Writers' Block: Strategies for addressing students' writing challenges
Maribel Alao (M.A.), Francine Beckford (B.Ed) & Michelle Stewart-McKoy (M.Phil)
University of Technology, Jamaica.
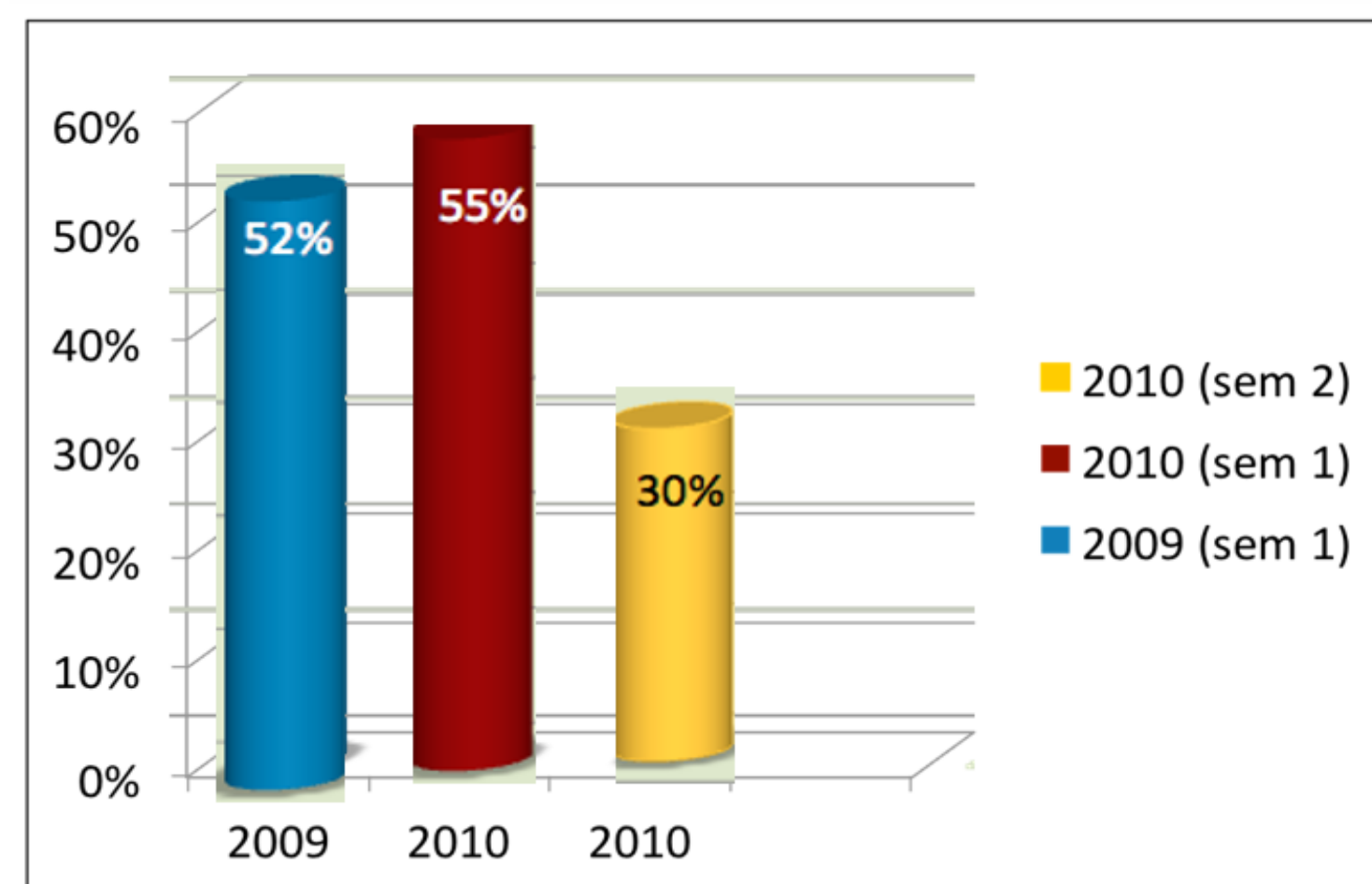
Communication Arts & Technology

Introduction

The Writing Workshop series forms a part of the compulsory courses of the BCAT programme. There were three anomaly reports (30% and above failures) between 2009 and 2010.

