Improving English Language Learners' Academic Writing: A Multi-Strategy Approach to a Multi-Dimensional Challenge[1]

Mejorar la Escritura Académica de Aprendices de inglés: Un efoque de multiestrategia a un desafío multideminesional

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Abstract

The demands of the academic field and the constraints students have while learning how to write appropriately call for better approaches to teach academic writing. This research study examines the effect of a multifaceted academic writing module on pre-service teachers' composition skills in an English teacher preparation program at a medium sized public university in Colombia. Four written samples from sixteen students were analyzed throughout the two academic periods of 2016. Analytical rubrics measured six writing features quantitatively. Results showed that this multifaceted academic writing module significantly improved pre-service teachers' competences such as discourse, syntax, vocabulary, mechanics and language conventions.

Key Words: Academic writing, peer review, tutoring, writing lab, systemized feedback, TOEFL practice, Process Approach

Resumen

Los requerimientos del área académica y las limitaciones de los estudiantes al aprender a escribir exigen mejores estrategias para la enseñanza de la escritura académica. Esta investigación examina el efecto de un módulo multifacético de

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escritura académica en las habilidades de composición de maestros de inglés en formación inicial en una universidad pública mixta de mediano tamaño. Cuatro muestras escritas de dieciséis estudiantes fueron analizadas a lo largo de los dos períodos académicos de 2016. Rúbricas analíticas midieron cuantitativamente las características de escritura de los estudiantes. Los resultados mostraron que este módulo multifacético de escritura académica mejoró significativamente las habilidades de escritura de los maestros de inglés en formación inicial a nivel local y global.

Palabras claves: Escritura académica, evaluación entre pares, tutoría, centro de escritura, retroalimentación sistemática, práctica TOEFL, Enfoque basado en procesos

Resumo

Os requerimentos da área acadêmica a as limitações dos estudantes quando aprendem a escrever, exigem melhores estratégias para o ensino da escritura acadêmica. Esta pesquisa examina o efeito de um módulo multifacético de escritura acadêmica nas habilidades de composição de professores de inglês em formação inicial em uma universidade pública mista de tamanho médio. Foram analisadas quatro amostras escritas de dezesseis estudantes no curso dos dois períodos acadêmicos de 2016. Rubricas analíticas mediram quantitativamente as características de escritura dos estudantes. Os resultados mostraram que este módulo multifacético de escritura acadêmica melhorou significativamente as habilidades de escritura dos mestres de inglês em formação inicial ao nível local e global.

Palavras chave: Escritura académica, avaliação entre pares, tutoria, centro de escritura, retroalimentação sistemática, prática TOEFL, Enfoque baseado em processos

Introduction

Academic writing tasks pose real difficulties to English language learners (ELL) at all levels of education and school subjects, especially to those students with limited academic literacy skills in their native languages (Schleppegrell, 2004; Gomez, 2011; Zhu, 2001). Indeed, once students enter universities and become part of learning communities, writing becomes more of a daunting task. As cognitive, content, and academic demands increase, the development of ELL's writing skills becomes a multi-dimensional challenge for students and for professors and institutions. Students struggle with the processes of learning to write while writing to learn (Marinetti, 1985).

At the college level, there is a need to learn how to read and write for multiple purposes. The nature of writing tasks, mainly argumentative and expository texts, involves critical literacy and it requires synthesizing information from a variety of linguistically-demanding sources. Professors from different faculties often expect that students enter universities with the required reading/writing competences to embrace academic writing tasks (Zhu, 2004). Furthermore, many of them believe that teaching writing is solely the responsibility of language teachers, and paradoxically assume that learners will get to write better on their own; as a consequence, when they assign elaborate complex academic papers to their students, with little or no support, they often get low-quality written products. After all, "writing tasks are assigned without clear guidelines for students about how a particular text type is typically structured and organized" (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 2).

Grounded on Cummins' (1991) Common Underlying Proficiency (CUP) hypothesis, which suggests that learners of a second language draw upon skills from their native language, and according to studies reported by Garcia (2009) on transferability, students' writing performance in English can be affected by their literacy competences in Spanish. Furthermore, the demands of writing tasks at the college level require more sophisticated levels in the argumentative and interpretive dimensions of language.

Students' lack of knowledge of academic genres' rhetorical features, combined with very limited writing experiences that involve argumentation and interpretation, constitute a multi-dimensional challenge in this pre-service teacher program.

