineering.

## **2. Key Theorists:**

Inspired by the Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory as the guiding framework for this study as Vygotsky places the social context at the heart of the learning and communication processes. According to Vygotsky (1896-1934) individuals use physical, cultural, and psychological tools to learn and to regulate their activity, and language. He asserts that human learning cannot be understood independently from the social and cultural forces that influence individuals, and that sociocultural interactions are critical to learning (Vygotsky, 1978).

The study draws from the work of multiple scholars who discuss second-language Writing and translanguaging in their research. Firstly, using Garcia (2009) who introduced the term translanguaging as a pedagogical practice that involves switching between two languages for input and output in the same activity. Secondly, using Canagarajah (2011) strategies which she developed for the co-construction of meaning and orientations for assessing effective translanguaging practices in the classroom to develop teaching. Thirdly, I used Manchón & Matsuda (2016) who expounded on the theory research and applications related to second language writing, since this research is about second language learners. Thus, the study draws ideas from translanguaging and second language writing both which are sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic theories. They have much to offer to our understandings of the languaging of bilinguals or multilingual students because it privileges bilingual/ multilingual performances and not just monolingual ones. According to Garcia (2009) translanguaging leverages the fluid languaging of learners in ways that deepen their engagement and comprehension of complex content and texts. Methodological issues are analyzed through frameworks discussed in Matsuda & Silva (2005). Translanguaging pedagogy develops students' languages in a horizontal continuum as part of the learners' linguistic repertoire, rather than as separate compartments in a hierarchical relationship (Garcia, 2017; Baker & Wright, 2021). The learner receives information in one language and works with that information in another language.

### **3. Glossary of Terms in the Study:**

**Academic Writing** – A formal style of writing used in scholarly and professional settings. It is characterized by clear structure, critical analysis, evidence-based arguments, and adherence to specific formatting and citation styles.

**Bilingualism** – The ability to use two languages fluently, either from early childhood (simultaneous bilingualism) or by learning a second language later in life (sequential bilingualism).

**Code-switching** - Code-switching is common among bilingual and multilingual speakers and can be influenced by cultural, linguistic, and situational factors. The practice of alternating between two or more languages, dialects, or language varieties within a single conversation,

sentence, or discourse. This can occur for various reasons, such as adapting to different social contexts, expressing identity, or enhancing communication. Code-switching is common among bilingual and multilingual speakers and can be influenced by cultural, linguistic, and situational factors.

**Communication Across the Curriculum (CAC)** – An educational approach that integrates communication skills—such as writing, speaking, and visual communication—into courses across various disciplines. The goal is to help students develop strong communication abilities within their specific fields of study, ensuring they can effectively convey ideas in academic, professional, and real-world contexts.

**ESL Writing** – Writing in English by individuals for whom English is a second language (ESL). ESL writing instruction focuses on language proficiency, grammar, coherence, and organization to help non-native speakers develop their writing skills.

**First Language:** The first learned language of a non-native English speaker (mother tongue) language.

**First Year Writing** - A foundational college-level course that introduces students to academic writing, critical reading, rhetorical strategies, and research-based writing practices. It is often a requirement for undergraduate students.

**Linguistic repertoire** - The range of language varieties, styles, and registers an individual can use in different social and communicative contexts. This includes knowledge of multiple languages, dialects, formal and informal speech, and other language resources that a person draws upon when interacting in diverse settings.

**Multilingualism** - The ability to use or communicate in multiple languages, either by an individual or within a society. It involves varying levels of proficiency and can include speaking, reading, and writing in different languages.

**Language Practices** - The ways in which individuals or communities use language in different contexts, including speaking, writing, reading, and listening. These practices are shaped by cultural, social, and situational factors and can include formal and informal communication,

multilingual interactions, code-switching, and translanguaging. Language practices reflect how people adapt their linguistic resources to navigate various personal, academic, and professional settings.

**Second Language Writing:** An interdisciplinary field of inquiry that examines contexts of second language writing, educational practices for teaching writing, and the composing processes and written texts of second language writers (Leki et al., 2008).

