

Academic Writing Development of ESL/EFL Graduate Students in NUS

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the impact of an English for Academic Purposes course on the development of academic writing abilities of ESL/EFL graduate students at the National University of Singapore. In particular, the study compared the essays students wrote prior to taking the course and after it in terms of grammar accuracy, fluency, academic vocabulary use, and overall essay bands. The study found that while not much progress had been made by these students in terms of grammar accuracy and fluency, they, over the course of one semester, were able to use more academic vocabulary, gained more than half a band in their overall essay quality, and improved their language band significantly. In addition, the study also administered a questionnaire to elicit these participants' views on the usefulness of the course for developing their academic writing skills and for writing their other course-work related assignments, as well as on any potential benefits (other than the development of English language skills) that the course may bring to them. The questionnaire analysis somewhat corroborates with our findings on grammar accuracy as students reported that the course did not help them improve their grammar accuracy. But apart from this, the majority of the students found the course to be useful for the enhancement of their academic writing skills. They also found the course to be of great benefit in helping them to gain confidence in writing for their core modules and in writing academic research papers. Besides, students reported some 'by-products' of the course, including their general English skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing emails as well as collaborating with other people.

KEYWORDS: *Academic writing; English for academic purposes; Grammar accuracy; Language learning*

The Centre for English Language Communication (CELIC) is entrusted by the National University of Singapore (NUS) with the mission of enhancing the English language and communication skills of its students, both undergraduates and graduates. To this end, CELIC has designed a number of English language and communication skills courses to cater to the different needs of NUS students.

While there is a great need to examine the effects or impacts of all the courses CELIC currently offers, the current study chooses to focus on the impact of the intermediate level graduate English course (i.e., ES5001A) on the academic writing development of ESL/EFL graduate students in NUS. This choice is deliberate for several reasons. First, the population of international graduate students from non-

English speaking backgrounds seems to be on the rise and the communicative competence in general and writing ability in particular, of these graduate students upon and after graduation will have a direct impact on NUS' reputation. Students who are found to lack communication ability will reflect NUS poorly among employers, local and international. Second, provisions of English language and communication skills courses (including EAP courses) have over the years been subjected to calls for accountability, and in such terms as understandable to governing parties who tend not to be specialized in the ESL/EFL field. Thus it is about time that the impact of CELC courses be measured and demonstrated not just in elusive arguments but in measurable and identifiable patterns. Third, CELC has yet to conduct a systematic study of the impact of its graduate English courses upon the development of graduate students' academic writing skills, despite some sporadic ones examining classroom practices and processes. A study of this kind is thus long overdue as it could provide CELC with insights of the effectiveness of courses offered, which in turn can form the basis on which to decide whether changes need to be made for the curriculum and syllabus of its course.

Studies on the impact of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) on the development of learners' English language skills have been few and far between. Existing studies have produced somewhat contradictory results. While some studies report no improvement after students have taken an EAP course (e.g., Read & Hays, 2003), others find improvements (e.g., Elder & O'Loughlin, 2003; Green & Weir, 2003; Storch & Tapper, 2009). At the same time, some other studies may not find significant changes in some aspects of language competence for students such as linguistic accuracy and complexity, but they find improvements in other areas. For example, students' writing became more formal and exhibited features of written register rather than those of spoken register (Shaw & Liu, 1998). The study that is most related to ours is the one done by Storch & Tapper (2009), which investigated what aspects of academic writing improved at the completion of one semester of studying an EAP course that was specifically designed for postgraduate students in Melbourne University. In their study, they examined texts written by 69 students at two separate times: in week 1 and in week 10. The texts were subjected to analysis for language use, text structure, and rhetorical quality. This study found that while no improvements were shown in terms of fluency for students' writing, the use of academic vocabulary showed great improvements over time. In addition, students' grammatical accuracy also improved over time. Although the nature of the EAP course has great similarity to that of our ES5001A course, whether the positive findings the study has shown are transferable to our context is a different matter altogether. It is thus of great interest to see how much impact our postgraduate EAP course has upon the academic writing development of our ESL/EFL graduate students.