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These teachers in development need to learn the language of the academia, which is often very structured and complex (Snow, 1987). These highly literate contexts require students to master advanced levels of grammatical forms and sophisticated vocabulary to interpret

and produce a variety of texts from different genres. As future English teachers, they must overcome their academic discourse limitations while learning to teach English reading and writing. In fact, in order to graduate from the program, students must reach a C1 language proficiency level, measured by a standardized test.

In response to years of professors struggling in their English teacher preparation classes with large, heterogeneous groups of students across different English writing proficiency levels, a new academic writing course was created in 2016. The goal was to design an academic, genre-based curriculum that was closely connected to the writing tasks students were typically assigned in other courses, and that offered support mechanisms such as peer review and ongoing tutoring in order to develop academic writing skills and foster transferability among the classes.

This two-semester action research study seeks to explore the impact that the new academic writing course has on the pre-service teachers' academic writing skills. This article provides a description of the instructional strategies that have been used in the academic writing course throughout the two semesters the class has been offered, and presents a quantitative analysis of four different academic writing tasks carried out during semesters one and two of 2016.

The leading question of this research study is: How has a newly-created, multi-strategy approach to teaching academic writing impacted English pre-service teachers' composition skills?

Literature Review

This newly-created, Multifaceted Academic Writing Module has four key components that are supported by research findings regarding the effectiveness of the Process Approach to writing, the positive aspects of teacher and peer review, the latest insights gained from several universities' writing labs, and the significant effects on students' academic discourse of on-going practice of the TOEFL Integrated Writing Task.

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Process Approach to Writing

After gaining attention in the 1960s, second language (L2) writing has become more of an important skill to develop for language learners. The literacy demands of information technologies have brought about more focus to writing, which now transcends classrooms and positions itself as a daily-life need (Onozawa, 2010). Decades ago, writing was

seen as a rigid skill inseparable from grammar instruction and, as Susser (1994) asserts, its focus was "on controlled composition, correction of the product and correct form over expression of ideas" (p. 36). However, despite the deterministic acknowledgement of some authors of the usefulness of this product-oriented approach to writing (Dykstra, 1973; Paulston & Bruder, 1976), new visions came upon writing as discussions about first-language (L1) composition transferred to the ESL (L2) field. Opposing grammatical proficiency, adherents to the expressionist movement believed that "the primary emphasis should be upon the expressive and creative process of writing" (Zamel, 1976). Since the 1980s, the Process Approach to writing in L2 has evolved, and according to Susser (1994), it also has encountered several opponents in regards to its validity as a pedagogy. Nevertheless, its importance for composition studies is undeniable. Nowadays, the Process Approach keeps shedding light on how writing happens and what actions writers follow when composing texts. As indicated in Graph 1, adapted from Coffin (2003), writing happens as a recursive progression with different stages that range from prewriting to editing and where writers exercise different thinking skills in order to shape their work. This cycle Susser (1994) suggests, "helps make students aware that writing is a process, and that there are different processes for different kinds of writing." (p. 34). Therefore, L2 writers avoid following strict and narrow schemes and get to suit themselves to the different tasks they are assigned. Current analysis like (Onozawa, 2010) and research studies like (Goldstein & Carr, 1996; Pritchard & Honeycutt, 2006; Akinwamide, 2012; Bayat, 2014) demonstrate the positive impact of the Process Approach as a pedagogy that is both reliable and rewarding.
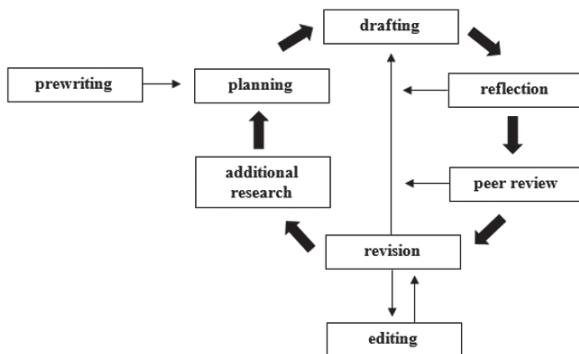

Figure 1. Process Writing Cycle. Adapted from Coffin (2003).

