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Learners' Perceptions of Writing Difficulties on a Pre-sessional EAP Programme in a British University

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Abstract

This study examines how learners' perceptions of their academic writing difficulties changed over the course of a four-week intensive English for Academic purposes (EAP) programme at a British university. The participants of this qualitative study were 14 Chinese undergraduate students who engaged in interviews and completed learning journal entries. The results of the thematic analyses indicate that vocabulary which constituted the biggest perceived challenge in Week 1 was no longer mentioned in Week 4 as a source of writing difficulty. Another finding is that after four weeks, students felt they had a better understanding of argumentation in a UK academic context and were not facing major difficulties with using sources and the understanding of argumentation in a UK academic context; they also reported that they were not facing major difficulties with using sources and understanding plagiarism in written assignments. Upon completion of the EAP course, students also reported that they tended to experience noticeably fewer challenges with academic reading. This qualitative study provides insights into the contribution of pre-sessional programmes in the development of learners' writing as they transition into the academic community.

Introduction

Writing constitutes a core academic skill at university since students' success is often determined by their performance in written assignments. Over recent years, research on both second language (L2) writing (Ferris, 2010; Hyland, 2003, 2016; Manchón, 2012; Murphy & Marin, 2002; Roca de Larios, 2002) and academic writing (Bitchener, 2017; Ferris, 2017; Paltridge, 2014, 2017; Tardy, 2017) has grown rapidly. Hyland (2016), Manchón (2012) and Ferris (2010) agree that English for Academic Purposes (EAP) has flourished as a field for research into second language learning and teaching. Higher educational institutions offer programmes for the development of academic skills *before* the degree course begins (pre-sessional EAP courses) and *during* the degree course (in-sessional EAP support). Although EAP courses might focus on improving learners' levels of English language proficiency (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002), their ultimate aims are to equip learners with relevant academic and study skills (Hanks, 2015, 2017a) as well as to familiarise them with academic writing genres and expectations (Evans & Green, 2007; Hyland, 2002; Reid, 2001; Zhu, 2004) to aid academic success.

In this article, we will contribute to L2 writing research by offering insights into the most challenging aspects of writing faced by the students during a four-week pre-sessional EAP course. We combined two methods of qualitative data collection in our study, semi-structured

interviews and reflective learning journals, to enable us draw conclusions regarding the nature of L2 learners' perceived writing difficulties on an intensive pre-session programme. Examining L2 learners' perceptions of their academic writing difficulties could help researchers in the area of academic writing by providing a more in-depth understanding of the underlying causes of these difficulties, as well as suggesting to teachers and learners some possible ways to overcome these challenges.

The challenges of L2 writing

Second language writing can be problematic for students. Underdeveloped writing skills are viewed as one of the main detrimental factors for L2 learners in achieving successful academic performance at the tertiary level (see Zhu, 2004). The learners who decide to study at university seem to be not well-prepared for the challenging experience of moving to a higher education context, as Hanks (2017a, 2017b) points out. The key source of difficulty for them is the paradigm shift they have to make in order to write in an academic style. According to Krause (2001), producing an academic essay for the first time is a big challenge since students are supposed to demonstrate in-depth knowledge of the subject matter and coherently communicate ideas across to the target audience by means of relevant and appropriate academic language. English as a Second Language (ESL) learners tend to struggle with various linguistic (e.g., vocabulary, grammar, syntax) and non-linguistic (e.g., organisational) features of academic writing in their essays at the tertiary level (Evans & Green, 2007). Leedham (2014) attributes this to the fact that learners are taught general rather than academic writing at schools, though this is of course less true for some students and more for others. For example, Cai (2017) reports that "Chinese students are ...much less proficient in academic writing, as requirements for English writing ...are low, with only general English essays covered" (p. 136). Cai also added that student-writers are being taught drilling and appear to be quite confident about their grammar, but "find it difficult to achieve appropriateness in an academic context" (pp. 133-34). Hence, when studying at university in an English-speaking country, L2 learners tend to have rather limited awareness of academic writing conventions and struggle to adapt to a new learning environment (Hanks, 2017a).

