

## THE EFFECT OF A DUAL INTERVENTION ON UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS: A CASE STUDY

**Astrid Isabel Díaz Donado** is a graduate of university of San Buenaventura Cartagena where she received her bachelor's degree in Education with an emphasis on English and French language teaching. In 2014, she completed her postgraduate one-year program in ELT at Fundación Universitaria Colombo Internacional, UNICOLOMBO. She currently works for the University of Cartagena in the Bachelor's program of Foreign Languages with emphasis on English and French. E-mail: astrid\_idd@hotmail.com.

**Jose Martín Patiño Niebles.** Bachelor of Science in Primary Education with an Emphasis in English, Colombo International University Foundation (Unicolombo). Student of the Graduate Certificate in English Language Teaching, Colombo International University Foundation (Unicolombo). Teacher, Colombian American Cultural Center of Cartagena.

Received: 11/26/2015 - Accepted: 04/27/2016

**Abstract:** Fifth semester students enrolled in the Bachelor in Education with an emphasis in English at a private university in Cartagena, Colombia, take content-based courses, among which is Second Language Acquisition II (SLA II). As part of the course, students are required to read academic papers for class debates as well as writing academic reflection papers. However, the experience of one of the teacher-researchers who participated in this study reveals that at the beginning of these courses, most of the students seem to lack the necessary academic reading and writing skills to complete the assignments properly. In response to this situation, we proposed a dual pedagogical intervention that included a 15-hour pre-semester course in academic writing and a subsequent academic writing course in **Moodle** (a free e-learning platform). This paper describes the effect of the former on the academic writing skills of 16 students in a SLA II class. Two surveys related to the effectiveness of the intervention were administered to them: one right after they attended the classroom-based course, and the other one after they submitted their final draft of their reflection papers. Then, their final versions of the papers were evaluated and compared to those written by another group. Findings suggest that the intervention helped to improve some aspects of academic writing. Further research is needed to explore alternative ways of tackling this issue.

**Keywords:** academic writing, writing skills, reflection papers, content-based instruction

**Resumen:** Los estudiantes de quinto semestre, matriculados en el programa de Licenciatura en Educación con énfasis en inglés en una universidad privada de Cartagena, Colombia, toman cursos basados en contenido, entre los cuales se encuentra el de Adquisición de Segundas Lenguas II (SLA II). Como parte del curso, los estudiantes deben leer documentos académicos para los debates en clase y redactar artículos de reflexión. Sin embargo, la experiencia de uno de los profesores-investigadores que participó en este estudio revela que, al iniciar estos cursos, la mayoría de los estudiantes parecen carecer de las habilidades de lectura y escritura académicas necesarias para completar las tareas correctamente. En respuesta a esta situación, hemos propuesto una intervención pedagógica dual que incluye un curso presemestral de escritura académica con una duración de 15 horas y un curso posterior de escritura académica en **Moodle** (una plataforma gratuita de aprendizaje electrónico). Este artículo describe el efecto del primero, en las habilidades de escritura académica, de 16 estudiantes en una clase SLA II. Dos encuestas relacionadas con la efectividad de la intervención fueron aplicadas a los estudiantes: la primera, una vez terminado el curso presencial y la segunda después de la entrega de los artículos de reflexión. Posteriormente, las versiones finales de los artículos fueron evaluadas y comparadas con los escritos por otro grupo no intervenidos. Los resultados sugieren que la intervención ayudó a mejorar algunos aspectos de la escritura académica de los estudiantes. Se requiere de más investigación para explorar otras alternativas que permitan abordar este asunto.

**Palabras clave:** estudiantes universitarios, escritura académica, habilidades de escritura, instrucción basada en contenidos

The Fundación Universitaria Colombo Internacional (Unicolombo) in Cartagena is a private institution founded in 2007 that seeks to the necessities of a globalized world in which bilingual professionals are required. The Bachelor in Education with an emphasis in English started the same year as a response to the low quality of foreign language education in the region and aims to contribute to the education of tomorrow's teachers, who shall improve English as a foreign language teaching practices.

