



Evaluating the Effectiveness of Year One Academic Writing Course in Preparing Students for the Final Year Project

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Abstract

This study investigates the effectiveness of a first-year Academic Writing course in preparing undergraduates with the necessary academic writing skills for their Final Year Project. The course teaches basic skills such as paraphrasing, summarising, synthesising and using sources responsibly. Responses were obtained from 40 final-year students who are writing their Final Year Project, at the Language Centre of a public university in Malaysia using a 19-item Likert-scale questionnaire. The questionnaire showed high internal consistency reliability, Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.89. It was found that students rated paraphrasing and summarising to have high development, while synthesis has been developed at a moderate level. Students were also found to have transferred the writing skills and knowledge to other courses, which is a positive learning transfer. However, they felt that the work and activities in the course did not entirely prepare them for the long piece of academic writing needed for their Final Year Projects. Overall, it is suggested by the study that the course successfully develops foundational writing techniques. However, it fails in preparing students for the more advanced and complex forms of writing they would be expected to complete in their Final Year Project. In conclusion, it is suggested that the course should provide more synthesising practice, longer research-related writing tasks and ongoing writing support at all stages of the programme to reinforce students' research writing readiness.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Final Year Project Readiness, Writing Skills

1 Introduction

Academic writing is an essential part of higher education because students learn that they can engage critically with scholarly texts, develop arguments and put forth their own ideas in a way that the academy will accept. An area fraught with the most difficulty for undergraduate students within the academy is the Final Research Project, where they are asked to learn synthesising information from a variety of sources, creating a literature review, and sustaining academic writing across several chapters. Academic Writing courses are usually offered in the first year of studies to prepare students for such demanding challenges. The implicit assumption is that an introduction to academic writing at an early age will enable students to meet the advanced research-

writing challenge. Yet, discussion continues about whether one introductory class adequately prepares students for the cognitive and linguistic challenges of the Final Research Project. The first-year Academic Writing course is intended to introduce students to the practice of summarising, paraphrasing, referencing and basic academic conventions in their various fields. In the Final Research Project, students must employ advanced skills, including critical synthesis, argument development, and coherence across chapters. Given the vast distance between the preparatory tasks and the sophisticated demands of the Final Research Project, one must question whether this first-year course indeed prepares students to conduct research. Although the first-year Academic Writing course introduces fundamental academic literacy skills, there is concern that a single semester of instruction may not be sufficient preparation for the advanced tasks required in the Final Year Project [1, 2]. suggest that paraphrasing and summarising are essential early skills, but these skills alone do not fully equip students to write literature reviews or synthesise sources. The Final Research Project requires students to integrate ideas from multiple studies, construct critical interpretations, and present coherent academic arguments. According to [3], synthesising involves identifying relationships among sources and constructing new meaning, which requires prolonged practice. However, synthesising is introduced only briefly in many introductory courses. The issue is compounded by the significant time gap between the first-year course and the final-year research project. Without reinforcement across the curriculum, students may experience skill decay [4]. argues that academic writing must be taught as a developmental journey, where skills are strengthened progressively rather than addressed in isolation. Some students report remembering their skills because other courses require them to practise paraphrasing and summarising, but this reinforcement varies across faculties. The lack of consistency means that some students reach the Final Research Project more prepared than others. Due to this uneven level of readiness, there is a need to assess whether the first-year Academic Writing course equips students with transferable skills to support successful research writing. This study, therefore, investigates students' perceptions and the alignment between the course content and the Final Research Project. The findings aim to contribute to the improvement of academic writing instruction and support students' long-term writing development. This study will answer the following research questions;

RQ1: How much does the first-year Academic Writing course help students improve their basic writing skills, especially paraphrasing, summarising, and synthesising?

RQ2: How well does the first-year Academic Writing course prepare students for the writing required in the Final Year Project?

RQ3: What do students and lecturers think are the strengths and weaknesses of the Academic Writing course?

