

## **MORE RESULTS AND REFLECTIONS ON A UM GRADUATE STUDENTS' ENGLISH ACADEMIC WRITING WORKSHOP**

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### **Abstract**

*Few studies of English academic writing workshops for non-native speaker (NNES) graduate students exist in the literature, and even fewer have been analyzed with a computational tool. This study explores the results of an English academic writing workshop for University of Malaya graduate students in all disciplines, including the analysis of pre-workshop, post-workshop, and follow-up participant writing samples with the Coh-Metrix syntax analyzer. The Coh-Metrix results for six indices were analyzed using SPSS. Participant responses to the researcher's pre-workshop, post-workshop, and follow-up questionnaires were also analyzed with SPSS. These analyses found that the workshop produced no significant immediate or longitudinal improvement in the six Coh-Metrix indices selected, but the questionnaire results showed a clear self-reported improvement in self-regulation of the academic writing process and in confidence toward it. These inconclusive results suggest that such interventions have more of an attitudinal effect on participants than a measurable quantitative improvement in their writing. Nonetheless, previous studies cited in the literature review claim to produce writing improvement, and this study's inconclusive findings might be due to its small sample size. More studies of English academic writing workshops for students of all levels are needed to clarify these questions.*

**Keywords:** *Academic writing, writing workshop, non-native English speakers, graduate students.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The difficulties faced by non-native English speakers (NNES) in composing English academic writing were first documented by Silva (1993) and more recently by Eckstein and Ferris (2018). Overall, they found NNES student writers produced lower word counts with higher rates of grammar errors and felt less confident and sure of what they were doing when they composed academic English. In response to these challenges, various researchers (e.g., Burgoine et al., 2011; Thomas et al., 2015; Dowse & van Rensberg, 2015) have organized English academic writing workshops for NNES undergraduate and graduate students and claimed positive results from them. This researcher found inconclusive measurable improvement with the Coh-Metrix syntactic

analyzer from his longitudinal study of his own English academic writing workshop for NNES graduate students at the University of Malaya, but he did find self-reported improvement by participants with his questionnaires. In the latter respect, the researcher's findings are consistent with his previous study on the same topic (Swindall, 2019). This study's findings may thus help point a way toward more effective English academic writing pedagogy.

### ***Research Gap and Problem Statement***

English academic writing skills are clearly essential for graduate students in any discipline for success in their studies and for publication during and after them. The need for special preparation in this area was articulated by Lavelle and Bushrow (2007) citing studies going back to the late twentieth century calling for it. In the case of NNES graduate students, the need for effective instruction is all the greater (e.g., Butler, 2015) since English is not their first language. As Lavelle and Bushrow (2007) also indicate, the path to mastery of scholarly writing conventions is a laborious one, but one way to hasten this result that has been attempted is the English academic writing workshop.

Studies of English academic writing workshops, both for native speakers (NES) and for NNES, are rare. Examples are Belcher (2009), Burgoine et al. (2011), Vanbaelen and Harrison (2011), Thomas et al. (2014), Dowse and van Rensburg (2015), McGrath and Kaufhold (2016), Swindall (2019), Vanhaelen and Harrison (2021), and Mckenna and Kyser (2021). These studies found that both NES and NNES undergraduate and graduate students suffered from low self-confidence and awareness of the writing process in their approach to English academic writing, and they all report that participant response to their workshops was positive. They also found that English academic writing workshops produced measurable improvement in participants' writing, including syntax and cohesion, as well as self-confidence in and awareness of the academic writing process.

A larger number of studies have explored NNES undergraduate and graduate student English academic writing practices. For example, Badenhorst et al. (2014) and Huerta et al. (2016) explored graduate student academic writing practices, finding low self-awareness and confidence in approaching English academic writing as well as a lack of awareness of the process they are following when they write academic English. This indicates a need for targeted intervention addressing these specific issues such as the workshops cited above.

