



English Language Writing-Exposure and Pre-Academy Writing Perceptions of Police Officers in Gauteng, South Africa

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Abstract

In South Africa, the quality and adequacy of English writing competency displayed by police officers is perceived to have been deteriorating. One of the perceived probable cause is lack or less of English writing exercises during the high school years and lack of adequate exposure (out of school) to English writing during working hours. This challenge can be addressed by investigating the pre-academy writing experiences of police officers before they joined South African Police Service (SAPS) as well as how much of English writing are they exposed to during working hours. An investigation about the pre-academy writing experience of police officers as well as their exposure to English language was conducted using a questionnaire complimented by in-depth interviews with a selected sample of research subjects. Among other things, the study also found that the inadequacy of English writing tasks during the high school years contributes significantly to the inadequate workplace English writing competency of police constables in South Africa (SA). Also the unsurprising finding was the over exposure of English writing during working hours. This article underscores the importance of adequate English writing competency as well as the importance of adequate English writing exercises during school years. The findings in this article may help anticipate English writing challenge faced by police trainees. Furthermore they can help in informing the content of English writing component in the Basic Police Development and Learning Programme (BPDLP).

Keywords: *Basic Police Development Learning Programme; South African Police Service; Workplace English Writing Competency; Training; Police Station; Pre-Academy Writing Experience; Police Trainee; Linguistic Competence; English Exposure*

Introduction

Pre and post-Academy English language skills testing is vital in police training academies in SA. Al-Zoubi (2018, 153) in agreement with the above assertion wrote as follows: *'Exposure to English*

language is something learners run into in their everyday life'. Recently in South Africa (SA) we have observed a concerted departmental effort to improve the quality of police officers produced by SAPS training academies and among other things, this has been observed by the recent introduction of a new SAPS training BPDLP (Basic Police Development Learning Programme). Among other things, this new programme also focuses on how to produce police officers who can write well in English for them to be able to work effectively. The central idea in this article is that adequate English language exposure coupled with adequate pre-academy English writing experience can enhance police officers English writing competency significantly. This idea is based on recent trends in research on students' exposure to English language outside a formal learning area or classroom which have shown to have the potential to enhance the students' English writing competency (e.g. Azzolini, Campregher, and Madia 2020; Al-Zoubi 2018; Lambine's 2008; De Wilde, Brysbaert, and Eyckmans 2020). This idea further draws from 'the assumption that apprehension among many university students to engage in writing may be a consequence of their inexperience with writing tasks at secondary school' (Kasanga, 1999; Mawasha 1993).

This article is an account of a study which attempted to follow this line of research, however in this article the focus was on police officers in the SAPS. The study was an investigation of police constables' pre-academy writing experiences and their exposure to English writing activities at workplace environment. This study was conducted with the hope that the findings of the study would better equip the SAPS instructors and curriculum developers in SAPS training academies in at least understanding the root cause of the challenge of inadequate English writing competency faced by police officers and trainees. The findings in this article may also help anticipate English writing challenge faced by police trainees. Furthermore they can help in informing the content of English writing component in the Basic Police Development and Learning Programme (BPDLP).

Literature Review

Studies on Language Exposure

The increased exposure to FLs (Foreign Language) via internet, audio-visual and social media allows for the possibility of learning languages, and especially English, outside the classroom context (Muñoz & Cadierno 2021, 186). The vital role of out-of-school exposure in L2 learning can be clarified by usage-based approaches, which accept language learning to be input-dependent and experientially-based (See, Ellis & Cadiern 2009). Thus, this study focused much on exposure (i.e. of English language learning of police constables). Linguistic competency can be enhanced if learning could continue also after formal instruction because 'much of what must be learned given even an optimal teaching system, must be acquired outside of formal instruction...' (Selinger 1977). Muñoz and Cadierno (2021, 186) concurred as follows:

'In the last decade, second language acquisition (SLA) research has turned its attention to the role of out-of-school exposure in the acquisition of foreign languages (FLs)'.

Al-Zoubi (2018, 152) also in agreement with the above assertion wrote as follows:

'Educators simply look forward to enabling their students to express themselves in simple correct and acceptable level of English through exposure to English language'.

In the last two decades, research has increasingly focused on the characteristics of learners' out-of-school exposure and its influence on language learning (see Sundqvist & Sylvén 2016). In addition, Unsworth, Persson, Prins, and de Bot, (2015, 188) found that after two years of instruction, amount of classroom exposure (more than 60 minutes of weekly classroom exposure versus 60 minutes or less) was

a significant predictor of children's outcomes in receptive vocabulary and grammar skills. This is precisely one of the reasons why we embarked on this study. Furthermore, it is argued that language exposure is vital to language learning and the type and level of language proficiency that emanates from the language learning process because that is almost entirely determined by language exposure (Lubega 1979).

Recent research has provided a countless evidence regarding the positive impact of out-of-school exposure on L2 learning (e.g., Cadierno & Eskildsen 2015; Muñoz et al. 2018). As it can be seen, a plethora of studies have shown that there is a correlation between exposure on the language learned and writing proficiency in that language (e.g. Unsworth, Persson, Prins, and de Bot 2015; Al-Zoubi 2018; Muñoz and Cadierno 2021). Therefore the on the effect of adequate exposure to English language activities outside the classroom on English writing competency is very important. Furthermore Chomsky (1972) found out in another study that there is a strong relationship between children's exposure to written language and the rate of linguistic development. Though language is a kind of latent structure in the human mind, according to the rationalists (Houston 1971) the development of language depends on exposure to some specific linguistic experience (Curtis Franklin et.al. 1974). According to Al-Zoubi (2018, 153) exposure to English language is something learners run into in their everyday life.

