

Students' Perceptions of ESP Academic Writing Skills through Flipped Learning during Covid-19

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Learners studying English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at University regard writing academic papers as a complex process since they have to consider issues about academic writing conventions as well as ethics. This current research examines university students' perceptions of ESP academic writing within the context of the online learning which emerged due to Covid-19 and, therefore, through the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and, particularly, utilizing the Flipped Learning approach as an active learning strategy to enhance ESP academic written competence. To be more specific, we examined how students, in tertiary education, perceived ESP academic writing skills within the field of Business English. The participants are 28 students doing the Degree in Administration and Business Management in a Spanish polytechnic. A mixed method research has been conducted for this current paper since both quantitative as well as qualitative methods were utilized for data collection. Regarding this study, both a questionnaire and a focus group interview were utilized to analyse the data. The outcomes proved that students' perceptions towards academic ESP written competence, using Business English, within the Flipped Learning approach was positive. The major results showed students' awareness of their needs and ESP written requirements. This research concludes with some future research suggestions.

Keywords: academic writing, written skills, English for Specific Purposes, business English, perceptions, flipped learning, Covid-19

Introduction

Academic writing is conceived as a written work or assignment, which is offered to students in academic contexts, and is a key aspect when teaching and learning in tertiary education. University students are required to actively develop their academic writing, implying, therefore, that these students need to develop specific academic writing skills. The research paper is an excellent example of academic writing. In the context of this current work, a research paper in tertiary education is conceived as a written academic paper or an essay written by ESP (English for specific purposes) students on specific themes related to the Faculty of Business and Administration.

Many ESP students find writing the research paper a complex process (Foster, 2006; Rohayah & Naginder, 2006; Ismail, et al., 2010; Pandey, 2020). This occurs, generally, because the written competence is viewed as a spontaneous task by learners. However, some students of ESP perceived greater difficulties in language-related problems (Hisham, 2008; Al-Khasawneh, 2010; Kotamjani, Samad, & Fahimirad, 2018) than general academic written competence. While some authors (Hisham, 2008; Al-Khasaweh, 2010) aimed at researching the academic writing problems of Arab post-graduate students on a Business English course, proving that the university students faced problems related to organization of ideas, grammar, vocabulary register, spelling and referencing, Kotamjani, Samad, & Fahimirad (2018), on the other hand, in their qualitative research, showed that the most difficult areas were writing with coherence, paraphrasing and summarizing, using adequate academic language and vocabulary, as well as utilizing adequate lexical phrases.

What is more, academic writing skills require not only organisation of thoughts (Rafik-Galea, Arumugam & de Mello, 2012) since students should make up ideas in order to create facts according to certain academic conventions, as well as discussion and thoughts on diverse aspects such as the knowledge of specific writing rules (Arumugam, 2011). A huge number of ESP students do not manage to understand how specific academic

writing conventions work. Moreover, these students lack academic writing skills (Al-Khasawneh, 2010) since they struggle with academic written competence. Acquiring good writing skills is a task, which is usually learnt with the aid of formal teaching practices (Kim & Kim, 2005). Academic written competence should, thus, be taught with the aid of useful approaches, feedback and collaborative multi-drafting for example, in higher education within the learning of English as a foreign language (Bowker, 2007; Heffernan, 2006).

Research on the teaching and learning of academic written competence in ESP has focused on not only students' but also teachers' perceptions (Ismail, 2011; Butler, Trosclair, Zhou & Wei, 2014) on the relevance of acquiring and, thus, improving academic writing skills in ESP as well as in the English for Academic Purposes classroom. Similarly, Ismail (2011) investigated ESP students' perceptions of writing and, particularly, an academic writing course from an ESP educational programme. The author, using a variety of research methods, determined that ESP students were aware of both their needs as well as ESL writing requirements, which implied students' positive attitudes towards academic writing skills. On the other hand, Butler, Trosclair, Zhou & Wei (2014) researched both ESP students' as well as ESP teachers' perceptions on written academic competence. The outcomes here proved that both students and teachers have a high regard for competence in academic writing not only from the process approach but also from the product approach.