In addition to the anomalies, an examination of students' work, students' English language profile, the syllabus, assessment type and number, lecturers' teaching methods and feedback frequency and quality dictated the need for improving the writing skills of the students.

Proposal: The Writers' Block
- Virtual Learning Environment (Moodle platform)
- Face-to-face sessions

Methodology

Setting up of one-on-one consultation
- Weekly 30 - 60 min schedules
- Students sign up via VLE, email or in person
- One session per student per week
- Forms to document students' weak areas
- Forms to document the content covered at each session.

Viewing writing centres from other universities and centres
- Six reputable universities and centres
- To determine relevant content for the 'Writers' Block'
- BCAT's content list was compared with on-line content.

Meetings and training sessions
- Weekly meetings
- Training (Moodle and Hot Potatoes)
- Work distributed and deadlines set

Writing Workshop
- *Reason for the Workshop*

The progress of the Writers' Block was retarded
  a. time constraints
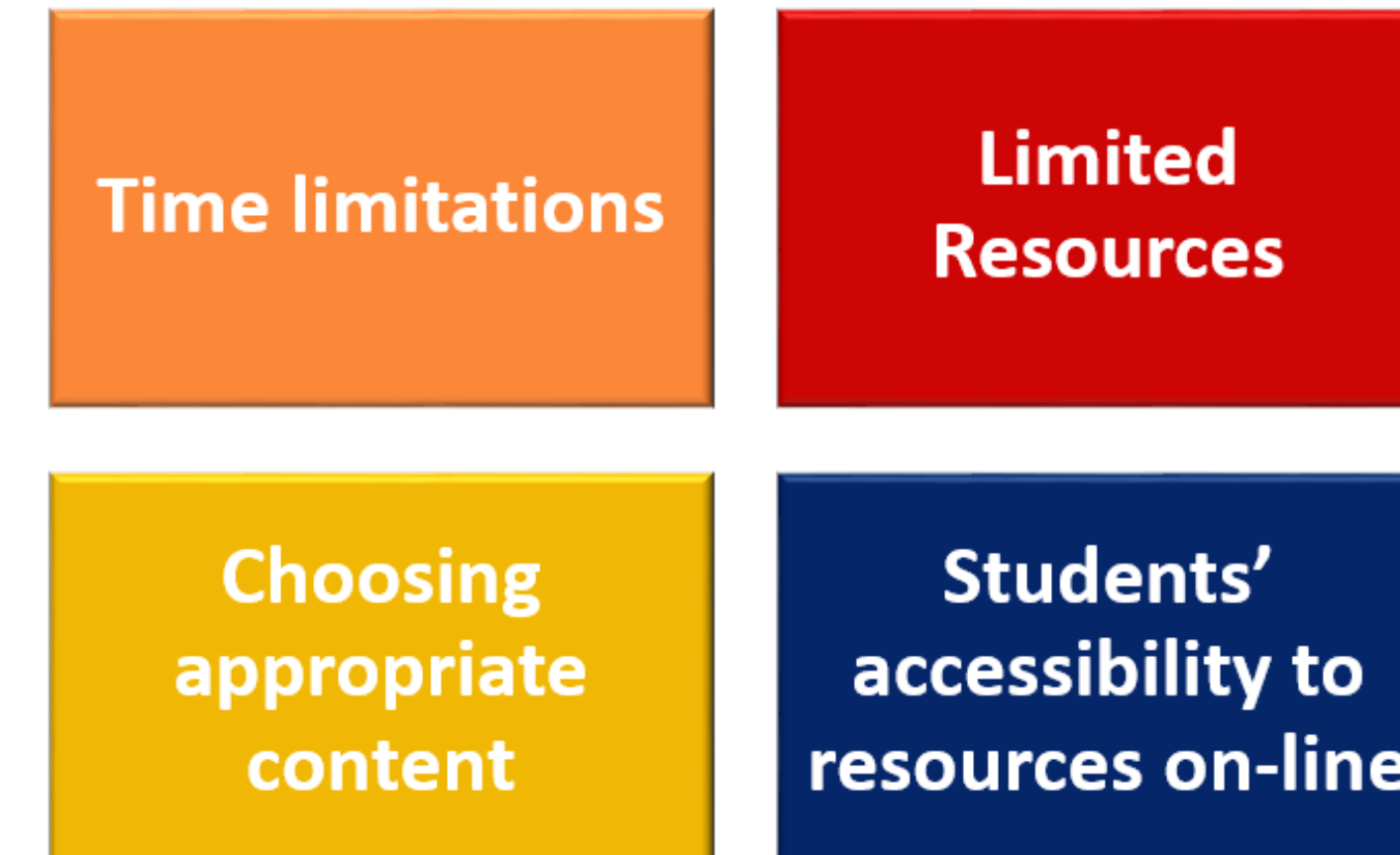 b. the volume of work was greatly underestimated