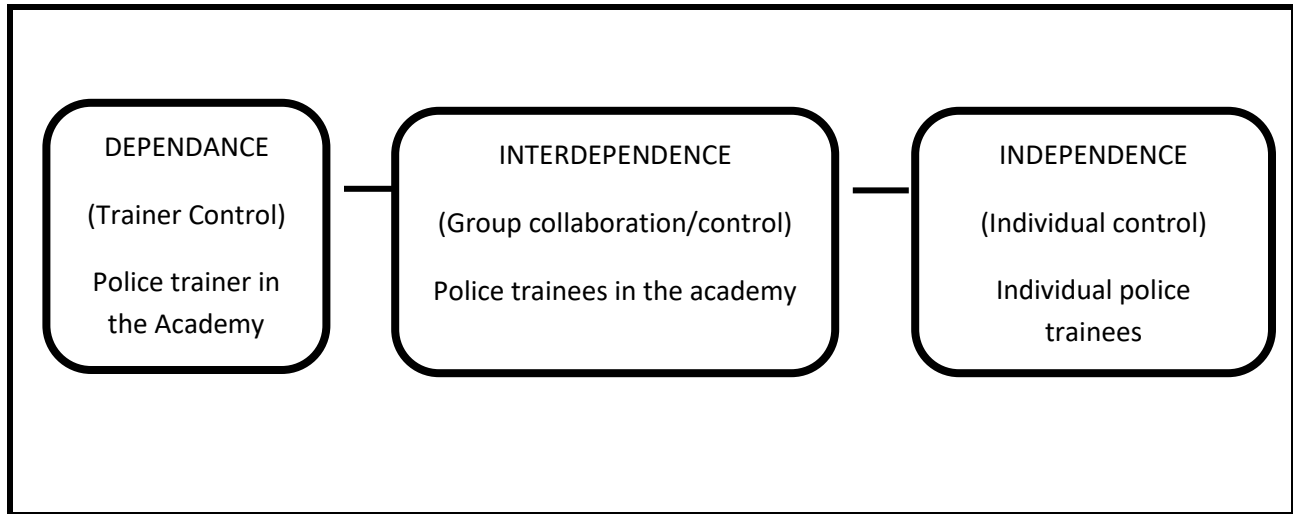
According to Wilkins (1974), the social background of the learner has significant effect on the development of language skills and for the purpose of this study, the pre-academy writing experiences served as the social background of the police officers and this will be taken to cover the linguistic background of the police officers. Al-Zoubi (2018, 160) in his study titled 'The Impact of Exposure to English Language on Language Acquisition' showed that 'the statistical analysis approved that there are some positive relationships between exposure to English language and language acquisition as well as in developing the four language skills'. Thus, it is imperative for one to investigate if the same principle can apply in police training academies. The literature reviewed about point to one thing and that is, there is a significant relationship between students' exposure to English language use through extra-school language activities and their proficiency in English language.

Lastly, the assumption that apprehension among many university students to engage in writing may be a consequence of their inexperience with writing tasks at secondary school (Kasanga 2006, 147) encouraged the researcher to investigate if the same phenomenon could be applying in police officers.

Theoretical Framework

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory was adopted as the underpinning framework to this study. According to the theory, one does not need to use grammatical rules of the target language extensively in order to learn it. All that is required are meaningful interactions in the language, which generally focuses more on the message that is conveyed than the grammar and rules of speech. Competence in the language is acquired because of receiving comprehensible input without having undergone any formal instruction or training. Thus, this makes this theory an apt lens to study how exposure to English language writing can help in improving ones writing competence. A linguist and a scholar by the name of Krashen founded this theory. In trying to elucidate the approach regarding how we see exposure as a critical element in improving English language writing we also draw from principles espoused by proponents of usage-based models such as Langacker (1987) and Tomasello (2003) Thus, this study is based on the assumption that usage-based differences in the amount of contact with English inside and outside school have implications for L2 English learning even at post school and workplace level. Since the study was concerned more specifically with writing, the Mini Model of student's progress towards autonomy in Writing by Kasanga (2004) was also seen to be apt. It is maintained that in the three stage move, the stage of dependence emphasizes the teachers role (i.e. in the context of this

study will be the police trainers in police training academies) and the interdependence focus on the peers' role. From this interdependence grows dependence (2004, 69). The model is depicted below.



Adapted from Kasanga (2004): Mini Model of student's progress towards autonomy in Writing

Research Methodology of the Study

Context, Setting and Sampling

According to Schwedt (1997, 140) the site or place of a study is chosen on the basis of a combination of criteria including availability, accessibility and theoretical interest. This study was no exception. Thus, this study was conducted in the city of Tshwane, Gauteng province in South Africa. The city at that time had three (3) SAPS clusters out of four (4) SAPS clusters in the selected geographical region were selected. These three clusters are located in various parts of the city of Tshwane. In addition, these three SAPS clusters comprised 20 police stations. Police cluster one (1) had nine (9) police stations followed by cluster two (2) with six (6) police stations and lastly cluster three (3) with five (5) police stations. Purposive sampling resulted with the selection of three SAPS clusters out of four SAPS clusters in the selected geographical region (Gauteng Province). The police trainees in these SAPS clusters are trained from SAPS training academies under a programme called Basic Police Development Learning Programme (BPDLP). This programme is offered by Safety and Security Sector Education and Training Authority (SASSETA) accredited SAPS training academies.

