

The Effect of a Dual Intervention on University Students' Academic Writing Skills: A Case
Study

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Abstract

Fifth semester students of the B.A in education with a focus in English at a private university in Cartagena take content-based courses, among which is Second Language Acquisition II (SLA II). One of the requirements in this course is to write a reflection paper. However, the experience of one of the teacher-researchers who participated in this study reveals that at the beginning of these courses, most students seem to lack the necessary academic reading and writing skills to complete the assignments properly. This action research describes the effect of a dual intervention that includes a 15-hour pre-semester course in academic writing and an academic writing course in **Moodle** (a free e-learning platform) on the academic writing skills of 16 students in a SLA II class. Two surveys were administered to them: one right after they attended the classroom-based course. The other one after they submitted their final draft of their reflection papers. Both surveys included issues related to the effectiveness of the intervention. Then, their final versions of the papers were evaluated and compared to those written by another group. Findings suggest that the intervention was helpful to a certain extent. Further research is needed to explore alternative ways of tackling this issue.

Key words: content-based instruction, academic writing, writing skills, reflection papers.

Introduction

A private institution was founded in Cartagena in 2007 with the mission of responding to the needs of a globalized world that requires bilingual professionals. There are approximately 600 students taking a B.A in education. About 450 of them are part of a government program called Centros Regionales en Educación Superior (CERES), created to help Colombians with limited resources gain access to university education. Thanks to the CERES program, students pay only 25% of tuition. CERES students take classes in different public schools in the city from 6:40 to 9:10 pm. Fifth semester students of the B.A. in education in the CERES program, the focus of this action research, attend classes at a public school located in a rather underprivileged neighborhood. The total number of research participants is 46. Their ages ranged from 18 to 35 years old. The students all share similar socioeconomic backgrounds.

The B.A in Education with a focus on English started in 2007 as a response to the low quality of foreign language education in the region and aims to contribute to the education of tomorrow's teachers, who shall improve EFL teaching practices. There are many ways this new generation of teachers can contribute to the improvement of teaching practices in our region, one of which is theorizing their practices by doing action research. This would require improving their academic writing skills to be able to document their classroom research. This is precisely the target of the present small-scale study.

Needs Analysis

When students reach the fifth semester of the B.A in education with a focus in English, they start to take content-based courses, among which is Second Language Acquisition II (SLA II). The most important prerequisite for enrolling in the content-based courses is to have completed at an EFL institute, where all students in the bachelor take their English courses as part of the Bachelor's program. By the time students complete the English courses, they are expected to reach a B2 level of the Common European Framework (CEF). However, some students seem to take the SLA II course without having the necessary skills to perform well in demanding tasks, which include critical reading at an academic level, participating in class debates and writing papers. The experience of one of the teacher-researchers participating in this project in the second semester of 2013 reinforced this belief. This teacher had to spend a great deal of his time training learners to acquire these skills, using important class time that would otherwise have been dedicated to covering the course content. To confirm this experience, a survey was given to the students at the end of the course. Although all the students (20) were required to answer the questionnaire, only 8 students did (For a closer look at the questionnaire, see Appendix 1).

Table 1.
Students' English level and academic writing skills before the SLA II course

Students' English level prior to SLA course.		Students who acknowledged lack of academic skills.	
A1	0	Completely agree	5
A2	0	Partially agree	1
B1	6	Partially disagree	2
B2	2	Completely disagree	0

Table 1 displays two of the main aspects of the questionnaire. The first one is the students' English level at the beginning of the SLA II course. Only 2 (25%) of the 8 students are

within the B2 level of English competence, which is the lowest ideal level required to take the SLA II course. The second aspect displayed in table 1 is the students' perception of their own academic skills and their ability to perform well in the SLA II course. The question specifically asked them if they felt they lacked the skills to participate in class debates, read and write papers in the SLA II course. Six of the eight students (75%) thought that they did not have the necessary skills to comply with the academic requirements of the course. This information seems to reveal why the tasks assigned to the students throughout the course (during the second semester of 2013) represented a major challenge for them and why it was necessary for the teacher to spend important class time teaching aspects of academic writing so most students could complete the assignments.

Table 2.
Papers students had read and written before the SLA II course

Number of papers read by students before SLA II course		Number of papers written by students before SLA II course	
None	4	None	8
1-3	2	1-3	0
4-10	1	4-10	0
More than 10	1	More than 10	0

Table 2 shows the amount of academic papers each student had read and written before taking the SLA course. Half of the students (4) who took the survey had never read an academic paper and only one out of eight (12.5) had read more than ten papers, which probably illustrates why the students had trouble processing the information found in the papers and the difficulties finding facts and data to support the arguments elaborated in their reflection papers. Table 2 also shows that none of the students had written a paper before taking the SLA II course. For this question, these results were expected since it would be natural for this student profile to have read at least a few papers but not necessarily to have written any. All this evidence suggests that

writing academic papers could be the hardest task a professor can give students in content-based higher education courses.

