

## **Academic Writing for French Language Programs: Undergraduate students in Malawi as a Case Study**

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### **Abstract**

The transition from secondary school to university in Malawi necessitates the implementation of purposeful academic skills courses that are intervention-oriented. These courses are aimed at equipping students with the necessary competencies, particularly in the domain of academic writing. Given that Malawi is an anglophone nation, these courses predominantly concentrate on enhancing students' writing abilities within the context of the English language. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that certain academic institutions in Malawi also admit students who are enrolled in French programs or are pursuing French courses. This underscores the importance of developing academic skills training programs tailored to the requirements of French courses. In the present study, we hypothesize that none of the Malawian universities where French programs/courses are offered have courses specifically designed for the acquisition of academic writing skills for the French language. Given this context, the present article attempts to ascertain the assertion of the lack of courses specifically designed for academic writing in French and explores how students acquire and develop the academic writing skills in French in the Malawian university. Data for the study was collected through an online questionnaire

distributed to students enrolled in French programs or courses at three higher education institutions in Malawi: University of Malawi, Mzuzu University, and Domasi College of Education. The findings of this study, organized into various thematic categories, provide valuable insights into the realm of academic writing for French language studies within the context of Malawian universities.

**Keywords:** Academic writing, French, Malawi, university.

### **Résumé**

Le passage de l'école secondaire à l'université au Malawi nécessite la mise en œuvre de cours d'aptitudes aux études fondées sur l'intervention. Ces cours visent à doter les étudiants des compétences nécessaires, en particulier dans le domaine de l'écriture académique. Étant donné que le Malawi est une nation anglophone, ces cours se concentrent principalement sur l'amélioration des capacités d'écriture des étudiants dans le contexte de la langue anglaise. Néanmoins, il convient de noter que certains établissements universitaires du Malawi admettent également des étudiants inscrits dans des programmes français ou suivant des cours de français. Cela souligne l'importance de développer des programmes de formation aux compétences académiques adaptés aux exigences des cours de français. Dans la présente étude, nous émettons l'hypothèse qu'aucune des universités malawites où des programmes/cours de français sont proposés n'offre de cours spécifiquement conçus pour l'acquisition de compétences en écriture académique pour la langue française. Dans ce contexte, le présent article tente de vérifier l'affirmation de l'absence de cours spécifiquement conçus pour l'écriture académique en français et explore comment les étudiants acquièrent et développent les compétences d'écriture académique en français dans l'université malawienne. Les données de l'étude ont été recueillies à l'aide d'un questionnaire en ligne distribué aux étudiants inscrits dans des programmes ou des cours de français dans trois établissements d'enseignement supérieur au Malawi : Université du Malawi, Université de Mzuzu et Collège d'éducation de Domasi. Les résultats de cette étude, organisés en diverses catégories thématiques, fournissent des informations précieuses sur le domaine de l'écriture académique pour les études de langue française dans le contexte des universités du Malawi.

**Mots clés :** Écriture académique, français, Malawi, université.

## **1. Introduction**

Many institutions of higher learning employ a variety of programs targeted at integrating students in the university learning setting. These programs include study strategies and skills courses and workshops. This is for a number of reasons, prominent amongst them the need to increase students' retention. Such interventions are designed to provide students with additional tools and resources to facilitate academic success (Wernersbach, Crowley, Bates, & Rosenthal, 2014). As argued by Müller (2021, p.2), academic skills are necessary for students to successfully complete their studies, create a career, and to be capable of lifelong learning and the labor market. "These programs commonly target time management, reading techniques for textbooks, effective note taking, resource utilizations (such as libraries), and study/exam-taking techniques" (Wernersbach, et al. 2014, p.14). Likewise, Delcambre (2011) contends that university studies target initiating students into the tools and foundations of a field, in other words constructing a disciplinary identity (Delcambre, 2011).

In the context of Malawi, students' integration into university also entails a number of factors including their induction into a range of academic skills such as writing. As they attend various programs in their first year of study, they are obliged to partake in language courses that prepare them for both basic and advanced academic skills in writing. In spite of Malawi's plurilingual setting, the teaching of these skills focuses on English. This is because it is the country's medium of instruction, although certain universities with a strong humanities' orientation also offer courses/programs that require academic skills in other languages such as French.

