

CHALLENGES IN DESIGNING AN ONLINE ACADEMIC WRITING TUTORIAL FOR INTERNATIONAL EFL/ESL SPEAKING GRADUATE STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

International graduate students (IGSs) whose mother tongues are other than English are known to experience difficulties with academic writing in graduate programs offered in English. The authors designed a set of extracurricular online tutorials aimed at helping IGSs with academic writing development and tracking their writing progress. The article summarizes challenges experienced by the developers in building and running this e-learning tutorials set. The results of the study indicate that while some outlined minor technical challenges in the tutorial design can be addressed, running the tutorials as an extracurricular non-credited activity is not sustainable long-term due to the learners' low motivation resulting with high dropout rates. Revamping the tutorial as a credited online Academic Writing elective course is suggested as a potential solution.

KEYWORDS

Online Tutorials Design, E-Learning, Academic English Writing, International Graduate Students

1. INTRODUCTION

EFL/ESL speaking International graduate students (IGSs) are a disadvantaged group in English-medium universities. As compared to their peers who are native speakers of English, IGSs face much greater challenges in university environments (Devedžić et al., 2022) and specifically in Academic Writing (Chen, 2022). Many universities in Canada are slow to respond to the needs of the IGSs in providing writing support (Okuda & Anderson, 2018). E-learning has the potential to provide those “missing links” that “schools usually omit in the teaching they provide” (Devedžić et al, 2022, p. 3). To address the “missing links” in the teaching of academic writing to IGSs, we developed an extracurricular writing tutorial set with a free open access on MoodleCloud. In this article, we address the challenges experienced by the team in developing and running the tutorials. Our article can be helpful to instructors who are not e-learning specialists but would like to create an online course or tutorial. The research questions we address in this article are: 1. What are the challenges in developing and running an online extracurricular academic writing tutorial? 2. How do three raters (with expertise in ESL) and the learners themselves evaluate the learners' progress with Academic writing in the tutorials?

2. ACADEMIC ESL/EFL WRITING

Academic writing in a foreign language is extremely difficult, since it requires a mastery of the formal grammar and academic vocabulary, of the logic, structure and cohesion of a narrative as well as of academic conventions (such as citation practice, paragraph organization, connectors, etc.) (Chen, 2022). Issues with Academic writing negatively impact IGSs' grades in their programs of study (e.g., Singh, 2015). However, most research of academic writing has been conducted in the context of standard tests of English proficiency (e.g., Riazi, 2016), or of undergraduate level students (Dafouz, 2020). Multiple versions of online courses for academic writing have been proposed (e.g., Shirvani & Porkar, 2022). Relatively few available studies of online writing by

graduate students have been conducted and they mostly addressed structured Academic Writing courses (e.g., Wang & Qin, 2022). The novelty of our study is its focus on an extracurricular e-learning of Academic English writing by IGSs.

The tutorial set focuses on the genre of Literature Review (LR) since it is one of the most frequent assignments among different Canadian graduate programs (Shi & Dong, 2015) and is also a required component of any graduate thesis or an academic paper. While developing the tutorials set, we adopted “the linguistic and genre” approach accommodating for acquisition of linguistic structures and writing within a specific genre (Xu, 2019).

3. ONLINE TUTORIAL SET AND ITS TOOLS

The purpose of the tutorial is to provide a cost-effective and user-friendly tool for IGSs to improve their academic writing online working individually or in groups with a minimal involvement of the instructor. The tutorials are split into 5 units addressing the LR genre requirements, logic and structure, grammar, academic vocabulary, and reported speech. Each unit consists of an H5P interactive e-book with embedded exercises, a writing task, and an end-of-unit survey, a final quiz, plus an evaluation tool by the raters. The tutorial set is delivered via MoodleCloud over the course of 3.5 months. Each tutorial unit lasts for about two weeks, and has fixed dates of writing task submissions. Tutorials 1, 3, 5 contained individual, and tutorials 2 and 4 – collaborative writing tasks, since L2 online writing courses often include collaborative writing to encourage student interactions (Li & Kim, 2016). In total, 30 participants from 4 different universities completed the tutorials.