Table 3.
Major challenges students felt they had to face

Challenges students had to face in the SLA II course.	Frequency
Reading and understanding the structure of academic papers	4
<i>Expressing an opinion and supporting it with data and facts</i>	6
Searching for information online related to SLA	0
Writing the reflection paper	3
<i>Using APA style in-text citation</i>	7
Writing the abstract for the reflection paper	3
Participating in class discussions and debates	2
Making oral presentations about SLA	2

In Table 3, students identified the biggest problem they had to face in the SLA course in the second semester of 2013. Students were allowed to choose up to four out of eight options. As the table shows, seven of the eight students (87.5%) identified using APA style in-text citation as a major challenge when writing an academic paper, followed by expressing an opinion and supporting it with data and facts which, with six students out of eight (75%) ranks as the second most frequent challenge. These two aspects were emphasized in the pedagogical intervention, which includes a 15-hour pre-semester course in academic writing and an academic writing course in Moodle (a free e-learning platform). The intervention was launched in the first semester of 2014. The objective of this study is to describe the effects of this pedagogical intervention on the students' academic writing shown later in the same semester. The extent of the intervention's effectiveness could eventually lead to a future change in the program curriculum.

Theoretical Framework

Academic writing skills

As several authors have noted, writing in a foreign language is not an easy task. Nunan (1999), for example, points out that, “producing a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing is probably the most difficult thing there is to do in language. It is something most native speakers never master.” (p. 271).

Writing seems to be even harder when it comes to writing academic papers in a foreign language for content-based courses in undergraduate programs. First of all, it is important to mention that according to the CEF, the required level to understand and/or produce these kinds of texts is B2 as stated in the reading and writing can-do overall descriptor for that level:

Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation...Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options. (p. 24)

Bacha (2002) states that “studying in institutions of higher learning in the medium of English, which may not be their native language, have been found to face problems mainly in writing, making them unable to cope with the institution’s literacy expectations (p.161). Writing academic papers in higher education demands specific skills, without which these papers would unlikely meet the required standards. One of the main aspects that has been studied is the kind of grammar and/or register used by the students in their academic papers. Biber, Conrad, Reppen, Byrd and Hetten’s (2002) comprehensive linguistic description of the range of spoken and written registers at U.S. universities shows that “spoken registers are fundamentally different from written ones in university contexts, regardless of purpose” (p.9). This element explains why

it is difficult for university students to make the transition from a rather colloquial spoken English to a more formal academic genre.

Nunan (1999) considers *genre* to be one of the main concepts in writing. He explains that “in written, as in spoken language, genres are typified by a particular structure and by grammatical forms that reflect the communicative purpose of the genre in question” (p.280). Part of the problem that students have to deal with lies in the fact that it is not easy to cope with the nature of academic writing and it takes time to adapt to this new kind of genre. First of all, they have to be able to write an abstract that includes the key elements that will allow any reader to evaluate whether the paper suits his/her needs. They also have to learn to build up arguments and support them with research data. Finally, they have to cite sources and write a list of references properly.

Building up arguments and citing sources properly

Students in the SLA course are required to write an academic paper reflecting on various aspects of EFL teaching (text-responsible (TR) writing, Leki & Carson, 1997, p 41). Elder, Golombek, Weigle, Boldt and Valsecch (2003) explain that in TR writing, students have to “demonstrate their understanding of specific texts (broadly defined as reading texts, lectures, or other sources of information) in their writing rather than writing from personal experience...” (p. 345). It is necessary to keep in mind that most CERES students have not studied for quite some time or were not required to complete such tasks in the past. In the reflection paper, they have to either subscribe to or criticize an idea or theory. In doing so, they have to support the arguments they construct with support from properly-cited sources. This brings up the issue of

citation.

Nowadays, with large amounts of technology at our service, it has become easier to find sources to help support a writer's ideas. However, this has also increased the "copy and paste" problem, making it crucial to teach students to cite properly in order to avoid plagiarism. They cannot be left alone in this task. Schuermann (2008) proposes that teaching citation should not be someone else's job and adds that "students are done a disservice if attention to citation and appropriate alternatives to copy-and-paste *writing* are not addressed..." (p.19). She also provides a number of reasons for teaching citation in ESL classes, one of which is that "college students take many general education courses, and they need to hand in written work and give presentations in discipline-specific classes early on" (Schuermann, 2008. p.19).

The Moodle course

The use of technology in the classroom is a growing trend. Benson (2011) points out that "technology is now an integral part of self-access, tandem learning, distance learning, which reflect the fact that new learning technologies are constantly in search of *new homes*" (p.145). In the present study, a tandem strategy between classroom instruction and a course in the Moodle platform was implemented to enhance the learning experience. There are some advantages to using technology in educational environments. One of them is that students can access the course anytime from anywhere. Smith (2008, p. 5) agrees that "students would appreciate the convenience of accessing information on their own schedule, no class attendance requirements, and the ability to review course content and presentations more than one time they were presented in the classroom". Another advantage of using technology in education is that it helps develop learners' autonomy. Motteram (1997, p.17 in Benson, 2011) clearly states, "There has always been a perceived relationship between educational technology and learner autonomy"

(p.154). Although the Moodle platform was a crucial element in this study, students were not forced to use it. Students were told about its importance but using it was not mandatory. The purpose was to establish whether the students used the Moodle course voluntarily. Another advantage is self-regulation. Smith (2008, p. 5) points out, “Students can hurry through concepts that are familiar to them and go slower through concepts for which they need additional time”. Some students are still reluctant to take advantage of these resources. A reason could be the lack of a present instructor. In this project, there is a slight difference. The teacher is close enough since she is the SLA instructor. They can ask her for feedback on their work throughout the semester. This creates a sense of presence since the instructor is visible. When there is a sense of presence in online learning, it can greatly enhance the instructor-learner relationship (Munro, 1998 in Lehman & Conceição, 2010). The aim of the present study is to evaluate the effectiveness of this tandem strategy, comprised of classroom instruction and the same course in the Moodle platform, in developing academic writing skills.

