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Enhancing Writing Skills of the Undergraduates: Implications for Curriculum Design in Sri Lankan context

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Abstract: We present findings from a mixed-methods study of undergraduates' attitudes toward written communication in their third academic year at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura's Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce (FMSC). The undergraduates in the Department of Commerce were asked to complete an online survey on their attitudes about mastering writing. The research method was descriptive. After analyzing the theoretical underpinnings of attitudes and writing, a survey was created, piloted, and given to 25 randomly chosen third year FMSC undergraduates. Only 22 of the sample members answered every query. To find out why the 22 participants desired to learn writing in the FMSC, a questionnaire with 10 closed-ended questions was sent, and a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews with all the 22 participants was conducted. The findings indicate that the majority (92%) of the participants need to improve their speaking skills not the writing skills in the university. Many (95.5%) valued it as a basic requirement to pursue their higher education in the future. There was a considerable level of preference (90%) to master English writing skills online than practising it in the physical classroom. However, only 19% of the participants mentioned that they have more than three hours a week to practise writing skills. Findings further indicated that about 20% of the sample never use library resources. The above findings may be helpful in designing English writing courses for undergraduates in Departments of Commerce in Sri Lankan universities.

Key words: Academic Writing, Undergraduates, Commerce, Curriculum Design

1. INTRODUCTION

Writing for Commerce Undergraduates in the FMSC in the University of Sri Jayewardenepura is a skill-based course designed to provide students with the necessary skills to write different kinds of essays. According to Dharmawardene and Wijewardene (2022), approximately one million students worldwide are learning English, demonstrating the importance of English teaching/learning for academic purposes. Because English has become "the medium of a

great deal of the world's knowledge," students must be able to communicate effectively in the target language (Hyland, 2007).

According to Swales and Feak (2004), English has become the language of research, commerce, and education. However, success in the relevant fields is determined by how well students handle various writing genres such as summaries, essays, and reviews (Kay & Dudley-Evans, 1998). Academic Writing is important in a

country like Sri Lanka, where English is widely used for academic purposes.

Strong writing skills have been considered as imperative in almost all facets of life (Dalem, 2010). Hence Academic Writing has become a prerequisite in order to carry on one's academic career. Additionally, in the arena of higher education one of the quality indicators of good universities is the English writing skills of their graduates (Yan, 2005). Despite the Sri Lankan government's significant investment in English education courses, there has been little research on the effectiveness of these programs from the perspective of learners.

Academic Writing courses in Sri Lankan universities are currently haphazard, with inadequate course design, teacher training, adequate instruction time, and proper evaluation. Invariably there is the need for the development of specific-purpose curricula based on learner attitudes, which will provide the appropriate context for long-term Academic Writing courses.

The present study addressed the following two research questions:-

- a. What are the Commerce undergraduates' attitudes on learning Academic Writing?
- b. Are there specific methodologies they prefer to use when learning Academic Writing in the University?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Department of Commerce at the FMSC of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura served as the study's location. The descriptive method was used in the study. Following a review of the theoretical background on attitudes and academic writing, a questionnaire was designed, piloted, and administered to 25 randomly selected third year FMSC undergraduates out of the 33 total number of students registered to follow the academic writing course in 2022. The selected sample was more than 75% of the total

population. Participants were randomly chosen considering the students' registration numbers. Leaving out one number after taking two consecutive numbers into consideration was the method utilized in selecting the study sampling. However, only 22 people in the sample answered all of the questions in the questionnaire.

For paired sample t-test, the participants' scores of the end-semester examination in 2022 was considered. Four scores of the four language components were separately taken into analysis.

A questionnaire was administered online to all the participants. It contained 10 closed-ended questions on the participants' attitudes and perceptions on learning academic writing in the University and online. The questionnaire was tested for reliability using Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha=0.81$). Face validity of the questionnaire was tested by getting six experts' approval of it. A focus group interview with all consented 22 participants was carried out in the university premises to explore their views on learning Academic Writing in the FMSC.