- *Promotion of the workshop*

a. in classes by lecturers   c. on the VLE
b. via email   d. by flyers

Survey
- Conducted during the semester
- Questionnaires given end of the writing workshop
- Data used in creating the content for the Writers' Block.

Main Challenges

- Time limitations
- Limited Resources
- Choosing appropriate content
- Students' accessibility to resources on-line

Writers' Block Results

Training Sessions
- required more time than anticipated
- insufficient time available for training sessions
- Insufficient time for content development given teaching workload

One-on-one consultation sessions
- Sessions highly publicised
- 4 students signed up
- 1 attended

Notes
- The lack of participation of students may give the impression that students do not seem to prefer this method for improving their English skills.

- Even though there were several hours available over a five-day period for them to register, this had no impact on increasing the number of participants.

- The one student who came, seemed to have an interest in improving her English as she attended regularly and usually informed the facilitator of any absences in advance.

- It should be noted that although the information which follows is based on one student, the information is still relevant and can assist in determining ways to improve the Writers' Block.

It was more useful to start out with simple tasks and then move on to more complex tasks, once the student was able to grasp the simpler concepts. The student was able to provide the rules for carrying out different tasks, for example, paraphrasing. Nonetheless, when it was required for the knowledge to be applied, the student demonstrated difficulty in achieving this. Therefore, it was necessary to use the chronological order for reviewing the information. Over time, the student, grasped the concepts more readily. Consequently, with additional sessions, it is highly possible that the students' writing would have improved significantly.