The process approach to writing

There are two main approaches to teaching writing. Nunan (1999) acutely explains that “Product-oriented approaches focus on the final product, the coherent, error-free text. Process approaches, on the other hand, focus on the steps involved in drafting and redrafting a piece of work”(p.271). He warns, however, that “proponents of process writing recognize and accept the reality that there will never be the perfect text, but that one can get closer to perfection through producing, reflecting on, discussing, and reworking successive drafts of a text” (p.271). In order to give the pedagogical intervention a collaborative and humanistic essence, a process-oriented

approach was implemented. Students were given the opportunity to write an outline of the paper, which represented the planning stage. The students were told not to worry too much on perfect writing at the beginning stage. Quantity was preferred over quality to give the researchers something to “work with”. In this stage, Nunan (1999) illustrates that “Writers are encouraged to get their ideas onto paper without worrying too much about formal correctness in the initial stages. They then share their work with others, getting feedback on their ideas and how they are expressed, before revising” (p. 272).

The popularity of the process approach has increased in our country. Ariza (2005) and Aldana (2005) are in favor of it and claim that “their students increased their motivation towards writing” and that students “obtained a higher level of proficiency in their composition skills” (p.52). Viafara (2008) adds that “university professors in Colombia have incorporated innovative perspectives to encourage learners’ writing in English” (p.77). Lopez (2006, in Viafara,2008) considers that combining collaborative and process writing with hypertext design to instruct her pupils can raise students’ motivation and skills for deeper expression of ideas. Zuñiga (2003, in Viafara,2008) has highlighted the influence of new technologies in students’ development of writing skills in English. The present study, which combines classroom instruction and a Moodle reinformant course, is an example of this influence.

Participants and Method

A total of 46 students participated in the study. 18 of them (group 1) belonged to the 2013-I SLA-II, in which the problem was identified. 16 of them (the main participants, group 2) belonged to the 2014-I SLA II group in which the dual-strategy was implemented. The other 12 students (group 3) belonged another SLA-II class in 2014-II. Their papers were compared to the papers the main participants wrote. The 18 students in group 1 and the 16 students in group 2 (main participants) are part of the CERES program. The students in group 3 are not part of the CERES program.

This qualitative research includes some of the phases of an action research. A problem was identified, an action plan was implemented and the effect of the plan was described. A redesign of the action plan was not part of this research. This action research is also a case study since it describes what happens in just one class with no further pretentions of generalizing the findings. The data collected for this study came from:

- A survey administered to the participants right after the classroom-based course before students started their SLA II course.
- A second survey administered to the participants after submitting their final draft in order to contrast their perceptions with the ones expressed in the first survey.
- The participants' final versions of their reflection papers and an informal comparison of the papers to those written by students from another SLA II class in the same program.

The whole process of this action research is described in following three phases.

Phase 1: The Diagnosis

In this first stage of the study, the problem was identified. The direct observation of one of the teacher – researchers (participating in this study) in the second semester of 2013, showed that some fifth semester students seemed to be taking the SLA II course without having the necessary skills to perform well in demanding tasks such as: critical reading at an academic level, participating in class debates and writing papers. As a result of this, a great deal of that SLA II course class time had to be allocated for the development of these skills, straying from the main objective of the course.

The diagnosis started with the analysis and assessment of the reflection papers that fifth semester students' wrote as part of their assignments for the SLA II course in August 2013. A survey (see appendix 1) was then administered to the same students at the end of the course. The results of the survey confirmed that they perceived writing academic papers as very challenging tasks and that they were aware they lacked some of the necessary skills to participate in class debates, read and write academic papers.

Phase 2: The intervention.

The action plan consisted of a 15-hour classroom-based course and a month-long course in Moodle in academic writing.

The fifteen-hour classroom-based Course took place a week before students started taking the SLA II course in 5th semester with the purpose of helping them improve their academic writing skills. The course included:

- Paragraph structure: topic sentences and supporting sentences.

- Abstracts: importance, relevance and function.
- APA style: APA basics, in-text citation. A full three-hour session was dedicated to instruct the students on the use of all in-text citation rules as well as writing a proper reference list in APA style.

Lesson planning was necessary to define the objectives, choose the materials, the activities and the instructional procedures for each one of the five three-hour sessions of the course. Each one of the lessons was planned under a collaborative view of language learning. Students were engaged in learning experiences in which they had to help each other to attain the proposed objectives (See sample lesson plan in appendix 2).

The same three units included in the classroom-based course were available in Moodle for a complete month after the SLA II started. Through a combination of video lessons, pdf documents, self-assessment quizzes, forums and weekly assignments, students were expected to achieve the objectives of the course. After the intervention, the students started the process of writing their reflection papers.

Based on the process approach to writing, students were asked to work in groups of three to write their reflection papers through three stages: planning, drafting and revising. In the first stage of the writing process, students had to choose the topic for their reflection papers, read academic articles related to the chosen topic, write an outline of the paper and start a bibliographic list of the sources they would probably use. In the second stage, they had to write the first draft of the reflection paper building up their arguments to defend their thesis, properly supported by using APA in-text citation to give credit to all the sources used. Finally, students had to write the final version of their reflection paper: this time including the abstract,

introduction, body, conclusion and the list of references. After each one of the stages of the writing process, students were provided with useful feedback that helped them rework on their successive drafts and make improvements for the final version of the paper. While this writing process was taking place, students had the support of the online course on Moodle platform, where they could find very useful material and activities that allowed them to practice before writing their reflection papers, and forums that helped them to share ideas with their classmates.

