

Student Experiences and Teaching Optimisation in Academic Writing Courses for English Majors in Macau: An Empirical Analysis from the Student Perspective

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Abstract:

In the era of academic globalisation, academic writing has become a cornerstone for evaluating higher education quality, especially for English majors who rely on it to engage in international scholarly exchanges. However, non-native English speakers often struggle with bridging the gap between linguistic norms and disciplinary requirements in such courses. This study employs a qualitative interview approach to analyse the learning process and experiences of three third-year English majors in an academic writing course at the City University of Macau. The research data show that there is a significant gap between the students' initial "experimental" expectations and the core content of the course. During the course, participants faced the pressure of transforming language into academic expression, building a logical argumentative framework, and balancing a multidimensional grading system. In response to the feedback from teachers, participants actively improved their writing skills through the use of tools, studying model essays, participating in peer review, and enhancing communication with teachers. Based on the findings, this study proposes optimisation recommendations, including layered assessment, enhanced methodology instruction, and a longer writing cycle, to provide insights for teaching practice in academic writing courses.

Keywords: academic writing courses; learning experiences; qualitative interviews; teaching optimisation; layered assessment strategy

1. Introduction

Against the background of the wave of globalisation and the deep development of academic internationalisation, academic writing ability has become a key indicator of the effectiveness of professional training in higher education. Especially for English majors, academic writing is not only the focus of comprehensive language skills but also an indispensable foundational ability to participate in international academic discourse. However, existing research suggests that non-native English speakers generally face multiple challenges in the learning process of academic writing courses. On one hand, the conventions of English academic writing (e.g., APA formatting and critical argumentation) differ significantly from the paradigms of Chinese writing, leading to cognitive conflicts among students during language transition and logical construction [1]. On the other hand, traditional academic writing instruction tends to focus on formal norms while inadequately bridging the gap between disciplinary characteristics and practical needs [2]. This issue is particularly evident in Macau, where systematic studies on academic writing courses for English majors remain scarce. As an educational hub blending Eastern and Western cultures, Macau's universities require academic writing courses for English majors to adhere to international academic standards while accommodating the linguistic backgrounds and learning needs of local students. However, there has been little exploration of several key questions: What differences exist between students' expectations and actual experiences in academic writing courses? How do core challenges in the learning process affect the devel-

opment of writing skills? And do current teaching and assessment systems align with students' developmental needs? Addressing these questions is critical for optimizing academic writing instruction.

In this context, this study focuses on the teaching practices of academic writing courses for English majors in Macau. Using qualitative interviews, the study systematically collects data on students' learning experiences to uncover the discrepancies between their expectations and actual experiences, analyze the core challenges and corresponding coping strategies during the learning process, and propose teaching optimization suggestions based on student feedback. The findings aim to provide empirical support for building a more targeted teaching framework for academic writing courses.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants

The study selected three third-year English major students from the City University of Macau as interviewees (Table 1). All participants had completed three semesters of academic writing courses, including key assignments such as literature reviews and research papers. Their course grades ranged from B+ to A- (upper-middle level), indicating practical understanding and reflective capacity regarding the course content. The homogeneity of the sample (same university, major, and year) helped control background variables, while the grade distribution minimized the influence of extreme cases on the analysis [3].

Table 1. Basic Information of Participants

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Major/Year	Academic Writing Course Grades (Year 2 Second Semester – Year 3 Second Semester)
Participant A	Female	21	English Major, Year 3	A-, A-, B+
Participant B	Female	21	English Major, Year 3	A-, A-, B+
Participant C	Male	22	English Major, Year 3	B+, A-, B+

2.2 Interview Guide Design

The study employed a semi-structured interview guide with five core questions covering key dimensions of academic writing learning (Table 2). The guide was designed based on the academic writing course syllabus in Macau universities, focusing on fundamental topics such as

course expectations, challenges, and assessment criteria. It also included open-ended questions (e.g., "What teaching content would you like to see added or improved?") to capture personalized feedback. The questions followed a progressive "cognition-practice-evaluation" logic to ensure systematic and in-depth data collection [4].

Table 2. Interview Dimensions and Guide

Question Number	Dimension	Specific Question Content
1	Initial Expectations	What were your initial impressions and expectations of the academic writing course? How did these differ from your actual learning experiences?
2	Learning Challenges	What did you find most challenging in the academic writing course? Could you provide specific examples of difficulties you encountered?
3	Evaluation Criteria	Are the requirements and grading standards of academic writing courses in Macau reasonable? Were there any requirements that were difficult to understand or follow?
4	Feedback and Improvement	How did you feel and what were your thoughts when receiving feedback from teachers on your writing? What measures did you take afterward to improve your writing skills?
5	Teaching Effectiveness	Do the current teaching content and methods of the academic writing course effectively help you address the difficulties you encountered? What teaching content or methods would you like to see added or improved?