**Second Language:** The second learned language of a non-native English speaker.

**Second Year Writing** - A college-level writing course typically taken after first-year composition. It focuses on advanced writing, critical thinking, and research skills, often emphasizing discipline-specific or rhetorical writing strategies

**Sociocultural theory** - A theory of learning and development, primarily attributed to Lev Vygotsky, that emphasizes the role of social interaction, culture, and language in shaping cognitive development. It suggests that learning occurs through social engagement, collaboration, and the use of cultural tools, with more knowledgeable individuals (e.g., teachers, peers) guiding learners within their **zone of proximal development (ZPD)**—the gap between what they can do independently and what they can achieve with support.

**Translanguaging** - The practice of using multiple linguistic resources fluidly and dynamically, without strict separation of languages. It allows bilingual or multilingual individuals to draw from all their languages to communicate effectively in various contexts. Translanguaging is the process of making meaning, shaping experiences, gaining understanding and knowledge using two languages (Baker, 2011, p. 288)

**Writing Across the Curriculum** - An educational approach that integrates writing assignments and activities across all disciplines, encouraging students to develop their writing skills in different subject areas beyond traditional English or composition courses.

**Writing Practice:** A skill one can develop over time by turning up in front of the blank page and letting your hand take you in bold and unexpected directions.

**Writing Within the Discipline (WWD)** – A writing approach that focuses on the specific conventions, styles, and expectations of writing within a particular academic or professional field. It emphasizes discipline-specific terminology, formats, research methods, and rhetorical strategies to help students develop writing skills relevant to their area of study.

### **Review of the literature**

Research around academic writing reveals that students lack the experience, skills and knowledge of academic writing (Jabulani, 2014; Mbirimi, 2013; Ukwuoma, 2016). Ukwuoma (2016) has noted that several studies have mentioned that students need to be taught how to write appropriately in order for them to meet university standards of academic writing. University lecturers are urged to take student writing deficiencies into considerations when they teach so that they can deliver their content in writing in a way that would help and improve their students' ability to write (Jabulani, 2014). Instructors have a huge responsibility of applying strategies that would promote learning to change the status quo (Ukwuoma, 2016).

Mbirimi (2013) also carried out a similar study based on a South African context, she reiterated that “black students are the most affected by academic literacy challenges, mainly due to the fact that English is not their first language although it is the main language of instruction in higher education” (p. 9). According to her the main stumbling block from black South African students writing is that they have not mastered the new academic discourse used in academic writing. In most cases students use discourses drawn from oral tradition with a variety of spoken discourses and genre. The use of spoken discourse on itself reveals the social, cultural, historical, linguistic roots of the students. Their language patterns showed features such as clause chaining, repetition, rhetorical questioning, and the use of first and second person pronouns that were directly transferred from the oral discourse, therefore failing to master a particular discourse, thus the academic discourse. Mbirimi, (2013) posit that student in this situation would normally go back on their ‘primary discourse’ or use a related secondary discourse.

Furthermore, Leibowitz (2000) states oral African culture has a strong influence on students writing practices because of the storytelling, debating societies at schools and praise singing which are mostly repetitive, which students then adopt; however, this is not acceptable in academic writing. He further mentions that one of the challenges students face in academic

writing is that the curriculum at university is failing to exploit the relationship between writing and talking. However, he argues that such oral practices are valuable to draw upon when supporting students' writing development at university. Such discourses are regarded by most academics as unacceptable in the academy.

Many studies, (Akinwamide, 2012; Mbirimi, 2013; Pineteh, 2013; Ukwuoma, 2016) on students writing challenges mainly discussed problems at every stage of essay/composition writing which is referred to as Process Approach on English in essay writing regarding planning, introduction, paragraph development and conclusion. They were looking at students' writings but in different contexts. None of the ones cited have discussed the interference of first language in writing in Botswana. Mbirimi (2013) had a similar study on first language influence on Black South African students, and the context is different from what this study. This research proposes the use of translanguaging proposed by (Vogel & Garcia, 2017). Although, every researcher mentioned above did their research around academic writing, all of them overlooked the influence of mother tongue on L2 writing except Mbirini (2013). Anyhow, her context is South Africa, and my research focus is Botswana.

In this research I will be discussing how first language influence student writing in the context of Botswana. High school leavers wishing to pursue Science, and Engineering degree programs in Botswana are not expected to have a good grade for English, instead they are expected to have high grades on their pure science subjects - physics, chemistry, biology, and mathematics. This makes students enrolled in STEM programs to have a negative attitude towards the English language. They think they do not need it and invest all their time on science-based courses, yet English is the language of instruction, and used in academic writing, and all official communications. Good command of English will help them in good writing, which is essential to students' success in school, and beyond.