Phase 3: Describing the impact

The effect of the action plan was described by:

- Analyzing the results of a survey administered right after the classroom-based course.
- Analyzing the results of a second survey administered right after students submitted the final version of their papers.
- Analyzing students' final version of their reflection papers.
- An informal comparison of the final version of the papers to those written by another SLA II group of students that did not take part in the intervention.

Two surveys were administered to the research participants in order to know their perception of the 15-hour Academic writing course and the Moodle course. The first survey (see appendix 3) was administered to these students right after the fifteen-hour classroom-based course ended. In order to help validate this perception, a second survey (see appendix 4) was administered to the same students after the final drafts were submitted (four months later) to gauge their perception about the same issues after actually having completed the demanding tasks required. The final versions of the papers were evaluated using a rubric (appendix 5),

specially designed for this purpose in order to determine how competent students were in relation to writing abstracts, building arguments, using APA style and writing reference lists. Finally, as an informal attempt to provide additional useful evidence (with no further pretensions), the mean scores of each one of the four categories in the papers (writing abstracts, building arguments, using APA style and writing reference lists) were compared to the mean scores of the papers written by students from another SLA II group, who did not take part in the intervention.

The results of the data collection were studied through a careful and thorough thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) of the students' artifacts and opinions expressed in both surveys.

Data Analysis and Results

Immediately after the pre-semester 15-hour course in academic writing was implemented, the students were given a survey in order to collect a first impression of the effectiveness of the course. The first part of the survey was about their English level and prior contact with academic papers. The second part described the students' initial perception of effectiveness of the classroom-based course.

English level at the beginning of the SLA II course & prior contact with academic papers

Of the 15 students who took the survey, 13 were in a course between 15-20 of the 24 courses at the EFL school (corresponding to B1 of the Common European Framework) in a recognized private EFL institution, the other two were between levels 21 to 24 (corresponding to a CEF B2). It is vital to clarify that students take these 24 English courses at this private EFL institute as part of the bachelor program at this university. This means that most of them are not in the ideal English level to take content-based courses such as SLA. This represents the first difficulty both students and the teacher have to overcome.

Relevant to previous contact with academic papers, 12 of the 15 students surveyed stated they had read academic papers before, but only 4 (26.6%) claimed to have previously read more than three academic papers. In regard to having the necessary academic writing skills, we would like to argue that if a university student wants to start writing academic papers, it is important to have read at least a few papers to be familiarized with the nature of academic writing. To make

matters even worse, 14 (93.3%) of the 15 students expressed that they had not written at least one academic paper.

With reference to having the necessary skills to participate in class discussions, debates, read papers and write papers on second language acquisition, 9 of the 15 (60%) students partially or totally agreed they did not have them before taking the SLA II course. Only 6 of the 15 students (36%) partially or totally disagreed with the statement, which means that majority of the students acknowledged they would start the SLA II course with insufficient academic skills.

First survey: students' initial perception of the classroom-based course

The students also expressed their initial perceptions on the effectiveness of the classroom-based course. The data collected in this section of the survey provided the following crucial information:

- 12 of the 15 (80%) students totally agreed that the pre-semester course on academic writing had been administered in a timely manner, which is before they start classes in 5th semester. The other three partially agreed.
- Most of the students found the course to be quite relevant. 12 of the 15 (80%) students totally consented the contents of the course would help them write a good reflection paper while the other 3 partially agreed.
- Most of them (14 of the 15 students) at least partially agreed that writing an abstract was not as difficult as they thought before taking the academic writing course, which somehow supports the hypothesis that laid the foundations for this small-scale study: Although most students take these

courses without having the necessary academic writing skills, all they need is a mini course to at least familiarize with the dynamics of academic writing.

- The necessity for this course to be institutionalized was supported by most of the students: 80% of the students (12 out of 15) feel that this course should be made mandatory for all students about to start fifth semester. One student commented that: “I think it was a great idea to have us take this course. I’m sure it will help to write academic papers”. Another one commented that: “The course was great for us because you can do and understand academic papers better. You can also know new vocabulary”.
- Students were also asked whether writing academic papers should be mandatory for all students in the program or only for those students who were good at writing. The findings in this particular issue were amazing: 14 out of 15 students considered that writing academic papers should be a requirement for all students in the program.

Challenges to face in the SLA II course

In this first survey, students finally expressed their opinions on what they thought would be the biggest challenges to face while taking the SLA II course.

Table 4.

Major challenges to be faced by the experimental group in the SLA II course

Reading and understanding the structure of academic papers.	5
Expressing an opinion and supporting it with research facts and data	8
Searching for information online related to SLA	3
Writing the reflection paper	6
Using APA style in-text citation	2
Writing the abstract for the reflection paper	4
Participating in class discussions and debates	6
Making oral presentations about SLA	5

According to the information in table 4, it can clearly be noticed that most students (8 out

of 15) identified *expressing an opinion and supporting with facts and data* as the biggest challenge they would have to face throughout the SLA II course followed by *writing the reflection paper* and *participating in class discussion and debates*, both of them identified by 6 out of the 15 students who took the survey. After carefully analyzing what these three aspects had in common, a critical issue emerged: the need to be creative and critical. In order to be successful in the three aspects mentioned, students would have to agree or disagree with someone's point of view and look for the appropriate sources or data to convincingly support the arguments elaborated.

