Supporting English Language Learners' Academic Writing Development Through a Systematized Assistance Model[1]

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Abstract

Despite recent efforts to improve college-level students' academic writing, the ways this skill develops continues to be vastly unexplored. Students do not meet the current literacy demands posed by higher education. These demands become more strenuous when students have to write in English, a language they do not master. The current study reports on the implementation of a systematized assistance model for writing in English as a Foreign Language in a Colombian public university's bilingual teacher education program. Weekly tutoring sessions were provided to 16 students from an academic writing course in one semester. Common error patterns in their writing samples were identified and categorized with an analytical rubric and students' reactions to the systematized assistance model were collected through a questionnaire. Results revealed that students

benefited significantly from tutor support and professor's feedback especially in terms of metalinguistic awareness, knowledge of the Process Approach to writing and accuracy in language convention use.

Key words: academic writing; tutoring; process approach; English writing lab.

Resumen

El apoyo al desarrollo de la escritura académica en aprendices de inglés por medio de un modelo de asistencia sistematizada

Las formas para mejorar las competencias de escritura académica de los estudiantes siguen ampliamente inexploradas. Los requerimientos de lecto-escritura en la educación superior no son alcanzados efectivamente por los estudiantes, especialmente los relacionados con la escritura académica en inglés, que son más estrictos. Este proyecto busca implementar un modelo de asistencia a la escritura en una licenciatura en bilingüismo de una universidad pública colombiana. Se ofrecieron semanalmente sesiones de acompañamiento con tutores a 16 estudiantes de un curso de escritura académica en un semestre. Fueron caracterizados los patrones de errores con rúbricas analíticas, y las reacciones de los estudiantes con respecto a la asistencia que recibieron fueron recolectadas por medio de un cuestionario. Los resultados muestran que los estudiantes se benefician significativamente con el acompañamiento del profesor y los tutores en términos de la conciencia metalingüística, el conocimiento del proceso de la escritura y el uso de convenciones lingüísticas.

Palabras clave: escritura académica; acompañamiento con tutores; método proceso; laboratorio de escritura académica en inglés.

Résumé

Le soutien au développement de l'écriture académique aux apprentis de l'anglais à travers d'un modèle d'assistance systématisé

Les manières d'améliorer les compétences concernant l'écriture académique des étudiants restent encore très inexplorées. Les exigences actuelles d'alphabétisation dans l'enseignement supérieur ne sont pas pleinement satisfaites par les élèves, en particulier celles liées à l'écriture académique en anglais. Ce projet vise à mettre en place un modèle d'assistance d'écriture dans une Licence en bilinguisme, espagnol-anglais, proposée par une université publique colombienne. Des séances hebdomadaires de tutorat ont été fournies à 16 étudiants faisant partie d'un cours d'écriture académique durant un semestre. Des patrons d'erreurs ont été classés à l'aide d'une rubrique analytique, et les réactions des étudiants envers cette assistance systématisée ont été recueillies dans un questionnaire. Les résultats révèlent que les étudiants ont véritablement tiré profit du soutien des tuteurs et

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professeurs, en termes de conscience métalinguistique, de connaissance du processus pour l'écriture et l'usage de convention linguistiques.

Mots-clés : écriture académique ; tutorat ; Approche du Processus ; laboratoire d'écriture anglaise.

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Cómo citar este artículo

INTRODUCTION

The art of composing academic texts in English is cumbersome even for native speakers, who indeed struggle structuring their papers according to the different genres required at the tertiary education level. Such a task is even more challenging for English Language Learners (ELLs), particularly for those who lack strong literacy foundations in their native languages (L1) as supported by Yang (2016), who highlights the difficulties ESL students have when writing. Since they require more scaffolding and ongoing support, having in place a strategically designed assistance protocol becomes pivotal to achieve remarkable improvements in learners' academic writing competencies. Such a protocol goes beyond the academic writing professor's feedback and it includes ongoing tutoring at a writing center where ELLs are supported in the development and polishing of their written products. Jahin (2012) and J. G. Williams (2003) remark the importance of providing effective feedback to students and the unique role of peer-review.

A support system with these characteristics started with the design of an academic writing course at an English Bilingual Teacher Preparation Program of a Colombian public university where multiple instructional and assessment strategies such as the Process Approach (PA), genre-based instruction, systematized feedback and ongoing tutoring have been used since 2016 (Marulanda & Martinez, 2017).