Workshop Results
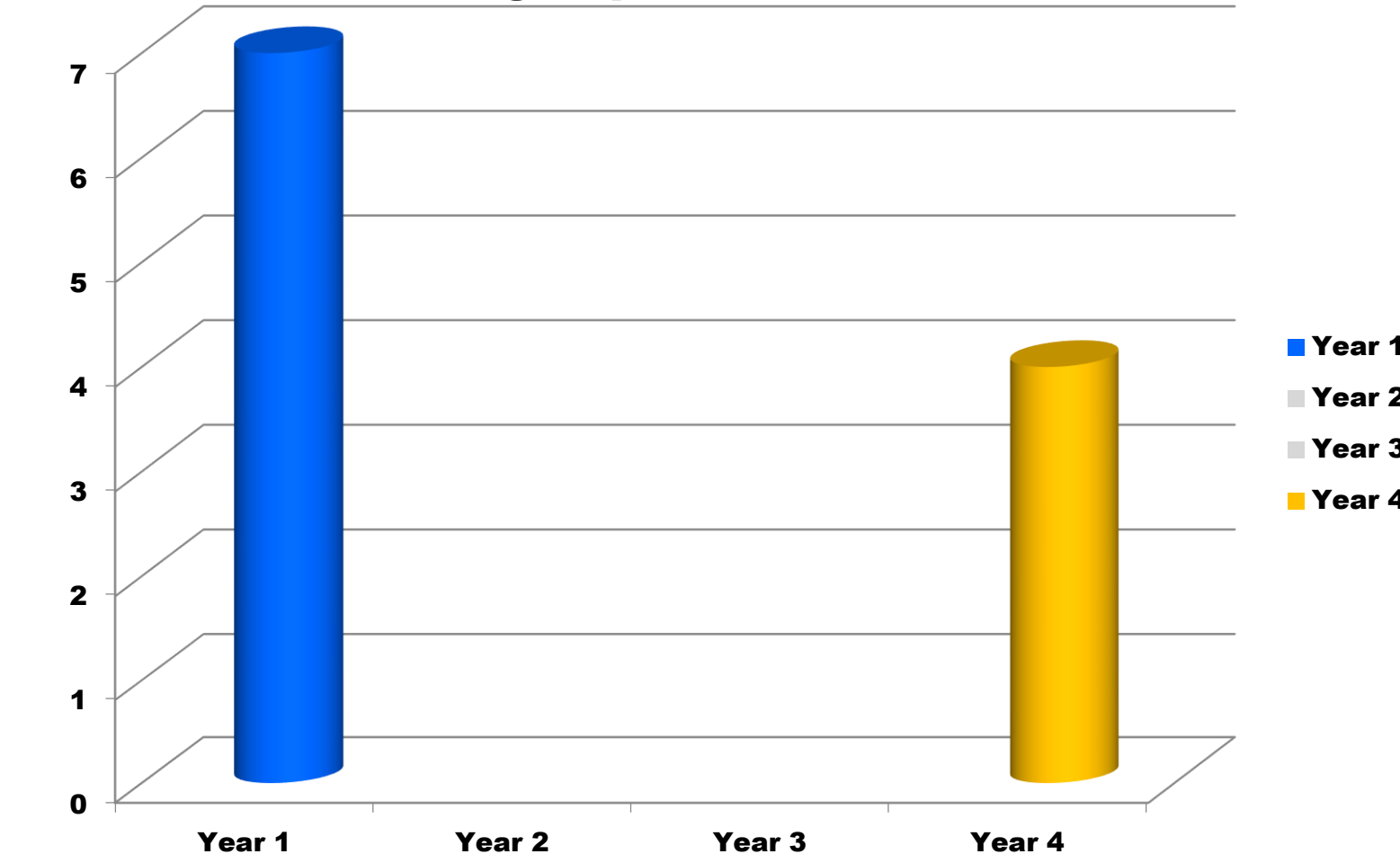
18 of a possible 20 attendees.
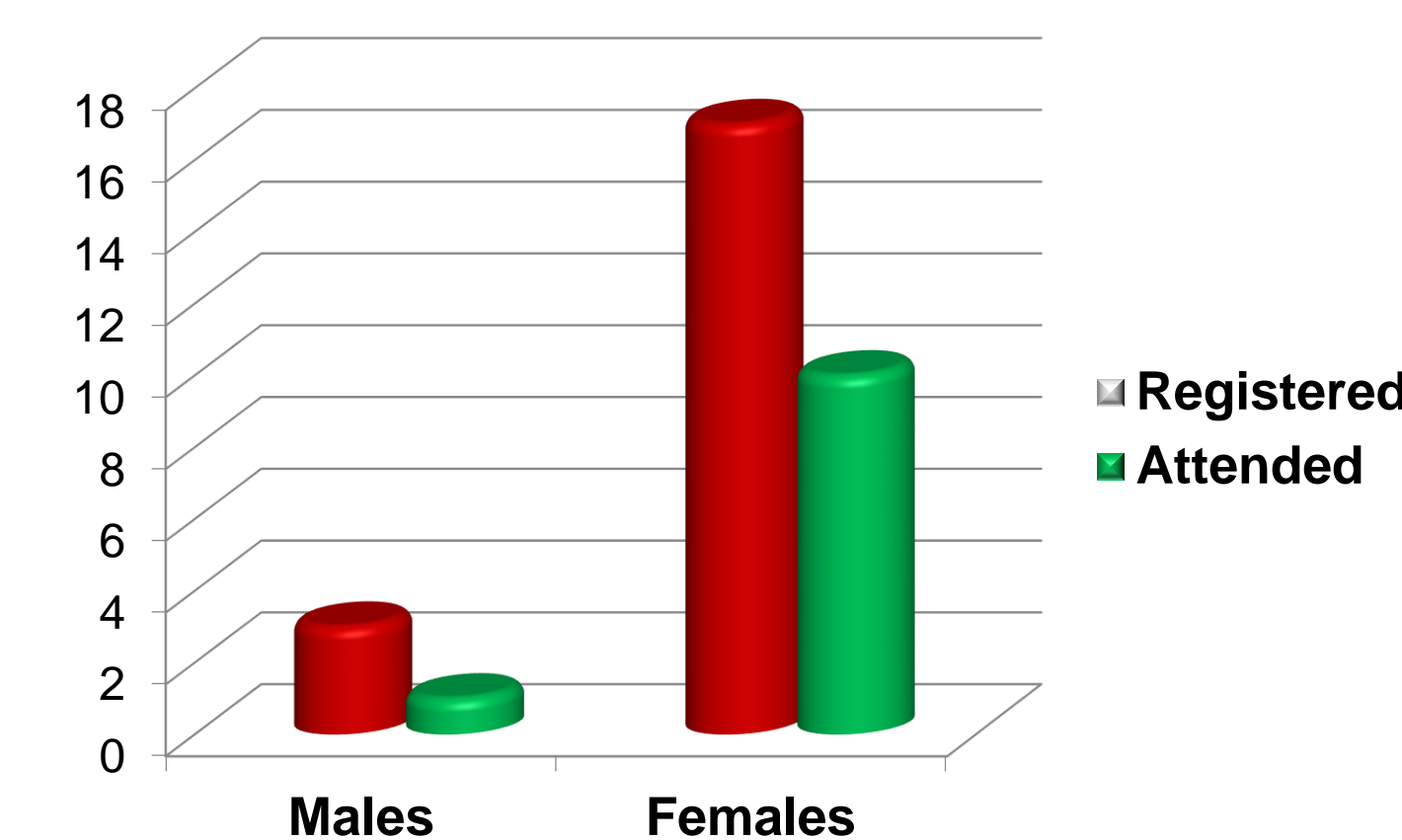
Age Groups
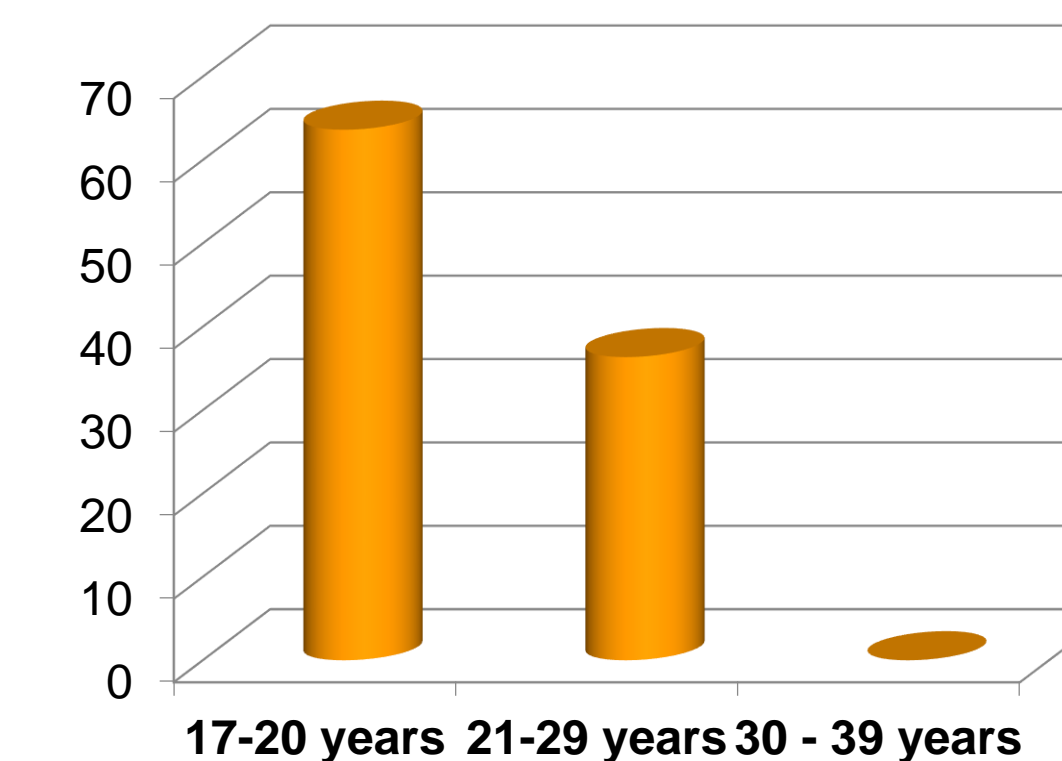
The workshop was open to students from all year groups; however, it was noted that the participants were either first year or final year students; with the majority being first year students.