The quantitative data gathered was analyzed using SPSS Version 22.0 and the qualitative data was analyzed through the Content Analysis under different themes such as preferred components, time availability, interest on the subject, future use, level of difficulty and use of library resources.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Students' Performance at Four Language Components

The students' marks for the four language components, reading, and writing, listening and speaking were analyzed using SPSS Version 22.0. The data tabulated have been presented with mean scores for each language component. Results reveal that the students' performance is best at writing skill (Mean = 74.68) while it was poor at listening skills (Mean = 53.55) though they underestimated their proficiency in writing (Table 1).

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the four language components assessed

		Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
N	Valid	22	22	22	22
	Missing	0	0	0	0
Mean		68.50	74.68	53.55	61.86
Median		69.00	75.50	55.00	60.00
Mode		69	67 ^a	46 ^a	56 ^a
Std. Deviation		8.943	7.047	13.269	7.318
Variance		79.976	49.656	176.069	53.552
Skewness		-.106	.652	-.208	.222
Std. Error of Skewness		.491	.491	.491	.491
Range		39	27	40	29
Minimum		49	65	31	49
Maximum		88	92	71	78
Sum		1507	1643	1178	1361

Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

Table 2 (below) shows the parameters that determine the shape and probabilities of the distribution of the students' scores they obtained for the four language components. In the normal distribution graph, the highest scale (13.27) was for Listening skills while the lowest (7.05) was for writing skills.

Table 2. Estimated Distribution Parameters

		Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
Normal Distribution	Location	68.50	74.68	53.55	61.86
	Scale	8.943	7.047	13.269	7.318

The cases are unweighted.

Table 3 (below) shows the average scores that the participants obtained for the four language components in their end-semester examination. Students' highest average score (74.68) was for the writing component while the lowest was for the listening component.

Table 3. Mean Values

	Reading	Writing	Listening	Speaking
Mean	68.50	74.68	53.55	61.86
N	22	22	22	22
Std. Deviation	8.943	7.047	13.269	7.318

3.2 Presentation of the data

The data collected through the online questionnaire are presented on figures 1 to 10 below.

1- Why do you learn Academic Writing?

22 responses



Figure 1. The reasons given by the participants for learning academic writing

The responses received for question 1 reveals that the majority of the participants (77.3%) learn academic writing with the intention of passing their examinations prescribed for them in the Faculty. Only a few of them, about 10% of the participants learn it targeting passing the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) (Fig.1).

2-What is your preferred learning style?

22 responses

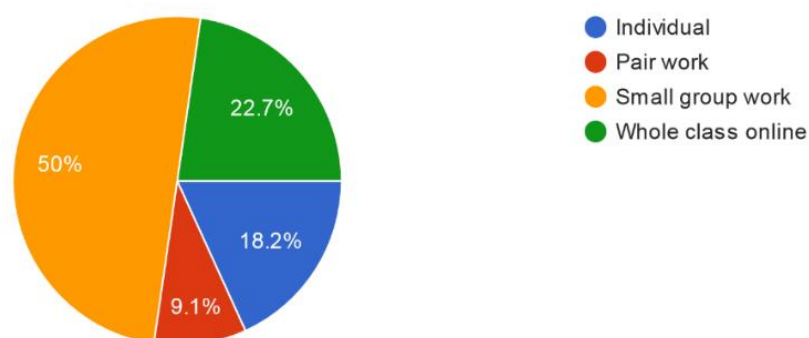


Figure 2. Participants' preferred learning style

The responses received for question 2 reveals that 50% of the participants prefer to learn academic writing in small groups. However, a significant proportion 22.7% of the participants said that they preferred whole class learning online (Fig.2).

3- What is your attitude about learning Academic Writing in the Faculty?

