'I'M GETTING THERE':
AN INVESTIGATION OF ACADEMIC WRITING DEVELOPMENTS OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS IN A FOREIGN BRANCH CAMPUS IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Many foreign university branch campuses in Malaysia make it compulsory for students to undertake academic literacy units (i.e. Reading for Academic Purposes, Technical Report Writing) in order to equip them with language skills as well as reading and writing for academic purposes. Despite the ubiquitousness of such units in universities, little is known about their effectiveness. This longitudinal study aims to address this gap. This paper reports on data collected from the first phase of a mixed methods study that seeks to explore (i) students' self-concept in academic writing, (ii) perceived impact of the Academic Writing (AW) unit on the writing development and (iii) the transferability of skills to other academic units. Findings from the questionnaire revealed that the AW unit had a significant positive impact on their writing skills and that the skills acquired were reported to be highly transferable to other study units. Nevertheless, to ensure academic success, the study concludes that the foundations for first year studies need to be laid early.

Keywords: academic writing, L2 writing, academic language-learning needs, language learning, English for academic purposes (EAP)

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Introduction

Academic writing is an integral part of tertiary education in Malaysia (Rahman & Rahim, 2016). At this level, undergraduates are expected to have the necessary linguistic skills to be able to produce writing that adheres to different genres and disciplines. However, among English as a second language (ESL) students, academic writing is often described as challenging, complex and often linked to writing anxiety. In particular, the comments made about Malaysian L2 writers are often bleak, imbued with issues that range from plagiarism (Habali & Fong, 2016), low self-efficacy (Shammodin & Nimehchisalem, 2015) to writing anxiety (Maringe & Jenkins, 2015). As a result, such factors have been reported to act as barriers for students' engagement and overall academic performance in the academic writing class (Badiozaman, 2015).

Evidently, academic writing is not an easy skill to master especially in a second language (L2). Particularly with ESL or English as a F foreign language(EFL) students, research has attributed this to linguistics difficulties (Zhang, 2013) and the tacit nature of academic writing (Elton, 2010). Furthermore, since academic writing "serves different purposes in different units and requires students to assume different social roles " (Zhu, 2004, p. 30), this has implications for the academic writing class in Malaysian universities, where students may be studying in different disciplines and have little to no academic writing experience. For this reason, many higher learning institutions in Malaysia make it compulsory for students to undertake units such as Academic Reading and Writing, and Technical Report Writing. These units aim to equip students with the necessary language skills and the ability to read and write for academic purposes so that they can function effectively within an academic environment.

Nonetheless, despite the fact that such units are ubiquitous in higher learning institutions in Malaysia, little is known about its effectiveness. The limited research on the improvements made by L2 learners in their academic writing in a L2 setting provided the impetus for this study. The focus on academic writing in this study is also due to the role of writing in tertiary education (Othman & Mohamad, 2009). Students' achievements at tertiary level are evaluated mainly on written assessments, be it in the form of large extended writing (e.g. projects, proposal and reports) or short-response essays (e.g. examinations and quizzes).

As the demand and participation in English-medium higher education increase, so is the expectation for students to have academic literacy skills. Hence, it is necessary to understand academic writing improvements that are made in academic literacy classes. Furthermore, factors involved in the development of academic writing such as organisation of ideas, identifying audience for various genres and synthesising from multiple sources are scarce. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap. In particular, it first seeks to explore how much impact the Academic Writing[1] unit (AW hereafter) has upon the writing development of our ESL undergraduate students. Secondly, it will examine the transferability of skills to other academic units.

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Literature Review

The development of academic writing skills is widely recognised as a major educational concern, particularly at the university level. As students progress through their academic years, they are asked to move from more general academic writing tasks to more specialised, discipline-specific writing (Nesi & Gardner, 2012). This is particularly true for Malaysian students transitioning from secondary schools to higher learning institutions, studying in an international branch university.

The acquisition of academic writing skills is reported to be challenging for many reasons. For example, advanced academic writing is widely recognised as an elaborated form of discourse that is grammatically complex. Staples, Egbert, Biber, and Gray (2016) maintain that "academic writing is produced in circumstances where language is carefully planned and edited, detailed and specific, and produced in a concise format" (p. 151). Writing in academic contexts also requires students to advance their own ideas within a framework of discipline knowledge and engage the reader in an academic discourse (Hyland, 2002). Furthermore, there is a lack of consensus with regard to which writing approach meets all students' needs (Biber & Gray, 2010). This is further complicated by the fact that writing involves many processes, namely pre-writing, translating, reviewing, planning and revising (Hyland, 2002). Compositional literature has also ascertained that writers move back and forth among these sub-processes (Barkaoui, 2007) in a recursive process. Writing, thus, poses great cognitive and metacognitive demands.