The current study has the following three main aims:

1. To investigate the impact of the CELC postgraduate EAP course (i.e., ES5001A) on the development of ESL/EFL postgraduate students' academic writing skills or abilities.
2. To examine to what extent the CELC postgraduate EAP course has helped postgraduate students with other assignments or research writing.

3. To explore what potential benefits other than academic writing skills the postgraduate EAP course may bring to the students.

Method

Data Collection

The study used a pretest/posttest design, which was based on the writing task in the first Diagnostic English Test (DET) in 2010. DET is a placement test that all incoming international graduate students are required to take, the results of which will determine whether students need to take any English courses and which level of English courses they need to take. In the DET, students are required to do one text-editing task, answer one set of reading comprehension questions based on a research paper, and write an argumentative essay of about 500 words in response to 2 stimulus reading texts. The results of the test are used to place students in 5 bands, with Band 1 the lowest band and Band 5 the highest. Those obtaining Bands 1-4 will be required to take one or two English courses so that they are equipped with sufficient academic literacy to cope with their respective academic studies in NUS. Students who obtained Band 5 overall and for the language component are exempted from taking graduate English courses.

This study used only the data for the writing task, due to the fact that a repeat of the whole test (lasting for two hours and fifteen minutes) for the posttest would pose difficulty in recruiting participants, even when a S\$10 cash reward was offered for their participation. The writing task required students to write an academic text of 450–500 words that responded to one of the following two prompts:

- (a) In the text in Section A, Lee Kwan Yew suggests that Singaporeans who have received “an education and opportunities” provided by Singapore cannot leave Singapore permanently with a clear conscience. Do you agree it is wrong to leave your country permanently in search of a better life? Support your answer with ideas and examples from the texts and from your own experience and observation.
- (b) The texts in sections A and B suggest that governments are making special efforts to attract foreign talent. Would such a policy be beneficial to your country? Support your answer with ideas and examples from the texts and from your own experience and observation.

To collect the posttest data, students who took the DET in January 2010 and were subsequently enrolled in Graduate English Course (Intermediate Level) (i.e., ES5001A) in Semester 2 of the Academic Year 2009/2010 were contacted via email in week nine of the semester and were invited to do the DET writing task again on the Saturday of week eleven. The essay scripts and bands they received from their essays constituted the posttest data. In addition, these students were also asked to sign a consent form and answer a questionnaire on (a) the usefulness of the course and various course components in the enhancement of their academic writing skills and abilities, (b) the usefulness of the course in helping them write their other course-work related assignments and research reports, and (c) any

potential benefits (other than the development of English language skills) that the course may bring to them. (See the questionnaire in the Appendix.)

Participants

Out of the 65 ES5001A students who took the DET in January 2010, 31 participated in this study. They came from a range of language and cultural backgrounds (including those from China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Iran, the Philippines, India, and Vietnam), with the majority (23) from China.

Among these 31 students, the majority (87%) did their bachelor's degree in a language other than English, with only 4 of them having done their first degree in English. More than half of these students (61%) had the experience of writing academic research papers in English, with some (26%) of them even having the experience of publishing their papers in English.

Most of the students (81%) were admitted into the University with the results of at least one international standardized English language test such as TOEFL (iBT) (with scores ranging from 78-107), TOEFL (pBT) (with scores ranging from 570-600), IELTS (with bands of 6.0 and 6.5), and GRE (with scores ranging from 1140-1420).

Data Analysis

The main source of data for this study was essays written in the DET about two weeks before the semester started (time 1) and in week 11 (time 2). Two levels of analysis were conducted, holistic and analytic. The holistic analysis was mainly based on the bands the participating students obtained at time 1 and time 2. This level of analysis aims mainly to ascertain whether students' academic writing competence has improved purely in numerical terms. The second level of analysis was a detailed linguistic analysis of students' scripts, with a special focus on fluency, accuracy, academic vocabulary use, and text structure.

Fluency

Following Storch and Tapper (2009), we measured fluency in terms of the total number of words and words per T-unit. To count the total number of words of an essay, the word count tool of the Microsoft Word was used. In counting words, titles were excluded.