This article seeks to report the findings of the implementation of this elaborate model of academic writing assistance in the first semester of 2018. After ongoing tutoring sessions were provided to 16 students from the Academic Writing course in the English Bilingual Teacher Preparation Program, this study identified common error patterns in participants' writing samples using a five-scale rubric comprising different compositional features. These errors were initially noted by professor's systematized feedback and later, characterized by tutors during and after assistance conferences to determine the degree of improvement in students' writing competences. Furthermore, with the help of questionnaires, this research project delineated more effective tutoring strategies to improve participants' compositional skills and metalinguistic awareness. The overarching goal of this research study is to explore the impact of a systematized assistance protocol in terms of students' improvement of writing competences, to identify students' most commonly made mistakes and to characterize the demeanor towards embracing academic writing tasks.

Results indicate that there is a high level of confidence regarding the effect of systematized feedback and tutoring on the pre and post versions from 16

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students' writing samples of four genres (descriptive, reflective, argumentative and expository). Also, most of participants' written products improved after being supported, specifically in terms of syntactic structures and conventional features of language (grammar and punctuation), which were the most common errors appearing in the writing samples analyzed.

Ultimately, this project seeks to institutionalize an English academic writing assistance center devoted to continuously support students and faculty members in developing their academic and intellectual written products.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Taking into consideration that most of the studies done on writing centers (WCs) in Latin America refer to Spanish-based ones, and that those supporting the composition of texts in English are located in contexts where that is the official language, it was necessary to understand their history and principles in general inasmuch as this could help extrapolate the foundations underlying the WC to be created. What tutors do in WCs is also a matter of discussion that can only be settled by clearly defined goals during and after conferencing with learners, thus it was paramount to assess different tutoring practices in order to establish the most suitable ones for this project. Furthermore, WCs can be seen as dynamic places where support is provided and where academic needs are analyzed and dealt with. An English-based WC dedicated to Spanish-speaking learners requires understanding the most common types of writing problems in this context; to do that, it was helpful to learn how to characterize learners' compositional problematic areas, so the support they received was optimal. In fact, research done by Powers (1993) and Harris and Silva (1993) regarding WCs show their cultural and pedagogical benefits as well as their potential for inquiry-based practices.

Finally, WCs' main goal is to ensure that participating students effectively transfer to other contexts what they learn in terms of academic written competencies, in order words, to take academic writing across the curriculum.

Writing Centers and the Curriculum

An additional advantage of WCs is that they enable learners to replicate the learning experiences they have during tutoring sessions in other scenarios where they are required to write academically. Göpferich (2016) proposes that through support at WC students can increase their subject-domain competence, and in turn, make better use of their declarative knowledge about writing, which transfers to other disciplines. This means that WCs do not act as isolated entities within

educational institutions; on the contrary, they have the potential to exert influence on courses and faculty objectives.

Despite its longstanding presence at academic settings in the United States, Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) programs have been subjected to several definitions (Mcleod & Soven, 1992) which vary considerably from its perception of grammar across the curriculum to the random addition of written assignments in content subjects. Nevertheless, even if WAC initiatives' main aim is generally recognized as that of improving students' writing skills, their real objectives go beyond. As described by Mcleod (1987), "writing across the curriculum also means change–change in the structure of writing programs, change in the university curriculum, change in faculty behavior in the classroom" (p. 23). Hence, WAC's main purpose is not solely directed at improving the students' writing skills, but at promoting academic self-assurance through the integration of content and writing subjects, actively involving the students in the learning process through the enhancement of their writing skills.

Collaborative work among faculty members is certainly one of the most outstanding aspects of WAC programs, if not decisive. As enumerated by Maimon (1992), WAC initiatives are characterized by a faculty sense of ownership with the program, continual dialogue and intellectual interchange across the disciplines, nonhierarchical participation, among others. Carlino (2012) describes this commonly found situation where:

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> Many professors in the social sciences did ask for a lot of reading and writing in their courses, but few of them oriented students to how to do it. When pedagogical assistance was provided, it tended to be sporadic and insufficient. (pp. 485-486).

Writing Centers and English Language Learning

WCs indirectly became pivotal programs in higher education settings (Murphy & Law, 1995; J. Williams & Severino, 2004). Although they came into existence around 1930, it was during The Open Admission, a movement that allowed underprepared students in American colleges, posing both educational challenges for institutions, where WCs had a flourishing opportunity across that nation (Boquet, 2008).