Research Design and Data Collection Instruments

This study adopted a case study design because it offered an in-depth study of a single unit (a relatively bounded phenomenon) in which the scholar's aim is to elucidate features of a larger class of similar phenomena (Gerring 2004, 341). In addition, Eisenhardt (1989, 534) and Yin (1994, 41-42) maintain that case studies can employ multiple levels of analysis within a single study. This study used quantitative research method. The investigation used made use of a questionnaire with mixed questions to collect data. The researchers administered the questionnaires. Two hundred and three (203) police constables participated in answering the questionnaire. It has to be noted that this was part of a large doctoral study.

The Aim of the Study

It was thus, hoped that answers to the ‘background’ writing experience of police officers and their experience regarding exposure to English writing during their SAPS training, at their workplace and as well during their grade 12 year will help in getting a comprehensive picture (i.e regarding at these three environments) regarding how English language exposure play or played a role in their English writing competency. Thus, the study was carried out with the following aims in mind:

- (i) To establish the police officers pre-academy English writing experiences
- (ii) To establish if the police officers are satisfied with the amount or level of English exposure they got both out of school while doing at grade 12 and during SAPS training years
- (iii) To establish if exposure to English language writing outside Police Training Academy aided English writing competency of police trainees.

It was envisaged that the findings of this study could help in creating intervention measures to help curb the inadequate English writing challenge faced by these police officers. Thus, The hypothesis that SA police constables have inadequate English language exposure during their grade 12 year and as well during their SAPS training workplace was tested by conducting a case study research that is based on the above discussed research design. The hypothesis in this regard are indicated below:

- Null hypothesis (H_0): Even though the education system in SA is predominantly offered in English most learners in SA do not receive adequately exposure to English language outside classroom setting.
- Alternative hypothesis (H_1): Even though the education system in SA is predominantly offered in English most learners receive adequate exposure to English language outside classroom setting.

Research Problem

Most of the SAPS recruits come directly from matric and research has shown that majority of them are from communities where English is not a native language. For example, in SA a very small percentage of police officers are L1 speakers of English (First Language Speakers) and this articulates to the issue of exposure. (See Kekana 2015). Thus, investigating English language exposure and pre-academy English writing experiences will be helpful in understanding the inadequate English writing competency faced by many police officers in SA. Accordingly, this study sought to provide evidence and also to achieve the two aims mentioned above by creating the following three research questions:

1. What are the police officers pre-academy English writing experiences?
2. What are the perspectives of these police officers regarding out of school exposure as far as English writing is concerned?

To harvest the relevant information that is evidenced-based so that the above two (2) main research question can be answered, the following secondary questions were posed to the research subjects to deduce a comprehensive picture about the matter at hand:

1. What were you doing prior to joining SAPS?
2. How often in your daily work do you write in English at your workplace?
3. Where you doing English writing tasks during your grade 12 education?
4. Where you doing English writing tasks during your SAPS training?
5. What strategy do you apply when confronted with a writing task?
6. How often during your matric/grade twelve year were you doing English writing tasks?
7. How important is having your draft read by your colleague before submission?

8. What did you find to be important to help you to improve your English competency during your matric/grade twelve year?
9. Do you think the English writing exposure you had before your police training helped you to improve your English writing competency at the academy?

Data Collection and Analyses

Data was harvested from all the 203 research subjects through a questionnaire. This was done to get in-depth information about their perceptions and experiences regarding their English language exposure before commencing their police training this data was analysed statistically for recurring themes.

Data Analysis, Presentation and Findings

The Mother Tongue Language of Police Constables

To answer the first research question inquiring about the mother tongue language of the police officers before they became police officers with the aim of getting the differences, descriptive statistics were calculated first (see Figure 5.1). Figure 5.1. below indicates that from the sample, no one spoke English as a mother tongue (0.0%). This clearly supports Kekana's (2015) that majority of the SAPS members do not speak English as a mother tongue this articulates to the issue of exposure to English. Thus, the question remains, how much of English language were this police officers exposed to before their police training academy?