As for computational analysis of graduate student academic writing, a smaller but equally recent and rich body of studies exists, notably Lu's (2010, 2011) pioneering studies of NNES university students' syntactic complexity. There was also Crossley and McNamara's (2014) computational exploration of NNES student writing quality and development using the Coh-Metrix. Application of the Coh-Metrix to NNES academic writing assessment has been performed by McNamara et al. (2014) and Dowell et al. (2015) finding it can measure learning achievement through syntactic and cohesion analysis.

To date, there has been no study combining these three aspects addressed to UM NNES graduate students except the researcher's (Swindall, 2019). Therefore, the researcher presents his objectives for filling the gap and solving the problem below.

### ***Research Objectives***

Based on studies of NNES academic writing workshops and computational analyses of NNES undergraduate and graduate student academic writing cited above and in the literature review, this research identifies the following objectives:

1. Designing and conducting a graduate NNES English academic writing workshop and measuring any syntactic and cohesive improvements from it in participants' writing samples before, immediately after, and one year following.
2. Exploring whether such an event changes participants' responses on the researcher's questionnaires from before to immediately after and one year following the workshop.

### ***Research Questions***

To achieve its objective of determining if an English academic writing workshop for NNES graduate students produces longitudinal syntactic, cohesive, and attitudinal improvement, the researcher asked the following research questions:

1. Does an English academic writing workshop produce syntactic and cohesive improvement in participants' writing samples from before to immediately after and one year following as measured by six indices on the Coh-Metrix syntactic analyzer?
2. Does such a workshop improve participants' self-reported attitudes toward English academic writing from before to immediately after and one year following the workshop as measured by the researcher's questionnaires?

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This researcher's concept of a workshop is that of an organized, practice-oriented educational intervention involving much input from participants similar to the one suggested by Sowell (2016), who follows Porter (2006). More specifically, he based his concept on those of Sarnecka (2019) and himself (Swindall, 2019). One relevant study comparing the results of an intensive English academic writing workshop to a semester of English academic writing instruction is Vanbaelen and Harrison's (2011) finding that the former improves participant awareness of the writing process as much as a semester does, although it does not produce comparable writing quality.

The differences between English L1 and L2 writers were distinguished long ago by Silva (1993) and Biggs et al. (1999) and more recently by Eckstein and Ferris (2018). All of them found that NNES writers produce shorter and less fluent English writing than NES writers, that they suffer from lower self-confidence, plan their writing less, and make more grammar and syntax errors with less cohesion in their overall output. Additionally, Lavelle and Bushrow (2007) and Yoon and Polio (2017) found the same deficit in self-confidence and awareness of the writing process as Badenhorst et al. (2014) and Huerta et al. (2016) cited above. Therefore, Karlen (2017) explored metacognitive strategies more completely than previous studies, as did van der Loo et al. (2018); both emphasized the need for conscious self-regulation in NNES students' approach to English academic writing. Above all, Crossley (2020) found that linguistic features in NNES student writing such as syntactic complexity and cohesion can influence human ratings of writing quality. Most recently, Kim et al. (2021) found that NNES undergraduates compose academic English better when they have higher cognitive and linguistic resources. All these studies found that more successful student writers, whether native NES or NNES, employed more self-

regulation of their writing processes. Thus, there existed a solid body of recent research identifying aspects of graduate NNES academic writing for the development of the researcher's workshop.

Among computational studies of NNES graduate student English academic writing, two 2015 studies extended such findings with added input from human raters: Yang et al. (2015) found that global sentence and T-unit complexity both predicted higher human ratings, and Kyle and Crossley (2015) affirmed that computational tools are valuable for assessing L2 proficiency, including writing. Kyle and Crossley (2018) followed their previous article with a similar study employing fine-grained indices, as did Crossley (2020). All these studies analyzed samples of 300 words.