There are many ways this new generation of teachers can contribute to that purpose, one of which is theorizing their practices by doing research. This would require improving their academic writing skills to be able to document their studies and proposals. However, writing in a foreign language is not an easy task. Nunan (1999), for example, points out that, "producing a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing is probably the most difficult thing there is to do in language. It is something most native speakers never master" (p. 271). Writing seems to be even harder when it comes to writing academic papers in a foreign language for content-based courses in undergraduate programs. First of all, it is important to mention that according to the Common European Framework (2011), the required level to understand and/or produce these kinds of texts is B2 as stated in the reading and writing can-do overall descriptor for that level:

Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation...Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options. (p. 24)

On logical grounds, there is no compelling reason to argue that writing academic papers in higher education demands specific skills, without which these papers would unlikely, meet the required standards. One of the main aspects that have been studied is the kind of grammar and/or register used by the students in their academic papers. Biber, Conrad, Reppen, Byrd and Hetten's (2002) comprehensive linguistic description of the range of spoken and written registers at U.S. universities shows that "spoken registers are fundamentally different from written ones in university contexts, regardless of purpose" (p.9). This element explains why it is difficult for university students to make the transition from a rather colloquial spoken English to a more formal academic genre.

One of the major challenges that students enrolled in the Bachelor in Education with an emphasis in English at Unicolombo have to face is the assignment of writing an academic reflection paper. In the fifth semester, they start to take content-based courses, among which is SLA II. However, some students seem to take this course without having the necessary skills to perform well in demanding tasks, which include reading academic papers critically, participating in class debates, and the required final assignment of writing a

reflection paper. Based on the experience had by one of the professors conducting this research and also teaching a SLA II course in the second semester of 2013, we consider that part of the problem that Unicolombo students have to deal with lies in the fact that it is not easy to cope with the nature of academic writing and it takes time to adapt to this new kind of genre.

Among similar lines, Nunan (1999) considers genre to be one of the main concepts in writing. He explains that "in written, as in spoken language, genres are typified by a particular structure and by grammatical forms that reflect the communicative purpose of the genre in question" (p.280). SLA II students not only have to be able to write an abstract that includes the key elements that will allow any reader to evaluate whether the paper suits his/her needs, but also have to reflect on various aspects of EFL teaching, thus they need to learn to build up arguments and support them with research data. And finally, they have to cite sources and write a list of references properly. About this last aspect, Schuemann (2008) proposes that teaching citation should not be someone else's job and adds that "students are done a disservice if attention to citation and appropriate alternatives to copy-and-paste *writing* are not addressed..." (p.19). She also provides a number of reasons for teaching citation in ESL classes, one of which is that "college students take many general education courses, and they need to hand in written work and give presentations in discipline-specific classes early on" (Schuemann, 2007, p.19).

To confirm the experience described above, an online survey was conducted at the end of a SLA II course. Although all the students (18) were required to answer the online questionnaire that was sent via e-mail, only 8 students did. The rest of them never replied to this request. The following tables present the results of the survey.

Table 1  
*Students' English level and academic writing skills before the SLA II course*

Students' English level prior to SLA course.	
A1	0
A2	0
B1	6
B2	2

Table 2  
*Students' academic writing skills before the SLA II course*

Students who acknowledged lack of academic skills.	
Completely agree	5
Partially agree	1
Partially disagree	2
Completely disagree	0

Table 1 and 2 display the results of the survey in terms of students' English level and their academic writing skills at the beginning of the SLA II course. Only 2 (25%) of the 8 students were within the B2 level of English competence, which is the lowest ideal level required to take the SLA II course. The second aspect that was taken into consideration was the students' perception of their own academic skills and their ability to perform well in the course. The question specifically asked them if they felt they lacked the skills to participate in class debates, read and write papers in the SLA II course. Six of the eight students (75%) thought that they did not have the necessary skills to comply with the academic requirements of the course. This information seems to reveal why the tasks assigned to the students throughout the course (during the second semester of 2013) represented a major challenge for them and why it was necessary for the teacher to spend important class time teaching aspects of academic writing so most students could complete the assignments.

Table 3  
*Papers students had read and written before the SLA II course*

Number of papers read by students before SLA II course		Number of papers written by students before SLA II course	
None	4	None	8
1-3	2	1-3	0
4-10	1	4-10	0
More than 10	1	More than 10	0

Table 3 shows the amount of academic papers each student had read and written before taking the SLA II course. Half of the students (4) who took the questionnaire had never read an

academic paper and only 1 out of 8 (12.5%) had read more than 10 papers, which probably illustrates why the students had trouble processing the information found in papers and the difficulties they went through when finding facts and data to support their arguments in reflection papers. Table 3 also shows that none of the students had written an academic paper before taking the SLA II course. In this question, such figure was expected since it would be natural for this student profile to have read at least a few papers but not necessarily to have written any. All this evidence suggests that writing academic papers could be the hardest task a professor can give students in content-based higher education courses.