22 responses

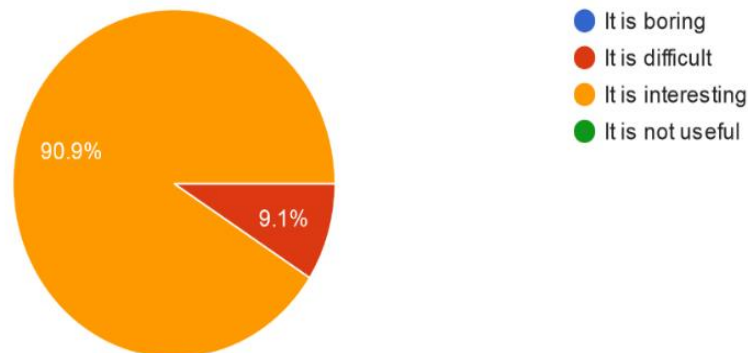


Figure 3. Participants' attitude on learning Academic Writing in the Faculty.

The responses received for question 3 reveals that the majority of the participants (90.9%) enjoy learning academic writing saying that it was interesting. However, nearly 10% of the participants found it difficult to learn (Fig.3).

4- How often do you use your library resources to practise Academic Writing?

22 responses

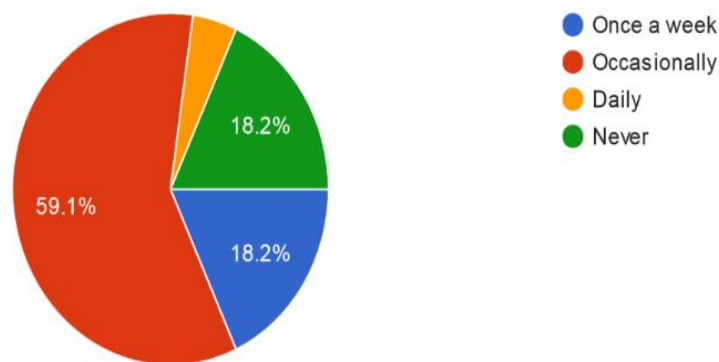


Figure 4. The frequency of using the library resources

The responses received for question 4 reveals that the majority of the participants (59.1%) use library resources available in the university in order to practice academic writing but about 20% of the participants have never used library resources for learning (Fig.4).

5- What English skill do you need to improve your professional goals?

22 responses

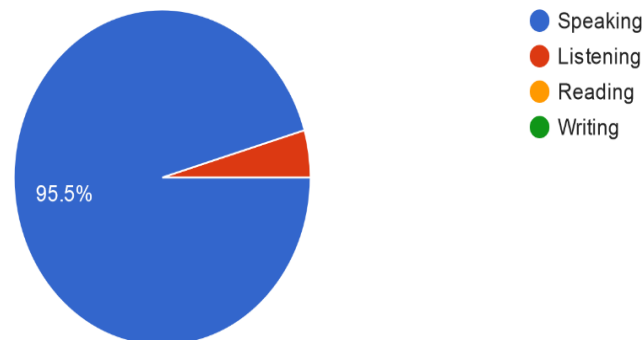


Figure 5. The most needed skill the students need as they perceive

The responses received for question 5 reveals that vast majority, 95.5% of the participants preferred learning speaking skills compared to the other components. Although this study was aimed at exploring their academic writing practices, none revealed that their priority was to improve their writing skills (Fig.5).

6- What resources are available to you to improve Academic writing?