Since this experiment took place within the context of distance education due to Covid-19, a brief overview state of the art will be next offered on the enhancement of academic ESP writing skills through the use of ICT. On the one hand, Kuteeva (2011) focused on wikis as a tool to enhance writing in the course of Effective Communication in English with the ultimate purpose of analysing how the wiki influenced the writer-reader relationship, showing that the wiki made learners become aware of the relevance of both grammatical correctness as well as structural coherence. On the other hand, Wang (2014), in his case study research, aimed to verify whether Taiwanese students' EFL writing skills improved. Wang proved that students engaging in collaborative writing activities obtained mastery in business writing. In addition, the findings showed that wikis helped students enhance their written competence as well as boosting their collaboration skills.

In coherence with this research, which is focused on ESP academic written competence, it is also worth mentioning the works by Montaner-Villalba (2017, 2019) who focuses on blogging as a tool for enhancing ESP written competence in the context of Vocational Training. Montaner-Villalba (2017), in his case study research, proved that there was not a relevant improvement in the development of writing skills while, conversely, there was a significant improvement in the learning of specialized vocabulary as well as reading competence. This research took place face-to-face. On the other hand, Montaner-Villalba (2019) showed, in his action-research paper, that blogging from the perspective of Project-Based Learning (PBL) in an ESP course helped students from Vocational Training to notably improve their ESP writing skills. This experiment was developed completely online. As for blogging from the approach of PBL, Halimatus Sa'diyah and Cahyono (2019) aimed at researching the effect of EFL written competence through a quasi-experimental research, showing that learners from the treatment group improved much better than learners from the control group (Montaner-Villalba, 2019).

Flipped Learning (hence, FL) has become, within the last ten years, the most popular approach in both distance education as well as blended learning. Many studies have produced significant findings in the application of FL compared to conventional classroom methods (Ferreri & O'Connor, 2013; Tune et al., 2013; McLaughlin et al., 2014). While traditional learning offers transmission of knowledge from teachers to students in a classroom context, FL gives students the opportunity to acquire knowledge before the class and utilize classroom time to practice and implement concepts through interaction with both teachers and peers. Then, after the class, students reflect upon the received feedback to use it to their further learning. FL, within the modality of blended learning, redistributes the learning spaces so that explicit instruction is offered online and more active learning strategies take place in the classroom (Keengwe, Onchwari, & Oigara, 2014; Santiago, 2017).

Technology-Enhanced Language Learning can be integrated with FL where learners can acquire grammar, vocabulary, syntactic structures, and other linguistic aspects (Egbert, Herman & Chang, 2014) outside the classroom context by themselves through online activities and learning materials. Regarding the Flipped Classroom approach applied to enhance EFL academic writing, Tsytoovich & Boronenko (2018) explored the use of the Flipped Learning approach to enhance academic writing skills in the English language in order to justify the choice of blended learning at tertiary level, proving positive outcomes at the end of the experiment. This research took place at the Center of Academic Writing at the South Ural State University.

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Regarding the FL approach within the teaching of academic ESP written competence, some new literature focusing on the field of engineering has been published. While, on the one hand, Martínez-Saéz (2019) aimed at enhancing undergraduate students' writing skills through a detailed analysis of the steps carried out to redesign the practice of academic writing in the fields of Biotechnology, Food and Agricultural Engineering and, additionally, the author designed an initial questionnaire to learn what students' perceptions regarding the Flipped Learning were; on the other hand, Sukerti, Rudiastari and Yogi Susana (2020) proved the effectiveness as well as the implementation of flipped learning to enhance ESP writing skills. Research participants were students in higher vocational education specializing in electrical engineering at the time of the experiment. The outcomes obtained here proved that the Flipped Learning approach was a determinant in improving ESP students' written competence.