Table 4  
*Major challenges students felt they had to face*

Challenges students had to face in the SLA course.	Frequency
Reading and understanding the structure of academic papers	4
<i>Expressing an opinion and supporting it with data and facts</i>	6
Searching for information online related to SLA	0
Writing the reflection paper	3
<i>Using APA style in in-text citation</i>	7
Writing the abstract for the reflection paper	3
Participating in class discussions and debates	2
Making oral presentations about SLA	2

In Table 4, students identified the biggest problem they had to face in the SLA course in the second semester of 2013. Students were allowed to choose up to four out of eight options. As the table shows, seven of the eight students (87.5%) identified using APA style in-text citation as a major challenge when writing an academic paper, followed by expressing an opinion and supporting it with data and facts which, with six students out of eight (75%) ranks as the second most frequent challenge. The two aspects mentioned above were emphasized in the pedagogical intervention, which included a 15-hour classroom-based course in academic writing and a subsequent month-long course in Moodle (a free e-learning platform). The two parts of the intervention were designed to be implemented out of the time allocated for a new SLAII course that would start on the

first semester of 2014. The classroom-based course took place a week before students started taking the SLA II classes in the fifth semester and the online course took place in tandem with the subject classes.

Two main approaches to teaching writing were considered in order to design the pedagogical intervention. Nunan (1999) acutely explains that “Product-oriented approaches focus on the final product, the coherent, error-free text. Process approaches, on the other hand, focus on the steps involved in drafting and redrafting a piece of work” (p.271). He warns, however, that “proponents of process writing recognize and accept the reality that there will never be the perfect text, but that one can get closer to perfection through producing, reflecting on, discussing, and reworking successive drafts of a text” (p.271). In order to give the pedagogical intervention a collaborative and humanistic essence, a process-oriented approach was implemented. Students were given the opportunity to write an outline of the paper, which represented the planning stage. The students were told not to worry too much on perfect writing at the beginning stage. Quantity was preferred over quality to give the researchers something to “work with”. In this stage, Nunan (1999) illustrates that “Writers are encouraged to get their ideas onto paper without worrying too much about formal correctness in the initial stages. They then share their work with others, getting feedback on their ideas and how they are expressed, before revising” (p. 272).

The popularity of the process approach has increased in our country. Ariza (2005) and Aldana (2005) are in favor of it and claim that “their students increased their motivation towards writing” and that students “obtained a higher level of proficiency in their composition skills” (p.52). Viáfara (2007) adds that “university professors in Colombia have incorporated innovative perspectives to encourage learners' writing in English” (p.77). López (as cited in Viáfara, 2007) considers that combining collaborative and process writing with hypertext design to instruct her pupils can raise students' motivation and skills for deeper expression of ideas.

## Method

A total of 46 students participated in the study. 18 of them (group 1) belonged to the 2013-II SLA-II, in which the problem was identified. 16 of them (**the main participants, group 2**) belonged to the 2014-I SLA II group in which the dual-strategy was implemented. The other 12 students (group 3) belonged to another SLA-II class in 2014-II. Their papers were compared to the papers the main participants wrote. The 18 students in group 1 and the 16 students in group 2 (main participants) are part of the CERES program. The students in group 3 are not part of the CERES program.

This study is a qualitative research that includes some of the phases of an action research. The main objective of this kind of investigation is to work out how an issue of a group of people or a course of study can be addressed (Patton, 1990). It is the

teacher, based on his/her own experience, the one who can provide the changes of curriculum by proposing possible solutions to the difficulties found in the classroom. By the same token, what results after reflection about their own teaching practice gives teachers more control over their career, and the opportunity for the creation of new theory, which constitutes an important source of professional development (Griffiee, 2012).