For the identification of a T-unit, we followed the definition used by the originator of the concept Kellogg Hunt. According to Hunt (1970, p. 4), a T-unit is "a main clause plus all subordinate clauses and nonclausal structures attached or embedded in it." The identification and counting of the T-units was done manually by one of the project members. Examples of T-units from the essays are given below:

Even [sic] it's uncertain weather [sic] I would try to apply PR in Singapore or fly back to China after I finish my study here, the fact is definite that the education I enjoy here, the vision I expand here, the knowledge I obtain here,

the friends I get to know here and all of the experience I have here will surely benefit to my devotion to the country where I work. (1 T-unit)

For example, to recruit a fresh Singaporean engineer, the company need to pay about SGD2700, /but if they recruit a Malaysian engineer who can do the same job, they only need to pay SGD2000. (2 T-units)

After decades of talent attracting program, the financial centre is actually sketched up with help of hundreds of foreign talents; /more importantly, the domestic professionals are catching up with a great improvement, partly due to learning effect, partly due to the fierce competition for survival. (2 T-units)

The frequency of words per T-unit has traditionally been used as an index of syntactic maturity or complexity. However, increasingly the concept has also started to be used as a measure of fluency, such as Wolf-Quintero, Inagaki, and Kim (1998) and Storch and Tapper (2009). Likewise, the current study uses the frequency of words per T-unit as the measurement for fluency.

Accuracy

In order to assess accuracy, we used error categories based on Wu et al. (2008), with some slight modifications (see Table 1). The four project members coded the 62 (31 pretest and 31 posttest) scripts for the different types of errors, with each coding 15 or 16 scripts. An accuracy score was then calculated by deriving the total number of errors per total number of words (E/W).

Use of Academic Vocabulary

Use of vocabulary is an important aspect of academic writing. Again, following Storch and Tapper (2009), we examined the occurrences of vocabulary in the Academic Word List (AWL) developed by Coxhead (2000). The AWL consists of 570 word families derived from a corpus of academic texts drawn from our 'sub-corpora' from arts, commerce, law, and science (see Coxhead, 2000 for details). These words are academic words that are found across disciplines and comprise 9-10% of an academic text (Storch & Tapper, 2009).

Each student script was checked for the presence of words on the AWL and the number of occurrences was recorded for each of the 10 sublists of AWL.

Text Structure and Rhetorical Quality

In the DET, each student's writing was given a banded score of 1-5 for content, organization, and language, respectively. Based on the banded scores for these separate areas, each essay was also assigned a weighted band of 1-5, which was calculated by giving one weighting for content and double weightings for both organization and language. For the posttest scripts, a tutor who had the experience of teaching ES5001A and of marking DET was engaged to mark all the essays based on the same set of DET descriptors. The bands obtained by each student at time 1 and time 2 were compared.

Table 1

Error Categories, Subcategories, and Codes

No	Categories	Subcategories	Codes
1	Verb	Verb tense/voice/aspect	Vt
2		Verb modals	Vm
3		Missing verbs	VØ
4		Verb form	Vform
5	Subject-verb agreement	Subject-verb agreement	SVA
6	Articles/Determiners	Articles or Determiners	Art or Det
7	Nouns	Noun number	Nn
8		Noun possessive	Npos
9	Pronouns	Pronoun forms	Pform
10		Pronoun reference	Pref
11	Word choices	Wrong collocation/idiom/preposition	Wcip
12		Acronyms	Wa
13		Word forms	Wf
14	Sentence structure	Run-ons, comma splice	Srun
15		Dangling modifiers	Smod
16		Parallelism	Spar
17		Fragments	Sfrag
18		Subordinate clauses	Ssub
19	Word order	Incorrect sentence forms	Woinc
20		Adverb position	Woadv
21	Transitions	Link words/Phrases	Trans
22	Mechanics	Punctuation, capitalization, spelling, typos	Mec
23	Redundancy	Local	Rloc
24	Others	Missing nouns/words, etc.	WØ
25		Unclear meaning, no correction possible	Um

Results

Fluency

Table 2 shows that the length of the essays written in the pre- and posttest was almost the same, with the essays in the posttest negligibly shorter. There were slightly more T-units in the pretest than in the posttest, and correspondingly, the average number of words per T-unit was marginally lower in the pretest than in the posttest, though none of these differences was shown to be significant, based on the results of an independent samples t-test ($t = .975$ for total number of words, $t = .48$ for total number of T-units and $t = .54$ for average number of words per T-unit).