Academic writing difficulties

Academic writing skills are core skills that L2 learners studying in a university context need to possess (Pecorari, 2006). The importance of writing is reflected in the emphasis given to academic writing on pre-session EAP programmes at British universities, where it occupies one of the central positions. The significance of EAP has been clearly emphasized in second language writing research (Evans & Green, 2007; Hyland, 2016; Reid, 2001; Storch & Tapper, 2009; Zhu, 2004). Although an EAP course may target advancing learners' levels of proficiency in English (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2002), their core aim lies in supplying L2 learners with essential academic skills and study skills (Hanks, 2017b, 2022) as well as making them familiar with different genres of academic writing.

L2 writers seem to view accuracy of grammar, clarity of expression, coherence and cohesion and other linguistic aspects of writing as more challenging than content-based and structural aspects of writing (e.g., Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Bitchener, 2017). The findings of some other scholars have however demonstrated a completely different trend, where learners seem to struggle considerably more with the effective organisation of their ideas than with the syntactic and lexical accuracy of their writing (e.g., Kubota, 1998; Marshall, 1991). L2 learners often view source-based writing as the biggest challenge, which could ultimately lead to plagiarism (Merkel, 2020). Another source of difficulty for L2 writers lies in their ability to understand "the disciplinary expectations for academic writing" (Pecorari, 2022, p.8). The research-based evidence (e.g., Pecorari, 2006; Pecorari & Petrić, 2014) suggests that students who are aware of the requirements of their academic disciplines are much less likely to plagiarise.

As argued by Wette (2017), reading and writing skills are intertwined, and learners' inability to demonstrate a successful performance in one of these skills appears to result in their inability to also succeed in the other skill. Students with more advanced language proficiency seem to have fewer academic difficulties than students with a more limited proficiency in the L2 (Phakiti & Li, 2011). Although learners' perceptions of 'difficulties' might not match the actual problems they face in the university context, when learners understand the extent of the problem, they are more likely to put in some extra effort in order to overcome the difficulties and resolve the problem.

Previous research suggests that L2 learners perceive their writing difficulties as either organisational, i.e., ability to structure a coherent argument, or linguistic, i.e., lexical, grammatical, and syntactic. For example, Evans and Green (2007) investigated the nature of language problems experienced by L1 Cantonese students studying at a university in Hong Kong. They concluded that L2 learners of English consider linguistic aspects of academic writing, i.e., grammatically accurate and lexically diverse use of language, more challenging than content and structural aspects of writing, i.e., communicating ideas across smoothly and organising the text coherently. As observed by Bitchener and Basturkmen (2006), learners' perceived writing difficulties are often determined by rather weak linguistic proficiency, i.e., grammar and vocabulary, and are observed, in particular, at the sentence level. A different observation was made by Kubota (1998), who pointed out that learners' difficulties with academic writing appear to be associated with organisational rather than language-related components. This might be caused by teachers' emphasis on linguistic accuracy and insufficient focus on the discourse organisation of students' texts.

There are many studies providing statistical analyses on student writing (e.g., Abdi Tabari, 2022; Mazgutova & Kormos, 2015; Révész et al., 2017) but what is missing from those is an understanding of students' perspectives. This is a gap which our study aims to address. Perceptions are not just a good-enough way to index learning; they have value in and of themselves. If students perceive that the challenges of academic English become more manageable, they are more motivated, spend more time on task, and feel more agency and authorial identity. This article offers a complementary text to Mazgutova and Hanks (2021) in which L2 learners' perceived writing strategies were discussed. Lack of space precluded analysis of learner perceptions of their difficulties in academic writing at that time. Therefore, this article sets out to better understand the learners' perceptions of their writing difficulties on the EAP programme, i.e., using academic vocabulary, developing arguments, thinking critically, selecting information from academic sources, and understanding plagiarism.