The concept of a WC has evolved from an authoritative stance to a more collaborative one. In the former, students would focus on writing as a skill that had no connection with other subjects (Russell, 1990) whereas in the latter, especially after *The Idea of a Writing Center* (North, 1984), it took more of a student-centered orientation where peer tutoring was predominant (Bruffee, 1984). This refreshed

vision has slowly permeated contemporary philosophies of WCs (Boquet, 2008) to the point of promoting the creation of specialized publications (Writing Center Journal, Writing Lab Newsletter) on centers with such views. Nowadays, WCs around the world have become so relevant and necessary that several international associations (EATAW, IWCA, ISAWR) have been established to share findings on how academic institutions deal with writing around the world (Thaiss, Bräuer, Carlino, Ganobcsik-Williams & Sinha, 2012).

In the case of Latin America, approximately a decade ago, universities were still addressing students' writing needs through remedial, prescriptive or isolated processes since "the idea of a writing center with writing tutors is usually not known in Latin American or Spanish universities" (Carlino, 2012, p. 492). However, recent initiatives have redefined the role of WCs as well as the identity and role of tutors in the Latin American context (Molina-Natera, 2014), even though they have been limited to addressing students' writing needs in Spanish.

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Despite this progress, educational institutions and their WCs have had to face the rapidly changing demographics that incrementally included more non-proficient language users. This phenomenon is often unknown territory for tutors that are not well prepared to assist students who are starting to write in a different language (Kennell, 2014). L2 writers began to be acknowledged by the literature very recently, so the number of studies examining this issue, even though incrementally rising, is still limited (Kennell, 2014; J. Williams, 2002; J. Williams & Severino, 2004). Nevertheless, contemporary publications (Bruce & Rafoth, 2009, 2016) have shown that L2 writers constitute an enriching community on the basis that it not only questions the pre-established philosophies of WCs –first directed to native speakers–, but also brings about new variables to study such as cross-cultural differences, emotional responses, error profiling, social justice, writing across the curriculum, among others. In other words, WCs have become places where new knowledge can be produced thanks to the specific needs and motivations that L2 writers have (Harris & Silva, 1993; Powers, 1993). The different linguistic backgrounds and the particular concerns of students who require writing assistance have permitted the growth of WCs and their modalities, which according to Thonus (1993), expand in this range: "(1) focus on form (controlled composition and contrastive rhetoric); (2) focus on the writer (negotiation of meaning and the process approach); and (3) focus on the reader (English for academic purposes and the academic discourse community)" (p. 16). This level of specificity allows WCs to thrive as locations to assist, to learn and to research.

Notwithstanding this comprehension, the EFL field, specifically in Spanish-speaking contexts, has no visible research that highlights how WCs address L2 writers' needs in higher education. It might be possible, nonetheless, to use

existing findings from ESL contexts in order to test their effectiveness in contexts where the native language is not English.

Tutoring in the Writing Center

The increased popularity of WCs worldwide can be attributed to the advantages that effective, ongoing tutoring pose for developing writers, especially if the techniques used to assist them in their writing process meet their needs throughout tutoring sessions. As described by Marx (1991), the power of tutoring relies on the "the one-to-one setting, the exchange of personal thoughts and ideas during a writing conference and the bonds formed between participants" (p. 51), elements that do not necessarily appear within classrooms. Nevertheless, one of the biggest challenges WC's staff, particularly tutors, must recognize and deal with is the wide variety of issues and necessities each writer brings, which can require tailor-made assistance sessions. This, enables the ultimate goal of a WC to "support writers on their journey to write ever more effectively" (Boehm, 2009, p. 1). As pointed out by Marulanda and Martinez (2017) students warrant reinforcement on their academic writing skills across the curriculum on an ongoing basis in order for them to eventually internalize the process and techniques that are required for highly academic written productions. As a matter of fact, the development of highly sophisticated academic writing requires sustained guidance as the needs of each written product vary according to tasks, purposes and discourse communities (Paltridge *et al.*, 2009).

Tutoring effectiveness is enhanced by the personal component found in tutor-tutee interactions that other learning environments such as writing classes lack, which enables writers to freely interact and participate in the upgrading of their papers, while implicitly enhancing their writing skills. Whether voluntary or mandatory, students who attend tutoring sessions at WCs can benefit from, as stated by J. Williams and Severino (2004), "an interaction between peers who share similar backgrounds, experience, and status, one that creates a different and powerful context for learning." (p. 165).