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Systematized feedback provided by teachers and peers

Feedback is particularly valuable for learners of a foreign language. When it comes to writing, corrective feedback can guide students in textual and compositional features in order to improve their final product. Written feedback needs to be properly provided so students can benefit from it, however, "research shows that most ESL writing teachers make similar types of comments and are more concerned with language-specific errors and problems" (Maarof, Yamat & Li, 2011, p.30). As has been shown in recent research (Williams, 2003), inappropriate feedback results in students' writing frustration and apprehension. This implies that feedback must be restructured if teachers aim to have better writing learning outcomes. One possibility that has been envisioned is supplementing teacher feedback with peer-reviewing. Peer review can be understood as feedback provided by learners to learners at the same level. For Jahin (2012), peer reviewing gives learners a purpose to write as well as multiple views on their written work. Also, he asserts that "Much research has indicated the positive effect of peer reviewing on the writing process and on the writer's product" (p. 61), leading not only to local and general improvements in learners' composition skills, but also in their confidence and affective filter. Additionally, peer reviewing finds support in theoretical frameworks such as Process Writing and Collaborative Learning (Hansen & Liu, 2005). Despite the fact that several studies cast doubts on the effectiveness of peer review when compared to teachers' thorough observations, Maarof, Yamat and Li (2011) conclude from their study that the majority of students had a positive perception of the use of both teacher and peer feedback since they both improve and enhance their writing skills.

On-going tutoring in a writing lab

Tutoring has also found a place in the formation of students' composition skills. In the present, several educational institutions, specifically universities, have writing centers or labs with trained tutors who provide personalized support to the community both face-to-face and online, one example being Purdue's OWL (Landsberger, 2001). However, as reported by Molina Natera (2014), there are currently less than ten universities with writing labs which offer support only in Spanish. Nevertheless, when in place, tutoring can serve as an advantageous underpin for the development of writing. As Sullivan and Cleary (2014) show by citing Topping (1996):

Claims made about the benefits of peer tutoring for both the tutor and tutee include the development of metacognitive skills,

improved cognitive processing, increased interaction/reduced isolation, more immediate feedback and prompting, lower anxiety, a higher level of disclosure and increased learner autonomy (Sullivan & Cleary, 2014, p. 57).

This means that tutoring sessions can benefit the written product per se and also enhance writers' attitudes and beliefs regarding text composition. In a study conducted by Adams (2011), students reported positive outcomes of tutoring sessions claiming they "fully enjoyed [the session] and left the meeting feeling positive about the future of my assignments." (p.114). Even though providing tutoring might result cumbersome and costly for institutions, if well implemented, it can be conducive to learning. Furthermore, Shrestha and Coffin (2012) found that tutoring "is an effective way of providing the kind of reflective, dynamic mediation that is able to effectively support students' academic writing development" (p. 57). Writing complexity can therefore be lessened if learners feel supported throughout the process of composition.

Standardized test-taking practice (TOEFL)

As taken from the concept of washback (Bailey, 1999), which is the impact of test results on students' attitudes, standardized tests can influence both teaching and learning. However, limited studies have investigated the effects of high-stakes language tests on both practices (Green, 2007; Soleimani & Maahdavipour, 2014). Although investigations like (Hill, Storch & Lynch, 1999) call into question the relation between language proficiency measured by standardized tests and academic performance, the rapid growth of the demand of these tests to gain access to advanced education force students to be familiar with the dynamics that exams like TOEFL or IELTS contain, which tend to be academic in nature. Indeed, as shown by Hosseini, Taghizadeh, Abedin and Naseri (2013), students' knowledge does not suffice to be successful in academic contexts, and thus, they must become proficient in such academic tasks, particularly those targeted in standardized tests. Additionally, recent research points out the favorable view both teachers and students have on standardized test practice and its effect on academic performance (Read & Hayes, 2003). It has also been noted that standardized test companies have made their tasks more authentic, fostering a better measurement of writing skills (Soleimani & Mahdavipour, 2014). Despite the reputation of these exams becoming too pervasive in academic curricula, their usefulness in the language teaching classroom remains to be explored more deeply.

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Methodology

Research Design

Action Research was selected for this project since, as proposed by (Dörnyei, 2007), it encourages participants to reflect on pedagogical practices, their effectiveness, shortcomings and possible ways to modify them to ensure positive effects on teaching/learning processes.