Table 2

Results for Fluency in Pre- and Posttests

Fluency	Pretest		Posttest	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Total words	458.71	101.04	457.87	110.75
Total t-units	27.84	7.37	26.61	6.28
Words/t-unit	16.96	3.16	17.44	3.19

Table 3

Results for Accuracy in Pre- and Posttests

Accuracy	Pretest		Posttest	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Total errors	31.13	12.62	33.58	17.05
Errors/Total words	0.07	0.02	0.07	0.03

Accuracy

Table 3 shows the average number of errors made by the 31 students in the pre- and posttests and the total number of errors per total number of words. Again there was no obvious improvement in accuracy scores from pretest to posttest.

A closer examination of the types of errors made by the students in the pre- and posttests revealed that the three most frequent types of errors remain more or less the same: wrong collocation/idiom/preposition (Wcip), articles or determiners, and noun numbers (see Table 4). The combined total of the three types of errors made up more than half of all the errors, 50.99% and 52.73% for pretest and posttest, respectively.

Academic Vocabulary Use

Table 5 shows the average number of occurrences of AWL words as well as the percentage of AWL words out of the total number of words in students' scripts in the pretest and posttest. There was a slight increase in the use of AWL words in the posttest compared with the pretest, although the increase was not statistically significant.

Text Structure and Rhetorical Quality

Table 6 shows the mean bands and standard deviations for student essays in the pre- and posttests. There was an overall improvement in the quality of writing exhibited in the posttest, that is, students seemed to get a higher band in terms of content, organization, and language as well as in terms of the essay in general. The improvement in language—of more than half a band (0.64) up from the pretest—was particularly striking. The Mann-Whitney *U* test results show that

Table 4

Types and Number of Errors in Pre- and Posttests

Type of error	Pretest		Posttest	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Wcip	219	22.65	258	24.78
Art or Det	140	14.48	113	10.85
Nn	134	13.86	178	17.10
Vt	59	6.10	44	4.23
Wf	59	6.10	68	6.53
Others	56	5.79	68	6.53
SVA	45	4.65	64	6.15
Mec	42	4.34	44	4.23
Vform	32	3.31	51	4.90
Srun	27	2.79	18	1.73
Rloc	27	2.79	33	3.17
Woinc	26	2.69	4	0.38
Um	17	1.76	20	1.92
Pref	16	1.65	24	2.31
Spar	16	1.65	0	0.00
Sfrag	14	1.45	10	0.96
Pform	10	1.03	1	0.10
Ssub	7	0.72	2	0.19
Vm	6	0.62	3	0.29
VØ	5	0.52	4	0.38
Npos	4	0.41	12	1.15
Trans	3	0.31	21	2.02
Smod	2	0.21	1	0.10
Woadv	1	0.10	0	0.00
Wa	0	0.00	0	0.00
Total	967	100	1041	100

Table 5

Results for Use of Academic Vocabulary

Use of AWL	Pretest		Posttest	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Total occurrences of AWL	25.81	10.99	30.19	13.01
AWL/Total words	5.69%	2.27	6.75%	2.93

the differences between the pre- and posttest bands in language ($p = .000$) and overall grade ($p = 0.043$) were significant and that in organization was close to statistical significance ($p = 0.060$). However, no significant difference was found in content ($p = 0.205$).