As noted by Bazerman (1988) and Thaiss and Zawacki (2006), disciplines are the framework in which writing practices and representations are elaborated and constructed. This implies that each discipline has some specific requirements in terms of academic writing and research-based writing, and in terms of genres of discourse as well (Delcambre, 2011). Since the highlight in academic writing in Malawi is often on English material, it is pertinent that we explore how students enrolled in French programs acquire and develop their academic writing skills. This is particularly because developing writing skills in French is an assert for students' development and appreciation of writing and academic study skills in the rare university classroom where French is the medium of instruction (Bishop & Haezewindt, 2005). Likewise, our focus is on writing since written texts play a prominent

role in evaluating university coursework, rendering the skill a high-stakes endeavor (Mendoza, et al., 2022). In our study, we hypothesize that no university in Malawi offers any specialized academic skills course tailored for students enrolled in French programs or courses.

## **2. Literature review**

Writing is a multifaceted task that requires a simultaneous coordination of cognitive, motivational, and linguistic abilities. Its intricacy becomes even more pronounced when one reaches the university level (Mitchell, et al., 2021), requiring students to learn to use argumentation, paraphrase and refer to sources (Hyytinen, Löfström, & Lindblom-Ylänne, 2016), as well as adapt into the requirements of a particular discipline. Thus, academic writing is commonly used in academic settings, such as universities and research institutions with its main purpose being conveyance of ideas, arguments, or research findings in a clear, concise, and logical manner (Murray, 2017). As argued by Fadhl, et al. (2023), Academic writing stands as a crucial skill for university students because it bestows upon them the resources, influence, and capacity to engage in knowledge construction, disciplinary conventions, self-identity development, social placement, and career progression. This style of writing is characterized by its use of formal language, objectivity, and evidence-based arguments (Hyland, 2016). It may take various forms, including research papers, essays, literature reviews, and dissertations, and it typically involves a rigorous process of research, analysis, and synthesis of information from credible sources (Belcher, 2019).

Students write for different purposes in a variety of contexts during the course of their university studies, but attention to academic writing as an activity is rarely found outside the academic literacy classroom (Meihuizen, 2019). Hyland (2011, p.53) finds “the widespread view that writing is somehow peripheral to the more serious aspects of university life – doing research and teaching students” as the probable reason for this confinement. Academic writing is offered to university students because from the available experiences, it appears necessary to support and strengthen their academic writing in a process which guides development towards abstract academic writing (Meihuizen 2019, p. 58).

The question of academic writing in French has its roots in French universities. Boch and Frier (2012) note that the need to teach academic writing emerged when higher education in France ceased receiving a homogenous

group of students who were already well versed with writing at the high school level. Since 2000, there has been a growing awareness of the fact that students reach university with incomplete written skills in French (Boch & Frier, 2012). Boch and Frier further noted that new university students are often very surprised by the importance that is suddenly attached to the linguistic aspect of their studies and the pressing necessity to improve their level. This is reiterated by O'Sullivan and Chambers (2006, p.56) who argue that students at this level "generally make a significant number of basic grammatical errors involving gender, agreement, and verb forms". "At the same time, academics, who often have little training in teaching writing skills, tend to consider that it is not up to the university to take this side of things in hand, and that it should be dealt with beforehand" (Boch & Frier 2012, p.215).

Studies also show that the teaching of academic writing for French is a continuous process in non-francophone institutions of higher learning. For example, at the University of Wollongong in Australia, one of the French courses at third-year undergraduate level targets further developing and enhancing proficiency in all four language skills, with specific emphasis on writing skills (Bissoonauth-Bedford & Stace, 2015). This is because students are at level B1/B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages, an international benchmark used to measure levels of attainment in the four language skills (CECRL, 2001). The need for continuous training of students in academic writing for a language such as French also arises because of our understanding of the existence of cross-cultural differences in thought and writing patterns (Siepmann, 2006). In some universities, the academic writing training for French is propelled by the need to enable international mobility of students, particularly where the destination is France or any francophone country. For instance, upon realizing that most graduates from the Kazan National Research Technological University leave for France in pursuit of graduate studies, French teachers at the university developed a special training program, aiming to make it easier for students to continue their studies at universities and everyday life in France (Kraysman, Shageeva, & Pichugin, 2021).