In coherence with this research, which is focused on analysing students' perceptions of their ESP writing skills and, to be more specific, in the field of Business and Administration, through Flipped Learning, relevant and worthwhile research has been recently published such as that of Salem (2018) and Tri & Trang (2019). In this vein, whereas, on the one hand, Salem (2018) aimed to investigate the impact of utilizing flipped classroom to improve functional written competence within the field of Business, proving that students from the experimental group gained positive results in comparison with the control group learners, on the other hand, Tri & Trang (2019) offered a case-study research, so as to prove whether ESP students improved their academic writing skills within the Business field. The findings showed that flipped learning boosted students' performance, as well as increasing their motivation and critical thinking.

This piece of research analyses students' perceptions of ESP written competence through the Flipped Learning approach. This research aims to address the following research questions:

- a) How do students view writing skills in English?
- b) How do students perceive their own writing competence in English?
- c) How do students regard their writing skill in English for specific purposes?
- d) How do students view their ESP writing competence through Flipped Learning?

Methodology

Context and Participants

This experiment took place at the Faculty of Business and Administration in a Spanish state polytechnic in the Valencian Region in Spain during the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020 and, approximately, from the second half to the end of the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020. This small project was developed between end-April and mid-June. Therefore, we had to carry out this experiment while instructing online with the aid of both the virtual platform of the university and the videoconferencing tool, Microsoft Teams, since we had to be locked down due to Covid-19 from March to June, 2020.

The participants were 28 students who were studying ESP as part of their Degree in Business and Administration. They were in the 4th academic year of Business and Administration at the time of conducting this research. These students were enrolled in the subject "English Language B1" which was an optional subject throughout the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020, that is, from end-February to mid-June. This subject was preparation for the Business English Certificate (BEC) and, particularly, the Cambridge English Business Preliminary, which is the equivalent to the B1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). In fact, the students' level of the English language was expected to be B1, according to the CEFR. These university students were selected in a random manner from, at least, three different groups following alphabetical order. They were aged between twenty-one and twenty-three approximately. The researcher of this work was also the instructor.

Research Tools

Two main instruments were used to collect data from the participating students. Firstly, a seventeen-item questionnaire was created to collect the data, according to the research questions of this study. All the variables

were classified into three items to meet the structural requirements of the research questions. This questionnaire consisted of a five-point Likert scale, which decreased from “5” as strongly agree to “1” as strongly disagree. An open-ended question was given to students so that they could express their opinion freely regarding what they liked and disliked about writing in English. The reliability of the questionnaire was 0.88 through Cronbach Alpha Formula. In the second place, the focus group interview technique covered four questions, which were aimed at consolidating through the above-mentioned questionnaire. These questions were flexible, allowing the participants to reflect upon and express their own answers freely. These questions were checked by two instructors in the university (excluding the researcher of this paper) to find out whether they were consistent with the data intended to be gathered through the questionnaire. Open-ended questions were chosen for this research to acquire a much deeper understanding of the findings obtained through the questionnaire with the main purpose of reaching some definite conclusions on how students perceived their ESP writing skills through FL within the context of distance education.

Data Collection

The researcher and instructor of this ESP classroom collected the data during the tenth week of the second semester of the academic year 2019-2020, that is, from 6th to 10th April 2020. The participating students had been previously offered enough time to develop their ESP written competence and, at the same time, the researcher who was their ESP teacher had the chance to establish an excellent rapport with the students. The questionnaire was completed by the twenty-eight participating students at the beginning of the class. Students were given between, at least, eight and ten minutes to complete the questionnaire. The focus group interviews took place through Microsoft Teams between end-April and mid-June. There were four interview sessions, in accordance with the research questions. Each interview session took place for at least 10-15 minutes before finishing the online ESP lesson via Microsoft Teams.

Data Analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were utilized to analyse the data. Whereas, on the one hand, the SPSS programme was employed to obtain various kinds of descriptive statistics as well as independent sample t-tests from the quantitative data, which were obtained through the 17-item questionnaire, on the other hand, qualitative data analysis was employed to examine the data collected through the focus group interviews. According to Creswell (2003), interpreting the quantitative five scale Likert questionnaire data was supported by the qualitative data which were obtained through the focus group interview with the final purpose of comparing students' perceptions about ESP academic writing skills. Students' opinions from these interviews were included with the discussion of outcomes obtained from the questionnaire for each research question, where convenient. This current research focused on the analysis of ESP written competence by students from the Business and Administration faculty. The outcomes of the questionnaire were examined in the same sequence as the four research questions were established earlier.