Seven areas of considerations are described in an action research: “initial awareness, exploration, initial response, plan creation, plan execution, evaluation, and reporting the results” (Griffiee, 2012, p.113). Following these steps, this study included a first stage in which a problem was identified and explored, then, based on initial data, an action plan was designed and implemented, the effect of the plan was evaluated and finally the results were described. The data collected came from: three surveys administered to the participants at different phases of the study, the analysis of the participants' final versions of their reflection papers, and an informal comparison of the papers to those written by students from another SLA II class in the same program.

The whole process of this action research is described in the following three phases.

### Phase 1: The Diagnosis

In this first stage of the study, the problem was identified. The direct observation of one of the teacher – researchers (participating in this study) in the second semester of 2013, showed that some fifth semester students seemed to be taking the SLA II course without having the necessary skills to perform well in tasks that were required in this course.

The diagnosis started with the analysis and assessment of the reflection papers that fifth semester students' wrote as part of their assignments for the SLA II course in August 2013. A survey was then administered to the same students at the end of the course. The results of the survey confirmed that they perceived writing academic papers as very challenging tasks and that they were aware they lacked some of the necessary skills to participate in class debates, read and write academic papers.

### Phase 2: The intervention.

The action plan consisted of a 15-hour classroom-based course and a month-long course in Moodle in academic writing. The course had the following goals:

By the end of the course students are expected to be able to:

- Participate in discussions related to Second Language Acquisition by giving opinions supported by facts and data.
- Read and understand academic papers in order to construct a solid theoretical framework for a project work.
- Read and understand all the parts an academic abstract is comprised of.
- Write a reflection paper.

The course included:

- Paragraph structure: topic sentences and supporting sentences.
- Abstracts: importance, relevance and function.

- APA style: APA basics, in-text citation. A full three-hour session was dedicated to instruct the students on the use of all in-text citation rules as well as writing a proper reference list in APA style.

Lesson planning was necessary to define the objectives, choose the materials, the activities and the instructional procedures for each one of the five three-hour sessions of the course. Each one of the lessons was planned under a collaborative view of language learning. Students were engaged in learning experiences in which they had to help each other to attain the proposed objectives (See sample lesson plan in appendix 2).

The same three units included in the classroom-based course were available in Moodle for a complete month after the SLA II started. Through a combination of video lessons, pdf documents, self-assessment quizzes, forums and weekly assignments, students were expected to achieve the objectives of the course. After the intervention, the students started the process of writing their reflection papers.

Based on the process approach to writing, students were asked to work in groups of three to write their reflection papers through three stages: planning, drafting and revising. In the first stage of the writing process, students had to choose the topic for their reflection papers, read academic articles related to the chosen topic, write an outline of the paper and start a bibliographic list of the sources they would probably use. In the second stage, they had to write the first draft of the reflection paper building up their arguments to defend their thesis, properly supported by using APA in-text citation to give credit to all the sources used. Finally, students had to write the final version of their reflection paper: this time including the abstract, introduction, body, conclusion and the list of references. After each one of the stages of the writing process, students were provided with useful feedback that helped them rework on their successive drafts and make improvements for the final version of the paper. While this writing process was taking place, students had the support of the online course on Moodle platform, where they could find very useful material and activities that allowed them to practice before writing their reflection papers, and forums that helped them to share ideas with their classmates.

### Phase 3: Describing the impact.

The effect of the action plan was described by:

- Analyzing the results of a survey administered right after the classroom-based course.
- Analyzing the results of a second survey administered right after students submitted the final version of their papers.
- Analyzing students' final version of their reflection papers.
- An informal comparison of the final version of the papers to those written by another SLA II group of students that did not take part in the intervention.

Two surveys were administered to the research participants in order to know their perception of the 15-hour Academic writing course and the Moodle course. The first survey (see

appendix 3) was administered to these students right after the fifteen-hour classroom-based course ended. In order to help validate this perception, a second survey (see appendix 4) was administered to the same students after the final drafts were submitted (four months later) to gauge their perception about the same issues after actually having completed the demanding tasks required. The final versions of the papers were evaluated using a rubric (appendix 5), specially designed for this purpose in order to determine how competent students were in relation to writing abstracts, building arguments, using APA style and writing reference lists. Finally, as an informal attempt to provide additional useful evidence (with no further pretensions), the mean scores of each one of the four categories in the papers (writing abstracts, building arguments, using APA style and writing reference lists) were compared to the mean scores of the papers written by students from another SLA II group, who did not take part in the intervention.