### **Design of the study**

The methodological approach adopted for this study was ethnography. Ethnography can be defined as "the study of social interaction and culture groups, whether these groups are defined as societies, communities, organizations or teams (Reeves, Peller, Goldman & Kitto, 2013, pg. 46). Wolcott (2008) cited by Murchison, 1973) defines ethnography as a 'way of seeing human behavior through a cultural lens, and a way of looking based on long-term,

situated fieldwork' (p.897). The main aim of ethnographic approach is to provide rich, holistic insights into peoples' views, actions and providing the place where they live (Angrosio et al., 2001). Furthermore, Angrosio et al. (2001) state an ethnographer's duty is then to substantiate the culture, lived human experiences, viewpoints and practices of the peoples in their own setting through observation and participation in the lives of those people being studied. These characteristics make this approach unique as compared to other qualitative methodologies as an ethnographer must be on site in natural setting where the people live to observe them and to participate in their daily lives. Ethnography contains within it a moral stance toward 'social inquiry that is humanizing, democratizing, and anti-hegemonic that is the way of being an ethnographic researcher's (Murchison, 1973, p.12). It has specific data collecting techniques such as participation observation, interviews and document analysis which is a good for triangulation.

### **The theoretical framework of the study**

Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory as the guiding framework for this study as Vygotsky places the social context at the heart of the learning and communication processes. According to Vygotsky (1896-1934) individuals use physical, cultural, and psychological tools to learn and to regulate their activity, and language. He asserts that human learning cannot be understood independently from the social and cultural forces that influence individuals, and that sociocultural interactions are critical to learning (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory is appropriate because the practice of writing normally happens under teaching which is a socially and culturally bound activity. In other words, writing occurs in social contexts that are mediated by instructional and personal interactions between teachers and students (Barnard & Campbell, 2005). The second theory used is translanguaging which is a sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic theory. Translanguaging offers valuable insights into how bilingual and multilingual students use language, emphasizing their full linguistic abilities rather than focusing solely on monolingual skills. As a teaching approach, it embraces the fluid use of language, helping students engage more deeply and understand complex content and texts more effectively. Additionally, translanguaging pedagogy supports language development as a continuous and interconnected process, treating all of a learner's languages as part of a unified linguistic repertoire rather than as separate, ranked systems (Cummin, 2006).



### **The general description of the setting /potential site**

The setting of the research was at the Botswana International University of Science & Technology (BIUST) main campus in Palapye, Botswana, it's the university campus where I teach the course entitled *Technical Writing and Academic Literacy (TWAL)*. I was teaching Year 1-3 undergraduate students in the Faculty of Science.

### **Participants**

My participants were first year students from the Faculty of Science. We have 12 classes from the Faculty of Science, since I could not have all these students for my population because it is not a survey, I did a sampling for my participants from this big pool. The researcher selected about forty participants from the Faculty of Science, ten from each class making a total of 40. Reeves et al. (2013) posit that in ethnographic studies, a single study site is often selected, but multiple individuals, actions and activities embedded within this setting are selected to develop an insightful account of daily life. They further state that participants, activities, and interactions are either sampled on an opportunistic or purposeful basis. In most cases the ethnographer chooses to select their participants purposely to generate a more comprehensive picture of the phenomena under study. Purposive sampling as research has shown it is widely used by ethnographers.

The as mentioned above study consisted of 40 students, 20 males and 20 females with an average age of 19 years. The subjects indicated a variety of college majors from the Faculty of Science, biology, chemistry, Mathematics & Statistics and Earth and Environmental Science. All the students' writers were all born in Botswana and spoke 18 different native languages such as Kalanga, Sesubeya, Setswapong, Sebirwa, Khoisan languages, Setswana - the national language (has 8 dialects), Ndebele, Tjikalagari, Seyeyi, among others.

### **Researcher Role/ Positionality**

My positionality was that of insider since I am a member of staff in the university even though I am on study leave. I will be working with my colleagues and students who know me very well. I will also be a participant observer, and its peculiar characteristic is that it combines both participation in people's lives and maintaining a professional distance with the people under study. Research (Angrosio et al., 2001) shows that participant observation is a more active engagement with research participants, requiring the ethnographer to balance the insider versus

outside continuum. The ethnographer through participation can act and behave like an insider but would also carry a sense of objectivity towards this role whereby s/he should separate oneself from the group being studied. Angrosio et al. (2001) further assert that observation is the act of perceiving the activities and interrelationships of people in the field setting.

