

An Interventive Collaborative Scaffolded Approach with a Writing Center on ESL Students' Academic Writing

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ABSTRACT

The expected transition in higher education from students' school-level assignments to university-level assignments provides challenges and development prospects for students and the academic world. Academic support programs have been introduced in South African higher universities to assist under-prepared university students to benefit from lectures, writing centers, and tutorials. However, the problem of poor academic writing by university students persists. The study aimed to examine students' academic writing difficulties. English Second Language (ESL) students' university-level writing experience, and the impact of a collaborative approach between a lecturer and a South African university writing center, to support ESL students with their academic writing, was explored. The study used the Scaffolding theory as a lens. The mixed methods approach was used, with data collected in three phases, comprising a pretest, posttest, and questionnaire. A sample of 216 first-year Senior Phase and FET students were chosen. Findings revealed that ESL students experienced challenges in academic writing skills such as structure, organization, coherence, table of contents, paraphrasing, referencing, and in-text citations. The collaborative intervention between a lecturer and the writing center assisted students to progress in their academic writing. The paper recommends exploring more collaborative strategies between lecturers and writing centers, to optimally support students.

KEYWORDS

Scaffolded; collaborative; academic writing; English second language; writing center

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

In 2014 the South African Council on Higher Education sought to increase previously disadvantaged students' access to higher education, in what has popularly become known as the massification of higher education. Massification meant less prepared students' transition from school-level assignment writing to university-level assignment writing caused challenges but also gave developmental prospects. In its attempt to increase access to higher education by previously disadvantaged students, the Council on Higher Education (2014) indicated that academic support programs should be introduced in South African higher education institutions such as universities, to assist underprepared students to benefit from lectures, writing centers, and tutorials.

Globally, scholars agree that one of the most critical skills for ESL students upon entering university is academic writing (Bulqiyah et al., 2021; Jabali, 2018; Solikhah et al., 2022; Toba et al., 2019). However, literature attests that academic writing skills are, and have been, problematic in several different contexts worldwide, with students experiencing writing difficulties involving several aspects and in various domains such as: 'structure', 'grammar', 'mechanics', and 'vocabulary'. (Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Sabarun, 2019; Toba et al., 2019; Kotamjani & Hussin, 2017; Altinmakas & Bayyurt, 2019; Mahmood, 2020). This is evident in studies conducted by Bulqiyah et al. (2021) in Indonesia, and Ajani and Gamede (2020) in South Africa. The two studies from both international and local contexts found that ESL students experienced difficulties in essay/ assignment writing.

Lea and Street (2006) have long lamented that academic writing challenges mostly affect students coming from linguistic minority community backgrounds. Both earlier and extant literature agree that high school students are not prepared for the transition into university. The ESL students from rural schools find the transition to university even more difficult in terms of higher reading and writing skills required (Lea & Street, 2006, Pineteh, 2014; van Dyk & Weideman, 2004). The transition becomes challenging for students as their writing must suddenly undergo an evolution process in academic writing. As much as it is acceptable to "use colloquial expressions, abbreviations and time buying expressions such as 'that's cool', 'by the way', 'mmm...it's all right' but in the academic writing context, respect to punctuation rules, grammar, and other conventions take center stage" (Hanafi, 2020, p. 133). The study focus is basically on academic essay writing in which students must analyze given topics based on literature sources to strengthen their arguments and create interest in the reader, whether fellow students or scholars at large.

Higher education institutions expect students to quickly acclimatize to the rigours of academic writing through the various discourses of disciplines offered. The belief is that students will acquire this prospective skill as they navigate the various systems within the universities. It is expected that students would have been developed at the high school level on how to write essays properly. However, Arifin (2018) indicates that most teachers often

overlook this skill for many reasons, with the emphasis being on the result rather than the process.

Academic writing skills are challenging to acquire, and as such, require support structures such as various collaborative strategies between students, between students and writing centers, between lecturers and students, and between lecturers and the writing centers. Positive effects of collaborative strategies on students' achievement in writing academic descriptive texts have been reported as playing a significant role (Jacobs, 2010; Harlena et al., 2020). Collaborative strategies, like "a joint production of a text by two or more writers" (Storch, 2011, p. 275), are believed to develop students to be independent writers through skills such as self-editing and revising their writing more effectively than when working alone (Anwar, 2018; Rollison, 2005). Within these establishments, the project of a collaborative scaffolded approach between a lecturer and a university Writing Center emerged as an intervention to assist first-year Senior and Further Education Training (Sen & FET) students in developing academic writing skills.