The major tools in the tutorials were selected with the goal of making tutorials easily accessible and simple enough to be used by learners and instructors with little e-learning experience or computer skills. Moodle is a learning management system (LMS) utilized to host all the materials (e.g., surveys, e-books, quizzes etc.) and functional modules (e.g., announcement, workshop, discussion forum etc.) of the tutorials. Moodle was selected as a platform because it is fully open to anyone for registration. In addition, Moodle also allows the developers/instructors to manage the participants, e.g., split them into groups, send announcements, etc. It enables onsite communication among the instructor and the participants. Survey Monkey was chosen as a support tool, since it is commonly used in Canadian universities and is also supported by the authors’ home university. Survey Monkey is employed for the participants to sign up for the study, report their language and academic background, as well as their perceived progress during the study. Survey Monkey is also used by raters assessors to provide ratings of the participants’ writings following a set of rubrics.

4. CHALLENGES OF THE ONLINE TUTORIAL DELIVERY

Moodle-related challenges. First, participants are required to create a Moodle account. To do this, they have to plough through endless policies pages. After they finally create an account, they must first log out, and then log back in. However, they are not automatically directed to the course (tutorials in our case). Instead, the participants need to click the “Site Home” on the sidebar to see the tutorial and get themselves enrolled in it. All these steps are rather counterintuitive. To help the participants navigate through creating the account and finding the tutorials, we provided detailed instructions on how to complete the enrolment through multiple channels (i.e., project website, automatic email after registration of a Moodle account). The manuals took a considerable extra time and effort of the developers. Even despite the manuals, more than half of the participants failed to register and had to be manually enrolled by a research assistant (RA), and dozens of potential participants dropped out prior to their enrollment due to the above difficulties.

Second, Moodle lacks several functionalities that are important for running the tutorials and conducting research based on the outcomes of the tutorials. For example, although Moodle provides a Module called “Assignment” for the participants to submit their writings, this Module does not support more than one rater assessing a submitted writing. For this reason, we had to transfer this task to Survey Monkey, which in turn, had its issues as outlined below. Likewise, although there is a Module called “Workshop” available in Moodle for the participants to collaborate in a group, it does not allow real-time online document editing, which is essential for group writing tasks. To address that, the team had to create multiple editable documents via Google

Docs, one Google Doc per each group in each tutorial, and post the links to them in the groups' working spaces on Moodle. This did not only multiply the numbers of tools to use, but also required the participants to learn how to edit Google Docs. In addition, Moodle has no support for automated extraction of participants' posts or communication records on the Discussion Forum and the Workshop, which added to extra time and costs to have these types of data extracted manually.

Survey Monkey related challenges. Survey Monkey does not have a built-in function for extracting and aggregating the response data automatically in an individualized way. Automated data extraction is pertinent for collecting information or feedback from the participants and for tabulating raters' assessments of the participants' writings. For example, the authors needed to trace participants' progress self-evaluation over each tutorial, but there was no automatic way supported by Survey Monkey to aggregate the individualized response data for every participant across different tutorial units. Survey Monkey does provide aggregated response data for all submissions within a specific survey with basic summary statistics and charts, but this aggregation is done at population-level and does not allow individualization (by each participant). Individualized survey data aggregation is also important for informing the participants of the respective raters' assessments in a comprehensive and timely manner. Due to the lack of individualized aggregation in Survey Monkey automatic support, the aggregation has to be done manually, which is extremely time-consuming. For instance, it takes about 20-30 minutes to aggregate three raters' assessments for every submitted writing. Moreover, manual aggregation creates a concern for human error.

H5P-related challenges. An inherent challenge of the tutorial sets was making the content interactive while maintaining a depth of instructional content. The initial content was developed by the course instructors in text format. To convert this content into interactive e-books in H5P additional elements had to be developed (e.g., figures, small quizzes) and the initial text had to be rearranged to make the content interactive and more easily readable online (Ref. Fig.1). This increased the time spent on communication within the team related to clarifications of the content, figures, and quizzes to maximize the tutorial quality. In addition, although H5P provides various options and modules to design and make interactive e-books, it does not support open-ended quizzes where an expected response should be provided in text format. As a trade-off, quizzes in the study were split into two parts, with the open-ended quizzes placed in Moodle, and non-open-ended quizzes - in H5P e-book, which could be confusing for the participants.