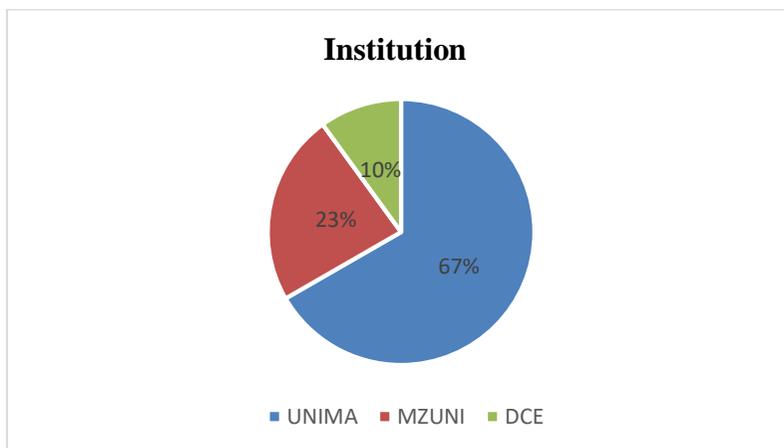
A review of the existing studies shows a dearth of literature on academic literacy in French language especially in anglophone universities. At the global level, studies on academic writing for French often occur in the context of French and francophone students' immersion in anglophone environments and vice versa (Séror & Weinberg, 2021; Boch & Frier, 2012; Delcambre, 2011;

O’Sullivan & Chambers, 2006). In the African context, studies that make such attempts are rarely visible. This article attempts to fill that gap with a narrowed gaze on the Malawian university context.

### **3. Methodology**

This article interrogates how students enrolled for French courses navigate academic writing in the target language as they get immersed in the university learning environment. To generate the required data, a questionnaire was distributed to students enrolled in French programs/courses at three public institutions of higher learning where French is offered as part of various programs. Thus, the participants came from the University of Malawi (UNIMA), Mzuzu University (MZUNI) and Domasi College of Education (DCE). The data was collected between May and July, the period in which all the participants submitted their responses.

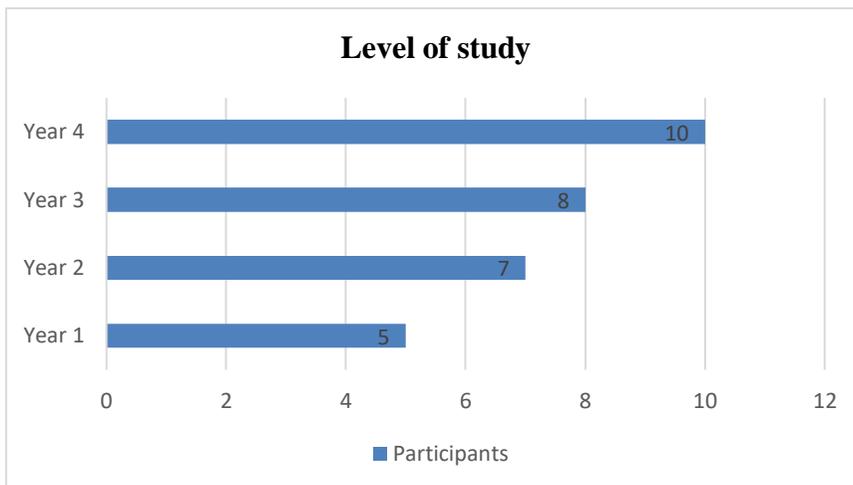
A questionnaire was shared through representatives of the students for each level (first year through to fourth year). Our target was the entire French student population. This was particularly a possibility because of the low numbers of students that enrol for French programs/courses. However, the questionnaire got a total of 30 respondents. Figure 1 below shows the students’ institutional representation:



*Figure 1: Institutional representation of the respondents.*

We can note from the figure above that 67% of the respondents were from the University of Malawi, 23% from Mzuzu University and 10% from Domasi College of Education.

The students sample size was spread across all years of study (1-4). Figure 2 below contains their distribution in terms of the years of study:



*Figure 2: Distribution of the respondents according to their level of study.*

As can be seen in the figure above, 17% of the participants were in first year, 23% were in second year, 27% were in third year, and 33% were in their final/fourth year. Including participants from all levels of undergraduate enrolment ensured a generation of insights from a multilevel student perspective, allowing for generalizability of the findings to students enrolled in French at all levels in the university.