Our study sought to address the following research question:

How did L2 learners' perceptions of their writing difficulties change from the beginning to the end of an intensive EAP course in a British university?

Methods

Research setting and participants

As mentioned earlier, this article is a companion piece to Mazgutova and Hanks (2021). Discussion in the companion paper focused on learners' perceptions of their writing strategies on an intensive EAP course in the UK. However, the study yielded a rich dataset of which only the changes in perceived writing strategies were reported. Here, therefore, we discuss further findings from the study, with a specific focus on students' changing perceptions of plagiarism, referencing and critical thinking.

One of the authors recruited 14 undergraduate L2 learners of English to participate in the study. They were all L1 Chinese speakers studying on an intensive pre-sessional EAP programme at a university in the UK. The central aims of the pre-sessional programme were to help learners improve their use of academic English, to develop their ability to think critically and to raise their awareness of some essential study skills and strategies they could find particularly useful while studying in a British university context (Hanks, 2017a, 2017b). Every week, students received

15 hours of in-class instruction as well as being required to self-study for approximately the same number of hours. Every student was invited to attend an individual tutorial during which they were given the opportunity to ask questions and their learning and were offered feedback on their weekly written assignment.

Academic Reading and Writing (ARW) was the core module taught every day on the EAP course. It aimed to help students develop their confidence as academic readers and writers. They were expected to read widely and to integrate the scholarly work into their own assignments. These assignments were argumentative essays they were expected to produce on the programme, and which increased in cognitive complexity every week. Upon completion of each essay, students were given formative feedback on several aspects of academic writing including *Task Response*, i.e., appropriacy of the content and persuasiveness of argumentation; *Organisation*, i.e., coherence of ideas in the essay; *Use of Source Material*, i.e., adherence to referencing conventions; and *Language Use*, i.e., accuracy and appropriacy of vocabulary and grammar.

Research instruments

Data in this study were collected using two qualitative methods: Semi-structured interviews and reflective learning journals.

Interviews

Kvale (2003) and Mann (2016) consider an interview as an attempt to make sense of the world from the perspective of the research participants. The role of the researcher is to uncover in-depth information by asking questions and listening to the interviewees carefully at the same time. Semi-structured interviews were thus chosen to enable us to examine student-writers' perceptions about their own writing difficulties. All 14 participants were interviewed twice: Once at the beginning of Week 1 and then at the end of Week 4 on the pre-session programme. The first interview was conducted to access students' perceptions about their writing performance, challenges they encounter during the writing process and the ways they overcome these challenges. The second interview was held at the end of the course to elicit students' feelings about their performance on the course and to get a detailed account of their writing difficulties. Some of the prompts used in Week 1 and Week 4 interviews were as follows: "How do you see yourself as a writer?", and "What do you struggle with when you write in English?" The length of each interview was approximately 15-20 minutes.

Learning journals

In addition to the interviews, reflective learning journals were adopted as a less intrusive tool to elicit data (Cathro et al., 2017). Combination of these two qualitative methods was expected to contribute to a more in-depth and accurate understanding of learners' perceived writing strategies and ultimately, to help to enhance the trustworthiness of our findings. Having produced an assignment, students were expected to complete one journal entry per week, in which they would reflect on their writing process and their vision of themselves as academic writers. Three reflective entries were completed by each learner over a period of three weeks on the EAP course. There was no fixed word limit for each entry, but, on average, their length varied between 500 and 600 words. Some of the learning journal prompts were as follows: "Was it a difficult topic to write an essay about?"; "Did you ever get stuck while writing your essay? What did you do to find the way out?"

Data analysis

All data collected with the aid of the interviews and learning journals was analysed by one researcher. Following this, a quarter of the interview transcripts and learning journals were coded and analysed by the other researcher, and an agreement was reached between the two researchers involved in the data analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The following steps were undertaken in the process of the data coding: 1) Themes and subthemes were identified; 2) key themes and subthemes were selected; 3) theme hierarchies were established; and 4) themes and subthemes were linked to relevant theoretical frameworks (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The transcripts were scanned for key words, lines were drawn down the margins to indicate

codes and meaning, and finally the data were examined for patterns (Bryman, 2003; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The coded transcripts of the data are available upon request.