While English language proficiency is critical to academic performance, it is not the sole factor in determining academic writing performance. As evidenced from the literature review, students not only encounter difficulties in English language proficiency, but also in internalising the requirements of the academic writing genre. Note that researchers acknowledged there were important differences within academic writing, showing that the use of complexity features varies across parameters like academic discipline and specific register/genres of academic writing (Leki, 2011). Thus, students' difficulties in adjusting to academic writing in higher learning could also stem from inadequate understanding of academic writing standards and expectations from the lecturers and the institution (D. Green, 2010).

Writing in Higher Learning

Writing in higher education requires students to put forth their ideas within a framework of domains or discipline knowledge and engage the reader in an academic discourse (Rahman & Rahim, 2016). Therefore, tasks at this level often require students to integrate sources in their writing. This is a major learning outcome from university studies (Cumming, Lai, & Cho, 2016) demonstrating the acquisition of new knowledge, a means of establishing membership and identity within academic discourse communities. In fact, Bereiter and Scardamalia (2013) argue that undergraduates are expected to be (advanced) "knowledge transformers" where upon receiving the foundations for becoming an expert writer is laid - they are to "reach the stage of knowledge crafting" (p. 358). In short, communicative expectations shift as writers advance in their degrees.

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For students in higher learning, the evaluative nature of academic writing is also apparent. In fact, Reid and Kroll (2006) highlighted another dimension to the concept of academic writing where:

> Academic writing is a form of testing. Instead of testing communication skills by multiple choice or true-false formats, writing assignments ask students to perform, to demonstrate their knowledge and skills by composing and presenting written material. And like all tests, the completed writing assignments are to be assessed (p. 261).

Evidently, the quality of students' written work determines his/her scholarship acceptance in academia as it demonstrates eligibility of higher education. Such challenges are further exacerbated for ESL students. Although they appear to have a general understanding of grammar rules, not many are able to write academically at the expected level. Among the reasons cited for this are the lack of experience with formal writing in previous educational institutions (Shammodin & Nimehchisalem, 2015); and inadequacies of the academic English language proficiency (Zhang & Mi 2010). Furthermore, balancing cognitive and metacognitive processes has also been reported to be challenging for novice writers (Wischgoll, 2016). Therefore, the acquisition of academic writing skills requires tremendous practice and training due to cognitive and metacognitive demands.

Evidences of Development

Studies investigating the development of academic writing often have varying results. There are studies which noted no significant writing improvement, despite students taking English for Academic Purposes (EAP) or Academic Writing courses (i.e. A. Green, 2005; Terraschke & Wahid, 2011). This could be attributed to various contextual and individual factors, and what actual development is being investigated.

Nevertheless, a study by Kolb, Longest, and Jensen (2013) which investigated the effectiveness of a writing-intensive first-year seminar revealed changes in students' writing process. The data collected via pre-test and post-test interview of 34 students noted that the first year students became better planners and reviewers after receiving explicit instructions. The seminar reported in this study was designed based on the underlying premise; "a better (writing) process yields a better product" (Kolb et al., 2013, p.20). For this reason, the students were "taught to change their writing strategies and practices" (Kolb et al., 2013, p. 23), and writing activities were designed into discrete tasks that culminate into broader final product-paced evenly throughout the term (Kolb et al., 2013, p. 21). Similarly, Wischgoll's (2016) experimental study also revealed that cognitive and metacognitive strategy training improved the university's academic writing skills significantly. Thus, it is likely that writing classes which reflect the most realistic writing processes will likely improve students' writing skills.

A study by Biber and Gray (2010) revealed that there is developmental sequence when novice academic writers learn to write. Novice writers begin with

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clausal complexity features most common in speech, and then gradually develop proficiency in the dense use of the phrasal complexity features associated with specialist academic writing. In fact, studies done by Parkinson and Musgrave (2014) and Staples et al. (2016) provided further empirical support in which phrasal features increase, as L2 writers develop their academic writing skills in preparation for college and graduate level work.

The capacity to write well academically at tertiary level is a plausible expectation of university students. Interestingly, studies on the development of learners' language skills have been few and far between. The limited research on the improvements made by L2 learners in their academic writing in an L2 setting provided the impetus for this study. The study sought to investigate what features of academic writing, if any, develop as a result of studying in academic literacy unit, such as the 'Academic Writing (AW)' unit in an L2 medium university after one semester (12 weeks). In doing so, not only will the study help disclose the potential challenges that are bound to be faced by the students; it will also facilitate a more objective and tactile approach towards the pedagogy of teaching academic writing in an L2 setting. Thus, the current study has the following two main aims:

(i) to explore the extent of impact the AW unit has upon the writing development of our ESL undergraduate students; and
(ii) to examine the transferability of skills to other academic units that AW units often claim to do.