The objective of the Study

The study's objective was to explore academic writing difficulties ESL students experienced at the university level, and the impact thereof, of a collaborative approach between a lecturer and a South African university's Writing Center as an intercession to support ESL students with their academic writing.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study used as its lens the zone of proximal development (ZPD) theory and the scaffolding concept by Vygotsky (1978) in his sociocultural theory. According to Vygotsky (1978, p. 86), ZPD refers to "the distance between the developmental level determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." The ZPD serves as a dipstick that determines and assesses the level at which a student can solve a problem independently, and the next level at which a student can attain it under the guidance of a capable adult or a more experienced person. The ZPD promotes the provision of support to students and collaboratively assists them to attain their full potential and self-efficacy. As specified by Margolis (2020, p. 17), "The various explanations of the concept of the ZPD addressed boil down to a simplified view of the ZPD as a special type of assistance provided by a teacher to a pupil to help solve tasks that the child cannot solve on his or her own." Most importantly, the ZPD identifies that individuals learn at their optimum level when there is assistance from others through collaborative activities, with more skilled persons contributing to students' learning at their best, processing new concepts or skills (Shabani et al., 2010). Scaffolding is any form of assistance that is given to students to enable them to understand concepts (Al Mumun et al., 2020). This can include guidance on experimental investigations, provision of resources, explanations, and many other forms of guidance.

These two concepts are blended in this study as they complement each other when explaining collaborative strategies to assist students in reaching their full potential. Collaborative interventions focus on providing evidence for the “maturing psychological functions” of a student. The assumption is that students can afford to make use of the interventive collaboration “because the maturing function supports an ability to understand the significance of the support being offered” (Shabani et al., 2010, p. 239; Chaiklin, 2003).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper employed mixed-methods research to explore students’ writing challenges, their effect, and how a Writing Center-based scaffolding approach intervention would help alleviate the students’ challenges. In mixed methods research, quantitative and qualitative data are gathered, analyzed, and combined for either a single study or a series of studies (Bulsara, 2015). The premise of this research approach is the understanding that combining quantitative and qualitative approaches allows for a complete understanding of the problem being investigated, other than using either approach alone (Creswell, 2014). The data were collected qualitatively to establish the challenges students experienced with academic essay writing. It was complemented by quantitative data in the form of collected students’ scores. A pragmatic research paradigm was employed. A researcher can use a pluralistic strategy for data collection to best answer the study objectives by adopting a pragmatic stance. The paper is part of a longitudinal project designed to assist first-year Teaching Practice module students enrolled in the Sen & FET phase level. The project was a collaboration between the lecturer and the university Writing Center. The Writing Center was established to assist students with academic writing for the various assessments they are expected to submit. The students wrote an essay assignment that was assessed. During her class session, the lecturer invited the Writing Center to hold a workshop for the students on how it operates. After the class, the students submitted their first draft for marking. The lecturer sent the students to the Writing Center for assistance with the second and final draft.

To strengthen the methodology of the study the “Analysis, Design, Development, Implementation, and Evaluation (ADDIE) model” was also employed as a framework (Hess and Greer, 2016, p. 11; Branch, 2009). As noted by Hess and Greer (2016), the ADDIE model was developed by ID scholars to create effective learning interactions. These frameworks include “Merrill’s (2002) first principles of instruction, Dick and Carey’s (1985) systems approach model, and Kirkpatrick’s (1994) evaluation model” (Hess and Greer, 2016, p. 5). Although the ADDIE Instructional Design Framework is the most popular, these and other frameworks provide practitioners who want to systematically design and assess learning extensive requirements. Five steps were blended with the methodology sections of the research. The stages as presented by Branch (2009) are outlined below, but their incorporation is explained in the data collection instruments.

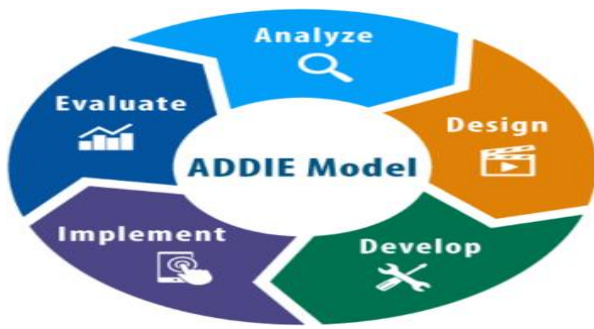


Figure 1. *The ADDIE Model*

- “Analyzing a learning situation.” (p. 11)
- “Designing objectives and principles to address the issues in the learning situation” (p. 11)
- “Developing resources to meet these specifications” (p. 11)
- “Implementing the learning resources in the learning situation” (p. 11) and
- “Evaluating how these resources addressed instructional needs” (Hess and Greer, 2016, p. 11; Branch, 2009).

