Identifying Gaps in Academic Writing of ESL Students[*]

Beena Giridharan

Curtin University, Miri, Malaysia

There is growing evidence that the lack of competence of university ESL (English as a second language) students in academic writing affects their overall academic performance. Olivas and Li (2006) connected low second-language proficiency levels in English to poor academic performance of international students studying at both university and college levels in the United States. Although, many ESL students at university have a general understanding of grammar rules, not many are able to write academically at levels expected of them. This is further exacerbated by a lack of awareness of students' own ability in academic writing. The paper reports on a case study conducted to identify critical gaps in academic writing standards among ESL students in a foundation studies programme. The study employed a pragmatic case study approach, drawing on qualitative methods as deemed appropriate. In this project, four essential criteria for developing good academic writing skills were investigated: attitudes towards academic writing tasks, planning, writing paragraphs and essays, and evaluating one's own writing. The study examined the challenges faced by students in academic writing and identified common grammatical, structural and syntactic errors made in writing tasks. Data from the study showed that most students enjoyed writing tasks, drafting essays and working with peers to brainstorm ideas and opinions for their drafts. A majority of respondents agreed that they were well aware of referencing systems and the need to substantiate their ideas with supportive evidence. However, many respondents were unable to evaluate their own work and admitted that their evaluation often did not match that of their instructors. The project aims to propose interventions and techniques to support student academic writing practices in the foundation year.

Keywords: academic writing, ESL (English as a second language) students, critical gaps

Introduction

The capacity to write well academically at tertiary levels is a plausible expectation of university students. Academic writing is often developed in students through formal instructional settings, although the proficiency in academic writing may be influenced by cognitive development, educational experiences and overall proficiency in L2 (second language) for ESL (English as a second language) students. In the case of L1 (first language) students, there are research reports indicative of poor academic writing skills, despite of the fact that L1 students possess productive knowledge of vocabulary required at tertiary levels, and are grammatically more fluent (Hinkel, 2004). Writing involves composing, developing and analyzing ideas, implying the ability to rephrase information in the form of narratives, or transforming information into new texts as in argumentative writing (Myles, 2002). Writing in academic contexts requires students to advance their own

ideas within a framework of domain or discipline knowledge and engage the reader in academic discourse. Research studies revealed that for students entering tertiary levels of post-secondary, academic success is dependent on successful academic writing (Kelley, 2008). It is undeniable that academic writing is the language of scholarship and demonstrates eligibility of higher education. The quality of an individual's written work determines his/her scholarship and acceptance in academia. Poor academic writing skills have often been alluded to as a key factor in the failure of ESL and international students in meeting institutional literacy expectations (Bacha, 2002; Zhu, 2004).

This paper discussed a case study investigation of critical gaps identified in academic writing standards among ESL students in a foundation studies programme. The study focused in particular on the challenges faced by students in academic writing and identified common grammatical, structural and syntactic errors made in writing tasks. The study was prompted by the dearth in research in academic writing in ESL contexts, long term analytical observations of academic writing standards among students, and the teaching and research experiences of the authors. The study reviewed and discussed literature pertinent to the academic writing theories to form theoretical reference points. Analysis of students' perceptions towards academic writing tasks, and identification of critical gaps in ESL academic writing by staff based on students' essay drafts and reflections recorded in research diaries contribute to overall data analysis and conclusions drawn in the study. The paper concluded by proposing techniques and instructional strategies to facilitate better academic writing skills among ESL students.

Literature Review and Background

Evidence of the growing importance of English L2 writing is becoming increasingly dominant in both educational programs and in professional writing in non-English dominant countries (Leki, 2001). Academic writing is a much desired skill in tertiary students. However, among ESL students, academic writing is often perceived as overwhelming mainly due to ESL learners' lack of grammatical and vocabulary competency. In an Asian context, most students have not engaged in academic discourse in their formal writing courses during secondary school education and are often introduced to academic writing at university. Ultimately, both context and inadequacies of English language proficiency compounds the academic writing difficulties experienced by ESL students at tertiary levels. Literature confirms the inadequacies experienced by university ESL students in their academic writing in English. Olivas and Li (2006) connected low second-language proficiency levels in English and poor academic performance of international students studying at both university and college levels in the United States. Increasingly, criticism has been directed against students' inability to write at acceptable levels and standards particularly among ESL international students (Horner & Min-Zhan, 1999; Rose, 1989).