Most tutoring sessions' success is determined by the role taken by both the tutor and the writer. Throughout the years, WC's function has been perceived as that of, as expressed by North (1984) in *The Idea of a Writing Center*, a "fix-it shop" or by Harris (1990) in *What's Up and What's In: Trends and Traditions in Writing Centers*, a "band-aid grammar clinic" (p. 19), partly due, to the wrong assumption that tutors' job is to enhance the writers' texts. Brooks (2008) highlights the tutors' main objective as the recognition of the student's relevance in the entire tutoring sessions and how the writing skills development fully depends on the writer's responsibility with their product, emphasizing that tutors are supportive figures

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throughout writing improvement processes more than corrective ones. Tutors should promote the writer's thinking independence and self-assurance, determining the success of tutoring sessions to a larger extent. This, in turn, ensures that students increase their metalinguistic awareness and enhance their self-monitoring skills, which can be transferred to other contexts and tasks across their undergraduate classes.

Related to the unpredictable nature of tutoring, there are plenty of authors supporting and highlighting tutors' acknowledgement of tutees diversity (Brooks, 2008; Devet, 2015; Harris, 1990; Lioi, 2008; Marx, 1991), especially the meaning and impact that collaborative work will play in this process. Brooks (2008) and Lioi (2008) have widely recognized the thin line between a tutor and an editor, and have provided advice regarding the importance of tutors to acknowledge it as well.

Regarding the role tutors should take during the tutoring sessions, in his essay *Minimalistic Tutoring: Making the Students do All the Work*, Brooks (2008) exposes the benefits of this tutoring strategy that places the student as the main, and preferably more dynamic, figure of any tutoring session. The tutor should always ask the writer to introduce himself as an individual and then find the most suitable ways to assist him in his writing process, pointing at individual writing features as well as methods to strengthen it. In a few words Lioi (2008) describes "Minimalistic Tutoring" as "a method that requires students to solve their own problems under the supervision of a tutor who acts as a coach, a more experienced peer, rather than an editor" (p. 44).

Another aspect that lately represents a challenge for WCs and its tutors is the recognition of L2 writers and the many difficulties faced in their academic process. J. Williams and Severino (2004) underline how in this case "tutorials with L2 writers might require a different, or at least a more flexible, approach to tutoring than was being promoted for work with native speakers" (p. 166). The authors draw attention to aspects like L2 syntax error, rhetoric variances and L2 reading strategies, all determined by cultural and linguistic differences. J. Williams and Severino (2004) reveal that tutoring sessions between native speakers and L2 writers vary considerably in structure, and because of this, a different approach to conduct the tutoring sessions according to its variables must be embraced, preserving the real objective of WCs as places where the writer takes full responsibility for his writing development. There is research about this matter in WCs, confirming the much required awareness from tutors to adapt to the circumstances each writer brings, an aspect entirely grounded on training (Brooks, 2008; Devet, 2015).

Acknowledging L2 writers tutoring variations is not the only challenge tutors at WCs must be prepared to face. Generally, tutoring practices are

determined by contextual characteristics of the WC, students' needs and subsequent tutor training. Despite the primary assisting quality of WCs, the methods used to do it should adapt to the circumstances without altering the objectives of the staff. Boehm (2009) describes the personality features required for tutoring candidates, such as enthusiasm, good listening and facilitation skills, ability to ask good questions, open body language and eye contact, etc. As the author sums up:

> That effective tutor training work is critical to the success of a Writing Center goes without saying. The art of such training, however, is where minds are stretched, skills are honed, and transformations take place, not only in those students a Writing Center serves, but in the tutors themselves. Effective tutor training truly makes the critical difference. (p. 5).

Error Analysis in Academic Writing

Error analysis becomes essential in academic writing teaching and learning practices as it carefully details the occurrence of mistakes within a specific population. Both students and professors can benefit from categorizing errors as this contributes to academic aims and outcomes being properly adjusted. The more writing errors can be identified the more recurrences can be prevented and the better written products can be obtained.