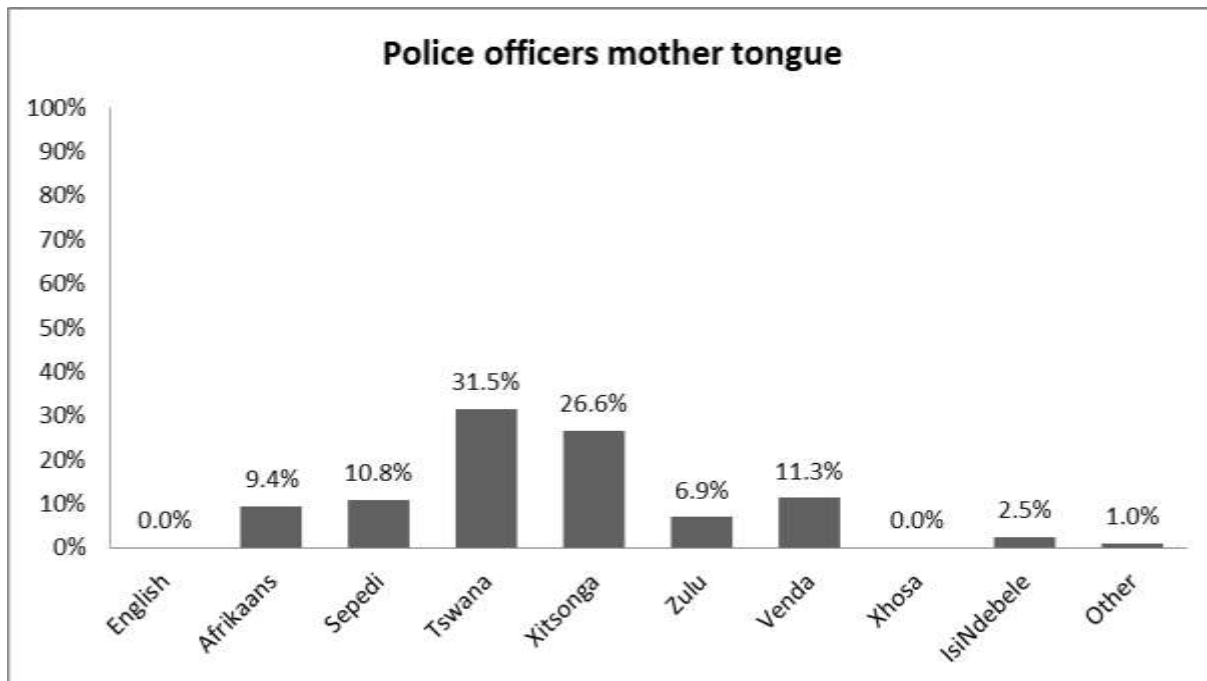


Figure 5.1 The mother tongue language of police officers
The work/job issue of police officers before they became police officers

To answer the second research question inquiring about the type of job the police officers were doing before they became police officers with the aim of getting the differences, descriptive statistics were calculated first (see

Figure 5.2). Figure 5.2. below indicates that 66.0% were students/pupil before joining SAPS. This is not a surprising result given the socio economic conditions and work situation in SA.

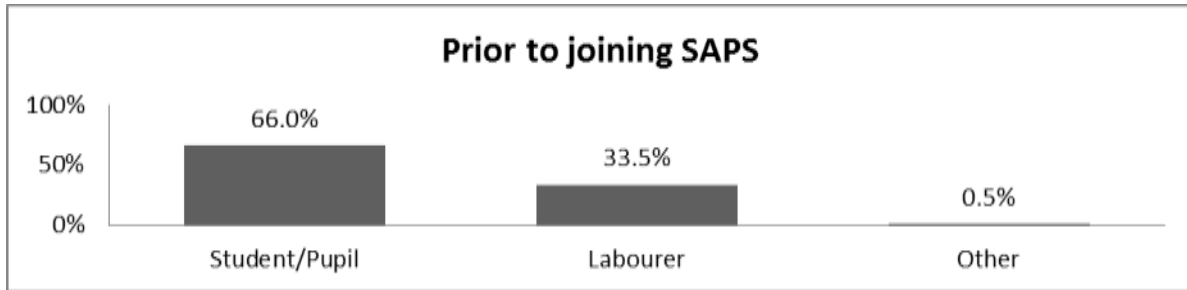


Figure 6.2. Work prior to joining SAPS
The English writing activities issue regarding police officers

The data in Figure 5.3 show that a staggering 184 (90.6%) of the research participants indicated that they write in English all the time at their workplace. This further emphasises the need for police constables to be exposed more to English language so that their English competency can be enhanced. The findings discussed in this paragraph are shown in Figure 5.3 below.

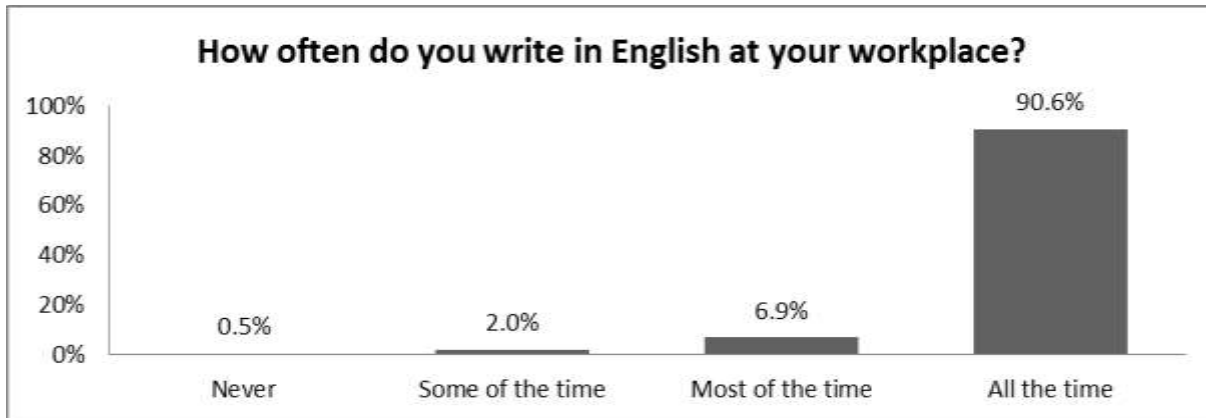


Figure 5.3 Perceptions about English writing activities at SAPS workplace.