The research study is based on the quantitative measurement of students' progress in the production of academic texts on a one-to-five-point analytical rubric. Researchers collected data from February to June of 2016 (first semester of new academic course) and from August to December of 2016 (second semester of the course implementation).

Context and Participants

This research study has been conducted in an English teacher preparation program at a medium-sized, public, coeducational university in Colombia. Students' age ranges between 18 and 25 years old, they speak Spanish as a native language, and their English level oscillates between A2 and B1, according to the Common European Framework of References for Languages (2001). This population is characterized by the limited exposure to academic writing experiences in high school and its weak literacy skills in their native language, as it is the case for the majority of students in public universities in Colombia, as reported by Gómez (2011).

The new academic writing class is a four-credit course offered in seventh semester with an intensity of four hours a week. The course started out in 2016 (semester one) with some elements of a former composition class whose curriculum focused on grammar and sentence writing review. Currently, the structure of the academic writing course encompasses four key elements: the development of several genre-based tasks using the Process Writing approach, systematized feedback provided by the professor and peers, on-going tutoring to students in a writing lab, and repeated test-taking practice on TOEFL writing tasks.

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First of all, the course's main objective is to engage students in the construction of several writing pieces from different academic genres through the use of the Process Writing approach in order to foster awareness regarding the cyclical nature of writing (Coffin, 2003). In other words, students are taught to maximize on the fact that written language can be reviewed and polished as opposed to oral discourse. In addition, students are exposed to the particular discourse features

of academic genre such as descriptions, summaries, reflections and argumentative essays.

Task-specific rubrics, developed by the course's professor, are designed to guide students through the development of each product. These assessment tools become instrumental for the professor and students to provide systematized, integrated feedback. Sometimes students evaluate each other's texts before turning them in; in other occasions, students pair up to analyze the feedback provided by the professor. The nature of the feedback provided in this class is systematized in the sense that it targets specific features (e.g. organization, cohesiveness, language mechanics, etc.), depending on pre-determined foci. This targeted and systematic way of giving feedback facilitates students editing work, and it prevents learners from feeling overwhelmed. Moreover, the feedback students receive is integrated so that teaching and revising are combined.

Another fundamental aspect of this Multifaceted Academic Writing Module is the support offered in an academic writing lab to students with writing difficulties. There is a virtual platform where materials are posted as lessons' reinforcements and grammar reviews, in addition to personalized tutoring provided by monitors. The tutorial sessions are focused on the improvement of specific macro and micro writing features depending on students' needs and professor's observations.

Last but not least, is the incorporation of the TOEFL writing tasks as an instructional tool. This is a refreshing way to look at standardized tests since it helps students become familiar with real testing conditions and it engages them in highly-targeted academic writing tasks.

In the first semester of 2016, there were 16 students in the class, and eight students (Cohort One) were selected randomly as participants in the project. The same sampling procedure was used for Cohort Two (second semester).

Role of the researchers

There are two researchers conducting the study: one is the Academic Writing Course professor who acts as a participant observer since the analysis is based on her insights regarding the evolution of the class and its students. The monitor, who works with the students in the writing lab, is also a participant observer given the fact that he was involved in the analysis of students' samples as a way to cross examined data results.

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Data collection instruments

For the data collection, four writing samples from each cohort were selected as representative of the work that was produced throughout each of the semesters. These written products were scored with rubrics with levels of performance that ranged from 1 to 5 (low to high, respectively).

Cohort One: Descriptive and summary paragraphs, descriptive essay and TOEFL integrated essay.

Cohort Two: Descriptive paragraph, reflective essay, opinion essay and TOEFL integrated essay.

These writing pieces were scored using analytical rubrics to assess students' progress at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of each of the semesters, in terms of the following language features: discourse (task purpose and audience), organization, coherence, sentence structure, conventions and vocabulary. The features analyzed in the rubrics were selected based on emerging patterns of difficulties and strengths students presented in their written work. Furthermore, these linguistic features play significant parts in the development of well-structured academic texts as "the ability to adopt linguistic features of 'literate-style' language enables students' success in a variety of school-based tasks…" (Schleppegrell, 2004, p.34).

Data analysis and interpretation

Four writing samples representative of different academic genres were analyzed in terms of discourse, syntax, vocabulary, conventions, and language mechanics for each of the 16 participants. Discourse evaluates students' ability to address the task purpose and audience; organization relates to coherence and cohesion; syntax assesses students' mastery of sentence construction; vocabulary focuses on the range of academic lexicon, and conventions determine students' grammatical competences, and the appropriate use of capitalization, parts of speech and punctuation.