Second survey: students' perceptions after submitting their final drafts

A second survey was conducted at the end of the semester with the main purpose of confronting participants' initial perception right after the pedagogical intervention with their opinions after submitting the final version of their reflection papers at the end of the semester. This second survey required the students to do the following:

- Identify the most difficult parts of writing the reflection paper after actually having gone through the process of writing one.
- Express their opinion on the effectiveness of the tandem strategy as well as the effectiveness of their individual components.
- Identify which of the four elements evaluated in the reflection papers they were able to improve mainly due to the intervention.

When asked to identify the most difficult parts of writing the reflection paper after

actually having gone throughout the process of writing one, their opinion changed significantly from the opinions expressed four months earlier immediately after the intervention.

Table 5.
Major difficulties identified by students when writing the Reflection papers

<i>Writing the abstract</i>	1
<i>Elaborating arguments</i>	3
<i>Using APA style</i>	7
<i>Writing the list of references</i>	4

Table 5 clearly shows that, almost half of them (7 out of 15) expressed using APA style had been the hardest challenge, followed by writing the list of references (4 out of 15 identified it). This data matches the students' opinion in the diagnosis carried out with the 2013 class, in which 87.5% of the students in the diagnosis phase identified using APA style as the hardest challenge after having submitted the final draft. The difference in the figure could be explained by the fact that in the diagnosis survey, they were allowed to choose up to four challenges from a list of eight while in this survey; they were allowed to choose only one. It is interesting to notice, however, that right after taking the 15-hour course and a few days before starting to take the SLA- II course, students did not think using APA style was going to be that hard. Actually, among the list of eight challenges to be faced in the SLA-II course when writing a reflection paper, they considered using APA style would be the least demanding. This opinion dramatically changed after the course. This might be explained by the students' misleading feeling that having understood the teacher's instructions on using APA style makes things easy to later find out it indeed requires a lot of careful and systematic work.

Table 6.
Participants' perception of the intervention

Effectiveness of each component and of the dual-strategy	TA	PA	PD	TD
The dual intervention helped me improve AWS	1	9	2	1
The classroom-based course helped me improve AWS	6	8	0	0
The Moodle course helped me improve AWS	0	8	2	4
<i>TA: totally agree PA: partially agree PD: partially disagree TD: totally disagree AWS: academic writing skills</i>				

Table 6 displays information about the students' perception of the effectiveness of the dual strategy and of each of its components. All the students (14) who answered this item at least partially agreed that the classroom course helped them improve their academic writing skills. 6 of them (42.85%) totally agreed.

The perception towards the effectiveness of the Moodle course goes in an opposite direction. Contrary to the fact that most students found the classroom-based course to be effective, only eight of them (57%) partially agreed that the Moodle course was helpful but none of the students totally agreed that the Moodle course was helpful. Six of the fourteen students (42.85%) either partially or totally disagreed that the Moodle course contributed to the improvement of academic writing skills, which means that almost half of the students do not seem to see online courses as an effective strategy to help students develop academic writing skills. It might be interesting to try redesigning the course to make it more appealing to learners or to develop summative assessment instruments in the Moodle course as an extrinsic motivation mechanism. Some of the students admitted not even logging in to the course. Others did log in but admitted not doing the activities. In the *comments* section of this second survey, five of them expressed how they used (if they did) the Moodle course. The table below shows the comments as well as our interpretations.

Table 7.
Students' comments on the Moodle course

Students' comments	Our interpretation
Student one: <i>"I think the course was interesting. I could develop some skills that allowed me to improve my essays. I just participated in the classroom-based course. I didn't log in to the Moodle course because it was hard".</i> Student two: <i>"I didn't log in to the Moodle course"</i> Student three: <i>"I haven't been able to log in".</i>	Some of the research participants might not consider a course in Moodle an appropriate way to improve academic writing skills although they might use Internet for other academic purposes. Students feel the classroom-based course was more relevant than the one in Moodle.
Students four: <i>"I logged in to the course but I didn't see the activities".</i> Students five: <i>"I have logged in to the course just a few times but I have seen and used some of the documents".</i>	Some of the students did log in to the course but signed out if they did not <i>find</i> the activities quickly or could not figure out how to use them.

In regard to the effectiveness of the combination of the classroom-based course and the Moodle course, 9 of the 15 partially agreed. Only one totally agreed. Three partially or totally disagreed. Two did not answer this question. Based on the students' perception of the role the Moodle course played in helping them improve their writing skills, it could be inferred that the 9 students that partially agreed think the classroom instruction played the more important role in the dual strategy.

Table 8.
Students' perception on the skills improved

Skill improved mainly because of the intervention	TA	PA	PD	TD	Score
Writing a good abstract	6	7	2	0	4.26
Building up arguments	3	10	1	0	4.14
Using APA style in-text citation	4	7	4	0	4
Writing the list of references	3	10	2	0	4.06
TA: totally agree PA: partially agree PD: partially disagree TD: totally disagree					

Students also expressed (in table 8) their opinion in regard to which of the parts of writing the reflection paper they felt they had improved mainly due to the intervention. 13 of the