The results of the data collection were studied through a careful and thorough thematic analysis of the students' artifacts. (Boyatzis, 1998) In this study, student's written production and opinions expressed in both surveys were analyzed.

### Results

Immediately after the pre-semester 15-hour course in academic writing was implemented, the students were given a survey in order to collect a first impression of the effectiveness of the course. The first part of the survey was about their English level and prior contact with academic papers. The second part described the students' initial perception of effectiveness of the classroom-based course.

#### English level at the beginning of the SLA II course & prior contact with academic papers

Of the 15 students who took the survey, 13 were in a course between 15-20 of the 24 courses at the Centro Colombo Americano (corresponding to B1 of the Common European Framework) in a recognized private EFL institution, the other two were between levels 21 to 24 (corresponding to a CEF B2). It is vital to clarify that students take these 24 English courses at this private EFL institute as part of the bachelor program at Uicolombo. This means that most of them are not in the ideal English level to take content-based courses such as SLA. This represents the first difficulty both students and the teacher have to overcome.

Relevant to previous contact with academic papers, 12 of the 15 students surveyed stated they had read academic papers before, but only 4 (26.6%) claimed to have previously read more than three academic papers. In regard to having the necessary academic writing skills, we would like to argue that if a university student wants to start writing academic papers, it is important to have read at least a few papers to be familiarized with the nature of academic writing. To make matters even worse, 14 (93.3%) of the 15 students expressed that they had not written at least one academic paper.

With reference to having the necessary skills to participate in class discussions, debates, read papers and write papers on second language acquisition, 9 of the 15 (60%) students

partially or totally agreed they did not have them before taking the SLA II course. Only 6 of the 15 students (36%) partially or totally disagreed with the statement, which means that majority of the students acknowledged they would start the SLA II course with insufficient academic skills.

### First survey: students' initial perception of the classroom-based course.

The students also expressed their initial perceptions on the effectiveness of the classroom-based course. The data collected in this section of the survey provided the following crucial information:

- 12 of the 15 (80%) students totally agreed that the pre-semester course on academic writing had been administered in a timely manner, which is before they start classes in 5th semester. The other three partially agreed.
- Most of the students found the course to be quite relevant. 12 of the 15 (80%) students totally consented the contents of the course would help them write a good reflection paper while the other 3 partially agreed.
- Most of them (14 of the 15 students) at least partially agreed that writing an abstract was not as difficult as they thought before taking the academic writing course, which somehow supports the hypothesis that laid the foundations for this small-scale study: Although most students take these courses without having the necessary academic writing skills, all they need is a mini course to at least familiarize with the dynamics of academic writing.
- The necessity for this course to be institutionalized was supported by most of the students: 80% of the students (12 out of 15) feel that this course should be made mandatory for all students about to start fifth semester. One student commented that: *"I think it was a great idea to have us take this course. I'm sure it will help to write academic papers"*. Another one commented that: *"The course was great for us because you can do and understand academic papers better. You can also know new vocabulary"*.
- Students were also asked whether writing academic papers should be mandatory for all students in the program or only for those students who were good at writing. The findings in this particular issue were amazing: 14 out of 15 students considered that writing academic papers should be a requirement for all students in the program.

### Challenges to face in the SLA II course

In this first survey, students finally expressed their opinions on what they thought would be the biggest challenges to face while taking the SLA II course.

Table 5

*Major challenges to be faced by the experimental group in the SLA II course*

Reading and understanding the structure of academic papers.	5
Expressing an opinion and supporting it with research facts and data	8
Searching for information online related to SLA	3
Writing the reflection paper	6
Using APA style in-text citation	2
Writing the abstract for the reflection paper	4
Participating in class discussions and debates	6
Making oral presentations about SLA	5

According to the information in table 4, it can be noticed that most students (8 out of 15) identified *expressing an opinion and supporting with facts and data* as the biggest challenge they would have to face throughout the SLA II course followed by *writing the reflection paper* and *participating in class discussion and debates*, both of them identified by 6 out of the 15 students who took the survey. After carefully analyzing what these three aspects had in common, a critical issue emerged: the need to be creative and critical. In order to be successful in the three aspects mentioned, students would have to agree or disagree with someone's point of view and look for the appropriate sources or data to convincingly support the arguments elaborated.