Ethics

We were keen to ensure that our participants were aware of the specific steps involved in the research process as well as the usability and dissemination of the research findings (British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2018). Participants were given an information sheet which clearly stated the aims and the design of the study and offered them the opportunity to take part. They were also informed that their participation was voluntary, that there was no obligation for them to respond to questions if they felt uncomfortable, and they were reminded regularly about their right to withdraw from the study at any time. If they agreed, they were invited to sign the consent form. The interview recordings, transcripts and learning journal entries were stored securely, and participants in the data were anonymised. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of a British university.

Results and discussion

In this study, we aimed to identify whether students' perceptions of their writing difficulties changed over the course of four weeks of studying on the EAP programme in the UK. We were particularly interested in their perceptions of difficulties with writing, as these perceptions may affect the uptake of advice given on pre-sessional programmes.

The results of our research appear to align with the findings observed in previous studies (Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006; Evans & Green, 2007; Phakiti & Li, 2011). The learners indicated that various difficulties restrained them from becoming successful academic writers. The following themes that emerged from our data are analysed and discussed below:

i. Use of academic vocabulary; ii. Argumentation and critical thinking; iii. Use of sources and understanding of plagiarism; and iv. Some aspects of academic reading.

Use of academic vocabulary

One of the most common perceived writing problems as reported by eight out of fourteen participants at the start of the EAP course was a limited ability to use appropriate academic words and phrases. This suggests that vocabulary constitutes a demanding aspect of L2 writing, especially in the first week of the EAP course. Nation (2001) highlights the central role of academic vocabulary in producing written texts. Vocabulary knowledge is a key linguistic component student-writers should work on in order to succeed in their writing. One of the students commented as follows:

Unlike a senior writer, I'm always not satisfied with the vocabulary I have, I just know simple words... (Student 7, interview 1).

This could be attributed to learners' dependency on vocabulary learnt at school and their tendency to only use basic words in their writing.

Learning journal data also indicated that students might associate their struggles with writing to an ineffective use of academic words. An example of this view was given by a student:

Usually, I can't remember some words and I will not find exact word to express what I mean so I will feel very upset and will check this word in dictionary or read more books to help myself change this situation (Student 3, journal 1).

By the end of the pre-sessional course, however, only two writers mentioned that the use of academic vocabulary was their main challenge. As one of them put it,

I still find it very difficult to find accurate synonyms that would express what I want. I can't write the way I want to write because I have limited vocabulary and I struggle with choosing the right words to express my ideas in an academic way (Student 3, interview 2).

The shift in students' perceptions might have happened due to extensive reading of academic materials including books, articles and student essays of outstanding quality while studying on the programme (Mazgutova & Hanks, 2021). Students encountered new vocabulary specific to the academic essay genre, e.g., reporting verbs and hedging expressions, which they practised incorporating into their own assignments, and by the end of Week 4 on the programme, probably became more confident in their ability to use academic vocabulary effectively. Furthermore, when asked at the beginning of the course about their writing difficulties, many student-writers might not have been conscious of what they actually considered problematic, given their lack of experience in academic writing. After the course, they might have realised that academic writing involves more than just vocabulary, and there are other major challenges they are likely to face such as critical thinking, argumentation and integrating scholarly work into their own texts.

Argumentation and critical thinking

The use of academic words is often viewed as difficult by L2 learners; however, the development of coherent arguments can be even more problematic (see Bitchener, 2017; Bitchener & Basturkmen, 2006). Argumentative writing is seen as substantially more challenging than other types of writing, e.g., descriptive writing (Khaldieh, 2000). Building an argument is one of the major challenges that students encounter in academic writing at the university. Many L2 students appear to be unsuccessful in their academic writing because of struggling with making a stance and demonstrating their voice while constructing an argument.