15 students (86.7%) partially or totally agreed they were able to write a good abstract mainly due to the intervention. The same number of people (13) partially or totally agreed that the intervention helped them elaborate on arguments for their papers. However, the number of students that totally agreed is lower. We feel it is not as easy to teach a person to elaborate on arguments, as it is to teach a person to write an abstract since abstracts usually follow a pattern and require little creativity while elaborating on arguments often requires the use of creativity and high-order thinking skills. As to using APA style in-text citation, fewer students (11) partially or totally agreed that intervention was as effective as in the case of the two previous issues. As we already discussed, students did not anticipate using APA style in-text citation would that challenging. On item 4, writing the list of references, only 3 of the 15 who answered the question thought the intervention helped them. Other 10 partially agreed. It can be concluded, then, that most students feel that the intervention was to a certain extent effective. As an interesting exercise (again, with no further pretensions), the students' opinions were turned into scores in order to have a better idea to what extent the participants felt they improved each one of the skills. All the *totally agrees* were given a score of 5, all the *partially agrees* a 4, the *partially disagrees* a 3 and all the *totally disagrees* a 2. A final score was given to each category to try to quantify to what extent the students felt they had improved due mainly to the intervention. Writing a good abstract obtained the higher score (4.26), followed by elaborating arguments (4.14) and writing the list of references (4.06). Using APA style in-text citation got the lowest score (4) in regard to which of these four aspects students felt they improved mainly due to the intervention. This data, however, cannot be considered as conclusive. Further research with an appropriate sample size would be necessary to attempt to do so.

Analysis of students' final drafts

The final versions of the 6 reflection papers were evaluated with an analytical rubric (see appendix

5), which included four criteria rated from 1 to 5: *Ability to write a good abstract*, *Ability to elaborate and support arguments*, *Ability to use APA style in-text citation* and *Ability to write a list of reference using APA format*.

Table 9.
Evaluation of each component in the reflection papers

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	Mean
Writing a good abstract	4	3	3	3	3	3	3.17
Building up solid arguments	3	3	4	4	4	2	3.33
Using APA style in-text citation	2	2	3	4	3	2	2.66
Writing a list of references using APA	3	2	3	3	2	2	2.5

Note: Six papers were submitted.

Table 9 shows that after the intervention most students were able to write good abstracts even though some of them lacked one of the main elements (aim, method and results) or in some cases were a bit confusing. Of the four criteria evaluated, the ability to build arguments got the highest scores. The mean score was 3.33 over 5, a little better than the mean for writing the abstract: 3.17. Unfortunately, in regards to using APA style, the scores were not as good. The mean score was 2.66. This data is coherent with the students' final opinion right after having submitted the papers but not with the students' perception before the semester started when they were not able to anticipate using APA style citation and writing a reference list would be such challenging tasks. Writing the list of references got the lowest mean score: 2.55. If we take into account that the reference list has to be done in appropriate APA style, we might conclude either

of the following: APA style is hard for undergraduate students to learn or students do not like to work diligently on such a demanding and time consuming (but not necessarily difficult) task as using APA style when writing an academic paper.

It is also important to remember that these two sections were the ones identified by the students in the intervention class as the major difficulties they had in the whole process of writing the reflection paper. Using APA style was also identified as the biggest challenge by the students that were in the diagnose class. Students might find these two tasks (using APA style citation and writing the reference list) tedious since they have to be careful and diligent in following the right APA citing procedure always keeping in mind there are quite a few “rules” and special cases. Another factor that might explain this deficiency is that students sometimes appropriate other writers’ text thinking the rater won’t notice or because they might not remember the source they got the text from. It is necessary to continue digging into the nature of this phenomenon since developing academic writing skills is a must not only for graduate students but also for undergraduate ones.

Table 10 displays a comparison between the scores obtained by the group of students who received the intervention as opposed to a group of fifth students taking a SLA II who did not. Again, this is a qualitative exercise that seeks to have a better understanding of the phenomenon studied rather than obtaining conclusive and/or definite results.

Table 10.
Comparison between the intervention group and the other group

Mean comparison		
Ability	Group 1	Group 2
Write a good abstract	3.17	2.66
Elaborate arguments	3.33	2.83
Use APA style in-text citation	2.66	2.66
Write a reference list using APA format	2.5	2.33
Group 1: Intervention group	Group 2: another SLA II class	

To start with, writing a good abstract seems to be one of the important benefits obtained from the intervention. As the table shows, the mean score of the intervention group in this ability was 3.17 compared to a mean score of 2.66 in the other class. In classes without specific instruction in academic writing, some information on using APA is provided. However, instruction on writing a good abstract is not usually given to the students. The intervention group did receive complete information on how to write a good abstract. This could explain the difference in the mean scores. A similar result was obtained from the students in the intervention group in the ability to elaborate arguments and support them appropriately. The mean score was 3.33 while the mean score obtained by group 2 was 2.83. It is important to highlight the fact that both groups were assigned the exact same task and in the same period of instruction. The third criterion used to evaluate the reflection papers was using APA style to cite sources properly. Here the results are a bit surprising. The mean scores for the intervention group and the other group are exactly the same; both of them obtained 2.66 in the ability to use APA in-text citation. Even though the intervention group received information on how to use proper APA format in-text citation, this information did not appear to be enough to have a direct impact on how accurately sources were cited in their papers. At this point, enough evidence has been collected as proof that APA style citation is a problematic task for undergraduate students in our region. Writing a reference list was also a difficult undertaking for both classes. The mean score of the

intervention class (2.5) was slightly better than that of the other group (2.33). A number of conclusions can be drawn from the data collected.