22 responses

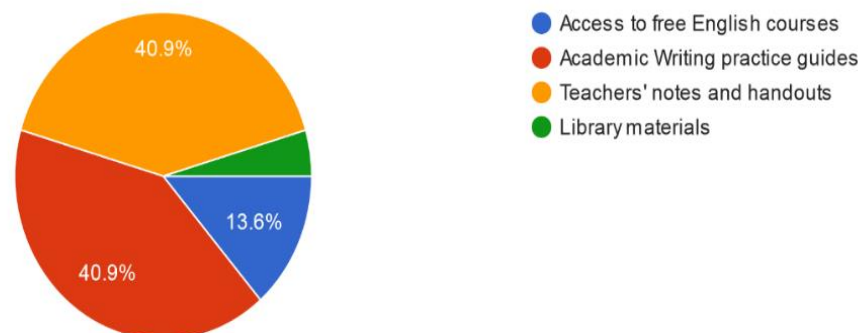


Figure 6. The resource availability for the improvement of academic writing

The responses received for question 6 reveals that the equal proportions of the participants (40.9%) used either practice guides available for them or the teachers' notes and handouts to improve upon their writing skills. Only 13.6% of the participants had access to free online English courses (Fig.6).

7- How many hours a week do you spend for learning Academic Writing?

21 responses

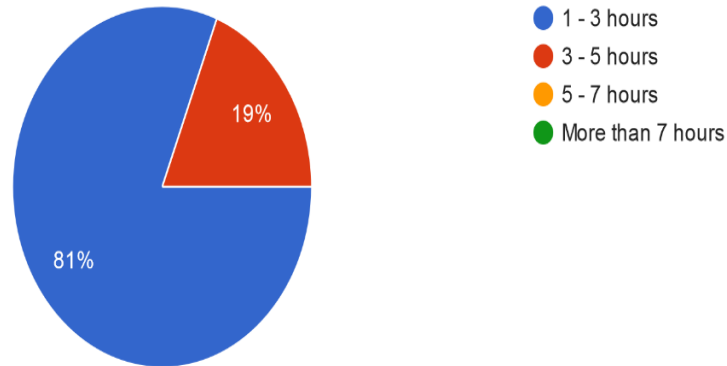


Figure 7. The number of hours spent on learning academic writing.

The responses received for question 7 reveals that more than 80% of the participants allocate about one to three hours a week for learning academic writing (Fig.7).

8- What is your preferred writing activity?

21 responses

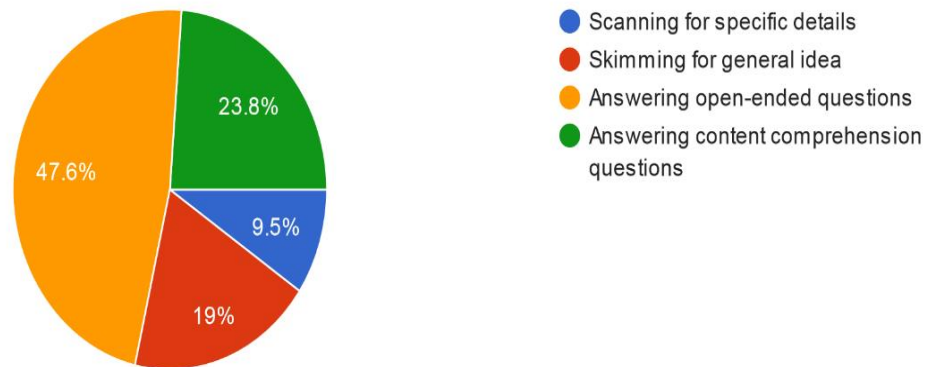


Figure 8. The preferred writing activity of the students

The responses received for question 8 reveals that majority, 47.6% of the participants preferred to learn academic writing by answering open-ended questions (Fig.8).

9- What is your present level of writing skills?

22 responses

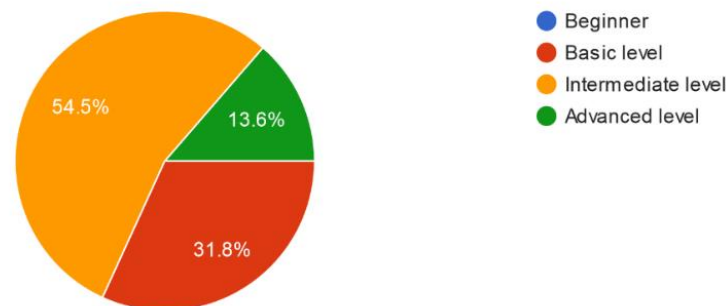


Figure 9. Students' present level of writing skills as they perceive

The responses received for question 9 reveals that majority, 54.5% of the participants believed that their level of writing skills was at intermediate level. Only 13.6% said that they had an advanced skills in writing while 31.8 said their skills were at the basic level (Fig.9).