As indicated in the learning journals by six out of fourteen respondents, in the first three weeks of the EAP course, establishing their own position and using evidence was perceived as very demanding. For example, one of the students described this difficulty in their journal entry as follows:

I don't have enough evidence to support my opinion. Connecting evidence to the topic is tough. I wish my ability to draw conclusions were better (Student 12, journal 1).

The findings of the interview show that initially the majority of student-writers were uncertain about what was expected of them. As highlighted in the interview with a student:

I can't do some critical thinking about the logic in the passage, that's why I can't get logic in my assignment (Student 13, interview 1).

In line with Bitchener (2017), students might not have had a clear understanding of what constitutes an argument in academic writing since this cognitive genre appeared to be new to them, and critical evaluation of the ideas of other scholars and justifying their own position on a specific issue was not required in their earlier education (see Bruce, 2008). In addition, they might not have known how to create an effective argument because of the limited experience of explicit teaching in their previous university context (see Bitchener, 2017). As mentioned by some students during the interviews, they were culturally led to respect authors' views and not criticise them. One of the interviewees stated:

I do realise that I need to be critical of the literature to some extent, but this skill is kind of new to me. I also don't feel quite confident challenging the views of other people, because, you know, all these people are writers and researchers in the field who know a lot, and I kind of feel hesitant about challenging and doubting what they say (Student 10, interview 1).

The interview data suggest that students were faced with this problem primarily at the beginning of the EAP course. By the end of Week 4, none of the respondents mentioned argumentation and critical thinking as major writing challenges. This finding concurs with a study by Thompson,

Morton and Storch (2013), who also found that by the end of the year, the participants of their study developed their “ability to critically analyse” sources (p. 107). Some possible explanations for this major change in students’ perception of writing difficulties are as follows. First, the Academic Reading and Writing module on the EAP programme put emphasis on developing learners’ critical thinking and enabling them to use evidence from academic sources to substantiate their argument. Furthermore, students were given the opportunity to develop their argument by composing several research-based essays, each of which they were expected to approach critically.

In early weeks of the EAP programme, having been told by their tutors to be critical in writing, students might have done so only to satisfy the task requirement. However, it seems that by the end of the course, students may have developed “a genuine critical awareness and interest” in academic writing (Harwood & Petrić, 2012, p. 59). Secondly, students received weekly written feedback from their tutors and attended one-to-one tutorials. Finally, input received from their tutors in class may have helped student-writers gain confidence in critical thinking and ability to produce coherent arguments in their texts.

Use of sources and understanding of plagiarism

The results of the interview and learning journal analysis showed that in Week 1 on the programme, five out of fourteen students reported a limited ability to use citation and referencing consistently. A student commented on the issues as follows:

I’m not good at writing correct bibliography and references (Student 5, journal 1).

Students were seemingly aware of the significance of using citations and referencing other scholars’ work in their academic assignments. However, at the beginning of the EAP programme, they might have had a limited knowledge regarding the choice of a proper citation style. The comment below illustrates this:

When I write the References, I find it difficult to choose the right format and this often leads to confusion and difficulty probably because I did not yet get sufficient training on how to cite and use quotations (Student 7, interview 1).

Also, their understanding of academic integrity and plagiarism might have been rather vague. Similar to the respondents in Merkel’s (2020) study, our participants expressed major concerns with source usage. This view was echoed by one of the students in their learning journal entry:

I don’t think I have good knowledge of the meanings of plagiarism. For example, I am aware that copying other authors’ ideas without acknowledging the source is wrong, but I didn’t know that submitting the same paragraphs in two different modules is plagiarism. I only learnt about this when I came to the UK. (Student 3, journal 2)

Finally, in contrast with Wette (2017), whose findings revealed that L2 writers were ultimately able to paraphrase and accurately use sources, we found that our students appear to not have developed their ability to paraphrase and summarise. As pointed out by some of them during the interviews, they were attempting to use synonyms to replace some words and phrases they encountered in original sources. For example, one interviewee reported as follows:

Paraphrasing is one of my main problems in writing. I can only give synonyms for the main words in a paragraph. I am worried that the meaning of the whole paragraph might change. Therefore, I try not to make too many changes. (Student 10, interview 1)

By the end of Week 4, learners’ perceptions of their use academic sources in writing changed substantially; most of them no longer felt that they experienced major difficulties with that particular aspect of academic writing. One of the participants reported:

Our tutors taught us the actual meaning of plagiarism as well as provided us with some good examples from books and other students’ essays. They also made it very clear

to us that plagiarism is more than copy-pasting other writers' work. Now I feel that I have grasped this concept well enough and will be able to avoid plagiarism in my future assignments. (Student 6, interview 2)

In accordance with the EAP curriculum, students received focused input on the importance of using academic sources accurately and consistently. Their ability to reference sources might have improved due to their work on research-based essays over the course of four weeks. For each essay, students were given detailed feedback from their tutor on various aspects of academic writing including citation and referencing. Finally, they might have improved their referencing ability by studying instances of effective citation practice in journal articles and exemplary student assignments. Some previous studies have shown similar gains made by the student-writers after taking pre-sessional EAP courses, such as improvement in their ability to produce well-written paraphrases and evaluate academic sources (e.g., Morton, Storch & Thompson, 2015; Thompson, Morton & Storch, 2013).

Some aspects of academic reading

The specific areas of reading-related difficulty student-writers experienced on the EAP programme were as follows. In Week 1, six out of fourteen students indicated in the interviews that they tend to struggle with comprehension of the reading materials they were expected to familiarise themselves with prior to writing their assignments. One of the learners disclosed how the difficulty with reading impacted the quality of her writing:

Sometimes I can't understand the materials clearly. If the topic is difficult and unfamiliar, I have some difficulty about understanding the topic and [...] can't write my essay (Student 10, interview 1).

Another reading-related difficulty lies in selecting relevant information from a range of academic sources when planning their assignments. Some students seemed to particularly struggle with the fact that "there are too many sources to choose from" (Student 5, journal 2). Students believed that their lack of ability to cope with intensive reading hindered them from making progress in academic writing.

Interestingly, in Week 4, most students pointed out that they no longer view reading as a problem affecting their academic writing performance. As one of the participants put it in their journal entry:

After 3 weeks of studying on the course, I began to realise that I should read the source several times and think about it in order to arrive at the exact meaning intended by the author. It requires a lot of work indeed but helps me so much with my own writing (Student 2, journal 3).

This view was echoed by another student in the end-of-course interview:

I do understand now that I need to think a lot and read a lot of academic articles. This helps me to decide which points to include in my essay and which ones to neglect (Student 8, interview 2).

All this might indicate that in Week 4, students seemed to struggle considerably less with different aspects of academic reading than they did in Week 1. Hence, writing appears to be closely interlinked with reading, and students should be constantly motivated to read different academic sources in their second language to enhance the quality of their assignments and to learn some new lexis.

As previous research suggests, student-writers' past experience might have an influence on the type of challenges they might experience with academic reading and writing (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2008; Phakiti & Li, 2011). Reading in L2 can present challenges as L2 writers "may have had little experience in navigating their way through academic texts that can often be quite dense for even L1...writers" (Bitchener, 2017, p. 88). Specifically, IELTS-style writing, which the L2 learners were taught in the past, is substantially different from academic research-based

writing they were taught while studying on the EAP programme (Moore & Morton, 2005). To be able to write IELTS-style assignments, they were not expected to read widely and use reliable evidence from the literature. However, on the EAP programme, there was an expectation for the learners to integrate arguments from a number of sources and substantiate their writing with some convincing research-based evidence to back up their claims. Students realised the importance of engaging with academic reading to become better writers. This concurs with Phakiti and Li (2011), who argued for a strong connection between reading and writing difficulties.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine L2 learners' perceptions of their writing difficulties on a very intensive EAP course. In the course of our research, we found that the learners felt that they experienced substantially fewer challenges with different aspects of academic writing upon completion of the pre-sessional programme. One of the interesting findings to emerge was that vocabulary was not considered as the biggest writing challenge after four weeks of studying on the programme. Another major finding was that students felt more confident with argumentation and critical thinking and none of them appeared to consider the use of sources and understanding of plagiarism as a challenging aspect of academic writing. Finally, upon completion of the EAP course, students no longer seemed to perceive reading sources as particularly difficult.