The data in Figure 5.4 show that a staggering 65% of the research participants indicated that they ‘sometimes’ had English writing tasks in English. It is only 24.6% which indicated that they had writing tasks ‘always’. This happened during their SAPS training. Figure 5.4 indicated the below results.

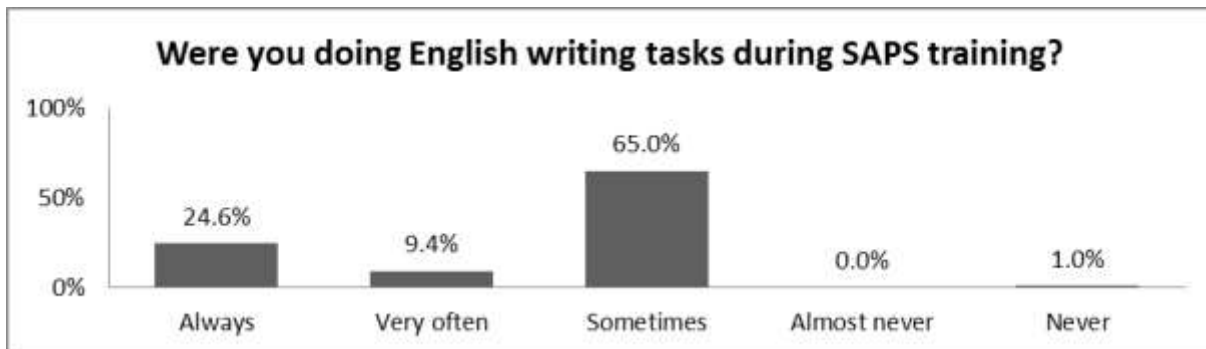


Figure 5.4 English Writing Tasks

The data in Figure 5.5 below show that a 59.1% of the research participants indicated that they had a writing task only ‘once a week’. This is a significant percentage. It is only 22.0% which indicated that they had writing tasks ‘twice a week’. Figure 5.5 indicated this results. The ‘once a week’ option is stronger and this indicates a conflicting message given the fact that in Figure 5.5 ‘all the time’ option is stronger.

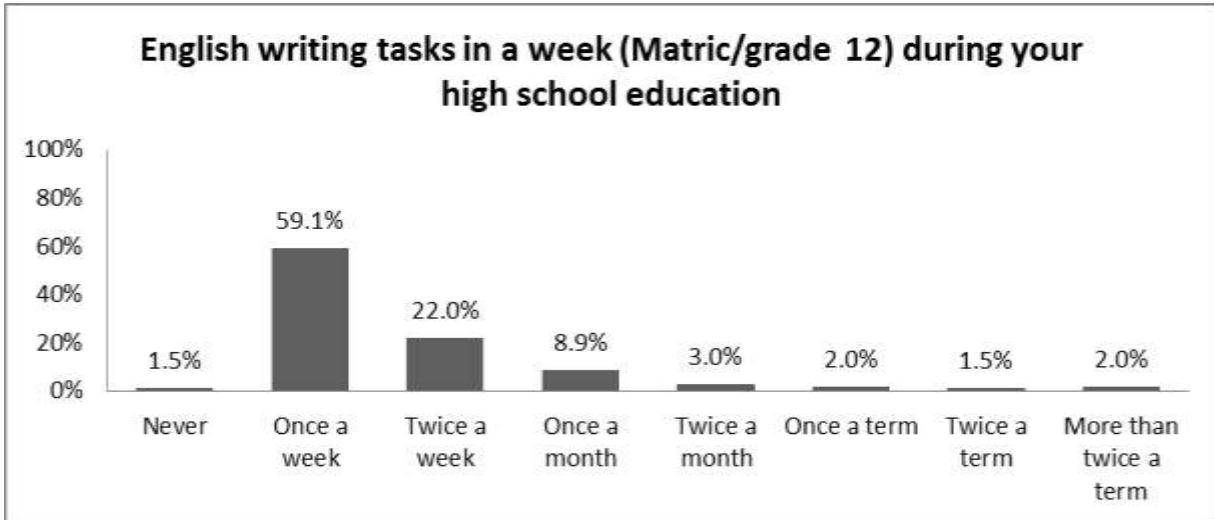


Figure 5.5 English writing tasks in a week during high school education

Statistical differences were computed to examine the differences in terms of ‘ how they perceived the importance of their colleagues reading their draft work before final submission’. The results in Figure 5.6 below indicates that the ‘probably important’ option is stronger than all the other options followed by ‘definitely important’ option. This clearly indicates that the police officers are not certain about the importance of having their work read by their colleagues before a final submission can be made. This is serious concern because we know the importance of peer review in academic work (including writing).