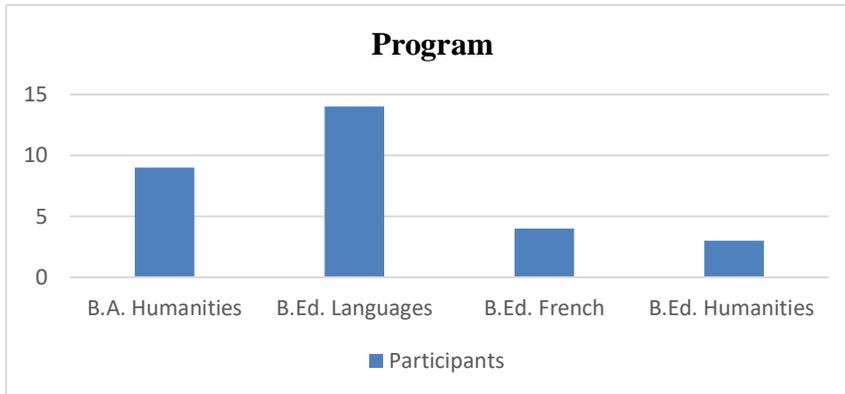
For data analysis, we categorized the generated responses into various themes and discussed them within the context of our understanding of the French teaching terrain at the university level in Malawi. The discussion is spread across various sections that are preceded by a brief discussion of academic writing for French in Malawi's universities. The themes generated from the categorization include students' acquisition of academic writing skills in Malawian universities, the peculiarity of academic writing skills in the French language, students' acquisition of academic writing skills for French, the existing gaps as well as remedial resources in the acquisition of the academic writing skills, and students' suggestions and recommendations for enhancement of academic writing skills in French.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

### **4.1. Academic writing in Malawian universities**

Academic writing is an integral part to learning in all universities in Malawi. At the University of Malawi, it is offered by the Department of Academic Skills and Careers. The department has for several years been offering English for Specific Purposes to all first-year students and some second-year students across various disciplines. Likewise, at Mzuzu University, academic writing is offered in courses under the Department of Communication Studies while at Domasi College of Education, it is taught by the English Section of the Department of Languages. As can be noted, the course(s) often go(es) by the alias English for Specific Purposes (with many possible variations across various universities). This evidently highlights our earlier observation that academic writing skills in the Malawian university setting connotes the ability to engage in academic writing but in the English language. This is in spite of the existence of programs and courses in which French becomes the medium of instruction, an experience that is confined to the classroom for the particular course/program.

A rare feature for most universities in Malawi, comprehensive French programs and courses are currently offered in three institutions of higher learning: The University of Malawi, Mzuzu University and Domasi College of Education. The University of Malawi is the oldest institution in the provision of French lessons, having opened its French Department in 1965 when the university first came into operation. At present, the university offers a variety of courses in Literature and Linguistics as well as in other non-specialized courses to undergraduate students enrolled in various programs. This university French model was also entirely adopted by the French Department at Domasi College of Education. Further, the significance of French to Malawi, in spite of its anglophone status, led to the creation of an entire program dedicated to the language at Mzuzu University. The university has been offering a 4-year Bachelor of Education (French) program, amongst other courses and programs such as those servicing students in the Faculty of Tourism, Hospitality and Management (Sefu, 2013). In addition to these three institutions, basic French courses are also offered at the Malawi Institute of Tourism (MIT). In Figure 3 below, we present a sample of the various programs which the participants of the study from the three institutions were enrolled in:



*Figure 3: Participants according to university program.*

As seen from the figure above, the program distribution of the students was as follows: Bachelor of Arts Humanities (9); Bachelor of Education Language (14); Bachelor of Education French (4) and Bachelor of Education Humanities (3).

When we consider the context of French as a subject in secondary school, paying particular attention to its students for a developed academic writing for integration into university may emerge as an obvious proposition. For instance, as an elective in the secondary school system, French as a subject is allocated fewer slots on the timetable. Further, French teaching also encounters resource availability issues (Jouffroy, 2022). Added to these is the fact that for the average French student in Malawi, the years spent learning French before university do not exceed four – the maximum number of years they attend secondary school. This implies that by the time students arrive in university, their academic writing abilities in the French language may not be fully developed to match the required levels of academic engagement at the undergraduate level. Despite this lack of depth in their academic writing abilities, the students still proceed to enroll for courses that are designed in ways similar to all non-French courses, and therefore equally requiring excellent academic writing skills.