### **Data collection**

Research shows that the main methods of collecting ethnographic data are participant observation, interviews, and document analysis. According to Reeves et al. (2013), participant observation is the key methodological approach involved in ethnography. Denzin (1989) defines participant observation as “a field strategy that simultaneously combines document analysis, interviewing of respondents, and informants, direct participation, and observation, and introspection” (pp.157-158). Based on the information from the literature (Angrosio et al., 2001; Bodgan & Biken, 2007; Creswell, 2001), these methods will be used in this study. Below is a detailed discussion on how they were implored in this research.

First, observations of lessons were carried out when instructors were in class teaching their student. During these times the researcher will write field notes based on observations made, documenting the interaction of students and their instructors, the way the instructors carry out their teaching of writing, and the exercises and activities such as group or pair work that are assigned to the students on writing tasks etc. Scott et al. (2013) advise that a researcher doing participant observation should always carry a notepad for brief jottings. Field notes provide space for jotting down observations, stories, descriptions, and interpretations which are observed during participant observation. There are times when one has no alternative but to wait, and record observation after they leave the setting; if such a situation arises the researcher should write the observations as soon as possible to minimize recall problems. Some researchers may choose to rely on equipment such as audio recorders and video cameras. Furthermore, ethnographers are advised to represent participants in their own terms by using quotations and short stories. Capture participants' views of their own experiences in their own words and avoid misinterpreting participants (Bodgan & Biken, 2007).

Second, interviews were conducted with students and instructors about language to triangulate data. Interviewing is the process of directing a conversation to collect information. There are different types of interviews but the one recommended for ethnography is the in-depth interview, which are neither focused nor structured. The interview will also be meant to evoke

the participant's understanding and interpretations of the issue being discussed (Angrosino et al., 2007). Bodgan and Biklen (2007) explain that in-depth interviews are complementary to the participation observation that the ethnographer would have made. Since participation observation furnishes the researcher with what happens in the peoples' everyday life, the interview on the other hand expresses and explains the social everyday life (Angrosio et al., 2001).

Last, document analysis of classroom artifacts that include lesson plans and students' writings (assignments, exercise, test scripts and examination papers) will be analyzed. Analyzing these textual documents will provide the research with a good picture of how language and discourses are used, and to identify any similar trends and practices in students' writing. Document analysis can provide useful background information to the study while also providing insight into how participants' views of themselves (Angrosino et al., 2001; Sangasubana, 2011).

### **Data analysis**

Data analysis can be defined as "transforming data into research results, big piles of data are transformed into succinct statements that describe, explain or predict something about what the researcher has studied" (LeCompte, 2000, p.146). Ethnographic data is too much, and the process of analyzing it iterative, it needs the researcher to pay careful attention, be creative, and have insight (Atkinson et al., 2001; Eriksson & Kovalainer, 2008). Data analysis can be carried out through description, analysis, and interpretation. At the heart of analysis is reading the data. The researcher started with reading through fieldnotes and other data. It is advised that this stage of reading, it should be done several times. The first time of reading fieldnotes should be done quickly scanning through them to get an overall picture of the data, however, as one proceeds, they have to be much more thorough, and this helps one to be familiar with the empirical data as one would understand them followed by recounting and describing the data (Atkinson et al., 200; Eriksson & Kovalainer, 2008; Strauss, 1987). Whenever the researcher is analyzing data, they should always remember to follow the formula of *code-patterns-categories-themes* model which simplifies analysis. In this study the ethnographic data analysis followed the five steps proposed by LeCompte (2002), which are tidying up the data.

The first thing that the researcher had to do was make copies of all the data that was collected followed by sorting it in order and putting them in a file or folder according to the dates they were collected. Creation of files will be according to type of data, should follow those for interviews, field notes, and document analysis given. Secondly, the researcher reading the data.

transcripts over and over, it is iterative process to identify relevant items that occur frequently, those omitted, and those that are declared participants which are tied to the research questions. Thirdly, creating stable sets of items where the researcher organized the items into categories and groups by comparing them. Lumping or grouping together all similar items separating those that are different and coming up with sets of taxonomies. Fourthly, creating patterns known as taxonomies which brings all like items together therefore calling for patterns to be identified, meaningfully putting patterns together so that a picture can be seen from these pieces that have been put together. Explanations and descriptions were made to clarify the ways that could solve problems. Finally, taxonomies were grouped into– patterns into – structures. Structures are the ones used to describe and explain the whole phenomenon (LeCompte, 2000, pp. 148-152).