The students' scores obtained in each of the writing tasks, based on the aforementioned language features, were collected and averaged in order to measure progress throughout the semester, considering that each task was incrementally more demanding, as seen in Tables 1 and 3 (Cohort 1) and Tables 2 and 4 (Cohort 2).

In the first semester of the project's implementation, all participant students exhibited high-level performances in academic writing features such as discourse and text organization. These two aspects of

writing were emphasized in many tasks throughout the semester, not only during class sessions but also in the writing lab's tutorials.

As seen in Table 1, academic vocabulary scores were high possibly due to a number of reasons. First of all, the topics selected for each of the writing pieces were academic in nature (e.g. reflective paper based on classroom observation, description essay about best teacher). Indeed, the TOEFL topics and prompts were highly academic as well (e.g. large-class vs. small-class advantages and disadvantages, lecture and discussion types of teaching styles, etc.). Finally, the reinforcement exercises provided in the virtual component of the writing lab were taken from academic writing textbooks (Savage & Mayer, 2005). Vocabulary was also heavily worked through the TOEFL practice sessions. The TOEFL writing tasks, particularly the integrated, are based on a two-million, academic-word data bank, taken from educational institutions in the United States, as reported by Fox, Wesche, Bayliss, Cheng, Turner and Doe (2007).

On the other hand, awareness and control of the syntactical and grammatical organization of academic texts represented the biggest challenge for students in Cohort One. As a matter of fact, as shown in Table 1, five out of eight students scored below four in language conventions (grammar, spelling, punctuation). A grammatical component was not part of the academic course syllabus since students take several English courses as prerequisites for this class and grammar is taught up to advanced levels. Nevertheless, the results shown in Table 1 raised an important issue related to the need of incorporating grammar reviews in the academic writing course.

However, considerable work was done around sentence construction and combination of clauses. Such practices helped students grow in the elaboration of sentences but they still struggled with the process of combining them to construct a text.

Table 1. Writing features average in cohort 1.

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8
Discourse	5	4.75	5	4.5	5	5	5	5
Organization	5	4.5	5	4.75	4.75	4.75	4.75	4.75
Syntax	3.75	4.25	4	3.75	4.75	4.25	5	4.25
Vocabulary	4.75	4.75	4.5	4.75	4.75	4.75	4.75	4.25
Conventions	3.75	3.5	3.5	3.5	4.25	4.5	3.5	4.5

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During the second semester of the course implementation, students' performance in language conventions (grammar, spelling and punctuation) and syntax improved considerably since systematic reviews of complex grammatical structures and sentence construction were incorporated in the writing lab exercises. In fact, as illustrated in Table 2, only one student out of eight received scores below four. Discourse and text organization scores continued to be strong as they were for Cohort One given the course's revised orientation, the Process Writing Approach, repeated TOEFL test-taking strategy video lessons and practice, as well as the continuous support provided to the students in the writing lab's tutoring sessions (see Table 2).

Table 2. Writing features average in cohort 2

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8
Discourse	5	5	5	5	4.25	5	5	5
Organization	5	4.75	5	4.75	5	5	5	4.75
Syntax	4.75	4	4.5	4.5	4.5	4.75	5	5
Vocabulary	4	4.75	5	5	4.75	5	5	5
Conventions	3.5	4	5	4.25	5	4.75	4.75	4.75

In terms of students' performance in tasks (different genres) written throughout the first semester of the project, most of the students performed very well on summary and descriptive writing products since these were two of the academic genres that were taught and practiced several times during the course, both in classes and in the writing lab's sessions (see Table 3).

The TOEFL integrated essay scores were lower than the rest, even though it was the final task of the semester; as seen in Table 3, two out of eight students scored below four in their compositions. The explanation for this may be twofold. First of all, for the most part of the semester, time was spent writing at the paragraph level, focusing on syntax. Secondly, students were under pressure since this task was their final exam.