10- Do you like to continue learning English online?

22 responses

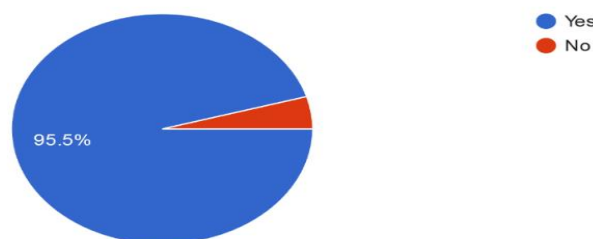


Figure 10. The preference to learn English further

The responses received for question 10 reveals that vast majority, 95.5% of the participants preferred to learn English online (Fig.10).

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study are consistent with that of Dalem (2010) as he too found that many undergraduates expect to improve speaking skills disregarding their inability to express their thoughts in writing. The purpose of his study was to determine what difficulties students encounter when learning to write academic writing and to differentiate between students' learning needs and objectives. The sample consisted of 15 students enrolled in the University of Malang during academic year 2016-2017. In order to explore these issues, this study was conducted descriptively, and a

questionnaire distributed among the students at the English department in the State University of Malang. He also found similar findings to those of the present study with regard to the students' attitudes on learning academic writing in the university. Availability of resources to learn, access to library resources and the time spent on learning writing showed similar findings to those of the current study. The percentage preferred to improve writing skill compared to the other three skills was only about 5% as his study revealed.

Swales and Feak (2004), who defined writing as a "... curiously solitary form of communication, addressed to an absent and often unknown reader" also found that majority of the undergraduates in Asian context expect to improve speaking skill and undervalue the necessity of mastering other components. Dalem (2010) states that writing is "... the logical organization and arrangement of the written sentences within a paragraph and paragraphs within the units of discourse ...and the expression of the ideas". The first definition appears to imply that writing is a secondary linguistic activity, whereas the second definition also considers it a type of communication that lacks a clear and solid social context. Sri Lankan students who underwent the present study seem to have realized the linguistic relationship of the writing as a component have with the other three components of language learning.

According to Aduba and Mayowa-Adebara (2022), the researcher Fitria (2020) defined writing as a "complicated cognitive task" because it "...demands careful thought, discipline, and concentration, and it is not just a simple direct production of what the brain knows or can do at a particular moment" (p. 9). Participants in the present study expressed their thoughts by directly translating what they think in their native language into English when answering the questions given at the end-semester examination. However, all of the above definitions seem to imply that writing is a secondary activity involving complex mental processes, making it a difficult skill to learn and teach and not an easy task as translating word for word.

According to Kisworo et al. (2023), writing is an important skill for university students because they must use it for note taking, essay writing, answering written questions, and composition writing, and so on. It is crucial for management students who must answer subjective questions. Yet, in the present study, students did not show that they had realized the above value of learning writing.

According to Scherer et al. (2023), the difficulty and complexity arise when the writing includes

discovering a thesis, developing support for it, organizing, revising, and finally editing it to ensure an effective, error-free piece of writing. The present study revealed that the participants were less capable of organizing, revising and summarizing what they intend to express. However, writing is considered a difficult skill to teach because it includes several components, such as a) a comprehensive command of grammar, b) mastery of spelling and punctuation, c) use of appropriate vocabulary, d) appropriate style to meet the expectations of the expected readers, and e) organizational skills (Scherer et al., 2023). Despite the fact that writing has been recognized as an extremely important skill, particularly in the context of English for academic purposes, it does not have a deserving place in language programs, according to numerous research studies (Dalem, 2010). The present study also contributes to the same set of studies as the sample proved that they underestimate the significance of academic writing when compared to the enhancement of the other language skills.

