

# A MOODLE COURSE TO HELP UNIVERSITY STUDENTS DEVELOP ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS\*

## CURSO EN MOODLE PARA AYUDAR A LOS ESTUDIANTES UNIVERSITARIOS A DESARROLLAR HABILIDADES ACADÉMICAS EN ESCRITURA

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**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 latter on the academic writing skills of 16 students in a SLA II class. Findings suggest that using a Moodle course might not be the most appropriate strategy to help students develop their academic writing skills in the context implemented. The evidence gathered through a survey lends support to the claim that students in our community are still not prepared to take advantages of online courses as much as they do of classroom-based instruction.

**Keywords:** e-learning, university students, academic writing, writing skills

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## Introduction

The Colombo International University Foundation (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. But, 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 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 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.

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*

English Level	Number of students
A1	0
A2	0
B1	6
B2	2

Tabla 2  
*Students' Academic Writing Skills Before the SLA II Course*

Acknowledgement	Number of students
Completely agree	5
Partially agree	1
Partially disagree	2
Completely disagree	0

Tables 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 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 3  
*Papers Students Had Read and Written Before the SLA II Course*

Number of papers read	Number of students	Number of papers	Number of students
Ninguno	4	Ninguno	8
1-3	2	1-3	0
4-10	1	4-10	0
More than 10	1	More than 10	0

Table 4  
*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
<b>Expressing an opinion and supporting it with data and facts</b>	<b>6</b>
Searching for information online related to SLA	0
Writing the reflection paper	3
<b>Using APA style in-text citation</b>	<b>7</b>
Writing the abstract for the reflection paper	3
Participating in class discussions and debates	2
Making oral presentations about SLA	2

*Note: The major challenges are in bold.*

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 5<sup>th</sup> 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 (2008) adds that “university professors in Colombia have incorporated innovative perspectives to encourage learners' writing in

English” (p.77). Lopez (2006, in Viáfara, 2008) 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. Zúñiga (2003, in Viáfara, 2008) has highlighted the influence of new technologies in students' development of writing skills in English. The present study, which combines classroom instruction and a Moodle reinforcement course, is an example of this influence.

It is worth mentioning the implementation of technology in education which provides new pedagogical approaches to both teaching and learning. Benson (2011) points out that “technology is now an integral part of self-access, tandem learning, distance learning, which reflect the fact that new learning technologies are constantly in search of *new homes*” (p. 145). There is growing support to claim that there are advantages of using technology in educational environments. One of them is that students can reinforce what they learn in class without having to go back to the school for a tutoring session, which is what is currently done. Smith (2008, p. 5) agrees that “students would appreciate the convenience of accessing information on their own schedule, no class attendance requirements, and the ability to review course content and presentations more than one time they were presented in the classroom”. Another advantage is that it helps to develop learners' autonomy. Motteram (1997, in Benson, 2011) states that this learning factor has been constantly related to educational technology. Finally, electronic Learning (e-learning) also helps learners to self-regulate the contents of what they need to work on. Smith (2008) points out that an advantage of this type of learning is that students can move on some concepts rapidly and take more time to comprehend concepts that are not common for them. This means that they do not have to follow the same path other learners do as usually happens in traditional classroom instruction, in which all students have to do what the teacher tells them to do, especially if the teacher spends more time in something they seem to have already mastered or if the teacher seems to move to a new lesson and he/she still needs more time to process the information being learned.

Taking into consideration all the benefits mentioned above, the Moodle platform was a crucial element in this study. Students were not forced to use this tool, however, they were told about its importance. Based on our own experience it can be affirmed that some students are still reluctant to take advantage of these resources. A reason could be the lack of a present instructor. When there is a sense of presence in online learning, it can greatly enhance the instructor-learner relationship (Munro, 1998 in Lehman & Conceição, 2010). In this project, the teacher was close enough since she was the SLAII instructor, so they could ask her for



feedback on their work throughout the semester.

The purpose of this part of the study was to establish whether the students used the Moodle course voluntarily in order to give support and continuity to the classroom-based course they had already taken. The present paper describes the effect of the month-long Moodle course as part of a dual pedagogical intervention to develop SLAII students' academic writing skills.

### Participants and Method

A total of 34 students participated in this part of the study. 18 of them belonged to the 2013-II SLA-II course, in which the problem was identified. The other 16 students belonged to the 2014-I SLA II group in which the dual-strategy was implemented. 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 (Griffee, 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" (Griffee, 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 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.