Methodology

The study adopted a sequential mixed methods design (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Phase One of the study involved distributing questionnaires to students who have completed a semester (12 weeks) of the AW unit. Phase Two of the study involved interviewing students who volunteered to be interviewed and fit certain character profiles based on the questionnaire data. Table 1 provides a visual model of the sequential investigative procedures for this study. An application to the University Human Research Ethics Committee was approved on the 9th December 2016. This paper reports only on data collected from the first phase of the study.

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Table 1
Visual model for the sequential mixed methods procedures

Phase	Procedure	Product
Phase One		
Quantitative data collection	• Cross-sectional Questionnaire	• Numeric data
↓		
Quantitative data analysis	• Descriptive analysis • Grouped frequencies	• Descriptive statistics • Mean • Standard Deviation
↓		
Connecting Quantitative and Qualitative and quantitative	• Purposeful Selection of participants • Development of interview questions	• Cases • Interview Protocol
↓		
Phase Two		
Qualitative data collection	• Individual in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted	• Text data (interview transcripts, field notes) • Students written work
↓		
Qualitative data analysis	• Coding and thematic analysis • Cross-thematic analysis • NVivo 9 software	• Visual model of multiple case analysis • Codes and themes • Similar and different themes categories
↓		
Integration of the quantitative and Qualitative Results	• Interpretation and explanation of the quantitative and qualitative results	• Findings • Discussion • Implications

Instrument

The first phase of this study utilised a survey questionnaire that was adapted from the Inventory of College Level Writing and Thinking Tasks survey (Rosenfeld, Courtney, & Fowles, 2004). The questionnaire was for a study involving university academics and it was used for a student survey. To further align with the purpose of the study and its context, the questionnaire was amended in the following ways:

1. The background items were added to obtain the students' level of English proficiency based on band scored in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET);
2. The items on self-concept as an academic writer were added;
3. The item gauging the extent of transfer that has taken place were added; and

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4. Open ended questions eliciting responses on the impact of AW on writing were added.

The questionnaire consisted of both multiple choice questions and qualitative questions. There were three main sections in the questionnaire; Section A investigated students' self-concept in academic writing, Section B investigated the impact of the AW unit and Section C gauged the transferability of skills gained from the AW unit. Responses for the items were rated on a 4-point Likert scale (1=False; 2=Mostly False, 3=Mostly True and 4=True). The qualitative questions elicited students' feedback on the usefulness of the unit in improving their academic writing and any other benefits that the course might bring them.

Respondents

The chosen institution is an international branch campus of an Australian university. As the medium of instruction in this institution is English, great emphasis is placed in ensuring that students have adequate language support, especially those who do not meet Band 6 IELTS English language entry requirement. For that reason, the AW unit is compulsory and is a pre-requisite for students to pass in order to graduate. Potential respondents were identified through purposive sampling (Patton, 2002). All the respondents who were enrolled in the AW unit in Semester 1, 2016 were invited to participate and fill in a questionnaire upon completion of the unit.

A total of 45 students (out of 60) agreed to participate, resulting in a 75% positive response rate. The undergraduate students come from various academic disciplines; and 26 (57.8%) of them were male and 19 (42.2%) were female students respectively (see Table 2).

Table 2
Breakdown of respondents based on academic major

Academic Major	Frequency	Percent (%)
Bachelor of Business	19	42.2
Bachelor of Design	2	4.4
Bachelor of Information & Communication Technology	4	8.9
Bachelor of Computer Science	8	17.8
Bachelor of Science	3	6.7
Bachelor of Engineering	9	20.0
Total	45	100

The analysis of the questionnaire revealed that the majority of the respondents spoke Mandarin and other native dialects as their first language (77.7%). The students fall in the average range of Band 3-4 of MUET, indicating that they are moderate to competent users of English. As there is no specific time that students can take the AW unit, students ranged in terms of their academic year. The majority of the students were in their first year, making up 75.6 % (n=34). This is followed by the second year students at 15.6% (n=7). The third year and final year each had (n=2) students, contributing to 8.8%. The details of respondents based on academic major are as follows (see Table 3).