Year groups

The students were asked to share their reasons for signing up for the workshop. The main responses and their percentages are as follows:
- To improve my English writing skills. (100%)
- My teacher recommended that I should go. (27%)
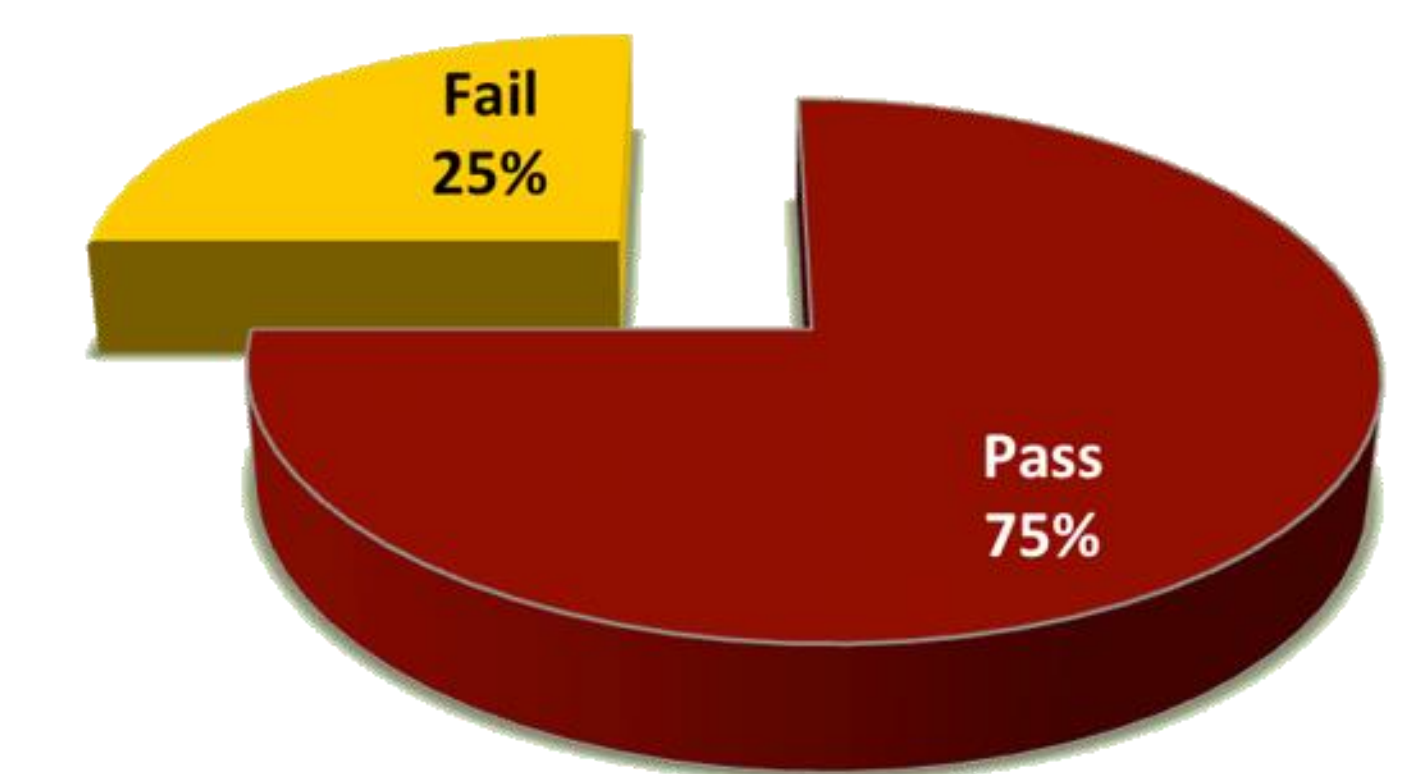- I was curious. (9.09%)
- Other (9.09%)