Conclusions and Implications

The data collected throughout this small-scale research allows drawing the following conclusions:

- The difficulties participants had when facing the challenge of writing academic papers seem to be due to not having the English level required, lacking important prior contact with academic papers and not being familiar with the nature of academic writing.
- Most students agree that the intervention was of high relevance and contributed to the improvement of the skills required to write a good reflection paper. Most of them also considered the course should be included as a mandatory requirement in the syllabus.
- The students' perception in regard to the relevance and effectiveness of the intervention is supported by the fact that the intervention group obtained a higher mean score in three of the four criteria with which the reflection papers were evaluated in comparison with the mean scores obtained by the students in the other group: *Writing a good abstract*, *Elaborating arguments* and *Writing the list of references*. The same three aspects were chosen as the ones they felt they improved the best mainly due to the intervention.
- Another finding that contributes to determining the benefit of the intervention is the fact that right after the intervention, most agreed that writing an abstract was not as difficult as they thought it was. The same students confirmed this opinion in the questionnaire answered immediately after submitting the final version of their reflection papers, when most of them did not think writing an abstract was as hard as they had anticipated before

the SLA started.

- Although the overall core of the findings shows that the intervention seems to have been beneficial, it is indeed clear that the classroom-based 15 hour course on academic writing played a more important role in the success of the intervention than the course on Moodle did. It would be important to explore in depth why students in our community are in general reluctant to use e-learning or blended learning as essential strategies to enhance their learning process.
- An aspect in which the effects of the intervention did not seem to be consistent is the use of APA in-text citation. The diagnose group had identified this item as the hardest (perhaps the most tedious) part of writing academic papers. Right after the initial classroom-based intervention, however, the research participants did not identify this item as one of the biggest challenges to be faced throughout the SLA II course. As discussed before, participants may have been misled by having understood APA citation style in the classroom-based intervention. This may have made it seem easier than it ended up being. In the end, the mean scores for using APA in-text citation were exactly the same for both groups. This could mean that to have a more significant impact on the use of APA citation format, a longer intervention might be necessary.
- Based on the results of the present study, implementing a course in academic writing in the program syllabus is necessary to get students familiar with the nature of academic writing, especially in special cases such as APA style format required in academic papers

such as the one required in the SLA II course in the university where the study was undertaken.

As a small scale study, it is necessary to look at these findings as a first step to describe the problems students have to deal with when writing academic papers in undergraduate programs in our country. It is true that the necessity for developing academic writing skills in the English language is growing. A new generation of teachers in our region should be ready to implement new ways of teaching that make learning more successful for learners. This is not enough, however, if these new ways of teaching are not documented so other educators can see what is being done and how it is working. Developing academic writing skills is, then, an integral part of any teacher. More and bigger efforts in order to find ways of helping this new generation of teachers document their practices are both welcome and necessary.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Diagnosis questionnaire.

UNIVERSITY: XXX

Assessing Needs

Survey questionnaire for students of fifth semester who are currently taking the courses "Second Language Acquisition II". Complete the following information and answer the questions:

1. What course were you taking at the XXX at the beginning of this module?
.....
2. I feel that at the beginning of this module, I didn't have the necessary skills to participate in class discussions and debates, read papers about second language acquisition and write reflection papers.
☐ Completely agree.
☐ Partially agree.
☐ Disagree
☐ Completely disagree
3. Had you ever READ any academic papers in English before this module?
 YES _____ NO _____
 If yes, how many?
 Between one and three _____ Between four and ten _____
 More than ten _____
4. Had you ever WRITTEN any reflection papers in English before this module?
 YES _____ NO _____
 If yes, how many?
 Between one and three _____ Between four and ten _____
 More than ten _____
5. In which of these academic skills did you have the most problems throughout the second *language acquisition* module? (Do not choose more than four)
☐ Reading and understanding the structure of academic papers.
☐ Expressing an opinion and supporting it with research facts and data.
☐ Searching for information online related to second language acquisition.
☐ Writing the reflection paper.
☐ Using APA style in-text citation.
☐ Writing the abstract for the reflection paper.
☐ Participating in class discussions and debates.
☐ Making oral presentation about Second language acquisition.

Appendix 2. Sample lesson Plan.

INSTITUTION: XXX

Teacher's names: XXX XXX		Term: Pre-semester	Date: January 28	Allocated time: 1h 30
Relevant recent work:		<i>Reading academic papers</i>		
Topic of the lesson:		Familiarizing with academic papers		
Objective: Students will be able to identify the main parts of an academic paper.				
Key words: <i>cohesion, coherence, unity</i>				
Materials/equipment: <i>markers, board, and copies.</i>				
INSTRUCTIONAL PROCEDURES:				

Lesson stages	Interaction	Skills involved	Time
A focusing event / lead-in /warm-up activity: T checks the topic sentences students wrote. Sts read their topic sentences aloud and the rest of the class discuss if they are strong topic sentences and make suggestions or corrections.	<i>T – Sts</i> <i>Sts-Sts</i>	<i>Speaking</i> <i>Writing</i>	<i>20 min.</i>
Teaching procedures (lesson core): Some copies are distributed to the students. They read the introduction of an academic paper about Content Based Instruction. After reading T asks Sts questions to check their comprehension and explain.	T-Sts Sts-Sts	Reading Speaking	25 min.
T asks Sts to work in pairs and make an outline of the introductory paragraph in order to identify its structure: topic sentence, supporting sentences and concluding sentence. T checks the outlines and give the corresponding feedback.	Sts-Sts T-Sts	Reading Writing	25 min.
After identifying the structure of the introductory paragraph T asks Sts to continue working in pairs and identify the words that are connecting sentences in the paragraph. After finishing, this task is socialized and discussed with all the class. Finally, T explains and gives more examples of those transition words and how they contribute to coherence of the paragraph.	Sts-Sts T-Sts	Reading	10 min
Assessment: The next activity consists of giving students three paragraphs with blanks to complete with the appropriate transition words that are below each paragraph. Subsequently, T continues talking about some other characteristics of strong paragraphs such as: Unity, completeness, order and coherence. Students are asked to explain if the paragraph they read featured these characteristics.			50 min.
Closure: As homework, they must choose some transition words and write two or three sentences using them.			