### Second survey: students' perceptions after submitting their final drafts

A second survey was conducted at the end of the semester with the main purpose of confronting participants' initial perception right after the pedagogical intervention with their opinions after submitting the final version of their reflection papers at the end of the semester. This second survey required the students to do the following:

- Identify the most difficult parts of writing the reflection paper after actually having gone through the process of writing one.
- Express their opinion on the effectiveness of the tandem strategy as well as the effectiveness of their individual components.
- Identify which of the four elements evaluated in the reflection papers they were able to improve mainly due to the intervention.

When asked to identify the most difficult parts of writing the reflection paper after actually having gone throughout the process of writing one, their opinion changed significantly

from the opinions expressed four months earlier immediately after the intervention.

Table 6

*Major difficulties identified by students when writing the Reflection papers*

Writing the abstract	1
Elaborating arguments	3
Using APA style	7
Writing the list of references	4

Table 5 clearly shows that, almost half of them (7 out of 15) expressed using APA style had been the hardest challenge, followed by writing the list of references (4 out of 15 identified it). This data matches the students' opinion in the diagnosis carried out with the 2013 class, in which 87.5% of the students in the diagnosis phase identified using APA style as the hardest challenge after having submitted the final draft. The difference in the figure could be explained by the fact that in the diagnosis survey, they were allowed to choose up to four challenges from a list of eight while in this survey; they were allowed to choose only one. It is interesting to notice, however, that right after taking the 15-hour course and a few days before starting to take the SLA course, students did not think using APA style was going to be that hard. Actually, among the list of eight challenges to be faced in the SLA II course when writing a reflection paper, they considered using APA style would be the least demanding. This opinion dramatically changed after the course. This might be explained by the students' misleading feeling that having understood the teacher's instructions on using APA style makes things easy to later find out it indeed requires a lot of careful and systematic work.

*Participants' perception of the intervention*

Table 7

*Participants' perception of the intervention*

Effectiveness of each component and of the dual strategy	TA	PA	PD	TD
Tandem intervention helped me improve AWS	1	9	2	1
Classroom-based course helped me improve AWS	6	8	0	0
The Moodle course helped me improve AWS	0	8	2	4

*TA: totally agree PA: partially agree PD: partially disagree TD: totally disagree AWS: academic writing skills*

Table 6 displays information about the students' perception of the effectiveness of the dual strategy and of each of its components. All the students (14) who answered this item at least partially agreed that the classroom course helped them improve their academic writing skills. 6 of them (42.85%) totally agreed.

Table 8

*Students' perception on the skills improved*

Skill improved because of the intervention	TA	PA	PD	TD	Score
Writing a good abstract	6	7	2	0	4.26
Building up arguments	3	10	1	0	4.14
Using APA style in-text citation	4	7	4	0	4
Writing the list of references	3	0	2	0	4.06

TA: totally agree PA: partially agree PD: partially disagree TD: totally disagree

Students also expressed (in table 7) their opinion in regard to which of the parts of writing the reflection paper they felt they had improved mainly due to the intervention. 13 of the 15 students (86.7%) partially or totally agreed they were able to write a good abstract mainly due to the intervention. The same number of people (13) partially or totally agreed that the intervention helped them elaborate on arguments for their papers. However, the number of students that totally agreed is lower. We feel it is not as easy to teach a person to elaborate on arguments, as it is to teach a person to write an abstract since abstracts usually follow a pattern and require little creativity while elaborating on arguments often requires the use of creativity and high-order thinking skills. As to using APA style in-text citation, fewer students (11) partially or totally agreed that intervention was as effective as in the case of the two previous issues. As we already discussed, students did not anticipate using APA style in-text citation would that challenging. On item 4, writing the list of references, only 3 of the 15 who answered the question thought the intervention helped them. Other 10 partially agreed. It can be concluded, then, that most students feel that the intervention was to a certain extent effective. As an interesting exercise (again, with no further pretensions), the students' opinions were turned into scores in order to have a better idea to what extent the participants felt they improved each one of the skills. All the *totally agrees* were a given a score of 5, all the *partially agrees* a 4, the *partially disagrees* a 3 and all the *totally disagrees* a 2. A final score was given to each category to try to quantify to what extent the students felt they had improved due mainly to the intervention. Writing a good abstract obtained the higher score (4.26), followed by elaborating arguments (4.14) and writing the list of references (4.06). Using APA style in-text citation got the lowest score (4) in regard to which of these four aspects students felt they improved mainly due to the intervention. This data, however, cannot be considered as conclusive. Further research with an appropriate sample size would be necessary to attempt to do so.