Results and Discussion

At the time of examining the outcomes of the first research question (*How do students view written skills in English?*) (see Appendix A, table 1), we find out that the mean score was 4.4 on a 5-point scale which decreases from 5 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). The mean proved that Business students of English had high perceptions about the relevance of their ESP written competence. This implied that ESP students were conscious of the need to improve the quality of their written competence in the English language. This result was in accordance with research by Ismail (2011) about the EFL needs of Arab undergraduate students in both the College of Education as well as the College of Humanities. The outcomes proved that the students understood perfectly the relevance of improving their written competence in English. In addition, the outcomes of this current research were also similar to the study by Mazdayasna and Tahririan (2008), who explored the general language proficiency from EFL Iranian students enrolled at the College of Nursing as well as the College of Midwifery, showing that these university students had reached a positive attitude towards their language proficiency.

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While the focus group interview was taking place, a considerable number of students from the College of Business and Administration indicated that they needed to improve their writing skills since they were preparing to work abroad at various international business sectors where the use of the English language was relevant. The focus group interviews offered the participants from this research an interesting chance to reflect on their language learning needs. The participating students of this research expressed that their level of EFL writing, in general, was low, implying that their level of academic ESP writing could not initially be of high quality. A lack of academic vocabulary in ESP was indeed the reason why these Business and Administration students felt that they needed to improve their written competence. The same issue is described in the work by other authors (Al-Hazmi's, 2006; Ismail, 2011) who verified that reflection was key since it allowed students to share their opinions and thoughts, as well as evaluate their own language learning experience.

The second research question (*How do students perceive their own written competence in English?*) (see Appendix A, table 2) focused on students' perceptions about their EFL writing skills. While looking at the data for this research question in detail, we observe that the mean scores of the EFL students from the College of Business and Administration, participating at this current experiment, regarding their opinions about their EFL written competence, was from 2.28 on this 5-point scale. This meant that these students did not have positive beliefs about their own perceptions of their writing skills when utilizing the English language. This outcome might be interpreted regarding the students' educational background since many of them had previously attended high schools belonging to the state, where a national curriculum was implemented in a very specific manner. In this vein, Ismail (2011) interpreted the outcomes of his research in relation to both the students' educational as well as social background, taking into consideration that a huge number of students participating in this research were female students who had previously had a similar educational experience. In addition to this, Kobayashi and Rinnert (2002) showed that students' EFL written competence could be influenced by their own experience in writing using their first language. The findings of this research showed that Japanese students proved to be more skilful in reading than the American ones, who proved to develop their writing skills more. This research by Kobayashi and Rinnert (2002) is in line with the findings of this current research since Spanish students of ESP perceived that their writing skills could be influenced by their own first language written experience since the ESP students, participating in this research, had not previously been offered the chance to practice writing academic texts before studying at university.

Another interpretation could be related to the students' comprehension of the question. The students could understand that they might be required to think about their own written experience. Since nearly every student was required to write their corresponding tasks in other areas utilizing the English language, while the focus group interview was being held, these students from the College of Business and Administration indicated that they successfully completed their written assignments for other areas because they were getting good marks. However, these high grades might have given these students the impression that their written competence in EFL was excellent. Moreover, at the focus group interviews, students stated that other teachers from other diverse areas belonging to the College of Business and Administration did not correct their mistakes which possibly contributed to their false impression about their writing skills. For this reason, the students participating in this research could falsely have believed that they had already mastered their ESP written competence. At this point, it should be highlighted that a content teacher's aim is not to check any kind of language mistake since they are not language instructors.