Although many ESL students at university have a general understanding of grammar rules, not many are able to write academically at levels expected. Most students in the foundation course are not cognizant of their lack of ability in academic writing. Therefore, monitoring the development through the assessing and grouping of academic skill levels of learners can be arduous and challenging for ESL instructors. In this project, the four essential criteria for developing good academic writing skills were investigated, such as attitudes towards academic writing tasks, planning, writing paragraphs and essays, and evaluating their own writing. Peet (1997) whose studies focused on L1 learners at tertiary levels recommended that in order to evaluate the standards of academic writing, instructors need to assess the four elements mentioned above. Simic (1994) suggested that

advancements in writing proficiency can be accelerated, when with sufficient scaffolding, learners are encouraged to experiment concurrently with several aspects of the writing process, thereby, understanding interconnections. In ESL academic writing, instruction has mostly moved away from a traditionally "product" approach to a "process" approach where instructors work with students on their written drafts and provide feedback for continuous improvement. The process approach centers around on writing activities that engage learners in the process of writing, such as generation of ideas, drafting, revising, editing, etc., whereas in the product approach, the instructor evaluates grammatical and language structures and content in general, and grades the work without opportunities for feedback and revisions. Process approaches focus on cognitive strategies that can be applied to writing tasks before developing a piece of writing that is well developed. Through this approach, the process allows the student to develop one's own voice and they become more self-directed (Matsuda, 2003). In the foundations programme, students are introduced to the argumentative or persuasive writing genre, and instructors use the process approach to assist students in developing academic writing skills. Feedback is provided on students' drafts to help them identify their areas of strengths and aspects for improvement. Feedback can be an effective technique in developing academic writing in ESL tertiary learners. Coffin, Curry, Goodman, Hewings, Lillis, & Swann, (2003) stated that providing feedback on learners' writing is a key pedagogical practice in higher education (see Figure 1). However, the quality of feedback provided to students plays a critical role in further advancing students' academic writing skills. Instructors' feedback assists students in monitoring their own progress and identifying specific language areas that need to be improved (Hedge, 2000).
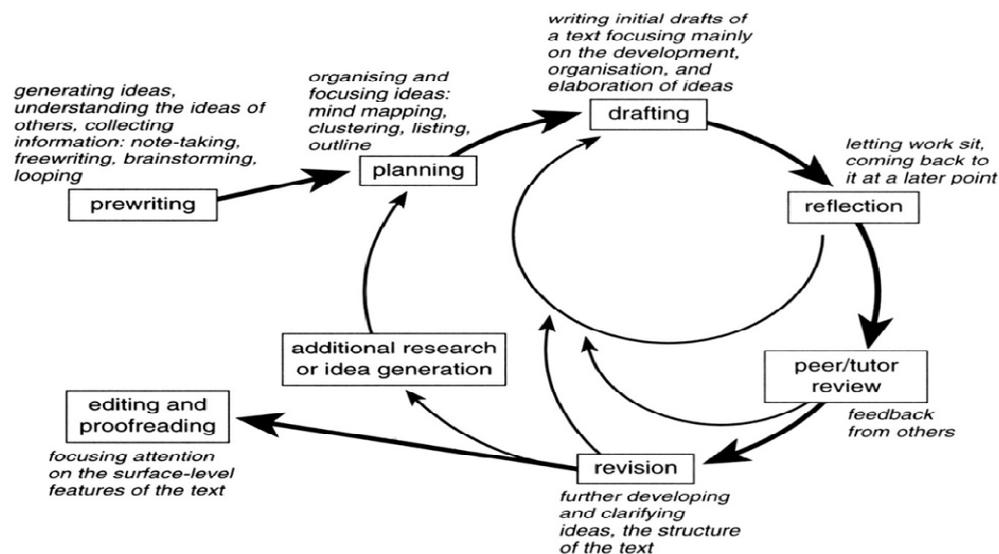

Figure 1. Feedback in process. Source: Coffin et al. (2003, p. 34).