Table 6
Essay Bands in Pre- and Posttests

Aspect of essay	Pretest		Posttest	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Content	3.03	0.61	3.26	0.77
Organization	2.84	0.69	3.16	0.58
Language	2.84	0.64	3.48	0.68
Overall essay band	3.00	0.52	3.29	0.64

Quantitative Questionnaire Analysis

The questionnaire consisted of both multiple choice questions and qualitative questions. The quantitative questions focused on two main areas: (a) the usefulness of the course and various course components for the enhancement of the students' academic writing skills and abilities, and (b) the usefulness of the course in helping them write their other course-work related assignments and research reports. The qualitative questions elicited students' feedback on the difficulties they still encountered in writing academic assignments, the usefulness of the course in improving their academic writing, and any potential benefits (other than the development of English language skills) that the course might bring them.

Impact of the Course on Academic Writing Skills

In this section of the questionnaire, students were asked to indicate the extent or degree of agreement to the 11 course objective statements, based on a five-point Likert scale with one for *strongly disagree*, three for *neutral* and five for *strongly agree*.

In general, the majority of students either agreed or strongly agreed that the course had fulfilled its objectives, except probably for the improvement of grammar accuracy (Item No. 9) (see Table 7). Specifically, at least two-thirds of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that the course had helped them understand the general characteristics of academic writing (94%), use expressions commonly used in academic writing (87%), interpret graphic information appropriately (83%), present graphic information in a clear manner (81%), apply the relevant academic writing style used in their disciplines (75%), present their arguments in a coherent manner (75%), and improve their language structure (71%). Slightly less than two-thirds of the students either agreed or strongly agreed that the course had helped them write for the intended audience (65%), synthesize key information in reading texts (65%), and make use of sources in writing (61%). However, less than half of the students (42%) either agreed or strongly agreed that the course had helped improve their grammar accuracy.

Table 7

Students' Perception of the Impact of the Course on Academic Writing Skills

The course has helped me in	1	2	3	4	5
1. understanding the general characteristics of academic writing	3%	0%	3%	52%	42%
2. applying the relevant academic writing style used in my discipline	3%	3%	19%	65%	10%
3. writing for the intended audience	3%	3%	39%	45%	20%
4. synthesizing key information in reading texts	3%	0%	32%	39%	26%
5. making use of sources in writing	3%	10%	26%	45%	16%
6. presenting my arguments in a coherent manner	3%	6%	16%	52%	23%
7. presenting graphic information in a clear manner	3%	0%	16%	58%	23%
8. interpreting graphic information appropriately	3%	3%	10%	48%	35%
9. improving my grammar accuracy	0%	10%	48%	39%	3%
10. improving my language structure	3%	3%	23%	61%	10%
11. making use of expressions commonly used in academic writing	3%	0%	10%	61%	26%

Transferability of Skills

In this section of the questionnaire, students were asked to indicate the extent or degree of agreement to whether they felt more confident in writing assignments in their core academic modules and in writing academic research papers, again based on a five-point Likert scale with 1 for *strongly disagree*, 3 for *neutral*, and 5 for *strongly agree*.

The majority of students either agreed or strongly agreed that after taking the course, they felt more confident in writing assignments in their core academic modules (78%) as well as in writing academic research papers in their respective disciplines (80%).

Qualitative Questionnaire Analysis

Difficulties in Writing Academic Assignments

In response to the open question of what difficulties they still encounter in writing academic assignments, the students noted at least 6 large areas of difficulty. The most frequently mentioned area of difficulty is the use of appropriate words and expressions, with more than half (i.e., 18 or 58%) of the 31 students commenting on it. Below are some examples of answers from the students:

- Lack of vocabulary and commonly used expressions
- Express ideas accurately
- The accuracy of word choice
- Limited vocabulary, expressions, etc.

My vocabulary is limited.

Clearly express my opinion in English.

Choose the suitable word choice in a sentence.

Not familiar with the academic words used in academic writing.

Use of verbs like “would be”, “could be”, etc.

This result is hardly surprising as the use of collocations and idiomatic expressions has also been found to be the most common type of errors students made in both their pre- and posttests.

The second most frequently mentioned area of difficulty in writing an academic assignment is the organization of ideas, with 6 of the students commenting on it. Below are some typical answers from the students:

General organization or structure is a bit difficult

Organize the ideas which are essential to be written

The most difficult task in writing is organizing and generating ideas. I mean it would take me at least 3 to 5 drafts to present a writing with deep contents, logically arranged and with good reasoning. Therefore it takes time. I'm very slow at this.