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Table 3
Distribution of respondents based on academic year and academic major

Academic major	1st year	2nd year	3rd year	4th year	Total
Bachelor of Business	14	5	0	0	19
Bachelor of Design	1	1	0	0	2
Bachelor of Information & Communication Technology	2	1	1	0	4
Bachelor of Computer Science	7	0	1	0	8
Bachelor of Science	1	0	0	2	3
Bachelor of Engineering	9	0	0	0	9
Total	34	7	2	2	45

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The AW unit is offered by the Faculty of Language and Communication. Students undertake the AW unit which is one semester (12 weeks) in duration, alongside their discipline subjects. The semester-long unit is delivered twice a week and each class lasts for 2 hours. The unit is designed with the aim to develop students' reading and writing skills for academic purposes (see Appendix A for unit outline) and develop their capacity to write an academic report appropriate to a university-level standard. The AW unit concentrates on developing skills in writing reports where it covers strategies for paraphrasing and summarising information, interpreting non-linear texts, reading for academic purpose, and synthesising information from different sources of information.

Students are required to write a report on a topic of their choice using the appropriate language, format and skills for report writing. This scaffolded assessment modularises components within an overall assessment and overtly breaks a large task into smaller chunks (Gipps, 1994 as cited in McNaught & Benson, 2015, p. 77). For example, throughout the course of one semester the writing of the report is broken down into sections and for each section, specific language and/or writing skills are taught (i.e. Literature Review Section - database search, summarising, paraphrasing and synthesising skills).

Initial contact with the respondents was arranged through the Unit Coordinator to introduce the study at a time that was convenient for them. In the first meeting with the respondents, the researcher verbally introduced herself; the students were then invited to complete the questionnaire in their own time. The respondents were given a week to complete the questionnaire. Those who were willing to participate in the interview need to leave contact details such as their email addresses for the researcher to contact them.

The data gathered through the questionnaire was analysed using SPSS 22. Statistical data obtained from the quantitative method employed allowed the identification of basic tendencies and significant relations (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). Descriptive statistics and cross tabulation were performed. The responses for negative statements were reverse-coded prior to the data analysis.

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Results

Prior to investigating the impact and transferability of skills acquired in the AW unit, it was important to gauge students' self-concept in academic writing. The descriptive analysis of their responses to the self-concept items is presented under two subheadings: *self-concept in academic writing* and *self-concept in writing in English*.

Students' Self-concept in Academic Writing

The 15 statements in this section included how students felt about their academic writing abilities, and how they valued academic writing and the tasks required of them in the AW unit. Table 4 presents the distribution of responses for the students' perception of academic writing.

Table 4
Distribution of responses for self-concept in academic writing

Item		Mean	Std. Deviation	Distribution of Responses (%)			
				F	MF	MT	T
PAW 12	It is important for me to do well in academic writing	3.3778	.80591	4.4	6.7	35.6	53.3
PAW 11	I enjoy studying academic writing	3.0222	.81153	4.4	17.8	48.9	28.9
PAW 2	I always look forward to my AW unit	2.9556	.87790	6.7	20.0	44.4	28.9
PAW 10	I learn things quickly in my AW unit	2.7778	.82266	8.9	20.0	55.6	15.6
PAW 21	I find it challenging to write critically in academic writing	2.7333	.88933	6.7	35.6	35.6	22.2
PAW 5	Writing in academic English is a challenge for me	2.7333	1.03133	17.8	15.6	42.2	24.4
PAW 6	I often need help in the AW unit	2.6667	1.00000	15.6	24.4	37.8	22.2
PAW 9	I have poor academic writing skills	2.6000	.96295	13.3	33.3	33.3	20.0
PAW 3	Tasks in AW units are easy for me	2.4889	.89499	17.8	24.4	48.9	8.9
PAW 1	AW is one of my best subjects	2.4444	.91839	20.0	24.4	46.7	8.9
PAW 17	I have always done well in academic writing	2.2222	.76541	17.8	44.4	35.6	2.2
PAW 14	Academic writing is easy for me	2.2000	.86865	22.2	42.2	28.9	6.7
PAW 7	I often do badly in AW assessments	2.1778	.86047	17.8	55.6	20.0	4.4

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Table 4 (continued).

	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Distribution of Responses (%)			
				F	**MF**	**MT**	**T**
PAW 15	I am hopeless when it comes to academic writing*	1.9333	.78044	28.9	53.3	13.3	4.4
PAW 23	The AW unit feels like a waste of time*	1.4667	.75679	66.7	22.2	8.9	2.2

Note. 1 = False; 2 = Mostly False; 3 = Mostly True; 4 = True. [a]Items are arranged from the highest to lowest mean. [b]*refers to negatively worded items

Two items had high means in this sub-category, affirming that the respondents generally have a positive disposition with regard to academic writing. The findings show considerable consensus amongst the respondents that it is important for them to do well in academic writing (PAW12), as indicated by the 35.6% who responded True (T) and the 53.3% who responded Mostly True (MT) to the statement. This corresponded well with items gauging respondents' interest in the subject of academic writing, namely Items PAW11, PAW2 and PAW10. The majority of the respondents seemed to enjoy studying academic writing (MT=48.9%; T=28.9%) and look forward (MT=44.4%; T=28.9%) to attending the classes. Nonetheless, most of the respondents reported that they were hopeless when it came to academic writing (T= 26.5%; MT=44.7%). This view was affirmed by Items PAW14 and PAW7 where the respondents reported that academic writing was not easy (64.4%) and they often did not fare well in the assessments (73.4%). This finding is corroborated by the mean ratings which are below 3.00 indicating areas where respondents needed help.