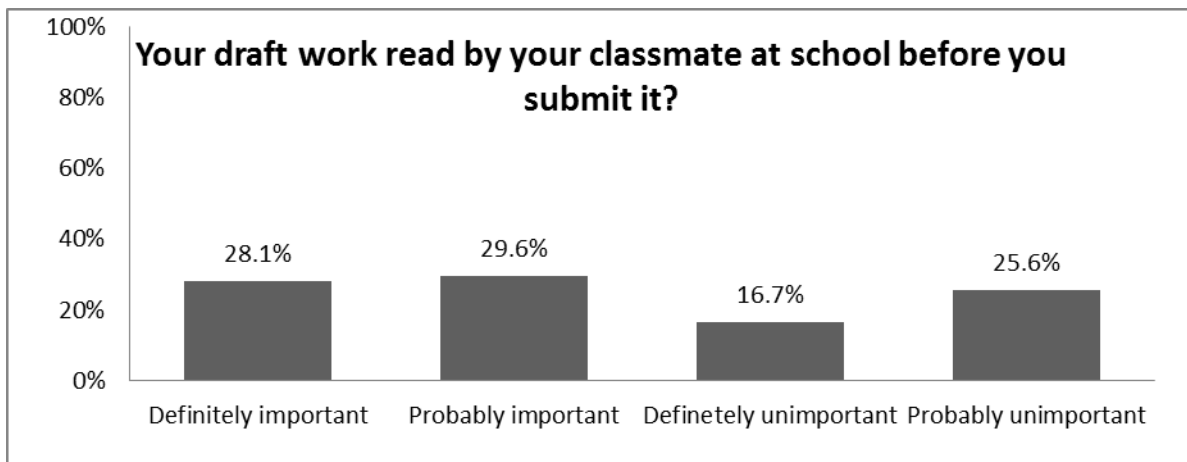


Figure 5.6 How often do you let your colleague read your draft work?
The writing strategy that the police officers employ

To answer the research question inquiring about the type of writing strategy that these research subjects employ or employed when embarking on an English writing activity, descriptive statistics were calculated (see Figure 5.7). Figure 5.7. below indicates that 77.3% of the research respondents indicated that they ‘never or almost never’ ‘get someone or a colleague to edit their written work’. This is not a surprising result given the fact that not too much emphasis is placed on peer review strategy not even in most high schools in SA and this is very concerning. Hirst and Altman (2012) also clearly shows the importance of peer review strategy. Thomas,Chie, Abraham, Raj and Beh (2014) in their study titled ‘A qualitative review of literature on peer review of teaching in higher education: an application of the SWOT framework’ also encourages and shows the importance of peer review.

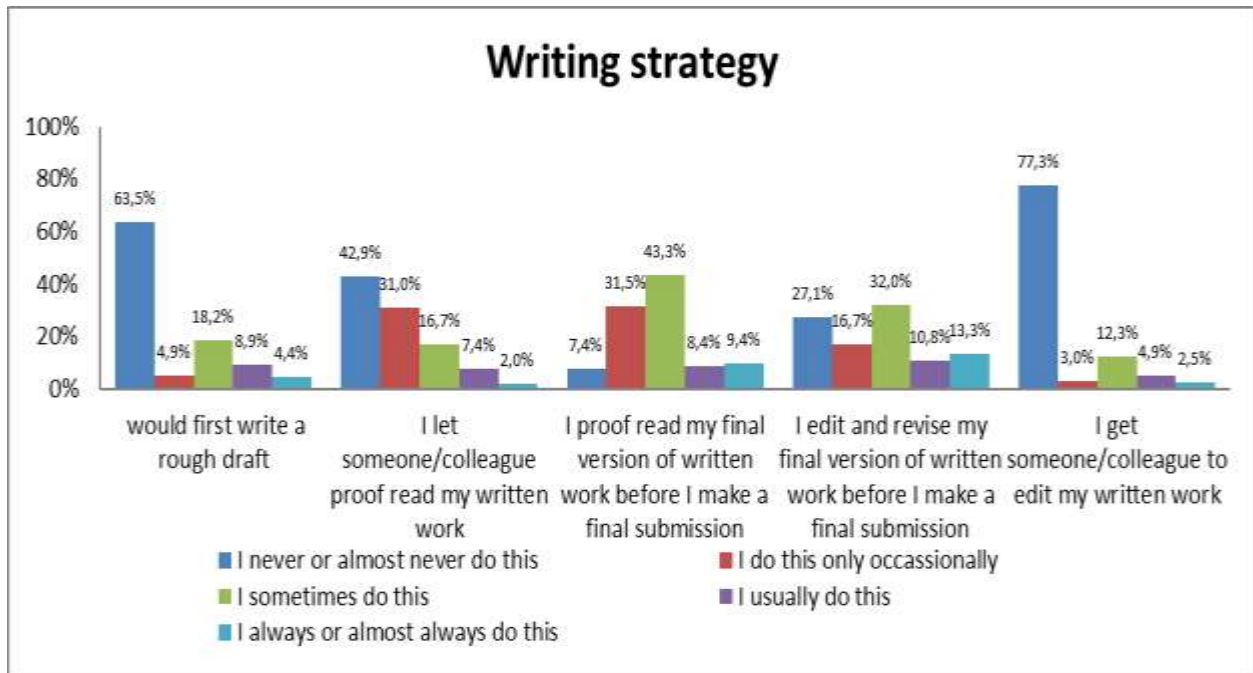


Figure 5.7 The writing strategy employed by the research subjects
The writing strategy that the police officers employ

To address the research question that inquired about ‘what the police officers considers to be important in as far as aiding their English writing competency is concerned’, statistical analysis were computed (see Figure 5.8). The first noticeable difference between the four samples concerned is the significant preference of the option ‘very important’. The one that stands out in that category is that ‘Reading’ and ‘Listening’ options comes out stronger. The other significant results is that the option ‘Important’ also received quite significant scores where ‘Speaking’ also came tops followed by ‘Writing’. Generally, the results indicate that the ‘Very Important’ graphs are stronger compared to all the other three graphs.