Appendix 3. Survey administered to participants right after the classroom-based course.

UNIVERSITY:XXX

ACADEMIC WRITING COURSE SURVEY-February-2014

Survey questionnaire for students of fifth semester who are currently taking the courses “Second Language Acquisition”. Complete the following information and answer the questions:

1. What course are you taking at the XXX at the beginning of this module?
.....
2. Had you ever READ any academic papers in English before this course?
YES _____ NO _____
If yes, how many?
Between one and three _____ Between four and ten _____
More than ten _____
3. Had you ever WRITTEN any academic papers in English before this course?
YES _____ NO _____
If yes, how many?
Between one and three _____ Between four and ten _____
More than ten _____

4. Before this course, I didn't have the necessary skills to participate in class discussions and debates, read papers about second language acquisition and write reflection papers.
- ☐ Completely agree.
- ☐ Partially agree.
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Completely disagree
5. The academic writing course given by Martin Patiño and Astrid Diaz was scheduled before the fifth semester started. I feel it was the right moment to take this course.
- ☐ Completely agree.
- ☐ Partially agree.
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Completely disagree.
6. I feel that at the information included in this module will help me write a good reflection essay.
- ☐ Completely agree.
- ☐ Partially agree.
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Completely disagree
7. Writing an abstract is not as difficult as I thought.
- ☐ Completely agree.
- ☐ Partially agree.
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Completely disagree
8. I feel that this course should be institutionalized and made mandatory for all students about to start fifth semester.
- ☐ Completely agree.
- ☐ Partially agree.
- ☐ Disagree
- ☐ Completely disagree
9. Which of these do you agree with the most?
- ☐ All students in my program should be made to write academic papers.

- ☐ Writing academic papers should be optional.
- ☐ Only those students who are good at writing should be obliged to write academic papers.
- ☐ Writing academic papers is not important for English teachers.

10. In which of these academic skills do you think you will have the most problems throughout the second *language acquisition* module? (Do not choose more than four)

- ☐ Reading and understanding the structure of academic papers.
- ☐ Expressing an opinion and supporting it with research facts and data.
- ☐ Searching for information online related to second language acquisition.
- ☐ Writing the reflection paper.
- ☐ Using APA style in-text citation.
- ☐ Writing the abstract for the reflection paper.
- ☐ Participating in class discussions and debates.
- ☐ Making oral presentation about Second language acquisition.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

Appendix 4. Survey administered to participants after submitting the final version of the papers.

EFFECT OF A BLENDED LEARNING INTERVENTION ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS.

The purpose of this survey is to know your perception on aspects related to writing academic papers.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Instructions: Read the question/statement and choose the answer that best describes your opinión.

	The abstract	Elaborating arguments	Using APA style citation	Writing the list of references
1. Which of these four aspects did you find the most difficult when writing your reflection paper?				
	Totally agree	Partially agree	Partially disagree	Totally disagree
2. The one-week course in				

January this year helped me improve my academic writing skills.				
	Totally agree	Partially agree	Partially disagree	Totally disagree
3. The Moodle course helped me improve my academic writing skills.				
	Totally agree	Partially agree	Partially disagree	Totally disagree
4. The combination of the one-week course and the Moodle course was effective.				
	Totally agree	Partially agree	Partially disagree	Totally disagree
5. I can write a better abstract mainly because of the intervention.				
	Totally agree	Partially agree	Partially disagree	Totally disagree
6. I can elaborate on arguments better mainly because of the intervention.				
	Totally agree	Partially agree	Partially disagree	Totally disagree
7. I can use APA in-text citation style better now mainly because of the intervention				
	Totally agree	Partially agree	Partially disagree	Totally disagree
8. I can write a list of references better now mainly because of the intervention.				
Comments				

Appendix 5. Rubric for reflection paper evaluation.

Categories	5	4	3	2	1
Abstract	Abstract is clear and appropriate length (200 words) and contains three main parts (objective, method and results).	Abstract is rather clear and approximate length (200 words). It contains two of the main parts (objective, method and results).	Abstract is not clear enough. A bit too short or long. It contains only one of the three main parts (objective, method and results).	Abstract is very confusing. Too long or too short. If any, It contains one of the three main parts (objective, method and results).	No abstract.
Elaboration of Arguments	Arguments are stated very clearly and supported with a lot of facts and data.	Arguments are stated somewhat clearly and supported with some facts and data.	Arguments are not stated clearly and supported with few facts and data.	Arguments are not stated clearly and are not supported with facts and data.	No arguments are stated.

APA style In-text citation	All sources used within the body of the paper are cited correctly when paraphrasing or quoting a source directly.	Most of the sources used within the body of the paper are cited correctly when paraphrasing or quoting a source directly.	Some of the sources used within the body of the paper are cited correctly when paraphrasing or quoting a source directly.	Few of the sources used within the body of the paper are cited correctly when paraphrasing or quoting a source directly.	No sources used within the body of the paper are cited.
Reference list	The reference list includes all the sources cited in the paper and not any other . Reference list is written in appropriate APA style.	The reference list includes most of the sources cited in the paper and not any other . Reference list is partially written in appropriate APA style.	The reference list includes some the sources cited in the paper and not any other . APA style in reference list needs improvement.	The reference list includes only a few the sources cited in the paper and not any other . References are not written in APA style.	Reference list is not included.