Items with the two lowest means in the questionnaire were represented by Items PAW15 and PAW23, with a mean value of 1.93 and 1.46 respectively. It is interesting to note that despite the perceived difficulty of academic writing, 88.9% of the students did not feel like the AW unit was a waste of time (False = 66.7%; MF = 22.2%). This finding warranted further investigation. In particular, it was seen as important to identify the factors that contribute to the difficulty of academic writing, and examine the reasons why students felt it was important to attend the AW unit.

As the students had English as a second language, it was important to gauge students' self-concept as writers of English. Table 5 shows the distribution of their responses. The majority of the students reported they often look for ways to improve their English writing (MT=35.6%; T=51.1%) in Item PAW22 and that they like writing in English (73.4%) in Item PAW4.

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Table 5
Distribution of responses for self-concept of writing in English

Item		Mean	Std. Deviation	Distribution of Responses (%)			
				F	MF	MT	T
PAW 22	I often look for ways to improve my English writing	3.3778	.71633	0	13.3	35.6	51.1
PAW 4	I like writing in English	2.9111	.90006	8.9	17.8	46.7	26.7
PAW 20	It is easy to organise my thoughts into sentences in English	2.5778	.94120	11	40	28.9	20
PAW 16	I feel confident in my ability to write in English	2.5556	.89330	11.1	37.8	35.6	15.6
PAW 19	It is easy to express my ideas effectively in English	2.4889	.96818	15.6	37.8	28.9	17.8

Note. 1 = False; 2 = Mostly False; 3 = Mostly True; 4 = True. [a]Items are arranged from the highest to lowest mean.

Despite these positive responses, the respondents struggled with writing in English. Mean ratings below 3.00 indicate areas where the respondents reported challenges in writing in English. This is evidenced by items PAW20 and PAW19. Almost half of the respondents responded False (11%) and Mostly False (40%) to the statement, *'It is easy to organise my thoughts into sentences in English' and 'It is easy to express my ideas effectively in English'.* This resonated with the findings on students' writing efficacy where 35.6% responded Mostly True and 15.6% responded True to the statement, *'I feel confident in my ability to write in English'.* These responses may have strong links to proficiency issues.

Impact on Academic Writing Skills

This section of the questionnaire attempted to investigate the impact of AW unit on their academic writing skills after one semester. A mean rating of 3.00 (important) or higher 4.00 (very important) was selected to distinguish the most important impact from those of lesser importance. The distribution of responses is presented in Table 6.

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Table 6
Distribution of responses for Impact of AW unit on academic writing skills

	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Distribution of Responses (%)			
				F	MF	MT	T
IMP33	Improving my reference skills	3.7111	.45837	0	0	28.9	71.1
IMP27	Making use of sources in writing	3.6889	.46818	0	0	31.1	68.9
IMP35	Improving my paraphrasing skills	3.5111	.58861	0	4.4	40.0	55.6
IMP32	Improving my language structure	3.4889	.54864	0	2.2	46.7	51.1
IMP34	Improving my summarising skills	3.4667	.69413	2.2	4.4	37.8	55.6
IMP24	Understanding the general characteristics of academic writing	3.4222	.54309	0	2.2	53.3	44.4
IMP30	Interpreting graphic information appropriately	3.3556	.60886	0	6.7	51.1	42.2
IMP29	Presenting a graphic information in a clear manner	3.3556	.64511	2.2	2.2	53.3	42.2
IMP26	Synthesising key information in reading texts	3.3556	.60886	0	6.7	51.1	42.2
IMP38	Making varied sentence structure to communicate ideas effectively	3.3333	.56408	0	4.4	57.8	37.8
IMP31	Improving my grammar accuracy	3.3333	.70711	2.2	6.7	46.7	44.4
IMP25	Writing for the intended audience	3.2889	.62603	0	8.9	53.3	37.8
IMP37	Writing precisely and concisely, avoiding vague or empty phrases	3.2667	.57997	0	6.7	60.0	33.3
IMP36	Writing persuasively by constructing well-reasoned arguments	3.2222	.63564	2.2	4.4	62.2	31.1
IMP28	Presenting my arguments in a coherent manner	3.1333	.69413	4.4	4.4	64.4	26.7

Note. 1 = False; 2 = Mostly False; 3 = Mostly True; 4 = True. [a]Items are arranged from the highest to lowest mean.