The constructivist or socio-cultural theories of learning can be applied to the case of L2 academic writing where the learner engages with instructors and peers in a social setting to develop academic thought and analysis. Academic writing is deemed to be cognitively complex. As per-cognitive theory, communicating is an active process of skill development and gradual elimination of errors as the learner internalizes the language (Myles, 2002). The notion of "scaffolding" emerged from Vygotsky's concept of "zone of proximal development" which refers to the distance between achievements of learners by their own efforts and what they

can achieve through assisted interactions. Formative assessments in writing within ESL classrooms require learners to work closely with their instructors and demonstrate organization, critical thinking and analytical skills in academic writing. Many researchers recommend that ESL learners must be taught to write effectively and not just correctly (Pratt-Johnson, 2008). L2 learners require adequate language tools, such as grammar and vocabulary in order to construct academic texts and organize coherent written academic discourses (Hinkel, 2002).

Traditionally, a process-centered instructional methodology that focused on invention, creating ideas and discovering the purpose of writing was used in ESL instruction (Reid, 1993). Within the process-centered paradigm for teaching L2 writing, learners are mostly evaluated on their pre-writing, writing and revision. However, academic writing evaluations at faculty and discipline levels continue to focus on the product of writing (Hinkel, 2004). Extensive, thorough and focused instruction in L2 academic vocabulary, grammar and discourse is essential for developing L2 written proficiency in disciplines (Hinkel, 2004).

Research Methodology

The study employed a pragmatic case study approach, which drew mainly on qualitative methods. The application of multiple data sources and approaches permitted the researchers to develop a depth of knowledge of the issue investigated (Anderson, 1998). The case study method enabled the researchers to develop a full understanding of the subject matter studied. In case studies, the case is investigated in depth and natural settings, and recognized the context in its entirety (Punch, 1998). A case study is one of the most frequently employed qualitative research designs that allow researchers to learn more about the issue under the study (Wiseman, 1999), and therefore, it was deemed most appropriate for the current study.

The study investigated the perceptions of students towards academic writing challenges and staff experiences towards identifying critical gaps in academic writing in students requiring numerous data gathering processes. Firstly, the academic writing teaching team identified critical gaps in ESL learners' writing during the evaluations of learners' academic essay drafts and recorded their reflections in research diaries. Additionally, a standard feedback form was designed to gather feedback from students on challenges faced in academic writing tasks. The feedback form was administered to students by the researchers at the end of the semester to allow students to be able to evaluate their skills and experiences better. The data from two strands of audience students and staff allowed for a wider repository of information to draw from. The major safeguard on validity of the data in case studies is to obtain confirmation from many data sources. The method is referred to as "triangulation" where information from various data sources point to similar conclusions (Anderson, 1998). The cumulative data were analyzed to develop better instructional strategies and resources employed in the teaching of ESL academic writing, and to enhance the learning experiences of the students.

Participants

The study participants came from the foundation studies course, specifically students enrolled in the Writing and Research Skills 061 Unit in the foundation programme. Collective understanding, regarding the phenomenon investigated, was required, therefore it was essential that both the students enrolled in the unit and the staff teaching the unit contributed to gathering the data. Purposive sampling was employed in the study. In purposive sampling, one selects the sample from which the most understanding or insights can be gained (Patton, 2002). The present study focused on identifying critical gaps among foundation students in general, so

samples of population from different groups were invited to participate in the study. The Writing and Research Skills Unit is a common unit, consequently data were gathered from 206 students ($n = 206$) to gain a thorough understanding of the gaps in academic writing skills and the challenges faced by foundation students in developing academic writing.