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 was divided into three units. Throughout each one of them students had to accomplish specific objectives. After finishing the first unit, students were expected to write a strong paragraph having previously worked on the identification of the structure and the main characteristics of this basic unit of any piece of writing. In the second unit, students started to get familiar with academic papers. After this second part of the online course, students were expected to identify the main parts of an academic paper, followed by the parts of an abstract and an introduction. The last part of the course was focused on APA style. After this third unit, students were expected to understand and use all the rules related to the use of APA in-text citation style in order to write a reflection paper using that required format. The three units focused on specific topics were developed through a combination of video lessons, pdf documents, self-assessment quizzes, forums and weekly assignments in order to attain the proposed objectives. In addition, there were three forums: a *Welcome forum* in which students could introduce themselves and talk about their expectations of the course, a *Technical forum* in which students could express any problems they would experience throughout the course, and a *News forum* in which students could express any doubts related to the content or activities of the course. Some other documents included instructions about how to complete and upload the assignments of each unit. The Table 5 shows the organization of the course

Table 5

*Content, Material and Activities of the Course*

Date	Content	Material	Activities
April 1 – April 10	Unit 1	Video: Paragraph structure	Forum: Characteristics of a strong paragraph.
	Understanding the parts of a paragraph	The purdue writing lab: Paragraph structure	Assignment Unit 1: Paragraph structure
	What's a paragraph?	Video: Unity	Quiz: Paragraph structure
	-Paragraph structure	Video: Run on sentences and comma splices	
	-How to write a strong paragraph: Coherence, Cohesion and Unity.	Pdf document: Introductory paragraph.	
April 11 – April 20	Unit 2		
	Familiarizing with academic papers	Academic paper folder: Academic writing guidelines	Assignment Unit 2
	-What's a reflection paper?	Abstracts folder: Abstracts examples	
	-Parts of a reflection paper		
	- Abstract		
April 21 – April 30	-Introduction		
	Unit 3	APA style folder:	Assignment Unit 3
	Writing papers using APA style	APA style guide	
	-How to write an abstract	Citing sources	
	-Basic citation styles	APA in word. 2007	
	-References		

Even though specific dates were established for the development of each one of the units, the course remained available during the rest of the semester in order for students to continue having it as a support of the Academic Writing assignments that they had to complete for the SLA II content-based course of fifth semester.

### Phase 3: Describing the Impact

The effect of the action plan was described by analyzing the results of a survey administered after 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 was administered to these

students right after the fifteen-hour classroom-based course ended. Then, in order to help validate this perception and know their opinion about the online course, a second survey was administered to the same students after the final assignments were submitted (four months later) to gauge their perception about the same issues after actually having completed the demanding tasks required. The results of the data collection were studied through a careful and thorough thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) of the students' artifacts and opinions expressed in both surveys. This paper is focused on the analysis of the second survey results which refer to the impact of the online course on Moodle platform.

## Results

The online course on Moodle platform was available to 6 groups of 3 students, each one the groups was given a password and a username to access. They were explained that they had to work with the rest of the members of their groups in order to complete the activities. Tutors were constantly sending e-mails containing the necessary instructions to log in, participate in the forums, read the material and complete the activities of each unit. After checking learners' access and work on the virtual course and after analyzing one of the survey's results we can report on the following aspects:

### Students' login

Based on what the Moodle platform reports, all the groups logged in the course at least once. However, since they had only one username and password per group, it was impossible to determine if all the members of each one of the groups accessed, or if there were students logging in individually without their partners. 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.

The perception towards the effectiveness of the Moodle course goes in an opposite direction. Contrary to the fact that most students found the classroom-based course to be effective, only eight of them (57%) partially agreed that the Moodle course was helpful but none of the students totally agreed that the Moodle course was helpful. Six of the fourteen students (42.85%) either partially or totally disagreed that the Moodle course contributed to the improvement of academic writing skills, which means that almost half of the students do not seem to see online courses as an effective strategy to help students develop academic writing skills. It might be interesting to try redesigning the course to make it more appealing to learners or to develop summative assessment instruments in the Moodle course as an extrinsic motivation mechanism. Some of the students admitted not even logging in to the course. Others did log in but admitted not doing the activities. In the *comments* section of this second survey, five of them expressed how they used (if they did) the Moodle course. The table below, shows the comments as well as our interpretations