The participants were asked to share the sessions which they found to be most useful. of the three topic areas, the section on subject-verb agreement (S.V.A.) was found to be the most useful, whereas fragments were considered the least useful.

Most Useful Sessions
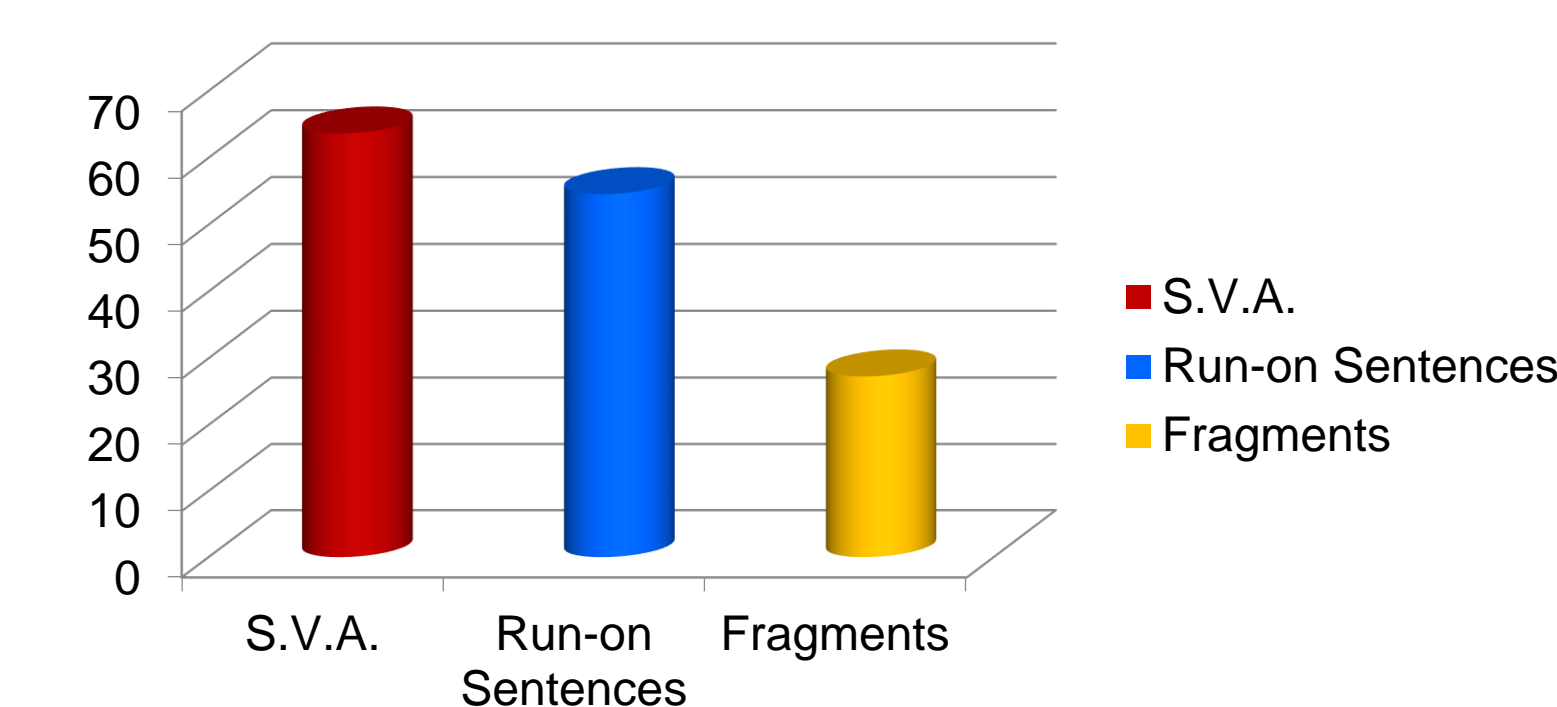
Writing Workshop I Results