Procedure

The Writing and Research Skills 061 Unit comprises of several academic writing tasks and assessments that allowed for students to reflect and provide data on their learning experiences. Qualitative data analysis is a continuous activity that constantly evolves and allows for "immersion" experiences (Moustakas, 1994). In this project, the researchers had opportunities for immersion, reflection and explication, where new linkages to findings can be made during the evaluation of ESL learners' academic essay drafts. These experiences were specific to criteria pertaining to academic writing concepts, theories and models. A standard feedback sheet (see Appendix A) was developed and administered to student groups to gain the perceptions and challenges experienced by students in academic writing. The researchers recorded experiences in a research journal to specifically record the involvement of students, responses of students to the task as well as personal thoughts regarding the aspects of the project. The feedback form and consent forms for voluntary participation in the study were submitted to the Ethics Committee for review, appropriateness and approval.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The data analysis in the study involved four elements: interpreting findings gathered, coding, organizing the data into themes and constructs and testing alternative interpretations of the data with members of the research team. The data gathered were also examined against the literature and theoretical background of the case studied. With qualitative research approaches, the data were organized into descriptive themes that emerged from the analysis for further examination and interpretation.

Firstly, student perceptions to academic writing were analyzed from the feedback form that was administered to 206 participants. The Likert style form allowed for participants to select answers against statements based on how much they agreed with the point of view given in the item. They were also able to indicate whether they strongly agreed, agreed, were neutral, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the items. The statements were categorized into various sections, such as attitudes towards academic writing tasks, planning and organising in writing, writing paragraphs and evaluating their own work. In addition, an open-ended section permitted participants to provide data on challenges they faced in writing, confidence levels achieved in writing, how they applied academic writing in other areas of university study, the areas of academic writing that were most difficult, and how instructors could help them improve their writing.

Student Perception to Academic Writing

The first section focused on gaining students' perception on their attitudes towards academic writing tasks. Participants provided responses on whether they enjoyed academic writing and whether they were able to draft essays with ease. Table 1 shows how the participants rated the statements. Thirty point six percent of the participants rated the task of academic writing as enjoyable. While almost 53% of the participants could not agree or disagree with the statement, 15.5% of the participants clearly did not enjoy academic writing, nor were they able to draft essays without effort.

Table 1

Perceptions on Academic Writing Skills

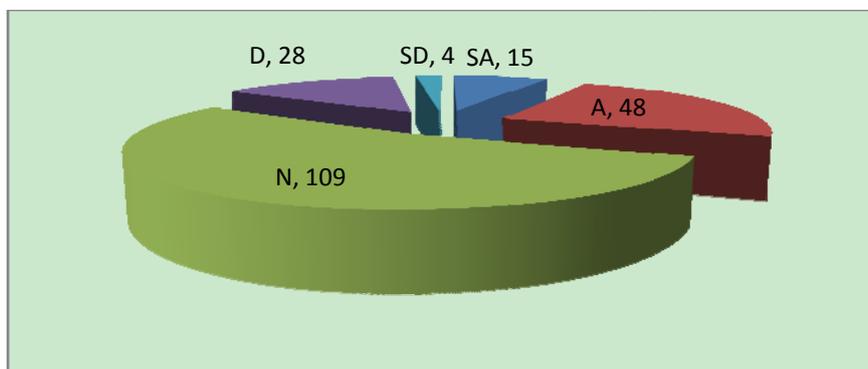| Academic writing is enjoyable for you and you are able to draft essays easily				
SA	A	N	D	SD
15	48	109	28	4

Figure 2. Student attitudes towards academic writing skills.

Figure 2 shows the distribution of participants' responses in their attitudes towards their own academic writing abilities. Respondents were asked how they rated the way in which they worked with peers for brainstorming for topics assigned in academic writing. Most of the participants agreed that they worked well with peers to generate ideas for the genres of writing: 51% of the participants stated that they worked well with peers, while a minority of 6.7% disagreed, 39% were unclear about their perceptions of working with peers for generation of ideas for academic writing tasks. Perceptions to peer work are shown in Table 2.

Table 2

Perceptions to Peer Work

You work well with peers to brainstorm ideas and view points for assigned topics				
SA	A	N	D	SD
13	92	82	12	2

Figure 3 shows the details of the perceptions to peer work by participants with a majority agreeing that they worked well with peers.
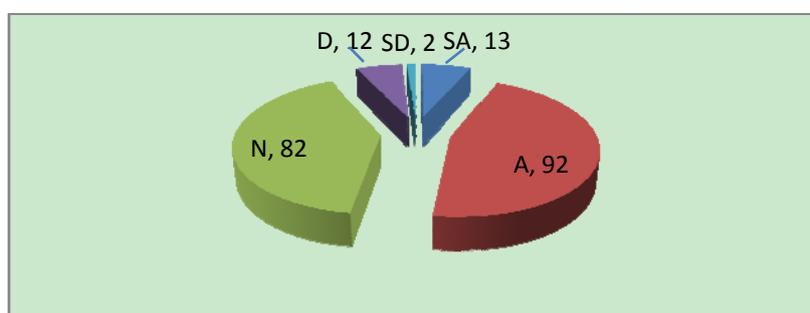

Figure 3. Attitudes to peer work for brainstorming ideas.