2 Literature Review

Today, research into academic writing development has advanced significantly [5]. claim that in a higher education context, explicit instruction should be used to teach linguistic and rhetorical skills for university-level writing tasks [6]. points out that academic writing is a learnt behaviour and should be systematically taught or modelled. Paraphrasing and summarising are core skills in showing understanding of educational

texts [7]. notes that paraphrasing indicates a higher level of comprehension, and summarising compels students to glean the most essential information. Both of these abilities are important for the prevention of plagiarism and academic argumentation [8]. Synthesis is something more complex [9], mention that synthesising is seeing across sources in the literature, a crucial ability in academic life, whereby you put together ideas to form a more transparent, deeper, and more connected understanding of your reading [10]. further adds that most inexperienced writers find synthesising difficult because their exposure to research writing is not extensive. Practitioners agree that synthesising takes guided practice and cannot be rapidly mastered [11]. Research into academic literacy also stresses that skills can be practised across the curriculum. [12] [13] argue that academic writing is not acquired overnight, but it should gradually be built up with various genres being exposed to students [14]. suggest that the more domains in which the students have writing experience, the better they can transfer writing knowledge from one context to another. As [15] suggests, pedagogical continuity is favourable to better writing results. Three main studies have investigated the role of freshman academic writing courses for advanced research projects [16] explored teachers' and students' views of teaching a first-year composition course at a large U.S. university. Based on mixed methods (surveys and interviews), the authors concluded that both faculty and students regarded the course as instrumental in building skills transferable to discipline-specific writing. The faculty improved the course effectiveness by integrating general writing competencies with disciplinary contexts and promoting relevance to students' fields of study. The study also found that contextualised, skills-focused instruction more effectively prepares students for academic literacy [17]. assessed, through surveys and interviews with students and lecturers, the progress of first-year students. The study found that students and instructors agreed less than expected. Students' assessments of their preparedness were often inflated or exaggerated. These results indicate that many Stage 1 courses do not meet academic writing expectations, underscoring the need for explicit instruction in appropriate conventions and modes of critical thinking to provide students with the necessary preparation for research tasks [18]. designed a preparatory course for research writing based on the literature review, proposal, and oral presentation skills of chemistry majors. Through student and faculty surveys, the study observed marked improvements in students' scientific writing confidence, understanding, and expression. Faculty members noted improvements in the quality and understandability of research proposals, suggesting that structured step-by-step writing courses are beneficial to students. To sum up, successful first-year writing courses have three characteristics which are localised integration of writing instruction, clear linkages with discipline-specific research, and faculty feedback processes that increase student confidence and competence in academic research writing.

3 Methodology

This is a mixed-methods study conducted at a public university in Malaysia with 40 final-year Language Centre students who have already undertaken the Academic Writing course while they were in their first semester. These students were recruited using total population sampling; in other words, all final-year students who are writing

for their Final Year Project participated, thereby allowing for full sample representation. A questionnaire, designed specifically for this study, utilised a 19-item Likert scale to assess students' perceptions about the development of competencies regarding the congruence between course objectives and the needs of the Final Year Project. The internal consistency of the questionnaire was examined, and an acceptable reliability was demonstrated, as indicated by a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.89, which suggests a high level of reliability. The questionnaire was filled out voluntarily by students during their class time at the end of the semester. The quantitative data were analysed using SPSS Version 26 to calculate descriptive statistics.

4 Findings

The findings of this study were derived from a descriptive analysis of a questionnaire administered to 40 final-year students, comprising 20 males and 20 females, at the Language Centre of a public university in Malaysia. The results provide insights into the extent to which the first-year Academic Writing supported students' development in paraphrasing, summarising, synthesising, academic integrity, academic confidence, and readiness for the Final Year Project.