Sajid and Siddiqui (2015) and Sajid (2016) analyzed errors in postgraduate EFL writers' research papers from Pakistan and suggested what the causes, effects and solutions for such errors could be as their premise was that academic writing is an essential skill in higher-education settings and so it need to be more carefully studied. The evaluated categories were diction, poor expression, preposition, punctuation, redundancy, subject-verb agreement, singular/plural, unparalleled structures, word form, verb tense and others. The authors offered three main recommendations. First, error analysis helps students see explicitly the rules of the English language. Secondly, extensive reading should be assigned, so learners have a reference for certain genre-based terms, expressions and meaning of words. Lastly, writing should be guided from a content-based approach rather than writing for the sake of writing. In that way, students will not only enhance their interest for researching, but also increase the academic vocabulary and language required in their context.

Similar to these studies, Singh, Singh, Razak and Ravinthar (2017) focused their research on the most common grammatical errors made by ESL students in their written products as "errors are expected in the process of learning and it is very important to identify the cause behind their occurrence" (p. 25).

Although this case study delineated a general list of errors, it emphasized those whose recurrence was higher. In this case, subject-verb agreement, verb tense, noun, preposition, adjective, article, pronoun, adverbs and conjunctions were the nine most common issues founds in participants' samples. Authors concluded that by identifying these errors, teachers enhanced learners' outcomes as this helped them understand their weaknesses with more clarity and use their knowledge of errors more purposefully. They also suggested that through writing conferences writing instruction can be enhanced.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

As this project seeks to improve teaching and learning practices, an Action Research (AR) framework was adopted since it emphasizes a deliberate intervention to bring about changes (Burns, 2009). The study is based on a mixed-method approach for data collection; quantitatively, a one-to-five-point analytical rubric was used to measure students' progress in the production of academic texts and also to identify and characterize commonly made composition errors (see Appendix 1). In addition, qualitative data was collected through questionnaires where participants provided insights in relation to the strategies that fostered improvement of their writing skills during tutoring sessions, as well as the effect of these sessions in their compositional practices.

Context and Participants

This study was carried out in the Academic Writing course from a Bilingual English Teaching Program at a state university in Colombia. This course's focus was recently modified to adopt a process-oriented stance and also to include ongoing tutoring sessions aimed at supporting students throughout the term in the composition of their written assignments (Marulanda & Martinez, 2017). 16 students were randomly selected and four of their written products were analyzed. There were several factors that were taken into account to ensure consistency in the outcomes: participants' class attendance, paper submission punctuality and tutoring sessions attendance. Tutoring sessions had an open availability so learners could book them anytime, and were provided by three students from advanced semesters previously trained in the theoretical foundations of peer assistance (Babcock & Thonus, 2012; Bruce & Rafoth, 2009; Hall, 2017). Once students had received feedback from the professor, they scheduled a 30-minute appointment with tutors to revise the first version of their written products and to discuss any doubts they had about them. After tutoring sessions, final versions of the written

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products previously assessed were submitted for a final grade.

Participants' age ranges between 18 and 25 years old, their first language is Spanish, and their English level oscillates between A2 and B1 according to both the Common European Framework of References for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) and an internal assessment check point administered in fifth semester of the program. They also show a limited background in academic writing and weak literacy skills in their native language, as it is the case of many undergraduate students in Colombia (Gómez, 2011).

Data Collection

Being a mixed-methods study, both quantitative and qualitative tools were used to gather information from participants: an analytical rubric for sample assessment and a questionnaire to gather participants' perceptions about the tutoring process. Each of the 16 students had to write a first and final version of four different academic texts (i.e. descriptive, reflective, expository and argumentative). Both versions were assessed using a five-point analytical rubric comprising the following writing features: Discourse, organization, syntax, conventions and vocabulary, as previously implemented by Marulanda and Martinez (2017). This rubric allowed the professor and tutors to identify structural and form irregularities in each of the written products, making the grading process more reliable, and therefore, enabling the collection of errors with more specificity. Furthermore, qualitative data was obtained through a questionnaire comprising Likert-scale and open questions where participants assessed the impact and effectiveness of the academic writing course and the support received through tutoring sessions.

RESULTS

Results obtained through the data analysis will be presented to illustrate the three components of this research goal. First of all, the comparison of students' performance on the pre and post written products is shown in Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4. Secondly, identification of error patterns based on students' products is presented as a way of raising awareness of certain areas that warrant attention in terms of instruction and assessment. And as a wrap-up, students' attitudes regarding the Writing Process approach and their participation in tutoring sessions are synthesized around four main themes.