Table 6

*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
<b>Classroom-based course helped me improve AWS</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	0	0
The Moodle course helped me improve AWS	0	8	2	4
<i>TA: totally agree PA: partially agree PD: partially disagree TD: totally disagree AWS: academic writing skills</i>				

Table 7

*Comments and Interpretation*

Students' comments	Our interpretation
Student one: "I think the course was interesting, I could develop some skills that allowed me to improve my essays. I just participated in the classroom-based course. I didn't log in to the Moodle course because it was hard".	Some of the research participants might not consider a course in Moodle an appropriate way to improve academic writing skills although they might use Internet for other academic purposes.
Student two: "I didn't log in to the Moodle course".	
Student three: "I haven't been able to log in".	Students feel the classroom-based course was more relevant than the one in Moodle.
Students four: "I logged in to the course but I didn't see the activities".	Some of the students did log in to the course but signed out if they did not find the activities quickly or could not figure out how to use them.
Students five: "I have logged in to the course just a few times but I have seen and used some of the documents".	

In regard to the effectiveness of the combination of the classroom-based course and the Moodle course, 9 of the 15 partially agreed. Only 1 totally agreed. Three partially or totally disagreed. 2 did not answer this question. Based on the students' perception of the role the Moodle course played in helping them improve their writing skills, it could be inferred that the 9 students that partially agreed think the classroom instruction played the more important role in the tandem strategy.

### Forum participation

4 groups entered and participated in the *Welcome forum*; they introduced themselves and expressed what they expected from the course. There were not technical problems, questions or doubts were reported in the *Technical* and *News forum*. Finally, only 2 groups gave their opinions about two of the characteristics of a good paragraph, which was the discussion topic of *Forum Unit 1*.

### Quiz

After going to the next unit, students had to answer *Unit 1 quiz*; this was a short test about paragraph structure. The quiz was taken by 2 groups. 1 of the groups got 10 points out of 10, and the other got 6 points right out of 10.

### Assignment submission

There was a final assignment at the end of each one of the units. Only 1 group submitted the first assignment corresponding to Unit 1. The rest of the assignments were not submitted by the participants of the course.

### Conclusions and future implications

Based on the analysis of the use of Moodle platform to support the development of academic writing skills of fifth semester students of Uicolombo, findings suggest that the use of virtual learning environments can be problematic. A real enhancement of language learning through the use of web-based resources depends on how these materials are presented and in the communication and support between the teachers and their students, and also between the interactions between the latter. Another aspect that must be considered is the learners' previous experience with virtual courses and also their management of technological tools.

Taking all these aspects into account and after reflecting about how this virtual course could be improved, we found that the following actions could make important contributions to the effectiveness and consequent attainment of the objectives of any virtual course.

### Pre-course survey

A previous survey could be applied to students before starting the course in order to know if they are familiarized with virtual courses and if they know how Moodle platform works. The results would give the tutor the opportunity to detect how many of the future participants of the course are ready to start and how many are not. Based on the result, the tutor can propose a face-to-face session in which he/she gives students clear instructions about how the platform works.

### Wiki

The creation of a wiki would be an effective tool to promote collaborative work. This website can become a platform for group collaboration in writing concepts, reports, project presentation material, etc. All the materials can be selected, designed and edited by the learners, which would provide positive effects on motivation and at the same time it can be used as valuable assessment for the tutor.

### Students' participation on course decisions

It would be a good idea use forums or surveys to ask students to make suggestions and express their opinions about the design, content and activities of the course. This could be very useful for future decisions that would respond to students' needs and interests. As educators and language teachers it is our responsibility to make contributions to the learning process, and to continue rethinking our pedagogical practices by being aware of what is offered by modern technology. Furthermore, it is necessary to keep up with the world and its current trends, and a way to attain this target is by opening the doors of our traditional classrooms to incorporate innovations in teaching and learning.

In conclusion, the big challenge as language educators is to construct strong structures for an engaging environment. We need to plan and make the right decisions on the tools and activities that can assist students in moving through different stages of learning. This process must enhance learner's abilities and ensure that they are motivated enough to be able to interact and collaborate in an online learning environment. As a result, independent knowledge will eventually be enforced building leading to a deeper level of thought.

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