### Analysis of students' final drafts

The final versions of the 6 reflection papers were evaluated with an analytical rubric (see appendix 5), which included four criteria rated from 1 to 5: *Ability to write a good abstract*, *Ability to elaborate and support arguments*, *Ability to use APA style in-text citation* and *Ability to write a list of reference using APA format*.

Table 9

*Evaluation of each component in the reflection papers*

	P1	P2	P3	P4	P5	P6	MM	Mean
Writing a good abstract	4	3	3	3	3	3	3.17	
Building up solid arguments	3	3	4	4	4	2	3.33	
Using APA style in-text citation	2	2	3	4	3	2	2.66	
Writing a list of references using APA	3	2	3	3	2	2	2.5	

Note: Six papers were submitted.

Table 8 shows that after the intervention most students were able to write good abstracts even though some of them lacked one of the main elements (aim, method and results) or in some cases were a bit confusing. Of the four criteria evaluated, the ability to build arguments got the highest scores. The mean score was 3.33 over 5, a little better than the mean for writing the abstract: 3.17. Unfortunately, in regards to using APA style, the scores were not as good. The mean score was 2.66. This data is coherent with the students' final opinion right after having submitted the papers but not with the students' perception before the semester started when they were not able to anticipate *using APA style citation* and *writing a reference list* would be such challenging tasks. Writing the list of references got the lowest mean score: 2.55. If we take into account that the reference list has to be done in appropriate APA style, we might conclude either of the following: APA style is hard for undergraduate students to learn or students do not like to work diligently on such a demanding and time consuming (but not necessarily difficult) task as using APA style when writing an academic paper.

It is also important to remember that these two sections were the ones identified by the students in the intervention class as the major difficulties they had in the whole process of writing the reflection paper. Using APA style was also identified as the biggest challenge by the students that were in the diagnose class. Students might find these two tasks (*using APA style citation* and *writing the reference list*) tedious since they have to be careful and diligent in following the right APA citing procedure always keeping in mind there are quite a few "rules" and special cases. Another factor that might explain this deficiency is that students sometimes appropriate other writers' text thinking the rater won't notice or because they might not remember the source they got the text from. It is necessary to continue digging into the nature of this phenomenon since developing academic writing skills is a must not only for graduate students but also for undergraduate ones.

Table 9 displays a comparison between the scores obtained by the group of students who received the intervention as opposed to a group of fifth students taking a SLA II who did

not. Again, this is a qualitative exercise that seeks to have a better understanding of the phenomenon studied rather than obtaining conclusive and/or definite results.

Table 10

*Comparison between the intervention group and the other group*

Ability	MEAN COMPARISON	
	Group 1	Group 2
Write a good abstract	3.17	2.66
Elaborate arguments	3.33	2.83
Use APA style in-text citation	2.66	2.66
Write a reference list using APA format	2.5	2.33

Group 1: Intervention group

Group 2: another SLA II class

To start with, writing a good abstract seems to be one of the important benefits obtained from the intervention. As the table shows, the mean score of the intervention group in this ability was 3.17 compared to a mean score of 2.66 in the other class. In classes without specific instruction in academic writing, some information on using APA is provided. However, instruction on writing a good abstract is not usually given to the students. The intervention group did receive complete information on how to write a good abstract. This could explain the difference in the mean scores. A similar result was obtained from the students in the intervention group in the ability to elaborate arguments and support them appropriately. The mean score was 3.33 while the mean score obtained by group 2 was 2.83. It is important to highlight the fact that both groups were assigned the exact same task and in the same period of instruction. The third criterion used to evaluate the reflection papers was using APA style to cite sources properly. Here the results are a bit surprising. The mean scores for the intervention group and the other group are the same; both of them obtained 2.66 in the ability to use APA in-text citation. Even though the intervention group received information on how to use proper APA format in-text citation, this information did not appear to be enough to have a direct impact on how accurately sources were cited in their papers. At this point, enough evidence has been collected as proof that APA style citation is a problematic task for undergraduate students in our region. Writing a reference list was also a difficult undertaking for both classes. The mean score of the intervention class (2.5) was slightly better than that of the other group (2.33). A number of conclusions can be drawn from the data collected.