The findings of the present study are also consistent with the study done by Mendis and Rambukwella (2020). They found that although different scholars have classified L2 writing theories and teaching approaches differently, all of these approaches have individual strengths and weaknesses, but they are complementary to one another as Grami (2010) has also stated. The participants of the present study As Rambukwella (2019) states, they are traditionally classified into four major approaches: "controlled composition, current-traditional rhetoric, the process approach, and English for academic purposes (EAP)".

Sukmawati et al. (2022) classified the four approaches to teaching L2 writing skills into four emphases: form (the rhetorical and linguistic features of the text), writer (the composing processes), content (as demanded by the readers), and reader (their expectations). According to Badger and White (2000), while numerous L2 writing teaching approaches have been tried, the product and process approaches, as well as the relatively new genre approach, are the most important. The staff at the Department of Commerce in the FMSC in the University of Sri

Jayewardeneperu considers the above concepts in teaching English Professional Communication to the undergraduates although the students show lack of interest in mastering academic writing.

It has also been stated that the primary emphasis of the 'controlled composition' and 'current-traditional rhetoric' teaching approaches is form (the written product), whereas the 'writer approach,' 'content approach,' and 'process approach' place a greater emphasis on the cognitive processes of the writing process (Badger & White, 2000). Among the various approaches to teaching L2 writing skills, the product approach has been identified as the most traditional (Grami, 2009). Although the FMSC used both traditional and modern approaches when teaching academic writing in the Department of Commerce before administering the questionnaire to the participants and before they make students sit the end-semester examination, student's preferences for learning language components did not change.

As Richards (1990) mentioned, the "product approach" emphasizes on the final product, i.e., the students' ability to write grammatically correct texts, the theory which was applied with the students involved in the present study as well. Research has provided valuable insights into the fact that this approach was popular in the 1950s and 1960s: a time when the audiolingual method of English language teaching was popular and focused on learners' correct use of grammatical rules in which writing skills were exploited through exercises such as grammar drills, imitation of model sentences or passages, fill in the blanks, substitutions, and so on, to reinforce the oral patterns that were used to practice through intensive practice. Incorporating these into the curriculum of the FMSC would be of use in enhancing the writing skills of the individuals in the future.

5. CONCLUSION

The findings provide important insights into the academic writing of Sri Lankan undergraduates majoring in Commerce. The responses of the participants to the focus group interview questions indicate that Commerce-major university

undergraduates are typically engaged in sentence-level or, at most, paragraph-level academic writing and do not believe it is important to write different types of essays at this level. It is recommended that the faculty provides students with extensive practice in writing paragraphs of reasonable length. The findings of this empirical study support the general assumption that Sri Lankan students are more interested in improving their speaking skills than their writing skills. Given the weak foundation in writing skills of Sri Lankan students who join the FMSC's Commerce department, it is strongly recommended that language courses be increased in order to strengthen writing skills in particular. The majority of lecturers use traditional methods of teaching academic writing, making it difficult for them to go the extra mile on their own to master English language skills and achieve better English language proficiency, according to focus group interviews with participants. Identifying students' writing problems at the start of their university studies cannot be overstated, and a comprehensive test should be administered to all freshmen and women who join Commerce departments in the FMSC at the University of Sri Jayewardeneperu in order to tailor course content to their needs.

Although many participants were reluctant to accept effective corrective feedback measures such as peer correction and group/pair work, there appears to be an urgent need to train students to participate in these classroom techniques to compensate for insufficient teaching hours for language courses and teachers' personal attention due to large classes in Sri Lankan universities. With the proliferation of online resources, students frequently underestimate the value of books; as a result, another issue with undergraduates is that they do not use dictionaries. Despite their apparent preference for online learning (>95%), it is also suggested that faculty members recommend good dictionaries and ensure that students carry them even in their classrooms so that they can learn more effectively.

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