Participants were asked to provide feedback on their reading trends for gaining a better understanding of topics assigned to them in academic writing. Fifty five percent of the participants agreed that they read widely

on the related topics for the genres of writing, while 4.8% disagreed and 38.3% preferred not to agree or disagree. However, none of the participants disagreed that they read for generating ideas in their writing.

Figure 4 shows the analysis for the trends in reading among the respondents with the majority of participants agreeing that they read widely for appropriately accessing the information for topics assigned in academic writing.
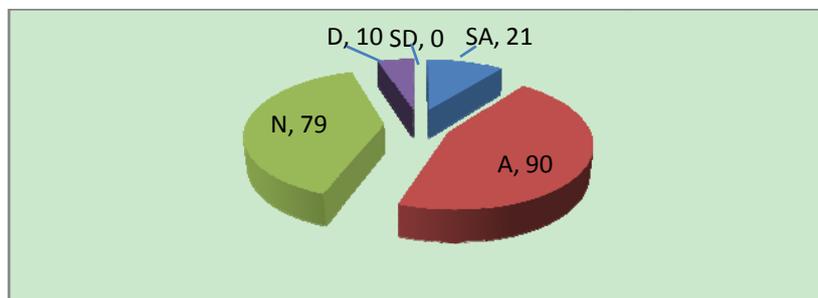

Figure 4. Trends in reading for topics.

Planning and Organizing

Feedback gathered regarding perception to planning and organizing, provided data on several aspects involved in academic writing processes, such as the ability to select and incorporate relevant resources into their own writing, the need for critical thinking skills in differentiating between facts and opinions in reading resources and for understanding the referencing styles which are required for citing and acknowledging external sources within their own writing.

Forty six point six percent of the participants reported that they were able to paraphrase and incorporate relevant resources in their writing, while 12.1% were unable to do so, and almost 51 % were unclear about their abilities to paraphrase or bring synthesis in their writing as shown in Table 3.

Table 3

Ability to Paraphrase and Synthesize Information

During the essay draft process you are able to paraphrase and include relevant resources				
SA	*A*	*N*	*D*	*SD*
9	87	105	22	3

Mechanics of Writing

The participants were requested to provide responses to evaluate their ability to write grammatically and construct apposite sentence structures in academic writing. Data analysis showed that 31.5% of the participants were confident about their grammatical abilities and sentence construction skills, while 47.5% were not sure of their skills, and 20.8% disagreed that they were efficient in their grammatical abilities and sentence construction skills.

Table 4

Evaluating Grammatical Ability

Most of your sentences are grammatically and structurally correct				
SA	*A*	*N*	*D*	*SD*
9	56	98	40	3

Positive attitudes towards own writing strengths are essential for students to feel confident and motivated. Only 31.5% agreed that they felt their grammatical abilities were sufficient. Almost half of the respondents were unsure about their grammatical abilities and one-fifth of the respondents felt their grammar skills were inadequate as shown in figure 5. One of the important steps to be taken for teachers is to help improve and evaluate students' attitudes towards their own writing.
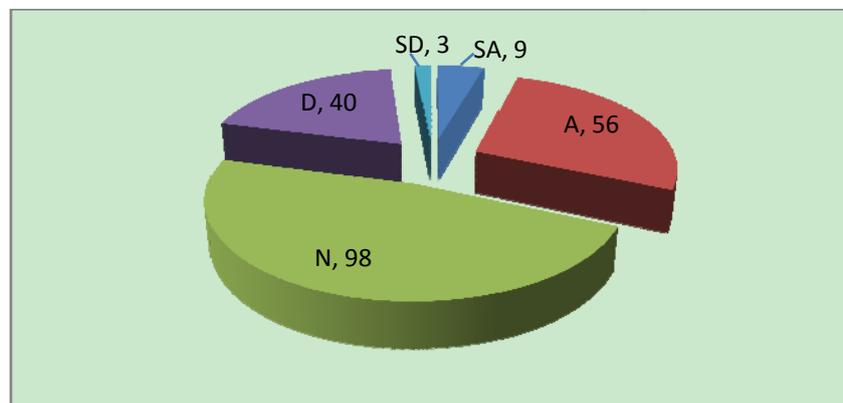