Participants and Study Setting

The study used a sample of 216 Sen & FET students enrolled for the Teaching Practice 1 module in 2022 under the Bachelor of Education Degree (B.Ed.) program and seven markers. In purposive sampling, a specified group of people is selected to participate in a study (Mc Combes, 2019), and the researcher deliberately chooses where and from whom to get data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2020) according to the requirements of the study. The 216 participants comprised 133 male and 83 female students.

However, not all the students followed the instruction of consulting the writing center for assistance because of various reasons. Some booked but were late as the due date had already passed, resulting in a limited number of students attending the writing center sessions. The Sen & FET students are students trained to teach at the secondary school level. The rationale for choosing participants in this phase was the belief that academic writing skills start at the secondary school level within the school system. The markers were employed as adhoc markers in the university. Five of them were employed by the university’s Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) while two were employed as junior lecturers in the Faculty of Education. The markers were given pseudonyms of Marker 1, Marker 2, Marker 3, Marker 4, Marker 5, Marker 6, and Marker 7. The sampled students were enrolled at one South African university, on a campus categorized as a rural campus. The campus is considered rural as most students accepted and enrolled come from quintile 1 and 2 secondary schools (*Figure 2*). The quintile system is a South African school ranking system that categorizes schools according to their poverty status, from poor to poorest (Dieltiens & Motala, 2014). Quintiles 1 to 3 are categorized as poor schools while quintiles 4 and 5 schools are not categorized as poor in this school ranking system.