## Results

For this study, I looked at how students write. The results of the study based on students' scripts or writing. I analyzed the overall structure of their writing and how they used and placed topic sentences. I also examined their choice of rhetorical modes—whether they wrote in an expository, narrative, or mixed style. Additionally, I checked the length of their compositions and whether they used first, second, or third-person perspectives.

On the sentence level, I reviewed sentence variety and the use of transition words. I also analyzed grammar and mechanical issues by noting errors in verb use, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, word choice, articles, sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling. These specific errors were chosen because they often show how a student's first language influences their use of English. The results of the study showed that grammar and usage errors were the biggest language problems in students' writing. Many students struggled with subject-verb agreement and punctuation, though they made fewer spelling mistakes. This may be because spell-check tools on computers that help them correct spelling errors.

Another major issue was forming correct verb tenses, as well as using prepositions, articles, and appropriate word choices. Many students' papers had frequent errors in these areas, likely due to the influence of their native languages. While research suggests that university lecturers should consider students' writing challenges and adjust their teaching methods to help improve writing skills (Jabulani, 2014), my ethnographic observations of lecturers teaching showed that many lecturers only encouraged the use of English in class and did not support using

other languages. This confirms an argument by Ukwuoma (2016), who stated that instructors play a key role in using strategies to promote learning and improve the current situation.

Finally, many students translated sentences directly from their native language into English, leading to more writing errors. Instructors need to acknowledge the impact of second-language influences on writing rather than assume that focusing only on the writing process will solve these difficulties. Feedback plays a crucial role in improving writing skills. Without personalized attention and clear feedback on errors, students will struggle to progress. It is important to recognize that second-language writing naturally includes errors, and teachers should help students develop self-correction and revision strategies. Second-language learners need and expect direct feedback not only on content but also on grammar, structure, and style. Without this support, students will face challenges in improving both their writing and language skills. This highlights the need for lecturers to develop skills that will help them utilize the linguistic resources multilingual students already possess. By activating these resources, students can enhance their metalinguistic awareness and strengthen their multilingual competence. The results of the study confirm that for English second language writers, the process of writing in an academic environment is challenging. I used to tell my students that the only way to improve their writing is to keep writing. I was thinking that with enough practice in writing, revision and reflection they would eventually acquire the fundamentals, or at least the standard, required of academic discourse.

To answer the fourth research question which wanted the possible strategies for addressing first language influence on the learning of English to BIUST undergraduate students I could be achieved by using translanguaging practices. These practices can vary in intensity, depending on the emphasis placed on metalinguistic awareness and the integration of multiple languages in the classroom. However, the challenge instructors and students face are that the school environment support monolingual instruction. No one in the university uses or knows about translanguaging pedagogy in their lessons. Additionally, the university policy follows that of the country or the education policy which uses English as a language of instruction in learning institutions, it does not support the translanguaging pedagogy/ practice. The education policy theoretically recognizes that the country has many languages but practically uses only English. Therefore, the social environment to allow translanguaging to take place is not supported in the monolingual policy promoted Botswana schools and institutions of higher learning.

### **Limitations of the study**

The limitations for the study included site selection, population size, and time constraints because ethnographic studies require more time. For this study there was only for a semester because I was using the students in my courses and they were moving on to other courses and I was looking at being able to use their assignments before the semester ended. The study will not be able to generalise the results as it will only select forty students from four classes in the Faculty of Science, in BIUST. This is very restrictive because the study will only be in one university, one Faculty and one course so it cannot be generalised. This study will be used as a springboard for future studies.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, researchers have emphasized that using translanguaging is the best way for multilingual students to improve their language skills for academic success and writing development. Based on my study, I recommend that higher education institutions in Botswana, especially BIUST, adopt translanguaging in their Technical Writing classes. This approach not only helps students perform better academically but also supports their emotional well-being as they progress in their education. By using translanguaging, students can fully express their understanding and knowledge of academic subjects instead of just translating their thoughts and responses.

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