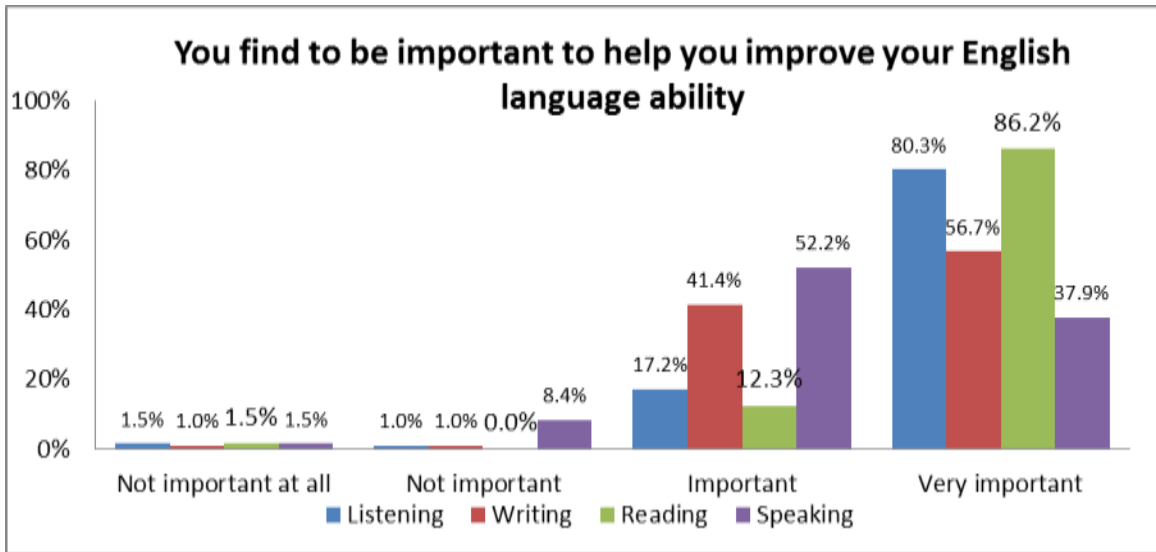


Figure 5.8 The aspect considered to be important in improving English writing

Statistical differences were computed to examine the research subjects perspectives and experience in terms of ‘ how they perceived the English writing exposure they (research subjects) had as a contributor to their English Writing competency’’, The results in Figure 5.9 below indicates that the majority of the police trainees do not think the exposure they had contributed to their English Writing competency. This clearly indicates that the police officers affirm the fact that because of their background (rural background where English exposure is less) they do not consider English writing exposure to be important in aiding the writing competency.

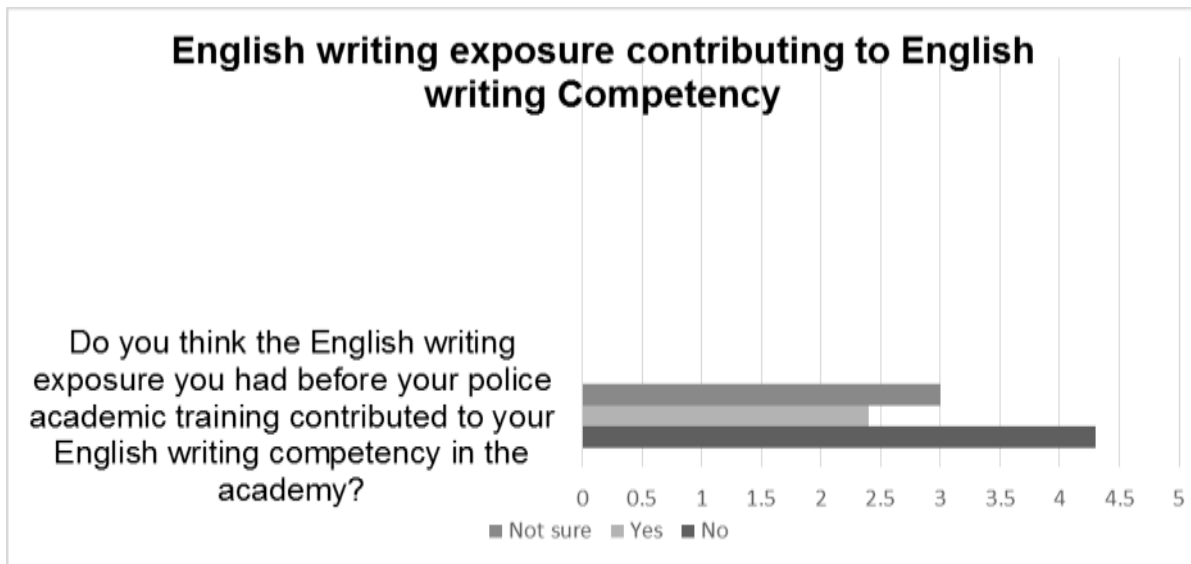


Figure 5.9 English Writing exposure contributing to writing competency

Discussion

This study investigated the perspectives of police constables (Research subjects) on different language aspects preferences in environments that differ in the amount of English exposure with the focus on writing. In some instances, the investigation compared the research subjects' frequency of their out-of-school and out of SAPS Training academy exposure by means of various related questions. The first research question compared the research subjects type of work or activity the police constables were doing before joining SAPS, descriptive statistics indicated that 66.0% were students/pupil before joining SAPS. This is not a surprising result given the socio economic conditions and work situation in SA. This result generally concurs with many other studies that indicated that majority of police recruits in SA have less English writing exposure and this kind of a situation creates problems for the SAPS Training Academies because they (Academies) are caught in a situation where they are supposed to attend to matters that should have been attended at secondary/high school education.