Mostly I suffer from difficulties related to how to organize an essay

Grammar is another area that students found difficult, with at least four of them mentioning it, as shown in the following examples:

My grammar is still poor, the ES5001A didn't teach much on grammar

The structure as well as the grammar.

Use proper grammar to make my writing more fluent

Grammar accuracy and exactly word.

Some students also mentioned the problem of resorting to thinking in their first language, which may involve more than just the use of words or expressions. For example,

I think the most difficulties is the English logic

It is still difficult to get [rid of] the thinking method of Chinese

I cannot express myself as natural as authors from English speaking countries.

I often have to think in Chinese and then translate into English. Moreover, I'm not sure the translation follows the habit of English. Can they understand me?

I wonder.

Finally, a few students expressed difficulties in generating ideas for their writing as well as in finishing a writing assignment within a stipulated timeframe:

I usually feel the content is not adequate when writing academic assignments.

The most difficult part in writing academic assignment is how to generate the content.

Content is not enough.

Less time to do write-edit-revise cycle.

The most difficult task in writing is organizing and generating ideas. I mean it would take me at least 3 to 5 drafts to present a writing with deep contents, logically arranged and with good reasoning. Therefore it takes time. I'm very slow at this.

Usefulness of the Course in Improving Students' Academic Writing

In their feedback on the usefulness of the course in improving their academic writing, students provided some general positive comments on the course such as "it's good" and "ES5001A has done a great job. Keep the good work." In addition, the students also commented on some of the specific skills that the course has helped them develop, including academic writing conventions and summary and analytic skills, as shown in the following examples:

The ES5001A teaches me how to summarize or analyze the paper or table or graphs more correctly

The module is useful in identifying characters of academic writing. I did not notice them, but the module clarified them. So I now know what I need to cover in my own academic writing.

We learn the writing structure which can be followed when doing academic writing. It is very useful . . .

Yes. Improving the understanding in academic writing in general. It is useful in my future reading and writing.

ES5001A is useful in improve my academic writing. I learnt many useful things during this study. Such as how to compose critical writing.

It helps me to form the general understanding of academic writing.

After attending the course, I realised many academic features in academic writing which my English teacher never taught me before.

It, of course, improves the academic writing aspects as the academic writing is altogether different from general writing or speaking.

Besides the provision of positive comments on the course, some students also expressed their unfulfilled expectations of the course. These expectations include the addition of more language-related activities such as word usage and grammar skills, as well as the instruction of discipline-specific writing practices. Below are some typical comments from the students:

"More assignment in commonly used expressions and vocabulary training"

I feel that it would be better to teach us some usually used grammar and exchanging words

There must be more practice of grammar accuracy and how to use exactly word.

May teach the students more "language" skills

It is suggested that more language points (how to improve) should be involved.

I could be better if more standard samples were evaluated.

I think reducing number of students in each class would help, to give more time working through writing-edit-reverse cycle.

I believe it would be better if the module would include some important writing forms that are necessary for researchers such as research proposals, article critiques in the student discipline and assignments that can improve grammar accuracy.

It may be useful to conduct the course/according to the discipline since different discipline has different academic style.

"By-products" of the Course

While the main aim of the course is to enhance students' academic writing skills, students seem to have also gained some 'added values' from the course (Perpignan, Rubin, & Katznelson, 2007). The most frequently mentioned 'by-product' is the improvement of their general English skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing (including the writing of emails and even the writing of essays in students' native language), as shown in the following comments:

It improved my listening a bit

Helped me in public English communication.

Spoken English. Because we have choice to communicate with other students and teacher. Luckily, the teacher can correct our expression and language.

I communicated with other students in the class and make friends with people from other countries. At the same time, it is a good chance to improve my oral English.

In my ordinary writing e.g. email.

Reading ability like article structure analysis.

ES5001A helps me to know how to organize my ideas and opinions.

Help in reading articles.

Actually it could help me to write essay in my language too. Because I had some difficulties in writing in my native language which by taking this module I could overcome some of them but still I should work on writing essays.