Figure 5. Evaluating grammar use.

Table 5 shows how respondents evaluated their abilities to use correct tenses in their academic writing. Only 37.8% felt that they were proficient is using the correct tenses, as opposed to 48.5% who were unsure of their own abilities, and 11.6% who disagreed that they were able to employ correct tenses in their writing.

Table 5

Correct Tense Usage

You understand how to write sentences using the correct tenses.				
SA	A	N	D	SD
21	57	100	20	4

The direct relationship between learners' attitudes and learners' motivation has been evident in empirical studies (Myles, 2002) showing evidence of increased performance in L2 academic writing by motivating learners. Therefore, it is imperative that instructional methods include strategies that are aimed at improving grammatical competence and proficiency in writing.

Evaluating Academic Writing Skills

Responses to statements on evaluating participants' own writing abilities in comparison to the instructor's evaluation showed that 27.1% of the participants agreed that they were able to evaluate their own writing, while 58.2% were unsure, and 15% disagreed that they could evaluate their own work as shown in Table 6.

Table 6

Evaluating Own Writing

You are able to assess/evaluate your writing very well				
SA	A	N	D	SD
9	47	120	30	1

The failure to recognize or evaluate own work could prove to delay the academic writing learning process.

Learners must be able to draw conclusions about their own writing abilities, so that they develop the ability to cope with the demands of academic writing in genres of disciplines as they progress in their courses.

Only 17.4% of the participants agreed that evaluation of their own work matched instructors' evaluation, while an overwhelming 67.4% were not sure that evaluations of their writing were similar to instructors' evaluations of their writing, and 15.5% disagreed that their evaluations matched that of the instructor (see Table 7).

Table 7

Comparison of Writing Evaluation With Instructor

The lecturer's assessment of your work is often similar to your own evaluation				
SA	A	N	D	SD
7	29	139	30	2

The use of open-ended sections explored the major challenges ESL learners faced in academic writing as well as aspects of academic writing that develop confidence among ESL learners. Additional data elicited on the writing processes, and experiences helped to triangulate the information provided in the Likert type statements in the feedback forms administered to study respondents.

Conclusions

By incorporating the fundamentals of English language development into teaching, integrating vocabulary learning and employing targeted instructional strategies, instructors can develop better writing skills in ESL learners and prepare learners for tertiary levels and beyond. The research project has identified the perceptions of ESL learners towards academic writing tasks looking at attitudes towards writing tasks, planning and organizing, students' grammatical competence and ability to evaluate their own work. It has also classified the elements that were included in what constitutes good academic writing, and has suggested approaches and techniques for enhancing academic writing for ESL learners. Instructors evaluated their students' academic writing capacity based on grammatical, structural and language ability including their use of vocabulary. Targeted activities to improve grammar, sentence and paragraph structures must be utilized in ESL instruction. Instructors must be aware of individual ESL learners' differences based on their prior knowledge and ability or potential to develop academic writing capabilities. Several methods can be used to advance academic writing for ESL learners, such as providing examples of strategies for improving planning and organizing, drafting and editing. Improving the ability to evaluate student work is also important. Early exposure to a variety of domain or discipline-based texts is also recommended to help students achieve academic writing proficiency of target language. In the process approach to drafting essays, instructors' feedback is critical for developing better content, structure and overall language proficiency for ESL learners. It is hoped that the usage of qualitative methodologies to examine the ESL academic writing experiences and the data analysis from the study will further contribute to the development of theories of second language writing. The findings from the current study may also help to improve the teaching methodologies in ESL academic writing.

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