Overall, the results in this section displayed high means. This indicates that that the respondents perceived the AW unit to have had a significant positive impact on their academic writing skills. It is important to note that the top five means were from items IMP33, IMP27, IMP35, IMP32 and IMP34. All the respondents perceived

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that taking the AW unit has improved their referencing skills (MT=28.8%; T=71.1%). Understandably, this has also impacted positively onto their use of sources in writing (MT=31.1%; T=68.9%), paraphrasing (MT=40%; T=55.6%) and summarising skills (MT=37.8%; T=55.6%). It is likely that having explicit instruction, exposure and feedback contributed to a greater understanding of the general characteristics of academic writing (MT=53.3%; T=44.4%) and subsequently improving their language structure (MT=46.7%; T=55.1%).

Items with the lowest means were linked closely to language proficiency and advanced academic writing skills (i.e. writing persuasively to a specific audience) as depicted by items IMP31, IMP25, IMP37, IMP36 and IMP28 respectively. A majority of the students responded Mostly True (46.7%) and True (44.4%) to the statement that the AW unit has helped improve their grammar accuracy, writing to the intended audience (MT=53.3%; T=37.8%) and writing concisely (MT=60%; T=33.3%). It is plausible that writing tasks which require students to use increasingly complex and sophisticated language in order to convey precise and specialised meaning or write in a persuasive manner is a complex endeavour for students who are novice academic writers. This would explain the relatively lower means for items IMP36 (Mean=3.222) and IMP28 (Mean=3.133) respectively.

Transferability of Skills

In addition to the perceived impact of the AW unit, it was also important to gauge the transferability of skills. A mean rating of 3.00 (important) or higher 4.00 (very important) was selected to distinguish the most important skills from those of lesser importance. The distribution of responses is presented in Table 7.

Table 7
Distribution of responses for transferability of skills

	Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Distribution of Responses (%)			
				F	MF	MT	T
Trans58	Finding relevant references	3.5111	.54864	0	2.2	44.4	53.3
Trans53	Summarising essential information	3.4667	.54772	0	2.2	48.9	48.9
Trans43	Making use of sources in writing	3.4222	.69048	2.2	4.4	42.2	51.1
Trans47	Reading and extracting thoughts in extended writing tasks	3.4000	.57997	0	4.4	51.1	44.4
Trans56	Revising and editing text to improve its clarity and coherence	3.3778	.57560	0	4.4	53.3	42.2
Trans55	Crediting sources appropriately	3.3333	.60302	2.2	0	60	37.8

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Table 7 (continued).

Item		Mean	Std. Deviation	Distribution of Responses (%)			
				F	MF	MT	T
Trans42	Synthesizing key information in reading texts	3.3333	.60302	0	6.7	53.3	40
Trans52	Developing a well-focused, well-supported discussion using relevant reasons and examples	3.3111	.59628	0	6.7	55.6	37.8
Trans44	Organising and presenting my arguments in a coherent manner	3.2889	.72683	2.2	8.9	46.7	42.2
Trans48	Improving my language structure	3.2667	.65366	0	11.1	51.1	37.8
Trans51	Integrating quotes and referenced material appropriately into own text	3.2444	.67942	2.2	6.7	55.6	35.6
Trans40	I'm more confident in writing academic research papers in my discipline	3.2000	.66058	2.2	6.7	60	31.1
Trans39	I'm more confident in writing assignments in my core academic modules	3.2000	.58775	0	8.9	62.2	28.9
Trans46	Interpreting graphic information appropriately	3.2000	.72614	4.4	4.4	57.8	33.3
Trans41	Writing for the intended audience	3.1556	.63802	0	13.3	57.8	28.9
Trans45	Presenting a graphic information in a clear manner	3.1556	.79646	4.4	11.1	48.9	35.6

Note. 1 = False; 2 = Mostly False; 3 = Mostly True; 4 = True. [a]Items are arranged from the highest to lowest mean.

Similar to the findings on the impact of the AW unit on their academic writing skills, the results in the transferability section revealed an overall high mean and are positive in nature. The item with the highest mean (3.5111) was students could *'Find relevant references'* with students responding mostly to True (53.3%) and Mostly True (44.4%). This was followed by '*Summarising essential information'* (Mostly True=48.9%; True=48.9%) and *'Making use of sources in writing'* (Mostly True=42.2%; True=51.1%) respectively. The respondents also reported that they *'Revise and edit text to improve clarity and coherence'* as part of their writing processes (Mostly True=53.3%; True=42.2%). In addition to positive transferability, the results also shed light onto their writing practices.