While examining the outcomes of each individual variable under this question, we noticed a few significant differences. The score means for the students' negative feeling (hating writing) about their EFL writing was 1.69 for Business and Administration students. The Business and Administration students seemed to be positive about their ESP writing skills, since they believed that they were excellent writers. Their answers to the "opinion question" (*How do you feel with class writing tasks?*), see Appendix A, table 2, variable 6) could possibly have been based on that perspective from students. The mean scores accounting for their feeling toward class writing tasks were 2.49 for the students from the College of Business and Administration. While the focus group interview took place, some students expressed that they would prefer a writing task provided they were given the chance to work in teams since this learning experience took place online because of Covid-19. This finding was similar to Ismail (2011) and Storch (2005) about collaborative writing. When the participating students were offered the choice to work either in groups or individually, a huge number of these students chose to work in groups and created shorter pieces of writing of a high quality within the approach of Flipped Learning. In this current research, all the students showed a positive attitude, in general terms, towards group work and

collaborative writing and, more specifically, to the practice of ESP academic written skills through the Flipped Learning approach within the context of online education caused by the Covid-19.

When students were asked if they were good writers in both English as well as in Spanish, which is their mother tongue, these students responded that their writing proficiency in both languages was not good. Regarding this specific variable, the mean score was 1.64. These students from the College of Business and Administration answered that they were not efficient writers in their mother tongue. Therefore, this may have had an influence on their ability to develop a proficient written competence in the foreign language, which is object of study at this current research. This issue was in line with both Ismail (2011) as well as Spack (1997), in which the outcomes revealed that first language learning might possibly shape how students experienced foreign language learning. The participating Business and Administration students from this research may need further training on ESP written competence so as to develop their proficiency as stated by the authors mentioned above (Spack, 1997; Ismail, 2011). Researching their language proficiency development might be a potential theme of a future study.

Research question 3 (*How do students regard their writing skills in English for specific purposes?*) (see Appendix A, table 3) is focused on students' perceptions about their ESP written competence. The mean score for the students from the College of Business and Administration was 2.81. The findings of this question proved that these students were a little positive about their ESP writing skills. This could be because of their assumptions about their written proficiency that was regarded to be acceptable from their own perspective. These students may feel that their practice in developing their ESP written skills was easy and, consequently, they were not acquiring significant learning regarding the practice of their ESP written competence. The focus group interview showed that these students from the College of Business and Administration believed that their learning experience on developing ESP written competence was not difficult. However, this learning covered many writing tasks. These participating students highlighted that this practice of ESP writing skills made them learn to plan, organize, edit and, then, end their essay. These ESP students consider their views and expectations about learning and teaching in the classroom useful, and every attempt to learn is always guided by these factors.

The outcomes of the "course attractiveness variable" proved that the Business and Administration students did not have a positive attitude towards this learning experience on the practice of ESP written competence. The mean for this variable (*The ESP written competence experience is enjoyable*) was 3.11 for these students. Similarly, the mean for the variable "*The ESP written competence is useful*" was 2.71 for the participating students. The lack of positive attitude of these Business and Administration students could be attributed to their lack of experience writing for specific purposes in their first language, Spanish. The reason for finding their ESP written competence experience enjoyable could be due to the fact that they felt that this learning experience helped students learn something new. While the focus group interview took place, a considerable number of students from the College of Business and Administration stated that the learning experience taught them to organize their essays as well as to express their ideas in a clear manner. This finding was in line with what Ismail (2011) and Storch and Tapper (2009) highlighted about their University students' perspectives about their learning experience on the practice of ESP written skills. In both cases, the authors verified that educational programmes on English for Academic Programmes can have a positive impact on students' attitudes towards their writing. The students participating in this current research asserted that students' feedback on the ESP written skills learning experience through Flipped Learning within the context of Covid-19 had been challenging. What is more, the students' opinions offered through questionnaires at the end of the experiment proved this.

Regarding the variable (*The ESP written competence experience is less challenging than the General Written Course*), the outcomes asserted what the participating students mentioned while the interview took place; moreover, it verified the general assumptions among ESP teachers that the participating students from the College of Business and Administration can find their learning experience challenging. The mean of this variable was 2.61 for these Business and Administration students. Even though these students perceived their ESP writing skills learning experience very easy, they considered their learning experience more challenging if comparing it with the General EFL Written Competence practice. However, they considered this experience beneficial since it helped them improve their own confidence through their writing skills. Similarly, Ismail (2011) in his research

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about ESP students' perceptions towards academic ESP written competence found that students regarded ESP written competence beneficial since it helped them develop confidence in their writing proficiency.