Improvement in written products

Table 1. Descriptive essays scores

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16
Pre	3,4	2,8	3,8	2,8	3,8	4,0	3,2	4,0	3,8	3,0	3,8	3,6	3,0	3,4	3,4	3,6
Post	4,0	3,6	4,4	4,4	4,6	4,6	4,2	4,8	4,4	4,4	3,8	4,0	4,4	4,0	4,2	4,0

As seen in Table 1, students' descriptive samples improved their grades by 0,8 units in average. Considerable gains were obtained by several students such as S2, S4, S10 and S13, whose initial versions of their essays got scores of 3,0 or below, and who later received scores that oscillated between 3,6 and 4,4 in their final versions.

Table 2. Reflective essays scores

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16
Pre	3,0	3,0	3,4	2,4	3,4	3,6	3,2	4,0	4,2	3,8	4,6	4,0	4,6	4,0	4,4	4,4
Post	3,8	4,0	4,2	4,2	4,6	4,6	4,4	4,2	4,8	4,8	4,8	4,8	4,8	4,8	5,0	5,0

In spite of the degree of difficulty of this type of essay, it is impressive to see the improvement made by students whose scores went from 2,4 and 3,2 (initial versions) to and 4,2 to 4,4 to (final versions). Indeed, a significant number of students displayed wide range of gains in their scores as in the case of S2, S5 and S10 (see Table 2). In average, students' reflective essays improved by 0,8 units.

Table 3. Argumentative essay scores

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16
Pre	3,8	3,4	3,8	3,6	3,8	4,4	2,8	4,0	3,2	2,6	4,4	3,8	3,8	3,6	2,6	3,0
Post	3,4	4,2	4,6	4,8	4,8	4,6	4,2	4,4	4,2	4,4	4,6	4,8	4,8	4,2	4,0	4,8

Students' performance on argumentative essays represented not only the greatest degree of improvement in comparison to other genres, but also in individual scores. On average, students improved by almost a unit. There were

students whose scores went up from 3,0 or below to 4,8. Particularly, gains of 1,2 were seen in the cases of S7, S10, S15 and S16 (see Table 3).

Table 4. Expository essay scores

	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14	S15	S16
Pre	3,6	4,0	3,6	3,8	3,4	5,0	4,8	4,2	3,4	4,0	5,0	3,8	3,8	3,8	4,0	3,0
Post	4,6	4,4	4,4	5,0	4,8	5,0	5,0	5,0	4,8	4,6	5,0	4,6	4,8	4,6	4,6	4,8

Exceptional improvement in students' performance was seen in the development of expository essays. As illustrated in Table 4, there were students whose gains in scores ranged from 1,4 to 1,8, specifically, it is worth highlighting the final results obtained by S4, S5, S9 and S16. As average, the overall grade improvement was 0,9 in this task.

Significance of improvement in written products

To check the significance of the data obtained, that is, to ensure whether systematized assistance had a predominant role in students' compositional skills, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was run on the scores of the initial and final written samples that were collected. Setting a level of confidence of 95% (α=0.05), the results of this analysis show that the p-value in each of the different written products was lower than the level of significance that was set (see Table 5), corroborating the statistical relevance of the data as well as the effect that feedback and tutoring sessions had on students' writing abilities.

Table 5. ANOVA Analysis of Written Samples (α = 0.05)

Written Sample	Probability (p)
Descriptive	1,36772E-06
Reflective	0,000158533
Argumentative	1,34734E-05
Expository	1,07135E-05

Error analysis

From the sixteen written samples that were analyzed, 941 errors were identified before systematized assistance. After ongoing support was provided, written samples' errors decreased by 66% (319).

Four academic writing genres were studied in the project as seen in Tables 6 and 7. As the academic term started, 274 errors were identified in the descriptive samples. By the end of the semester, the total number of errors decreased to 115, representing 58% improvement in this genre. Regarding reflective samples, errors went from 196 to 52, illustrating a 73% rate of positive change. Argumentative essays developed by 65% as evidenced in the reduction of errors (from 287 to 99). Finally, 183 errors were identified in expository products before assistance, which decreased by 71% (53 errors) once support was provided.