The study has generated some meaningful findings; however, it has certain limitations that should be recognised. All students who volunteered to take part in our research were Chinese learners from very similar educational and cultural background. We do not believe that this necessarily invalidates our study which was qualitative in nature. However, for future research, we intend to seek out cohorts of students with mixed backgrounds so that we could build a more detailed picture of student perceptions of their writing difficulties and the efficacy of pre-sessional programmes in developing student writing capacity.

Our study was based on self-report, and there may have been differences between what the learners and teachers perceived as a problem in academic writing. A further study could thoroughly examine the written texts produced by the student-writers to identify their difficulties and assess to what extent they match up with their perceived writing challenges.

This study is also limited by the fact that the participants were self-selecting, i.e., they volunteered to be involved in our research. Self-selection threatened the external validity of our findings and resulted in research bias. The issue is that those who expressed their willingness to participate in the study were likely to be more motivated and confident about their own writing than the rest of the EAP student cohort.

Furthermore, our study was conducted in the context of one specific EAP programme within one specific institution and it was not possible to generalise the findings. Finally, as one of the researchers acted as the EAP programme coordinator at the time the research was conducted, they also could have been biased about the findings and conclusions drawn. They were predisposed to promote the programme and its effectiveness in aiding student development. The other researcher who co-authored the manuscript was an experienced EAP professional who had no connection with the programme at all and therefore identified potential bias.

For ethical purposes, the learners were told by the researcher that their participation was completely voluntary, and they could withdraw any time if they were willing to do so. Importantly, it was made explicit that their decision regarding engagement in the study would not in any way influence their performance on the EAP course.

The findings have shown that L2 learners' limited experience with academic texts in English is likely to have an adverse effect on the extent of their academic vocabulary. It is thus important that students read intensively to meet the needs of academic writing. Furthermore, teachers

need to make sure that learners understand how to increase their vocabulary and how to use it effectively. It can also be inferred from our findings that learners need to be introduced to vocabulary learning strategies on pre-sessional programmes to enable them to succeed in their academic reading and writing performance at the university.

Considering the results of our study, a possible implication lies in the possible transformation of the delivery of EAP reading and writing courses in other countries where students tend to experience similar problems. This could be achieved by designing and introducing new intensive EAP-focused teaching materials to replace the outdated textbooks, in order to assist L2 learners' academic writing development. Our study strengthens the idea that practitioners should adopt a student-centred approach when teaching EAP to university students by actively engaging them in the learning process and offering multiple opportunities to analyse and critically evaluate scholarly ideas and express their own viewpoints.

For over twenty years, EAP has been struggling as a field to find ways to teach academic writing more effectively. Many researchers have focused on the written work that students produce, and analysed their mistakes, errors, weaknesses and developing strengths. However, without an understanding of what the students themselves perceive as difficulties in writing, and without explicitly engaging with these student perceptions, EAP will continue to struggle. This study has, in a small way, begun the work of exploring student understandings of academic writing, and shows how even short pre-sessional programmes can make a positive difference. By working together, listening to student concerns, and exploring student perceptions collaboratively, we can help student writing develop. Their puzzles about academic writing shift from surface-level linguistic problems to a deeper understanding of what it means to write in academic genres, thus reflecting the move from periphery to centre of the academy. More research is needed to understand student perceptions of their difficulties, and actively engage them in the pursuit of good, effective academic writing.

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