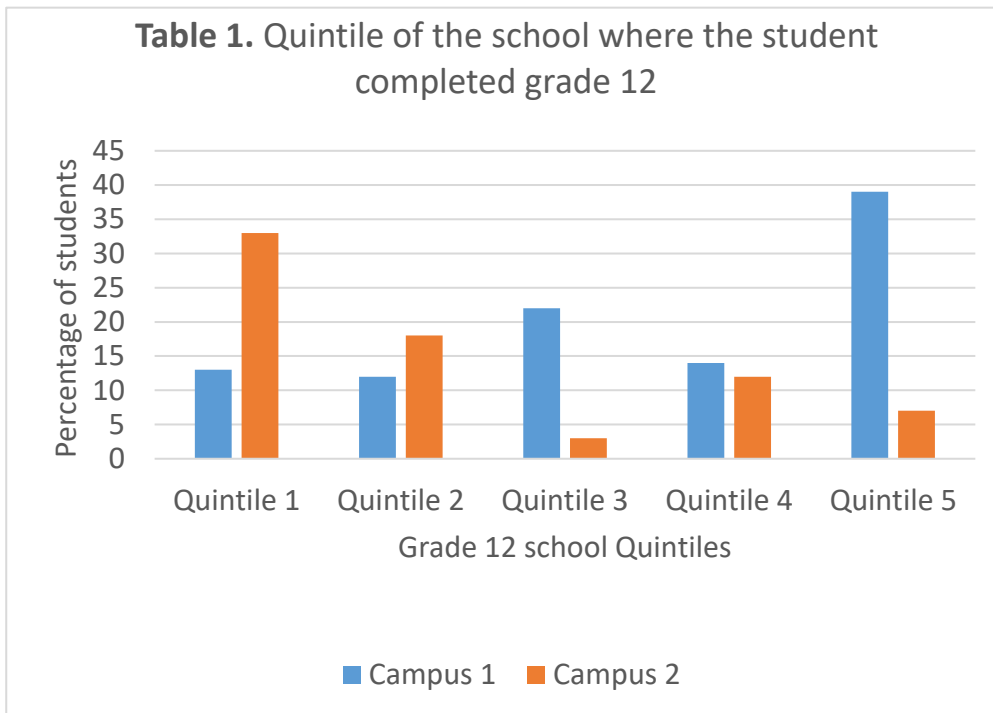


Figure 2: Demographic results of the study settings

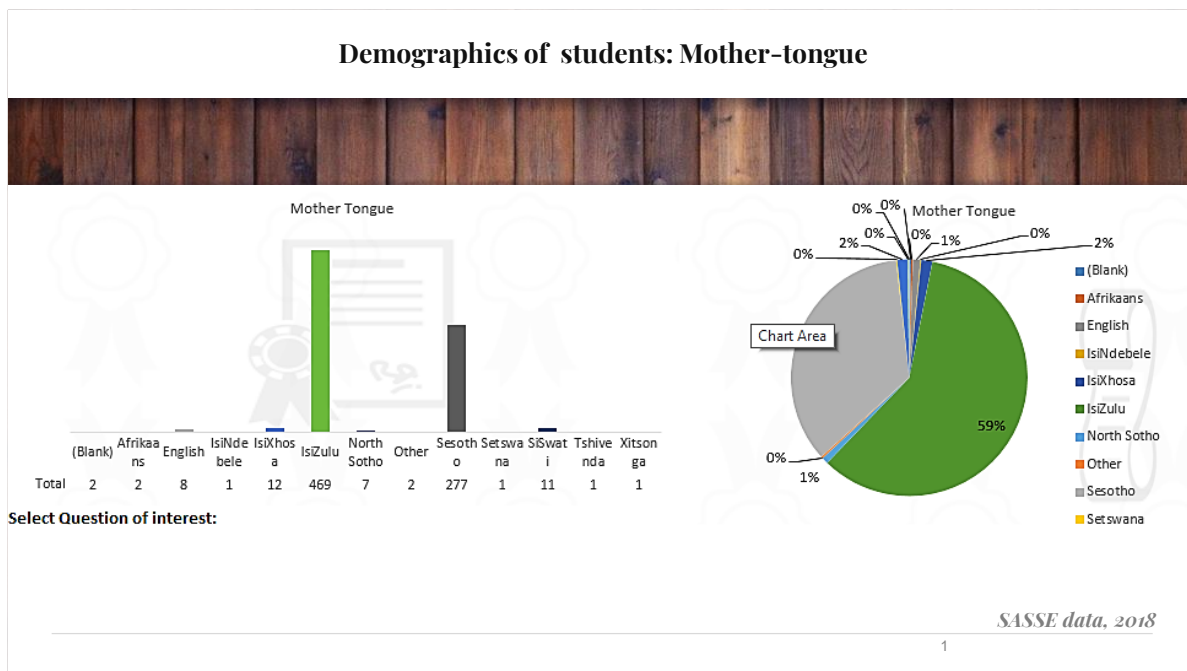


Figure 3. Demographic results of the students’ mother-tongue

Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

For this study, data were collected in three phases using a pretest, marker’s comments, and a posttest. The pretest was designed in the form of an essay assignment in a Teaching Practice module, and students submitted their first draft which they produced without the assistance of

the writing center A rubric for marking was designed to mark the students' essay assignments, looking at various language conventions. The markers provided comments to the students on how they performed in their assessment, for both the pretest and the posttest. For the posttest, the students were required to go back and review their first draft with the Writing Center and rewrite the essay assignment with the assistance of the writing center. The assessment for the posttest was the same assignment given in the pretest and was marked using the same rubric. The three phases were aligned with the analysis, design, development, and implementation stages in the ADDIE model. The lecturer and the seven markers marked the students' work and allocated grades. They also provided comments on the students' work and compiled summaries of the various strengths and weaknesses (challenges) students' essays showed according to the specified language conventions. After the first submission, students were asked to go with their first draft and the rubric to the writing center for assistance prior to their final submission.

For the quantitative part of the study, students were allocated into groups namely – the control and the experimental group. The control group did not get guidance from the students' writing assistance site, while the experimental group was assisted in different ways to improve comprehension, writing, and presentation style. Both groups had to write initially, and the work was assessed. The marks for both the control group and the experimental group were compared. The experimental group then went for consultations for a semester and submitted their assignment. The control group wrote a similar essay assignment without any consultations from the students' writing assistance site. The pretest and posttest results were compared through the paired sample t-test. To compare the two groups before and after the intervention, the independent sample t-test was applied.