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Due to the explicit instruction and transferability of skills from the AW unit, the respondents also reported an increase in confidence, in writing academic research papers in their discipline (Mostly True=60%; True=31.1%) and core academic modules (Mostly True=62.2%; True=28.9%) in items Trans40 and Trans39 respectively. These findings warranted further exploration in the next interview phase in order to understand better the high transferability and the circumstances in which the skills were perceived to be useful and relevant.

In general, the results indicated that the AW unit was effective, even though it was taught over a short period of time. The results appear to indicate that the undergraduates do need the academic writing support. As Horwitz (2010) stated, what learners believe about what they need to learn strongly influences their receptiveness to learning. In this study, it is likely that the students believed that it was important for them to learn academic writing. This thus, would explain the high mean ratings for impact and transferability.

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the impact of AW unit on the writing development of ESL undergraduate students after one semester (12 weeks). Secondly, it examined the transferability of skills to other academic units. It was interesting to note that students did not perceive their abilities in English and writing in English as very high. This is proven by the means represented in this section (mean average is the lowest out of three sections). The reasons for these perceived ideas could possibly be that they were placed in the unit based on the university's English entry requirement and also their very little experience in academic writing prior to the class. Nonetheless, these did not appear to deter their interest in learning the unit and also in attending the classes.

Despite the perceived abilities in English language and writing in the English language, students valued the AW unit very highly. This is evidenced by the quantitative data and the answers in the open-ended section of the questionnaire. Students reported that: *"This class has improved my vocabulary, doing citations, references and finding materials"* (Student 2), and *"Through this unit, I learnt to write better in terms of sentence structure for my reports"* (Student 33). This finding concurs with Lillis (2001) who argued that the focus should be transferred from students' 'problematic' language to the institutional practices of teaching academic writing. As the AW unit provided opportunities for students to improve their academic literacy and L2 proficiency, this context afforded an enriching educational experience for students in which the links between the academic writing and its relevance to academic studies are made explicit.

Completing the AW unit early in their academic studies appeared to have a positive impact on the students' self-concept as academic writers and their writing development. It is likely that this change was a result of explicit instruction in the AW unit, and growing awareness of the wide range of sources available (databases, peers and language tutors) as part of the writing process. Note the responses from the open-ended section of the questionnaire: *"I've learnt how to write a report and analyse information in a complex and academic way"* (Student 33) and *"I know now*

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each section of a report has a different purpose and style of writing" (Student 16). Thus, what the findings of this study suggest is that following a semester of study, there are changes in terms of how students approach a writing task as reflected by the strategies they have reported to adopt.

The feedback from students indicates the task and activities throughout the unit was practical in helping them navigate their academic studies. Having had consistent high failure rates in the past, a review of the unit was done in which scaffolded assessments were introduced. This appeared to have been central to results on the development and transferability of skills. It is likely that continuous feedback throughout the unit (in line with the tasks) helped students to identify the process made and the likelihood of them developing the necessary skills and abilities: *"The lecturer is always guiding us when we do the tutorial questions and this makes it clear to me what my mistakes are and how to improve"* (Student 34) and *"I get to discover my weaknesses in academic writing and therefore allows me to improve and fix those problems" (*Student 9). Because the tasks were specific within the scaffolded assessment, it allowed the feedback to be correspondingly specific and directive which helped significantly on the writing output. The current and frequent interactions that learners have with the subject may also explain the overall positive response, transfer and development in the findings: *"The report is step by step. Writing is step by step. It is helpful for someone like me"* (Student 45) and "*The lecturer is always guiding us and this makes it clear- what my mistakes are and how to improve"* (Student 34). The scaffolded assessments allowed the feedback to be correspondingly specific and continuous (in line with the tasks), which helped improve the writing output (Hyland, 2013).

In addition to the higher order writing process (Kolb et al., 2013), the findings appear to indicate increased confidence during the program. The AW unit was reported to alleviate the stress and anxiety that come with academic writing. In addition to the quantitative data, note the responses from the open ended sections: *"I'm getting there.* W*riting is less intimidating now* (Student 1) and "*Now I have confidence. Once you have confidence, any other tasks in English seem easy and manageable"* (Student 44). This heightened level of self-efficacy resonates that of Piniel and Csizer (2015) where writing efficacy is reciprocally linked with learners' interest and perceived value of the writing skills.