2.3 Interview Implementation and Data Processing

2.3.1 Interview format and recording

Two participants (Participant A and B) were interviewed face-to-face, with audio recorded using an iPhone device. Each session lasted 8–10 minutes. One participant (Participant C) was interviewed via Tencent Meeting using the platform's recording function, with a session duration of approximately 9 minutes. All interviews were conducted in quiet environments and preceded by written informed consent from participants, clarifying that recordings would be used solely for academic research.

2.3.2 Data transcription and analysis

Within 24 hours of each interview, the recordings were transcribed verbatim into Chinese text, and the transcripts were cross-checked with the original recordings to ensure accuracy. The data were analyzed using manual thematic coding. First, an open-ended review of the three interview transcripts was conducted to identify high-frequency keywords such as “difficulties in language expression,” “challenges in logical argumentation,” and “detail in grading standards.” After identifying these keywords, they are divided into five core themes: “gaps between expectations and reality,” “writing skill bottlenecks,” “assessment system feedback,” “feedback reception and improvement,” and “teaching optimization needs” [5].

3 Results

3.1 Differences Between Course Expectations and Actual Experience

At first, all 3 participants believed that academic writing courses should be advanced and rigorous, where they

could learn experimental design methods or complex research processes. However, after attending classes, the participants (100%) realized that the course focused more on analyzing literature and training logical argumentation rather than how to conduct quantitative research. For example, one participant expressed, “I thought I could learn experimental methods in academic writing courses, but the focus was actually on researching cited literature and constructing arguments.” Another participant mentioned, “The first assignment required a complete research paper, which was a significant jump in difficulty and lacked sufficient connection with previous foundational writing courses.” Moreover, the strict requirements for APA format standards and deep exploration of critical thinking in the course exceeded 2 participants' (67%) expectations.

3.2 Core Challenges During the Learning Process

The biggest challenge in learning academic writing lies in the transition between everyday language and academic language, as well as following academic norms. All participants (100%) frequently made errors in citation formats, such as line spacing, font, and other details, resulting in repeated revisions of the article. At the same time, building a logical argumentation framework was also fraught with difficulties. For instance, 2 participants (67%) admitted being accustomed to listing and describing data but lacked analytical skills, making it difficult to adapt to the progressive argumentation logic of academic writing. One participant (33%) specifically stated, “My first draft was 80% data description without critical analysis.”

3.3 Rationality and Implementation Issues of Grading Criteria

All participants (100%) acknowledged the meticulousness

of the grading criteria in terms of language, logic, and citation and believed that they reflected academic norms. However, in actual writing, 2 participants (67%) indicated it was difficult for them to simultaneously meet multiple requirements, often neglecting one aspect over another. In addition, the mechanical deduction method for formatting issues (such as Word setting errors) has been criticized by 1 participant (33%) for being too rigid and lacking flexibility.

3.4 Strategies for Responding to Teacher Feedback

Participants commonly felt disappointed when they received negative feedback from their teachers at the beginning. However, later on, all the participants' attitudes changed, and they recognized the professionalism of their supervisors. Subsequently, all participants (100%) improved their writing skills by using resources like the Academic Phrasebank to enhance expression, with 1 participants (33%) also using Grammarly for language polishing. Additionally, 2 participants (67%) studied high-scoring papers for structural guidance, with one noting, "Analyzing sample essays helped me understand how to organize arguments logically." Moreover, 1 participant (33%) participated in peer reviews to get multiple perspectives on their writing, and all (100%) engaged in one-on-one discussions with professors to address specific issues, which helped them prioritize revisions effectively.

3.5 Suggestions for Teaching Optimization

The participants appreciated the framework and practicality of the course system and put forward improvement suggestions in several areas. 2 participants (67%) recommended the instructors strengthen the teaching of logic and methodology, especially in the design of humanities experiments and questionnaire validity assessments. Also, 3 participants (100%) suggested extending the writing timeline to promote teacher-student interactions and 1 participants (33%) proposed increase private feedback channels such as emails. Additionally, the participants unanimously (100%) called for learning resources such as formatting templates and academic expression databases to support their learning.