Data analysis

To analyze the qualitative data, the study adopted qualitative content analysis. According to Luo (2019), qualitative content analysis is gathering information in written, spoken, or visual form to discover the purpose of the intended study. In qualitative content analysis, data is based on written human language categorized into different phrases, images, or words (Reis & Kowalczyk, 2021). Roller (2019) defines qualitative content analysis as an orderly process in which the researcher reduces content and analyzes it by extracting meaningful concepts that are relevant to the data generated. Quantitative data were examined using the Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS), to produce informative and inferential statistics. The SPSS version 27 was used to compare and compute the paired sample as well as the independent sample t-tests, to generate the relevant data needed for comparison and conclusions.

Ethical Considerations

Self (2014) suggests that for research to be credible, the researcher needs to evaluate any potential harm and risk involved to safeguard the dignity, confidentiality, and identity of the participants. The study obtained ethical clearance from the university where the study was conducted. The gatekeeper's approval permitted students to be participants in the study. The participants' identities were protected, and pseudonyms were used to protect their identities

(Creswell, 2020). Participants were consulted and consented to the data being used for publication. All participants were informed that they could withdraw from participating in this study at any time (Clark-Kazak, 2017) and that there were no penalties for any student who did not consult with the Writing Center.

FINDINGS

Qualitative Findings: Markers' Comments

Assignment content

The findings indicated that students experienced challenges with comprehending the content of the topic given on the essay assignment. The markers concurred that some students' discussions related to the topic, but the information was scant and not discussed in-depth. The participants shared the following:

Most students had the correct content, but more information could have been given. (Marker 1).

Several essays presented content that is not in any way related to the content, especially on professionalism. The students were unable to connect professionalism with teaching; especially the concept of professionalism within the education/teacher space. (Marker 2)

They need to improve on conceptualizing the content and know more about how to write an academic essay, the reason why some got below 10 marks. (Marker 3)

Responding to the essay question: Some students did not or failed to respond to the essay/assignment question. Their responses did not reflect a level of understanding, Not fully answering the question: Some responded to the first half of the question neglecting the second part or vice versa. (Marker 7)

The students' assignment on the content required showed a lack of mastery of the skill of writing in relation to the question, leading to students lacking the conceptualization of the concept.

Organization of the assignment

The findings showed that the students faced challenges with organizing their assignments academically. The participants shared that many students lacked proper alignment in their essay assignments. One of the participants had the following to say:

The introduction lacked a roadmap, and it mainly was the definition of the words. Some were using bullet points instead of paragraphs. Students need to learn to use subheadings and the number of sentences needed per paragraph. Some had a reasonable conclusion. Others continued and raised new points in the conclusion. (Marker 6)

The other participants shared the following:

They (students) do not know how to create a manual table of contents through word and some of them do not know how to structure an academic paragraph. There are students who did not follow the instructions thoroughly (Marker 5)

Secondly, the students performed poorly when it comes to the structuring of the essay. There were several essays that did not have an introduction and a conclusion. For those that had

an introduction and conclusion, critical elements such as the road map, the brief conceptualization of both professionalism and professional teacher identity were missing, and the thesis statement (the introduction) and summary of main ideas and rephrasing of the thesis statement (the conclusion). (Marker 4)

Language and mechanics

Among the challenges noted, the study indicated that students experienced challenges with maintaining coherence in the essay assignment. The participants alleged that the students did not proofread their work as many struggled with editorial and grammatical errors. The following statements from the markers illustrate this:

Proofreading and editing are needed to ensure an easy and coherent flow of ideas (Marker 7)

Furthermore, the students still lack the ability to provide a sound and coherent argumentation in their essays; there is no flow of ideas, the student's voices, and perspectives (are mostly missing), and their ideas are not supported by academic literature. In addition, the essays had several structural, language, and grammatical errors. (Marker 4)

Coherence also seemed to be a problem (Marker 3)

The markers' dissatisfaction with students' inability to argue and ensure meaningful discussions backed by literature in their essay assignment, as well as their lack of proofreading of their work, indicated unprofessional and non-academic work.