Table 6. Number of errors before tutoring

	Discourse	Organization	Syntax	Conventions	Vocabulary	Total
Descriptive	20	1	63	90	97	274
Reflective	3	1	39	76	77	196
Argumentative	3	5	73	108	98	287
Expository	9	1	48	66	60	184

Table 7. Number of errors after tutoring

	Discourse	Organization	Syntax	Conventions	Vocabulary	Total
Descriptive	21	1	29	28	26	115
Reflective	2	1	16	17	16	52
Argumentative	1	0	25	36	37	99
Expository	2	0	13	22	16	53

There were five writing features analyzed in each of the written products. Starting with discourse, 35 errors were found prior to tutoring, decreasing by 26% at the end of the study. In regard to organization, 75% of errors decreased after assistance. In terms of syntactic errors, a reduction of 63% was evidenced, as errors went from 223 to 83. Furthermore, writing features comprising language

conventions (e.g. grammar, punctuation, spelling) showed a betterment of 70%, with errors decreasing from 340 to 103. Lastly, vocabulary errors occurrences went from 332 to 95, revealing a 71% increment of correct vocabulary usage.

Error analysis indicates that through instruction, systematized feedback and ongoing support, students' written products can improve significantly as there is a better understanding of writing as a cyclical and iterative process; a higher awareness of the different academic genres and their demands; and an increased metalinguistic awareness that is reflected at the level of paragraphs, sentences and words.

Student Questionnaires

The 16 participants answered a 19-point questionnaire (see Appendix 2) regarding perceptions about the systematized assistance protocol with questions related to their opinions on the Process Approach usefulness, skills they improved the most at, and the impact of tutoring sessions on their compositional skills.

Usefulness of the Process Approach

Students' perception on the impact of using the Process Approach was high as they reported improvements in their written texts in terms of organization and coherence. As a matter of fact, 9 students reported using the Process Approach frequently, pointing out that brainstorming and drafting where the most common steps followed when embarking on writing tasks.

Errors and skills improvement

In terms of writing skills improvement, metalinguistic awareness was considered the most important aspect. Indeed, participants considered that errors in syntax, grammar and punctuation decreased significantly due to professor's feedback and tutoring sessions, which made students more cautious in sentence and paragraph construction. In fact, 11 students considered that their writing skills improved 'very much' according to a scale that ranged from 'hardly' to 'a lot'.

Professor's feedback and tutoring benefits

On a scale ranging from 'hardly' to 'absolutely', 11 participants considered that professor's feedback was absolutely crucial to the betterment of compositional skills. In addition, eight students considered tutoring sessions to be 'very important' on a scale that went from 'least important' to 'most important', as evidenced by the frequency of students' attending tutoring sessions, from which 11 reported going 'always'. Seven students considered that their metalinguistic

awareness as well as their knowledge of compositional steps improved throughout tutoring.

Recommendations on instruction and tutoring

In regard to the Academic Writing course syllabus, a number of students suggested incorporating more writing exercises and improving the quality of instructional support. Furthermore, tutoring sessions should be longer and more frequent. Students also recommended that more writing practice and better instruction should occur in other courses in the program in order for positive transfer of academic writing skills to take place.

DISCUSSION

It is important to state that up to this date, the literature addressing academic writing centers supporting the composition of texts in L2 has documented ESL contexts predominantly. Furthermore, after thorough perusal, it is not evident that initiatives similar to the one exposed in this article had been previously studied in Colombia or Latin America. Thus, establishing a relevant comparison that acknowledges similar L1, demographic and cultural factors as well as educational levels was not possible.

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Nevertheless, considering the theoretical implications unfolded at the beginning of this document, results reveal the effectiveness of process-based, student-centered, and tutor-supportive approaches to write academically. Not only are the quantitative results poignant in the sense that writing features improved and errors diminished, but also, qualitative data indicates the reach that such a systematized protocol can have, particularly at higher education settings, according to students' answers in relation to its usefulness.

Drawbacks and limitations were also identified in this study. Firstly, the population involved was unstable in terms of work submission punctuality and constancy throughout the study as some participants dropped out and had to be replaced. This affected data analysis, which was postponed until all samples were collected. Furthermore, some participants missed tutoring sessions and had to reschedule them, which delayed one process overlapping with others. A final aspect worth looking for is the way the information is categorized considering that both pre and post samples had to be collected and analyzed. This implied making sure participants kept their samples and hand them in.

CONCLUSIONS

From the data obtained and analyzed, it is apparent that ELLs' academic writing skills benefited significantly from having a systematized assistance protocol that supports them throughout the process of composing writing tasks.

Not only did students show overall improvement in their writing samples according to analytical rubrics averaging five different writing features (average score increase of 0.8), but also, based on error characterization in initial and final written products (reduction of up to 73% of errors). Lower p-values in the ANOVA analysis offer compelling confidence regarding the impact of professor's feedback and tutoring sessions on students' tasks across all genres; furthermore, students' responses on a questionnaire triangulate the reliability of quantitative results.