#### **4.2. The peculiarity of academic writing in French**

The conception of academic writing for French presupposes distinction in writing for academic purposes in the French language. Our study was based on this presupposition as informed by our own experiences of learning and teaching French in two of the three institutions (Mzuzu University being the exception). Siepmann (2006) equally takes note of these differences, referring

to them as a form of linguaculture plurality that cannot be homogenized. To affirm the peculiarity of academic writing in French, and therefore solidifying our basis for interrogating the question, we asked the participants if there were any observed differences between academic writing in French and in English (the latter being Malawi's medium of instruction). This question generated a total of 30 responses (100% response rate). Out of these, 80% acknowledged the existence of differences, but with varying magnitude. One respondent summarized his observation of the differences as follows:

French academic writing tends to demand more brevity than English. I also noticed that French academic writing aims more on clarity, important points first, which is different from English. For example, the table of contents is at the end in French academic writing (dissertations), which I think is logical. You write whatever you write, and later figure out where is what topic. So, the focus is more on writing with clarity rather than trying to confine oneself to pre-determined space.

However, most of the responses centred on the rules of writing. Such responses included references to the complexity of French writing rules coming in form of "grammar" and "accents". Further, the remaining 20% of the respondents argued that they did not see any differences. Out of these, two proceeded to indicate that they could not tell the differences, if any, "due to lack of exposure to other forms of French academic writing".

These differences, as confirmed by a majority of the students, do have consequences on the students' French academic writing skills. As such, the study sought to uncover how the differences impacted them in their academic writing endeavors. This question generated a total of 27 responses out of which 14 (52%) pointed to existing negative impacts. One student argued that the differences "make it very challenging to write and limit one's writing e.g. number of pages. The harder the writing, the fewer the words". Another student argued that while he did not have much problems with writing academically in French, "some rules delay me because I have to constantly switch between the two sets of rules [French and English], in terms of grammar, punctuation, even brackets". Another student said while he could not say much about academic writing, he "always felt like the transition from English to French has been difficult for me and I believe the same would apply if I had to write academically". These responses equally confirmed the basis of our argument

on the existence of difficulties in academic writing skills for French course/program students in an anglophone milieu. Out of the participants who said the differences had not impacted their writing, 7% said this was the case because it was just a matter of following the writing skills in the particular language (French in this context). Another 7% of the students argued that it was a challenge to measure the impact of the French writing skills in an English academic writing atmosphere.

We further interrogated students' confidence in academic writing for French, realizing how difficult the transitioning to academic writing in French would be considering the significant differences with English. Queried directly on the confidence they had in their ability to writing academic papers in French, the question generated 28 responses. Out of these responses, 46% indicated that they were not confident. Their responses included the following: "Not very confident but I would like to keep trying"; "I have less confidence"; "on a scale of 1 to 10, 2 or 3"; "got little confidence because I was never trained about French academic writing skills"; and "not confident at all, by percentage, I would suggest 15% or less". Out of the remaining responses, 11% indicated that they were very confident and did not have problems writing for academic purposes in French. The other 43% responses included confidence that was based on the hope that with time, the students would ameliorate their writing skills. For example, one of the respondents stated that:

Although am not that fluent enough in French, I have enough confidence in my abilities to write academic papers in French. This is so because every time I write an academic French paper I get to improve in my French writing skills.

While the confidence is commendable, such responses resonated with the preceding responses indicating that the students did not receive any specialized training for academic writing in French, and therefore generally lacked confidence. It was also indicative of the need for introducing such a specialized course to boost the students' confidence and in turn advance good practices in academic writing for French. This is especially important considering that there are not as many platforms as is the case within the English context on which students enrolled in French courses/programs would be compelled to practice academic writing in the language, Malawi being an anglophone country.

#### **4.3. Students' acquisition of academic writing skills in French**

Against the background of a weak supportive system for students studying French at the secondary school level, acquiring academic writing skills in French in the university becomes an inevitable asset. As such, it would be anticipated that various courses would be designed to aid the students enrolled in French for acquisition of such skills. In light of this, a select set of questions in this study interrogated the students' process of acquiring academic writing skills in the three institutions. Thus, we devised a query on whether the students received any training in academic writing skills tailored for successful academic writing in the French language. 50% of the students indicated that they had not received training through any specialized courses while the other 50% said they had. Figure 4 below contains a distribution of the responses:

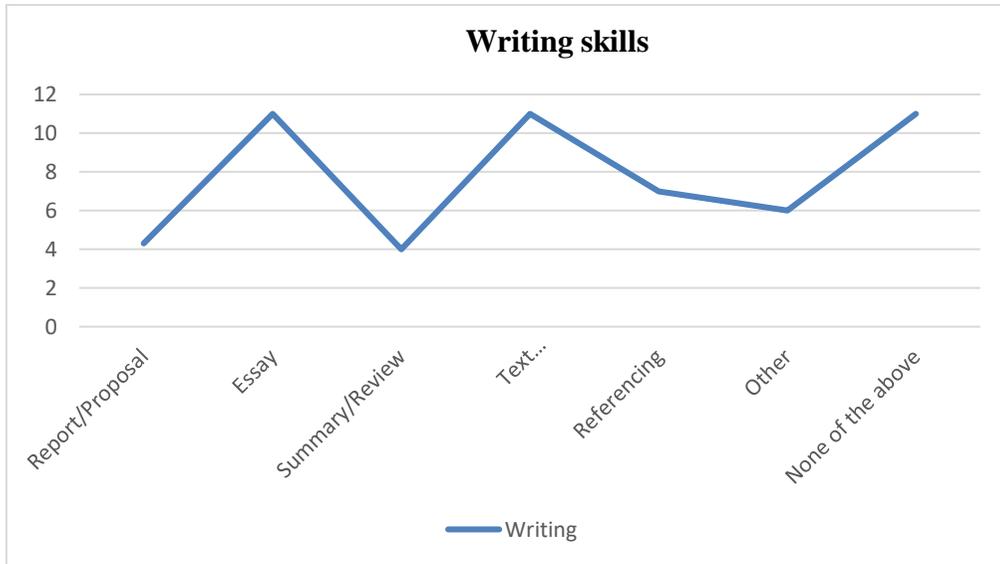


*Figure 4: Responses on whether students had received academic writing training for French.*

When queried on what level they had received the training, there were varying responses amongst the students, mostly depending on what year of study they were in. Out of the 30 participants, we registered 18 responses. These responses ranged from “one semester” to “all the semesters” as the duration within which they had been taught academic writing for French. One of the participants, a third-year student, said “I have received the trainings in all levels so to say, from first year to second year, and now third year. In short I have been receiving such trainings for three years now”. This was also corroborated by another third-year student who indicated that they were inducted in academic writing for French “from first year in the university till now in third year”.

However, some students had varying responses pointing to a particular short-term period in which they were trained. Some of the responses in reference to this short term included: “second year”, “level 3 (third year)”, “for some weeks”, “first semester”, “year three but one semester”, “for one year and year one semester two”. 15 responses showed that the students had not partaken in any academic writing training for the French language. The non-uniformity in the responses was a confirmation that there were indeed no academic writing/purposes courses specifically designed for French. This is because academic skills courses in the Malawian university setting are provided in the first year (and second year for B.A. Humanities at the University of Malawi). As such, a uniform response would have been a pointer to the existence of such course(s) – one year similar to the standard period in which English for specific purposes is offered in the various universities, with the highlighted exception.

For the concept of acquisition of the academic writing skills in the French language, we listed five elements which we considered central to academic writing. This was based on our knowledge of the type of assignments that students of French in the university are subjected to in throughout all levels of study. These are: report and proposal writing; essay writing; summary and review writing; text organization and structure; and referencing. As such, possessing knowledge and skills in these aspects would be deemed adequate for academic writing in the French language. Thus, from this list of skills, students were asked to select as many as they felt they had been trained in. Figure 5 below presents the outcome:



*Figure 5: Aspects of academic writing which the students had learnt for the French language.*

From the figure above, we can observe that essay writing as well as text organization and structure were the most selected as areas participants of the study felt they had been drilled in (with 11 responses in their favor respectively). However, we note that in 11 other responses, the students also believed they had not been taught any of the provided elements of academic writing. This lack of consensus is consistent with the non-uniformity in their responses on the levels on which they had received the training as well as the 50-50 response percentage when queried on whether they had actually received any such training through specialized courses. This, again, confirms our hypothesis that currently, no Malawian university offers courses in academic writing skills for students enrolled in French programs/courses.

Having foreseen the eventuality of a negative response on whether they had received the training, the students were also asked to highlight how they had acquired knowledge and skills of writing for academic purposes in French if their response to the preceding question was not affirmative. This generated a total of 16 responses, the lowest response rate (47%). Out of these, 5 said they did not believe they had acquired any such skills, with one student particularly indicating that “I don’t know how to write in French”. Another 5 said they applied knowledge from Language and Communication Skills courses taught in English, with most reiterating this response: “I personally have to use skills

gotten from another general course: Language and Communication Skills, of which most of the skills narrow on the academic writing in French”. This was in part echoed by another respondent who, pointing to their French lecturers teaching them some skills in passing, said:

So, writing for academic purposes in French was done through that way. However, it is just a few things, the rest we just use the knowledge from English. For instance, the use of references, in-text citation, essay writing, we use the knowledge that we get from English.