The highly academic environment in which the students are embedded may provide further cues to the centrality of academic writing at tertiary level. This context and the AW class in which students were in, appear to be beneficial as students were guided from the pre-writing stages to post-writing stages of a report. The activity exposes students to not only strategies for writing, but also research skills (i.e. database search, organising information, synthesising information). Note the responses, *"This class has improved my vocabulary, doing citations, references and finding materials"* (Student 2) and *"It has enhanced my academic research skills"* (Student 14). These support mechanisms will assist students for successful completion of the unit as well as effective strategies for undergraduate study. This was supported by the open-ended answers from the questionnaire; *"I am more confident in extracting the information, gathering and data. I [am] more systematic than I used to be"* (Student 10). This finding resonates that of Wishcgol (2016) which

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identified training interventions which included prewriting activities, inquiry activities for content developing, collaborating with peers as having the ability to ease the writing demands.

It was interesting to note that stress and anxiety were frequently cited by these undergraduate students as one of the challenges faced in writing. As mentioned in the literature review, academic writing is indeed a complicated endeavour for L2 writers. Tinto (2010) who focused on domestic graduate students, suggested that students who are transition into a new academic setting faced challenges of both academic and social integration. Although the study only focused on academic writing development and its transferability to other academic domains, it became apparent that participation in the AW unit was able to provide support and opportunities for students to learn academic writing, and subsequently transition/articulate accordingly into their new academic and social environments. It is likely that having such 'interventions' explicitly taught in the AW unit helped reduced their writing anxiety. Note the responses from the open ended sections: "*Now I have confidence. Once you have confidence, any other tasks in English seem easy and manageable*" (Student 44), "*I speak up more. AW has improved my communication skills*" (Student 23); and "I'm getting there. W*riting is less intimidating now* (Student 1), *I'm more confident in extracting information*" (Student 10). While self-confidence was low prior to undertaking the AW, the findings appear to indicate increased confidence during the program.

This heightened levels of self-efficacy resonates that of Piniel and Csizer (2015) where writing efficacy is linked with learners' interest and perceived value of the writing skills. It is also important to note that the transferability of skills in this study transcended that of writing skills. The students reported: "*I can meet my friends from different faculties, practice my English and write together*" (Student 34), and "*It [skills] can be applied when I do my research (*Student 45)". As a result, writing is perceived as a manageable task and not anxiety-inducing as reported in the findings: "*Writing is fun and stress free, when you manage your time well*" (Student 18). All these provide empirical evidence to support compositional and pedagogical literature where "in order to get students to improve the quality of what they write, they need to change how they write" (Kolb et al., 2013).

Despite the positive responses (Mostly True: 46.7%; True 44.4%) on how the AW unit has helped improve their grammar accuracy, the preliminary analysis of students' writing did not indicate significant changes. It is likely that the lack of improvement in grammatical accuracy could be attributed to the relatively short time period of the study (12 weeks). This finding concurs with Storch (2009) which noted some improvement in the formality of learners' language, but no evidence of improvement in linguistic accuracy or complexity. Nonetheless, the study has highlighted the value of the AW unit. More importantly it highlighted the need for further academic and language support for the student population.

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Limitations

This study was exploratory in nature and its results need to be interpreted cautiously. The limitations in this study are due to its reliance on self-report data. There is a possibility of ambiguity in meaning in terms of students' understanding of the questionnaire items. Nonetheless, given that the project is designed to capture students' perceived development and transferability of AW skills, using self-reports seems justified at this early stage as it allows the gathering of information that is not available from language proficiency data alone. Secondly, the number of students involved in the study was small. While the findings of the study have been enriching, and to a certain extent are supported by the current literature, the description may be unique to this particular group of individuals, within this particular setting. It is thus anticipated that the longitudinal qualitative data from Phase Two would further expand on the findings of Phase One.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the impact of an AW unit on undergraduate students' writing development. Secondly, it examined the transferability of skills to other academic units. Results revealed the AW unit was able to assist students who may be under-prepared to meet the academic challenges of tertiary study. The majority of the respondents perceived that the unit has a significant impact on their writing development, and the skills gained from one semester were transferable to other academic units. For L2 students who are novice writers, writing can be a demanding and overwhelming task. Thus, a classroom setting which provides immediate feedback and emphasis on both language and skills acquisition is integral to first year success.

Writing remains to be the main method of communicating knowledge in the academic community. For students who are novice writers, it is unrealistic to believe that academic writing skills can be mastered within a short period of time. Nonetheless, the results of this study show that there are clear developmental trends in academic writing of L2 undergraduate writers. It may not necessarily translate into increased grammar accuracy, but it has become apparent that students are gradually becoming familiar with and are grasping a deeper understanding of what academic writing entails. Thus, the study highlights the need to have continuous 'pre-skilling' courses to ensure that students are adequately equipped with the appropriate level of academic skills to transition effectively into undergraduate study.

Notes

[1]In this institution, the academic literacy unit is called Academic Writing (AW)

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