WWI 2011/12 results

Recommendations

Writers' Block
1. **Improved time management** – personnel has to manage time wisely so as to be able to handle regular teaching duties as well as other work and personal commitments. The bulk of the work should be carried out during less stressful periods such as the summer. It is best to work on a bit at a time, then increase over time.
2. **Workshop**: a workshop should be held at least once a semester and the themes could be chosen by asking students to identify their main problem areas and then selecting from those options.
3. **Design of activities**: the activities should be designed so as to take into consideration the different learning styles of students, as well as their interests.
4. **Content**: It is best to work on a few topics and then increase in number as time goes by.
5. **Training**: Additional training needs to be provided for Hot Potatoes.

One-on-One Consultation:
1. **Length of sessions**: Each session should last for a minimum of one hour. Although this will reduce the number of students which can be assisted; it will be of more benefit to the students who attend. The sessions also need to accommodate evening students who work during the day.
2. **Stigma**: It should determined whether or not there is a stigma associated with the sessions. This may be done through a questionnaire or asking the students directly. If there is a problem, effective solutions need to be sought to make the sessions more attractive.
3. **Promotion**: There needs to be greater promotion within the classes, as well as via the VLE.
4. **Pairs**: Students could be encouraged to sign up with a friend as they may feel intimidated, having to work alone with the facilitator.

The Workshop:
1. **Workshop content**: The workshop should focus on a maximum of two areas in order to ensure that students get enough exposure to the content. The themes should also be based on areas which other lecturers think their students have a difficulty with.
2. **Improved time management**: Adequate time needs to be allotted to the different activities so that students can benefit more from them. The session should also start at the scheduled time, despite the number of students present.
3. **Engaging activities**: Additional activities which involve group or pair work should be included, as that will increase student participation and they can learn from each other.
4. **Varying the content**: apart from power point presentations, videos can also be used to capture the attention of students.
5. **Promotion**: more creative ways of advertising need to be identified and the placement of posters at more strategic locations.
6. **Follow-up**: After each workshop, contact should be maintained with students and their lecturers to determine a positive change in their writing.