Based on the previous data collected throughout the present research, it can be concluded that the difficulties participants had when facing the challenge of writing academic papers seem to be due to not having the English level required, lacking important prior contact with academic papers and not being familiar with the nature of academic writing. Considering their initial condition, most students agreed that the intervention contributed to the improvement of the skills required to write a good reflection paper and they also considered the course should be included as a mandatory requirement in the syllabus. Furthermore, the students' positive perception in regard to the relevance and effectiveness of the intervention is supported by the fact that the intervention group obtained a higher mean

score in three of the four criteria with which the reflection papers were evaluated in comparison with the mean scores obtained by the students in the other group: *Writing a good abstract, Elaborating arguments and Writing the list of references*. The same three aspects were chosen as the ones they felt they improved the best mainly due to the intervention.

### Discussion

Although the overall core of the findings shows that the intervention seems to have been beneficial, one important aspect in which the effects of the intervention was not consistent is the use of APA in-text citation. The diagnose group had identified this item as the hardest (perhaps the most tedious) part of writing academic papers. Right after the initial classroom-based intervention, however, the research participants did not identify this item as one of the biggest challenges to be faced throughout the SLA II course. Thus, participants may have been misled by having understood APA citation style in the classroom-based intervention, which may have made it seem easier than it ended up being. At the end, the mean scores for using APA in-text citation were the same for both groups. This could mean that to have a more significant impact on the use of APA citation format, a longer intervention might be necessary.

Another major issue identified after this research is related to the role of online courses. It is indeed clear that the classroom-based 15-hour course on academic writing played a more important role in the success of the intervention than the Moodle course did. Previous research on how writing activities were integrated as part of blended learning outcome has shown positive effects. After having proposed a Moodle course to improve writing skills of a group of university students in Palestina, Adas and Bakir (2013) reported "...the students stated that they enjoyed a lot relating inside instructions and illustrations to outside activities using technology. They improved significantly their writings..." (p. 213). Hence, it would be important to explore in depth why students in our community seem to be reluctant to use e-learning or blended learning as essential strategies to enhance their learning process. Finally, based on the findings of the present study, implementing a course in academic writing in the program syllabus is necessary to get students familiar with the nature of academic writing. As a small scale study, it is necessary to look at these findings as a first step to describe the problems students have to deal with when writing academic papers in undergraduate programs in our country. It is true that the necessity for developing academic writing skills in the English language is growing. A new generation of teachers in our region should be ready to implement new ways of teaching that make learning more successful for learners. This is not enough, however, if these new ways of teaching are not documented so other educators can see what is being done and how it is working. Developing academic writing skills is, then, an integral part of any teacher. More and bigger efforts in order to find ways of helping this new generation of teachers document their practices are both welcome and necessary.

### References

- Adas, D. & Bakir, A. (2013). Writing Difficulties and New Solutions: Blended Learning as an Approach to Improve Writing Abilities. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 3 (3), 254-26
- Aldana, A. (2005). The process of writing: A text by using cooperative learning. *Profile, Issues In Teachers Professional Development*, N° 6, p. 47-57.
- Ariza, A. (2005). The Process-writing approach: An alternative to guide the students' compositions. *Profile, Issues In Teachers Professional Development*, 6, 37-46.
- Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching autonomy*. Harlow: Longman.
- Biber, D., Conrad, S., Reppen, R., Byrd, P. & Helt, M. (2002). Speaking and writing in the university: A multidimensional comparison. *TESOL Quarterly*, N° 36, p. 9-48.
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. London: Sage Publications.
- Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge, U.K: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge.
- Griffee, D.T. (2012). *An introduction to second language research methods: Design and data*. California: TESL-EJ Publications.
- Lehman, R. & Conceição, S. (2010). *Creating a sense of presence in online teaching*. Jossey-Bass. San Francisco.
- Nunan, D. (1999). *Second language teaching and learning*. Boston: Heinle ELT.
- Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Smith, R. (2008). *Conquering the content: A step-by-step guide to online course design*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Viáfara, J. (2007). Student teachers' learning: The role of reflection in their development of pedagogical knowledge. *Cuadernos de Lingüística*, N° 9, p.225-242.