Table 3. Task performance average in cohort 1.

|	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8
Summary Paragraph	4.4	4.2	4.4	4.2	5	4.6	4.4	4.8
Descriptive Paragraph	4.8	4.8	4.6	4.4	4.8	4.4	4.6	4.4
Descriptive Essay	4.6	4.6	4.4	4.6	4.8	5	5	4.8
TOEFL Essay	4	3.8	4.2	3.8	4.2	4.6	4.2	4.2

In spite of the fact that the tasks carried out during the second semester were more academically demanding, students' performance was much higher than in Cohort One (see Table 4). There are several hypotheses that may explain the improvements in students' written products such as curriculum modifications, more grammar and syntax reviews, a better selection of academic tasks, and more systematic student participation in the writing lab. There were changes made to the course syllabus in order to incorporate the argumentative genre; also, the number of products was decreased to allow more time to work one of them. In the virtual component of the writing lab, numerous exercises were uploaded to practice advanced grammatical forms and syntax such as nominalization, phrasal verbs, reduced adverb clauses, among others. These variables might have influenced the quality of the written products.

Table 4. Task performance average in cohort 2.

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8
Descriptive paragraph	4.2	4	4.6	4.4	4.4	4.8	5	4.8
Reflective essay	4.4	4.6	5	5	5	5	4.8	5
Opinion Essay	4.6	4.6	5	4.8	4.6	4.8	5	5
TOEFL Essay	4.6	4.8	5	4.6	4.8	5	5	4.8

In terms of data dispersion (Table 5), graphs A, B and D, particularly the latter, showed that there is an impact of the strategies utilized throughout the Academic Writing course on students' writing skills. However, graph C illustrates that students from Cohort 1 had difficulties in applying their improved usage of writing features to the academic writing tasks assigned.

Table 5. Data dispersion of writing features (graphs A&B) and task performance (graphs C&D)
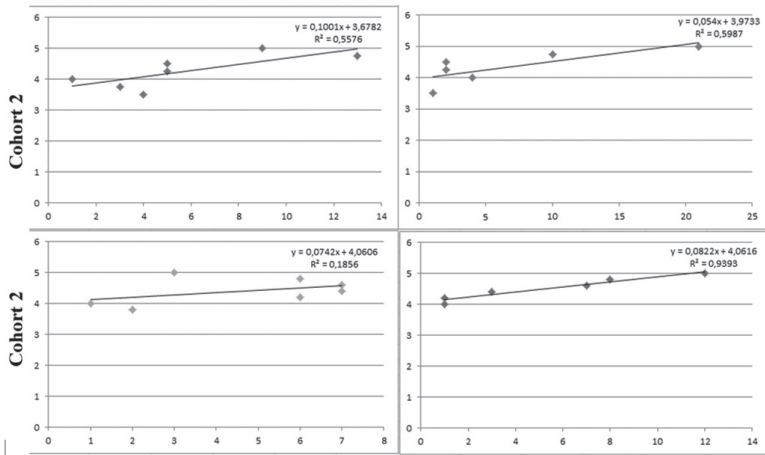
Conclusions and Recommendations

From the data obtained, it can be inferred that in order for students to write college-level, academic products, they must have a solid foundation on the grammatical and syntactical features of complex texts. Such finding has significant implications for the Teacher Preparation Program of this study since it calls for an evaluation of the content and standards of prerequisite courses that supposedly address the sub-skills required for an academic writing course.

The positive results of students' written work throughout the first two semesters of the implementation of the new Multifaceted Academic Writing Module could be explained by the combined use of the multiple instructional and assessment strategies mentioned throughout this study.

Moreover, students must be continuously reminded, required and supported to use academic writing across all disciplines, being mindful of content-specific lexicon. This is especially crucial in a context where students are future English teachers who have the responsibility of breaking vicious cycles of educational inequity and poor academic literacy skills.

In order to obtain a more comprehensive view of the impact of the academic writing course on students' academic writing abilities, the quantitative results obtained in this study should be cross-examined through questionnaires and interviews to assess students' and

professors' perceptions regarding the development of the writing skills and transferability to other courses.

Grounded on the data obtained from Cohort 1, in terms of writing features and performance in academic tasks, several curricular modifications were made (e.g. extended practice of academic genres and grammatical exercises), also tutoring sessions were extended as well as systematized feedback. Such modifications, as shown in Table 5, resulted on Cohort 2 students' overall improvement of their academic writing skills.

Nevertheless, further research must be conducted to explore the effectiveness of the Process Approach, systematized feedback, and on-going tutoring in increasing students' metalinguistic awareness and the quality of their academic written products.

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