In-text referencing and referencing list

The participants complained that the students did not know how to reference using the Harvard style, both in-text and in a reference list. They could not paraphrase and had high similarity indices as they just copied and pasted. The participants further lamented that the students seemed to use Google paraphrasing tools, which removed the meaning from their discussions. The participants had the following to share:

This student needs to improve on in-text referencing and know how to compile reference lists according to the Harvard style of referencing. Some just copied links to their reference list which does not follow the academic style of referencing. Some just copied and pasted without paraphrasing the essay which contributed to the higher plagiarism percentage recorded in the assignment (Marker 1)

High plagiarism due to poor paraphrasing skills and such students were advised to visit the writing site for proper tutelage. Most of the learners could not adhere to the prescribed referencing style and more so some of them don't know how to use in-text citations. Some had a high similarity percentage due to complete copying and pasting of another student's assignment. (Marker 2)

Still, on the information, most of it was not referenced. Or if referenced, it was not done correctly. One could not tell if the reference was a direct quotation or a paraphrased one. Also, a lot of students had a bibliography without in-text references. Which means there is still a lot of work to do when it comes to referencing. (Marker 3)

Students still struggle with how to reference using Harvard style and, another critical issue noted is that some appear to have used paraphrasing tools sites, which in the end made their work incomprehensible. (Marker 4)

Most students neglected or did not create in-text referencing. They do not understand the concept that a reference list consists of because of in-text referencing. The reference list was poorly written with numbering and bullets included (Marker 7)

The marker's comments showed that the students lacked proper skills in writing essay texts in the expected academic format and as such, suggested that students need to develop such skills. High plagiarism was one factor that the markers highlighted, as students copied other writers' work without acknowledging them.

Quantitative Findings: Experimental and Control groups' pre and final drafts assignment scores

The quantitative data was collected from scores students received when the first and final drafts of the essay assignments were marked for both the experimental and control group. The markers marked the students' first draft and allocated scores. After the first draft scores were published on the students' page and the students were instructed to visit the Writing Center for assistance. The experimental group then went for consultations and submitted their final draft assignment. The control group wrote a similar essay assignment without any consultations from the students' writing assistance site. The markers marked the final drafts from both the experimental and control groups and final scores were allocated. The control group did not get guidance from the students' writing assistance site, while the experimental group was assisted in different ways to improve comprehension, writing, and presentation style. The marks for both the control group and the experimental group from the first draft and the final draft were analyzed using SPSS version 27. The pretest and posttest results were compared through the paired sample t-test. To compare the two groups before and after the intervention, the independent sample t-test was applied. The tables below detail the analysis of the student's scores.

Table 1. *Mean and standard deviation of the experimental and control group before the intervention*

		N	Mean scores	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Group	Experimental	108	10.44	4.322	.415
	Control	108	11.44	4.315	.415

The mean scores are the average scores obtained by the students in the control and experimental groups on their essay assignments before the intervention.

Table 2. *Independent samples test the experimental and control groups before the intervention*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Significance	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper	
EXP 000 01	Equal variances assumed	.168	.683	-1.686	214	.047	-.990	.587	-2.149	.167	
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.689	213	.047	-.990	.587	-2.149	.167	

Levene's test for equality of variances revealed that the variances were homogenous for competence, $p > .05$ (Table 2). Hence, in conducting the test, equality of variance was assumed. The 108 participants who received writing intervention ($M = 10.44, SD = 4.322$) in comparison to the 108 participant students in the control group ($M = 11.44, SD = 4.315$), did not show a significant difference in scores before the intervention, $t(214) = -1.686, p = .09$ (Table 1 and Table 2). The two groups of students can, therefore, be assumed to be of similar ability.

Table 3. *Mean and standard deviation of the experimental group pre- and post-intervention*

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental group pre-intervention	10.44	108	4.322	.415
Experimental group post-intervention	13.88	108	2.824	.272

The mean scores as specified in Table 3 are the average assessment score for the experimental group on pre-and post-intervention. More detail on the mean scores and the deviations shown is given in the explanation of Table 4 below.

Table 4. Paired samples test for the experimental group pre- and post-intervention

Paired Differences					t	df	Significance	
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
			Lower	Upper				
-3.435	3.814	.367	-4.163	-2.708	-9.360	107	<.001	<.001

There was a significant improvement a month after the intervention by the writing center ($M = 13.88, SD = 2.824$) compared to the week before the writing center intervention ($M = 10.44, SD = 2.824$), $t(107) = -9.360, p < .001$ (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 5. Mean and standard deviation of the control group pre- and post-intervention

	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Control group initially	11.44	108	4.315	.415
Control group after a semester	11.22	108	3.826	.368

The mean scores as specified in Table 5 are the average assessment score for the control group on pre-and post-intervention. More detail on the mean scores and the deviations shown is given in the explanation of Table 6 below.