4 Discussion

4.1 Alignment Between Course Expectations and Discipline Characteristics

There was a significant difference between the actual content of "literature analysis orientation" and participants' expectations of "experimental" academic writing. For example, some participants hoped to learn language

experiment design, but the course focused on citation and logical reasoning. This gap reflected students' insufficient understanding of academic writing paradigms, which may be due to the lack of systematic teaching of qualitative research methods in early courses [6]. To address this, it is recommended that the course clarify the characteristics of academic writing that emphasise textual explanation and logical reasoning through case comparisons in order to help students establish realistic expectations.

4.2 Challenges in Language Standardization and Logical Argumentation

Participants were always plagued by two major difficulties when it came to academic writing. One is that their expression was too colloquial and far from rigorous academic expression. Secondly, the format requirements of academic writing were strict, and details such as font and line spacing required frequent revisions by participants. Logically, there were also problems, such as overemphasizing data description over analysis and deviating from the argument in the outline. In this regard, it is necessary to enhance the guidance of "academic language conversion" and "argument structure construction." The "argument-evidence-analysis" model can be introduced, combined with step-by-step exercises, to help students shift from description to critical analysis. Plus, offering academic phrase banks could also assist in language standardization [7].

4.3 Balancing Grading Standards in Execution

Participants appreciated detailed grading criteria, but it was difficult for participants to balance multidimensional requirements during implementation. A layered assessment strategy is suggested to address this challenge. In the initial stage (e.g., the first 4 weeks of the course), the assessment should primarily focus on core dimensions such as logical coherence and argument construction, temporarily minimizing the emphasis on format details. As students gradually master the core writing skills, the second stage (e.g., weeks 5-8) can introduce basic format requirements (such as citation norms and paragraph structures), while adopting a "warning-first" mechanism for minor formatting issues instead of direct deductions. In the final stage (e.g., after week 9), the assessment can comprehensively include all format standards, such as font styles, line spacing, and reference formats [8]. Meanwhile, to reduce technical errors and enable students to concentrate more on content development, standardized templates (e.g., APA templates) should be provided.

4.4 Feedback Mechanisms and Learning Strategies

Participants were quite frustrated when they received negative feedback from their teachers, such as the essays

they thought were excellent but were pointed out to be illogical. However, they eventually adopted proactive strategies, including studying high-quality papers, using tools like Grammarly, and engaging in peer review. To improve the feedback process, non-public methods such as email or one-on-one meetings could reduce psychological stress [9]. Training could also enhance the effectiveness of peer review and encourage students to shift from passively receiving feedback to actively analyzing texts [10].

4.5 Bridging Teaching Content and Practical Needs

Participants expressed a desire for more instruction on research methodologies, such as evaluating the validity of questionnaire designs and for extended writing timelines to allow for in-depth discussions. The current course may lack coverage of applied research methods, such as empirical designs in language teaching. Therefore, embedding small-scale practical cases, such as simulated questionnaire analysis, is recommended. Additionally, spreading out writing tasks into stages, such as brainstorming, drafting, and revising, can help students deepen their understanding of logical structures and prevent rushed, lower-quality writing due to tight deadlines [11].

5. Conclusion

This study systematically employed qualitative interviews to explore the learning experiences of English majors in Macao in the academic writing course. It was found that students initially misunderstood that the course focused on “experimental research” but actually emphasized literature analysis and logical argumentation training, which revealed their lack of understanding of the norms and paradigms of academic writing. During the courses, the main challenges for students were to transform their language into academic expression and to build a rigorous, logical argumentation system; they generally struggled to balance the requirements of the multi-dimensional grading criteria. Notably, after receiving feedback from teachers, students took the initiative to adopt systematic improvement strategies, such as using tools, deconstructing sample papers, participating in peer reviews, and solving problems through personalised communication. At the same time, students put forward feasible suggestions such as implementing layered assessment, strengthening methodological guidance, extending writing timelines, and optimising the feedback mechanism.

However, this study has some limitations. First, the sample consisted of only three students from one university, which may affect the general applicability of the findings. Second, the data were collected in a single manner, obtaining information solely through interviews, and lacked

multivariate validation and cross-corroboration, such as text analysis. Lastly, the different models of teaching and learning were not compared, which is a limitation in comprehensively evaluating the effectiveness of course design. Future research can be expanded in three directions. First, broaden the sample scope by including students from multiple universities in Macao to enhance the representativeness of the conclusions. Second, integrate text analysis with classroom observations to comprehensively examine students’ writing development from multiple perspectives. Third, conduct teaching experiments to compare the instructional effects of effectiveness of layered assessment strategies with traditional assessment models, thereby offering more targeted practical guidance for the reform of academic writing courses.

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