Table 1. Summary of Students' Responses to the Academic Writing Course Questionnaire

Item No.	Questionnaire Item	Mean
1	The course helped me improve my paraphrasing skills.	4.25
2	I can summarise academic texts more clearly after taking the course.	4.35
3	The course helped me understand how to synthesise information from different sources.	3.60
4	I feel more confident using academic sources after taking the course.	4.10
5	I can avoid plagiarism more effectively due to the skills I have learned.	4.05
6	I still remember the paraphrasing, summarising, and synthesising skills I learned.	4.10
7	I regularly apply these skills in other subjects.	4.15
8	The course provided a solid foundation for future research writing.	4.05
9	The skills learned will help me when writing my Final Year Project.	4.20
10	The tasks and assignments are similar to the writing required for the Final Year Project.	3.40

11	The course helped me understand how to work with academic journal articles.	4.00
12	The course improved my overall confidence in academic writing.	4.00
13	The course has clear explanations and examples.	4.30
14	The activities in the course help improve academic writing.	4.15
15	The course focuses too much on basic skills and not enough on advanced skills.	3.85
16	The course should provide more practice in synthesising multiple sources.	4.25
17	The course should include longer writing tasks (literature review, extended essay).	4.30
18	The course needs more practice-based activities to prepare for higher-level writing.	4.20
19	Overall, the course is effective for long-term writing development.	4.10

The results of this study show that students generally had positive attitudes towards first-year Academic Writing and reported improvements in various aspects of their academic writing. The highest-rated two items were summarising (Mean = 4.35), clarity of explanations (Mean = 4.30), and the need for more extended writing tasks (Mean = 4.30), indicating that students found the teaching clear and also noted the value of longer, research-like writing practice. Paraphrasing (Mean = 4.25), synthesising practice needs (Mean = 4.25), and plagiarism avoidance (M = 4.05) also received high scores, suggesting that the course has effectively reinforced the core skills. However, students wanted higher-level practice, particularly in synthesising information from multiple sources. Students were also highly confident about employing academic sources (M = 4.10) and believed that the course had helped them acquire fundamental writing research skills (M = 4.05-4.20). Skill retention and application were also high, as the students still remembered what they had learned in writing (M = 4.10) and often applied the skills in other classes they took (M = 4.15). In contrast, the similarity of course tasks to the Final Year Project (Mean = 3.40), with a perception that little synergy exists between introductory writing tasks and what a final-year research topic demands, was rated lowest, and was negatively rated by respondents, indicating that there was an apparent mismatch between beginning-level writing tasks and those at the Final Year Project level. However, they found activities in the course useful (Mean = 4.15) and believed that it was helpful, as it is effective long-term in developing writing skills (Mean=4.10). Students also felt the course concentrated too much on basic skills (Mean = 3.85) and should include more opportunities to develop advanced writing abilities, in particular, through long assignments and synthetic writing tasks. Taken together, the findings suggest that the course is practical in cultivating fundamental

academic writing ability, but it should be improved to develop more advanced research writing.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

Taken as a whole, the results have demonstrated the success of the Academic Writing course in terms of equipping students with basic skills, such as paraphrasing and summarising, addressing the first research question. This is similar to the research in [2, 7], who claim that these skills can be taught and gained by the students, though not overnight, but through practice, the skills can be improved. Nevertheless, synthesising was still fairly limited, which also highlighted the intricate nature of this higher-order skill [9, 10] emphasises that synthesising is a skill that requires extensive practice and explicit instruction. In addition, the students did not feel that the course was sufficiently relevant to their final year expectations. The course was said to have provided a good base for research writing. Yet, the genres they had practised did not precisely correspond to an extended piece of writing in their Final Year Project, which answered the second research question and supported [19] claim that instruction should resemble actual academic tasks if transfer is to be meaningful. These perceptions align with [12] and [13] view on academic literacy that high-level writing skills need to be scaffolded. Nevertheless, students also indicated that they recalled what they had learned and used it regularly, proving a transfer of learning over time as described by [14]. All the research questions suggest that while the course does successfully develop basic writing skills necessary for university study, it was in need of closer alignment with demands from final year research writing such as a greater focus on synthesis, and increased practice demanding extended length. Therefore, the course should offer more synthesising activities, longer writing, such as mini literature review assignments and more precise curriculum alignment with the Final Year Project. Continued writing support throughout the following semesters is also recommended to promote sustained academic literacy development.

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