Table 6. Paired samples test for the control group pre- and post-intervention

Paired Differences					t	df	Significance	
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				One-Sided p	Two-Sided p
			Lower	Upper				
.21296	4.44499	.42772	-1.06087	.63494	.498	107	.310	.620

There was no significant effect of time for the 108 participants who did not receive the writing intervention in the initial stage ($M = 11.44, SD = 4.315$) and a month later ($M = 11.22, SD = 3.826$), $t(107) = 0.498, p = .62$ (Table 5 and 6).

Table 7. Mean and standard deviation of the experimental and control group after intervention

VAR00007	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Experimental group	108	13.88	2.824	.271
Control group	108	11.22	3.826	.368

Table 8. *Independent samples test the experimental and control group after the writing aid intervention*

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means				Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Significance	One-Sided p			Two-Sided p	Lower
Equal variances assumed	9.163	.003	5.807	214	<.001	<.001	2.657	.458	1.755	3.559
Equal variances not assumed			5.807	196.898	<.001	<.001	2.657	.458	1.754	3.559

Levene's test for equality of variances showed heterogeneity of variances for competence, $p < .05$ (Table 8). Hence, equality of variance was not assumed in the test. The 108 student participants in the experimental group ($M = 13.88$, $SD = 2.824$) compared to the 108 student participants in the control group ($M = 11.22$, $SD = 3.826$) exhibited scores that were significantly higher than their counterparts after the intervention, $t(214) = 5.807$, $p < .001$ (Table 7 and Table 8). The intervention had a significant effect on the scores of students who went for consultations at the writing center.

DISCUSSION

Most participants indicated that students experienced challenges with their academic writing, which ranged from language barriers such as a lack of comprehension of content to an inability to express themselves, resulting in a lack of in-depth discussions. Moreover, the participants' comments and the areas of development students are required to attain, such as referencing, the conceptualization of the essay, language, and mechanics; confirm that writing skills are critical, but remain a challenge for ESL students entering university (Bulqiyah et al., 2021; Altınmakas & Bayyurt, 2019; Mahmood, 2020). The participants' comments confirm what Hanafi (2020) notes, that academic writing requires respect for the various language conventions, and acceptable grammar structures, as colloquial phrases are unacceptable.

The study findings concur with several studies, which indicate that developing writing abilities for academic purposes is, and has been, a challenge for many different contexts around the world (see Ariyanti & Fitriana, 2017; Sabarun, 2019; Toba et al., 2019). Studies conducted by Bulqiyah et al. (2021) in Indonesia and Ajani and Gamede (2020) in South Africa further confirm the results of the investigation. As identified earlier by Lea and Street (2006), such challenges mostly affect students coming from linguistic minority community backgrounds, where English is taught as a second language. Both current and previous studies agree that students are ill-prepared to transition to university, and therefore, need significant assistance as they enter tertiary institutions, where the only medium of instruction is English (Lea & Street, 2006, Naidoo, 2015; Pineteh, 2014; Jabali, 2018; Toba et al., 2019). According to Naidoo (2015), instructional language development should begin early in high school to equip students with the required degree of language competency.

Further evidence for the need to get support was obtained from the quantitative data, where students who got assistance in writing skills were observed to perform better than their counterparts who did not get support in comprehension and writing skills. The results showed that there was a significant improvement between the students' initial drafts and their final drafts following the writing center's intervention. The results from the quantitative data collected concur with Jacobs' (2010) and Harlena et al.'s (2020) observation that, when there is a collaborative intervention to assist students with academic writing, positive effects are yielded. The student's performance was improved after the writing center's intervention. According to various scholars, collaborative strategies develop students' ability to be independent writers, as they acquire writing skills from collaboration and assistance from others (Anwar, 2018; Rollison, 2005). The collaborative strategy with the writing center, in which the student's ZPD is identified, and assistance provided using a scaffolding approach, yielded constructive outcomes for students' academic writing. This concurs with the notion that collaborative activities with more skilled persons contribute to students' learning and processing of new concepts or skills (Shabani et al., 2010). Furthermore, the scaffolding approach, through the provision of resources, explanations, and any other guidance given by the writing center, enabled students to understand concepts (Al Mumun et al., 2020) and the effects were visible in the quantitative results.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study established that ESL students experience challenges with academic writing skills when they enter higher education institutions. Collaborating with the students for enhancing their academic writing skills, is one of the important tools that can be used to assist students to navigate the academic writing requirements in higher education institutions. Therefore, it is recommended that more collaborative strategies be explored to enhance and ensure sustainability in students' academic writing skills.

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