The investigation also found that the majority of the police trainees do not think the exposure they had contributed to their English Writing competency. This clearly indicates that the police officers affirm the fact that because of their background (rural background where English exposure is less) they do not consider English writing exposure to be important in aiding the writing competency. The above assertion ties with Muñoz and Cadierno (2021:202) study which also found that the amount of gaming in English to be positively related to different language measures, including receptive vocabulary size, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Thus, we argue that most police recruits experience less English writing exposure because due to the economic conditions of where they come from (i.e family background) they do not have the means to access things such as 'gaming' which has proven to provide the relevant exposure for 'writing skills'. Furthermore, Muñoz and Cadierno (ibid) asseverated that on the out-of-school activities, it was interesting that 'viewing English-spoken videos was more strongly associated with linguistic measures'. Thus, we argue that most pupils (particularly grade 12) should be exposed more to 'viewing English-spoken' material such as TV and other related media so as to improve their English competency including writing.

The unsurprising results in this investigation is the one that showed that a staggering 90.6% of the research participants indicated that they write in English all the time at their workplace. This further emphasises the need for police constables to be exposed more to English language so that their English competency can be enhanced. The investigation is also illuminated the fallacy that when L2 learners of English are provided with longer period of English instruction they will acquire adequate writing skill even if they are not exposed to English outside their formal education.

The results did not support the prediction that since South African education system is 'run' predominately through the language of English, the assumption is that most learners at grade 12 (Matric) are have more exposure to English language. Interestingly, majority of the research subjects in this investigation indicated that they do not think they got adequate exposure to English during their grade 12 year and even at SAPS training academies.

A tentative explanation for these findings is that the SAPS recruits may have thought (unconsciously) that because they have taught through the medium of English and done English as a subject that gave them adequate exposure to English and that this would be enough to help them at their SAPS training and as well as at their workplace. This misconception can also be found in their teachers and trainers. Thus, it is imperative that trainers at SAPS training academies and as well as teachers at high schools be warned that English language exposure that is outside formal classroom setting is a contributing variable which should also be taken seriously and encouraged.

Lastly, the investigation also has some aspects of English language contact from an anthropological linguistic perspective which articulates to the issue of linguistic exposure in a particular

society of people (i.e the police officers) and this is what makes this study a bit different to other studies in this field. The issue of how police recruits lived experiences before becoming police trainees and ultimately police officers is central as it relates to the lived experiences of a community or communities.

Conclusion

The present study has shed some new light on the unexplored issue of differences in English learning arising from divergences in the weight of in-school and out of school learning and in the degree of social penetration of English and linguistic distance from this language. Despite the exploratory nature of the study, its findings make several relevant contributions. It has shed light on the ways in which English language learning may be affected by different combinations of classroom instruction and out-of-the classroom exposure and, hereby, it has provided support for the experientialist view of language acquisition in usage-based accounts of L2 learning, that is, the fact that language knowledge is viewed as emerging ontogenetically from participation in particular usage events (Tomasello 2003). The study has also provided a comparison of the amount and types of out of school exposure in which same-age teenagers in a more or less English-rich environment engage. By contrasting the association between these different types of input with learners' performance on the different tests, the study has indicated that this association may show different directions and be dependent on learners' cultural habits (i.e., dubbed or undubbed TV) and, probably, on their proficiency.

Al-Zoubi (2018, 160) articulates that the more the learner exposed to English language, the more he reads and speaks in the language - i.e. - the higher the exposure, the better the learner performs in the target language. Actually, exposure to English language improves language learning as exposure refers to the total contacts with a target language that a learner receives, both in verbal and in written forms. The study reported in this investigation also concurs with Al-Zoubi (ibidi) because it is indeed very important that police recruits be exposed to English because generally they are expected to use mostly during their workplace environment.

The results also pronounce on one important pedagogical implications for police trainers in SAPS Training Academies and that is, police trainers and teachers (particularly at high schools) need to recognize and acknowledge the critical importance of the activities in which learners/ police trainees engage with English in their free time and the effect that this contact with English may have on their writing competency. This study used data which do not warrant the directionality of causality but explored various variables that has a potential to contribute to the English writing competency of police trainees and future studies could investigate the relative effect of different activities on learning gains in relation to specific but different workplaces.

Recommendations

The study recommends the following:

- Advanced or rigorous English linguistic screening of police recruits be implemented at all SAPS Training Academies to establish the level or degree of out of school English exposure experienced by their recruits
- English language exposure activities in SAPS training academies should be part of the training and this could be done through provision of leisure 'games' that concentrate on English language (e.g. Provision of TV's where English language programmes are watched)
- We recommend that police trainees be provided with longer period of English instruction, which we believe will manifest into longer exposure to usage events that are more focused on English linguistic exposure during their training.
- Police trainees must be made aware of the importance of out of training academy English writing activities (exposure)

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