So day-to-day by the professor and good interaction with the classmates coming from different countries.

Oral English. The ability to discuss in English.

In my other assignments, I will finish them quicker

In addition to the benefits of improving students' general English language competence, students have also mentioned some other 'by-products' of the course, especially the social interactional function of the course. Below are some examples:

Help me to make some friends in my class

The module also provides me a chance to know new friends, who need to improve their English too, and we can speak in English on the class. We learn from each other and encourage each other.

Making friends.

Collaborating with friends in class in terms of peer review.

It helps me to know how to critique others' work and the attitude towards the life.

Discussion

The course under study is an intermediate level graduate English course offered to international graduate students who scored below Band 5 in the Diagnostic English Test, which is conducted twice a year. The focus of the course is in fact not on essay writing, but rather on research paper writing, which is exemplified by the three assignments students are required to do: data commentary, critique, and report. Thus it may seem to be unfair to evaluate the effectiveness of this course in terms of the development of students' general academic literacy rather than the specific skills that the course aims to achieve. We chose the writing of an essay as our gauge of their level of academic literacy nonetheless, mainly based on the practicability of the task.

Our analysis of the essays written by the students in the pretest and posttest shows that students were able to produce texts which sounded slightly more academic, mainly in terms of their use of academic vocabulary. In addition, they had gained over the course of one semester more than half a band in their overall essay quality and had improved their language band significantly. However, there was no change over time in terms of their grammar accuracy, fluency of writing or textual complexity as measured by the use of T-units, and content band of their essays.

The questionnaire analysis somewhat corroborates with our findings on grammar accuracy as students reported that the course did not help them improve their grammar accuracy. Yet apart from this, the majority of the students found the course to be useful in the enhancement of their academic writing skills. They also found the course to be of great benefit in helping them to gain confidence in writing for their core modules and in writing academic research papers. Besides, students reported some 'by-products' of the course, including improvement in their general English skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing emails as well as collaboration with other people.

Thus, overall, the course seems to have achieved the objectives it set out to achieve, i.e., in helping students to recognise the general characteristics of academic writing, recognise the grammar and style of academic writing in their own discipline, present well organised ideas in formal English, interpret data and academic texts, write a simple critique, write a data commentary, and write a report (<http://www.nus.edu.sg/celc/courses/grad/index.html#es5001a>). Nonetheless, we are aware that some students still expressed difficulties in the use of words, grammar, and generation and organization of ideas, though we readily acknowledge that eradication of all these problem areas from our students should not be the task of ES5001A tutors alone. The improvement of language proficiency, in general, and academic literacy, in particular, is a life-long process

which may be expedited by a passionate pursuit on the part of students themselves, targeted language and communication programmes on the part of CELC, and outside-of-class institutionalized and sustained support systems on the part of the University.

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ES5001A has helped me in	1	2	3	4	5
8) synthesizing key information in reading texts	<input type="checkbox"/>				
9) making use of sources in writing	<input type="checkbox"/>				
10) presenting my arguments in a coherent manner	<input type="checkbox"/>				
11) presenting graphic information in a clear manner	<input type="checkbox"/>				
12) interpreting graphic information appropriately	<input type="checkbox"/>				
13) improving my grammar accuracy	<input type="checkbox"/>				
14) improving my language structure	<input type="checkbox"/>				
15) making use of expressions commonly used in academic writing	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Section 3 — Transferability of Skills

Instruction: Based on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, indicate the extent or degree of agreement to the following statements by placing a tick in the appropriate box.

	1	2	3	4	5
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
After reading ES5001A, I am more confident in	1	2	3	4	5
16) writing assignments in my core academic modules	<input type="checkbox"/>				
17) writing academic research papers in my discipline	<input type="checkbox"/>				

Section 4 — General Comments

Instruction: Write your feedback on the space provided.

18) What difficulties do you still encounter in writing academic assignments?

19) Do you have any feedback on the usefulness of ES5001A in improving your academic writing?

20) Besides helping you work on your writing skills in English, has ES5001A helped in any any other aspects?

Yes, please indicate

No

Thank you for completing the survey questionnaire.