The first part of the response which referred to acquiring the skills through other courses was equally reiterated by 4 other respondents who stated that they had learnt it through guidelines provided by teachers on various assignments. Further, 3 other respondents said they acquired the writing skills for French through personal efforts. This included self-assessment, reading French texts, and outsourcing help from friends. Consolidating the responses revealed that indeed, there was no particular course that was designed to equip the students with academic writing skills for French. The only time they were taught how to write was when given tasks by lecturers, otherwise the rest depended on personal effort. This was also subtly revealed by the allusion to the Language and Communication Skills course (English for Specific Purposes) as an equal source of knowledge for academic writing in the French language.

#### **4.4. Gaps and remedial resources**

The present study also interrogated existing challenges to the students enrolled in French courses/programs as they engage in academic writing. These challenges were discussed along with their effective remedies as implemented by the students. The question generated 28 responses. Out of these, 82% dwelled on lack of sufficient vocabulary and a complex grammar system for French that made it hard for them to efficiently engage in academic writing. One student, for example, argued that:

The biggest challenge is trying to constantly switch between the two different sets of rules. Sometimes I do not know the rules for French so I find myself using English rules, and it does not always work.

Further, 11% of the responses highlighted the following general problems: “vocabulary and lay out”; “the lack of format and style”; and “citations”. From

the remaining 7% of the responses, one student reduplicated a response to an earlier question on confidence while another just pointed out to “second language interference” without any clarification. In the context of Malawi where English is sometimes the second or third language for a student, we interpreted it (English) to be the second language in question as it is the one in use for academic writing (other than French in the context of our population sample). These responses indicate that students struggle a lot in their writing for academic purposes for two main reasons: a flimsy foundation in French grammar and the lack of courses designed specifically to train them in academic writing for the language. As observed earlier, most of what they learn on academic writing comes from various courses as lecturers take it upon themselves to teach the students how to engage with assignments and other academic projects.

In resolving these difficulties, the students highlighted a number of remedial resources they turn to. They mentioned a number of strategies and tools they found convenient to help them overcome the barriers to academic writing in French. These included the internet, online French learning and translation applications, reading various French texts, and YouTube tutorials. Out of the 30 responses generated, only one student indicated that he took no countermeasures at all. These responses demonstrated passion amongst the students and a fertile ground on which to launch an aggressive writing skills campaign through, among others, specialized academic writing courses for French. As one student stated, “most students who take French have passion for French. whether they are finding it hard or not the passion is still there and it is strong”. He further argued that these students “need much help, French being a foreign language that mostly starts at secondary school for most students and others at University”.

#### **4.5. Participants’ remedial suggestions**

Having gauged students’ perspectives on the challenges encountered in academic writing for French, it was equally pertinent to solicit their opinions on good intervention approaches. As contemporary pedagogical approaches become more learner-centered (Patel-Junankar, 2017), it is crucial to incorporate student ideas in resolving matters that directly affect their learning abilities. This is even more important for university students where independent thinking is encouraged (Paivandi, 2015). Against this context, we first queried the participants on how important they felt it was for them to

receive training in academic writing courses that would particularly be designed for French. This question generated 30 responses, with all students (100%) stating that having such courses would help them in so many ways. One student argued that “[writing] skills trainings can help students broaden their knowledge of French and be able to write freely and even publish French articles and stories”. Another respondent said it would make writing academically easy and

can also erase the fear that most students have. I think some students do not want to even contemplate on doing academic writing in French because they have no idea how they would go about it.

Likewise, another respondent argued that introducing courses for academic writing in French would “help the students write better or improve their academic writing skills, for instance in their academic proposal”. In some of the responses, the participants alluded to a possible boost in confidence in their writing if such courses were to be introduced.

The participants were further asked to offer their own recommendations for improved academic writing in French. This question also generated a 100% response rate (30 responses). The students made various recommendations. Prominent amongst them was the apparent need for courses that were specifically designed for academic writing in French. The idea of a French course for academic writing was properly expounded by one student who added his own experience to learning French in university:

During most of my French lectures, when a written assignment is given, we always ask for a format and style on how to develop the text. So, introducing a language and communication skills course in French would do me good.