In terms of overall improvement, argumentative samples had the highest score increment in final versions as indicated by one-unit increments. This could be explained by the extensive practice that took place around this genre throughout the term as this type of writing is not only demanding due to its structure but also because of the persuasive skills that it entails.

As reflected from error reduction, the writing genre that improved the most after students received systematized assistance was the expository type. This genre poses significant challenges for students as they are required to have a very specific vocabulary range. Although writing features such as vocabulary and conventions showed significant improvements after tutoring sessions, they represent areas that warrant special attention and further instructional support as their error occurrence was higher than the rest.

Noteworthy is the fact that organizational features in students' essays had a minimum number of errors in pre and post versions submitted, which attests to the effectiveness of discourse instructional strategies used along the academic term. However, the gains obtained at the end of this project highlight the significance of having a strategically designed assistance protocol giving the complexity of academic writing assignments at the university level.

Students' answers to the questionnaire disclosed a number of important issues related to course design, instructional support and the tutoring process design. It is clear students feel that the academic writing course should include more opportunities for them to practice writing under rigorous standards and clear guidelines, better one-on-one instructor-student support, and more frequent tutoring sessions.

Based on the quantitative and qualitative data analysis, one can hypothesize that long-term substantial gains in students' academic writing competencies across the curriculum could be obtained if such systematized assistance protocol is institutionalized as an academic writing assistance center. Hence, it is

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recommended that in order to ensure transferability of academic writing skills, systematized support should be extended beyond the Academic Writing course to students' enrolled in different courses of the English Bilingual Teacher Preparation Program.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix 1 – Analytical Rubric

Feature	Pre	Errors	Post	Errors
Discourse: · Identifies and addresses content, purpose of writing, and target audience				
Organization: · Organizes ideas into paragraphs · Paragraphs are coherent · Uses transition words to link ideas				
Syntax/Structure: · Forms simple, complex and compound sentences cohesively · Links sentences using conjunctions, adverbs and transition words				
Conventions: · Spelling, grammar and punctuation are used correctly most of the time				
Vocabulary: · Lexical items related to the text's content are used · Word usage is appropriate for the writing task				
	Total:		Total:	

Appendix 2 – Student Questionnaire

1. Which of the next steps of the Writing Process Approach do you always follow when writing?

A.   Browsing for themes
B.   Brainstorming
C.   Outlining
D.   Drafting
E.   Editing

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2. How often do you follow the Writing Process Approach to complete a written assignment?

A.   Always
B.   Frequently
C.   Sometimes
D.   Seldom

3. How has the Process Approach changed the way you write?

4. How much do you think your writing skills have improved?

A.   A lot
B.   Very Much
C.   A Little
D.   Hardly

5. How? Why?

6. Which strategies do you consider are more appropriate to enhance students' writing skills?

7. How could the Academic Writing course better support students in their writing development?

1.   How useful was the corrective feedback given by the professor?
A.   Absolutely
B.   Very
C.   A Little
D.   Hardly

8. What errors in writing have you overcome as a result of professor's feedback?

9. How crucial do you consider professor's corrective feedback in your writing process?

A.   Absolutely
B.   Very
C.   A Little
D.   Hardly

10. How did the Professor's feedback help you in your writing tasks' development?

11. How do you think tutoring sessions can increase their effectiveness?

12. In what ways did your writing skills benefit from tutoring sessions?

13. How often did you attend tutoring sessions?

A. Always
B. Frequently
C. Sometimes
D. Seldom

14. How did you perceive the tutoring sessions you attended?
15. How do you rate the effectiveness of peer-review?

A. Very high
B. High
C. Low
D. Very Low

16. Rate in order of importance the elements involved in the the revision process (5: most important, 1: least)

( ) Analysis of professor's feedback (Error identification)

- Discussions with the tutors
- Editing
- Re publishing

17. What were the errors you most frequently made in your written assignments?

- Syntax (sentence structure, word order)
- Discourse (addressing the audience based on genre)
- Organization (sentence and paragraph distribution)
- Vocabulary (word choice and register)
- L1 Interference (wordiness, false cognates, calques)
- Conventions (punctuation, grammar, spelling)

18. What strategies could be implemented in other courses to ensure that the writing competences you developed in the Academic Writing Course are transferred successfully?