Challenges related to participant dropout. From over 300 participants who signed up for the study, only 30 participants (10%) completed the whole tutorials set. As mentioned above, dozens of participants

Compare the following sentences for the writer's stance or perspectives. Can you identify the presence of the writer's stance? If yes, mark the stance-making expressions.

- Facebook and other social media websites have taken down millions of posts that contained hate speech in the past few months.
- According ✓ to ✓ Johnson et al. (2015), *it is imperative to* raise the bar for screening the samples to be used in this type of experiment.
- As ✓ can ✓ be ✓ seen ✓ in this survey, this topic has been relatively new and, we believe, *it is likely to* see more publications on this topic in the new few years.

Perfect!


 6/6

Figure 1. An example of an interactive exercise in Tutorial 4 on the Moodle Platform (in h5p)

dropped out even before starting their work on tutorials. Others dropped out in subsequent weeks of the tutorial commenting on not being able to handle the extra work on writing along with their coursework and research. We offered remuneration of \$100 to the participants, but it was not a sufficient motivation to continue non-credited work.

5. THE ASSESSMENT OF THE PROGRESS WITH ACADEMIC WRITING IN THE ONLINE TUTORIALS SET

Three raters' aggregated assessment demonstrates an increase in the scores for all the writing assessment rubrics (Ref. Table 1). The participants who completed the tutorials ranked their experience and progress with different aspects of Academic writing and LR genre awareness - highly (Ref. Table 2).

Table 1. Raters' aggregated assessment (10-point scale) of the participants' writing by 9 rubrics in Tutorials 1 and 5

	rubrics	T1	T5
1	incorporating sources	6.8	8.1
2	referencing	6.3	7.8
3	structure	6.9	7.8
4	logic	7.1	7.9
5	clarity	6.8	8
6	cohesion	6.8	8
7	connectors	6.8	8.1
8	grammar	6.9	7.9
9	academic vocabulary	7.1	8.2

Table 2. Participants' assessment of their progress upon the completion of the tutorials set (4-point)

rubric	Average score (1-4)
overall progress	3.4
genre knowledge	3.4
incorporating sources	3.3
referencing	3.3
structure, logic	3.3
cohesion	3.3
academic vocabulary	3.1
grammar	3.3
overall experience	3.5

6. DISCUSSION

Developing academic writing skills by IGSs has been shown to be an extremely difficult task in earlier research (e.g., Chen, 2022). Various types of virtualization and e-learning forms for improving IGSs' writing have been suggested (e.g., Barbour El Rassi, 2022). However, to the best of our knowledge, online tutorials for teaching Academic Writing to IGSs have not been proposed so far, and our research is innovative in this respect.

Our study shows that first, completing an online writing tutorial has a positive impact on the participants' academic writing as per raters' and self-assessment scores, which need to be further verified in future with measuring objective writing parameters. Second, as noted in earlier literature, the success of online learning largely depends on the students' "readiness and intentions to continue" (Barbour El Rassi, 2022, p. 18), which was not the case in our study. While we, of course, had no way to identify the actual reasons for dropouts, many learners sent apologetic e-mails to the instructors stating that they are too busy with their regular programs of studies to continue. Due to university policies, we could not pay the participants more than \$100 for taking part in the study, and it was simply not enough to motivate them to continue with the tutorial set when their program or research priorities were at stake. It appears that taking a non-credited tutorials set was too overwhelming for most participants to handle in combination with work on their regular programs of studies and theses. High dropouts in online MOOC courses have also been reported earlier (Kinash, 2013). A solution is seen in the conversion of our tutorials into an elective credited course on the home university platform familiar to the learners.

The study was limited by the number of participants that persevered to the end of the tutorials (30), and by types of assessment (expert and self-assessment). Text analysis techniques for writing assessment should be added in future.

7. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the online tutorials are an effective way to improve Academic writing according to the expert scores and participants' progress self-assessment. We identified a range of challenges and solutions related to navigating different tools to create an online e-learning tool for Academic Writing to IGSs. We also found that teaching non-credited tutorials leads to a high dropout. Offering such tutorials for partial or full credit as an

elective would yield more consistent enrollments. Our future research will also involve a detailed analysis of texts produced by the participants following parameters identified in earlier studies (e.g., Kyle & Crossley, 2015; Wang, & Qin, 2022).

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