While looking at the findings of the fourth research questions (*"How do students view their ESP written competence through Flipped Learning?"*) (see Appendix A, table 4), which deals with students' perceptions and opinions about the ESP writing skills with the aid of Flipped Learning, we find out that the mean score for the Business and Administration students was 4.7 on a 5-point scale. This mean showed that the ESP participating students had high perceptions about the importance of their ESP written competence through the Flipped Learning approach. This outcome was approximately in line with research by Tayan (2017), who focused not only on ESP Business students' perceptions but also teachers' feedback on Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL). The outcomes here proved that these ESP students understood the importance of learning Business English through MALL. Moreover, Jaramillo (2019) examined both students and teachers in a flipped intermediate Spanish school where the outcomes from students' surveys showed that students' perceptions were lower than teachers' but were nevertheless positive. However, it should be noted that the references mentioned above did not focus on students' perception of ESP writing skills through the Flipped Learning approach. This suggests that this current research offers worthwhile and significant value to the field of study in this current paper.

During the focus group interview, many participating students indicated that they needed to improve their academic ESP writing skills, in general terms, through ICT because they were still not familiar with digital tools and, particularly, with Flipped Learning as a pedagogical approach to practice their academic ESP written competence within a complete online learning experience which emerged in March 2020 as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic worldwide. However, as mentioned above, they expressed that they were satisfied regarding the fourth research question.

Conclusion

This research explored ESP students' perceptions of academic writing in English as a foreign language through Flipped Learning within the context of distance education during the Covid-19 pandemic. The outcomes highlighted the students' expectations and views which they brought with them to the online writing class through both the online platform as well as the videoconferencing tool, Microsoft TEAMS. The results emphasized the learners' positive attitudes toward the practice of academic ESP written competence and, in particular, the development of ESP written competence through Flipped Learning within the context of online education with a special emphasis on ESP students' own views and opinions of their ESP written competence. One of the most relevant issues was the students' misunderstanding about their writing skills. Some students responded that they were satisfied with their written competence when, in fact, they still needed to pay attention to improving this skill through Flipped Learning. To conclude, this research contributes partially to understanding students' perceptions of ESP writing using the Flipped Learning approach in the context of online education. Future research needs to be conducted on analysing ESP tertiary students' perceptions of their academic written competence through Flipped Learning in other subjects, such as Computer Engineering and Design Engineering.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None declared.

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APPENDIX

Table 1*Students' perceptions of writing in English*

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>T-test</i>
Learning to write in English is a very relevant competence for my academic study at the university.	4.83	1.27
I need to learn to write in English because it is a rather relevant skill for my professional career.	4.98	4.53***
I love to write in English since I write perfectly in Spanish.	3.36	.73
I love writing in English.	4.76	3.22**
I think that I might be a good writer provided I keep practicing daily.	4.20	0.50

Note: *p< 0.05 **p< 0.01 ***p< 0.001

Table 2*Students' views of their own written competence in English*

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>T-test</i>
I would like to learn all language skills except writing	3.51	1.62
Writing is not a relevant skill for me	1.97	1.64
I hate writing in English since I do not know how to write	1.69	3.81**
I cannot write because my English is not good	2.39	1.83
I am not a good writer in both Spanish and English	1.64	2.48*
I am not happy with class writing tasks	2.49	2.72**

Table 3*Students' perceptions of their own writing skills in English for Specific Purposes*

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>T-test</i>
The ESP written competence experience is enjoyable	3.11	2.30*
The ESP written competence experience is useful	2.71	.8
The ESP written competence experience is less challenging than the General Written Course	2.61	1.95*

Table 4*Students' expectations of their own ESP writing skills through Flipped Learning*

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>T-test</i>
The ESP writing skill through FL is not interesting	4.20	0.50
The ESP writing skill through FL is OK	4.85	1.29
The ESP writing skill through FL is really useful	4.99	4.54***