He went further to propose an alternative integration of academic writing skills in courses that are already existent, and would therefore be compatible with such content. For instance, he referred to the course of *Expression and Communication* offered at the University of Malawi:

Or the course, Expression and Communication for example, which I had in my first year (I don’t know if it applies to the other universities), at least must contain these academic writing skills and must be a priority, otherwise I see myself graduating less competitive in French academic writing as we’re always overpowered by the Anglophonic

academic writings.

In some responses, this call was indirect. Some students proposed the need for introducing more elective courses for French minors where they believed they could improve their academic writing. Clarifying on this, one student highlighted that current French courses focus on a particular concept for every semester, hence a single course even for academic writing would not suffice. He argued that as a result, “it is only [...] the French majors who end up being advanced in French way more than the minors”, hence the need for the introduction of elective courses for both streams (majors and minors) aside the prescribed obligatory ones. This clarification was again reflective of the context where students learn academic writing for French through other courses rather than a specially designed one.

Further, while the concept of a specially designed course was predominant, along with the introduction of more elective ones where there would be continued training in academic writing, some participants made other equally significant recommendations. One suggestion that recurred in some instances concerned the introduction of a French writing competition in all universities/institutions that offer French in Malawi. The students argued that this would prompt them to engage into more academic writing outside the classroom context. Additionally, another suggestion called for the need to “conduct trainings and seminars, writing competitions, [and] debates [...] in every university in Malawi”.

The active engagement of the students in providing possible solutions demonstrates their readiness to adapt to any possible interventions targeting amelioration of their experience in academic writing for the French language. It also confirms their understanding of existing challenges due to unavailability of academic writing courses for French in the Malawian university. This position reiterates our hypothesis of a lack that interferes with the students’ transitioning and development of critical skills in academic writing. The affirmation warrants the need for intervention from relevant stakeholders, in this context various authorities responsible for curriculum review and development in the concerned institutions (Jouffroy, 2022).

## **5. Recommendations**

Our discussion of the findings renders it pertinent for us to recognize the role assumed by French lecturers in the Malawian university setting as they take it upon themselves to teach students the nuances of academic writing in French. However, we argue that addressing these challenges requires a systematic approach to ensure that the acquisition of writing skills is not solely dependent on individual teachers' effort. As such, we suggest a solution to the identified challenges and propose an alternative perspective for future research on academic writing within French programs or courses.

For the former, we find the idea of conceptualizing specialized academic writing courses for French as highlighted by some of the students an effective remedy. These courses can span the first two years of the French program of study. The objective would be to ensure that the students are well equipped with skills in academic writing from the entry point (first year) through to the second year as they prepare to engage in major research projects in their years of specialization (third and fourth year). The reason behind the proposition of a two year-period, as opposed to just one (first year) as is often the case with academic writing in English, relates to the general background of the students of French. As highlighted previously, French as a foreign language only starts appearing in the Malawian education system at the secondary school level. Hence, providing university students with a two-year specialized course in academic writing presents an opportunity for enhanced proficiency in their overall French academic writing skills. This serves to compensate for the limited time spent on French as a foreign language before entering the university. In the case of the latter, given that our analysis focused solely on students' perspectives, a more comprehensive insight into the terrain of academic writing in French could be attained by exploring teacher experiences at the university level. As such we present the significance of input from university lecturers on the subject as a potential avenue for future research that can be conducted independently and serve as a valuable complement to our own study.

## **6. Conclusion**

To sum up, the article interrogated how students enrolled in French courses/programs in Malawian universities navigate academic writing skills particular to French. This objective emanated from the common understanding that specially designed courses for academic writing skills only focus on English as the language is the only prominent medium of instruction in

Malawian universities. However, such a perspective overlooks the context of university students enrolled in French courses/programs where French is the medium of instruction. Our findings affirmed the neglect which we assumed such students encounter in terms of academic writing. Thus, the study confirmed the inexistence of courses equally conceived to equip these students with academic skills necessary for their writing as they execute various tasks and assignments in French. We also found that as a consequence, the students struggle with academic writing in the French courses, often relying on their course lecturers' varying guidance and borrowing concepts from the English-oriented general language and communication skills course. As such, in the article, we also outlined student recommendations for a successful integration of university students enrolled in French programs/courses with regards to academic writing. The article concludes with our own recommendations on both the remedial aspect pertaining to the highlighted challenges in academic writing for French and possible areas for future research on the same.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest

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