The study most closely corresponding to this researcher's is Dent's (2018) use of the Coh-Metrix to analyze 400-word argumentative essays by four NNES graduate students and finding improvement from instruction in Toulmin elements quantifiable with pre-, post-, and delayed post-test Coh-Metrix analyses. Additionally, Azadnia et al. (2019) applied Coh-Metrix analysis to excerpts from 10 Iranian and 10 NES doctoral dissertations, finding two similarities and two differences in the four indices of syntactic complexity that they had selected. Although the researcher conceived of his methodology independently, his later discovery of these two studies argues for the validity of his research design below.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The objectives of this study were to discover if there is immediate and/or longitudinal improvement from an English academic writing workshop for NNES graduate students in participants' syntactic complexity and cohesion, confidence, and awareness of what they are doing when they write academic English. It was therefore divided into three stages: the researcher's pre-workshop questionnaire and writing sample request; the workshop itself; the researcher's post-workshop questionnaire and writing sample request; and finally the researcher's one-year follow-up questionnaire and writing sample request. The three writing samples were all analyzed for four syntactic and two cohesion indices of the Coh-Metrix online analyzer, and the results were compared using SPSS, namely Friedman's Chi-square ANOVA.

### ***Content of the Workshop***

The one-day workshop was divided into two three-hour sessions, one in the morning and the second after lunch. The main material was the researcher's deck of 36 slides covering NNES graduate student problems with English academic writing and Western rhetorical patterns, as well as incorporating others' writing into one's own with documentation; special emphasis was placed on the writing process and on syntax, including compound, complex, and compound-complex sentence construction. All the slides' content addressed academic writing practices applicable to all disciplines. There were also regular pauses for discussions and questions among and by participants. It must be stressed that the tone of the workshop was positive and encouraging since the researcher knew from his own experience and the literature that NNES graduate students are nervous about such a topic. Participants' engagement during the workshop became joyful, with most of them smiling and involving themselves eagerly. The event concluded with positive feelings on all sides, and the participants reported that they were glad to have attended.

***Researcher’s Questionnaires***

The researcher based his pre-workshop, post-workshop, and follow-up questionnaires on his own workshop’s results (Swindall, 2019) and the studies cited in the literature review. Based on these, the researcher focused his questionnaires’ items on participants’ affective and metacognitive states before, immediately after, and one year following the workshop. The questionnaires’ format was Google Forms that were emailed to each participant at the relevant stage. Results of the SPSS analysis of the questionnaires are reported in the findings.

***Coh-Metrix analysis of participants’ writing samples***

The researcher’s writing sample requests were contained in the pre- and post-workshop and follow-up questionnaires. They asked participants to compose an argumentative paragraph of 200 to 300 words expressing their opinion of a passage from a scientific editorial on solo versus team research. This prompt was used for the pre- and post-workshop and follow-up writing sample requests to assure uniformity of the basic content of the writing samples so that changes in their syntactic complexity and cohesion would be more detectable.

The Coh-Metrix is an online syntactic analyzer consisting of a text box into which the researcher pasted his participants’ writing samples from their questionnaires. Writing samples must be at least 200 words by advanced learners to achieve meaningful results (McNamara et al., 2014). By entering a captcha code and clicking a submit icon, the results for 106 indices appear. The researcher focused on four syntactic indices, namely left embeddedness (67), number of modifiers per noun phrase (68), minimal edit distance all (70), and syntactic similarity all (73), and two cohesion indices, namely argument overlap all (32) and stem overlap all (33). This selection of indices partly follows Crossley and McNamara (2014) as well as Dent (2018) and Azadnia et al. (2019). Results of SPSS analysis of the Coh-Metrix results are reported in the findings below.

**FINDINGS**

Coh-Metrix analysis of the pre- and post-workshop writing samples and of the follow-up writing samples by participants did not reveal significant improvement in any of the six indices at any stage. However, there were only 16 participants in the workshop, and only eight of them submitted the post-workshop questionnaire and writing sample; furthermore, a mere three of those eight submitted the follow-up questionnaire and writing sample. The results are presented in the tables below.

***Coh-Metrix syntax indices***

Here are the descriptive and test statistics for Coh-Metrix indice 67, left embeddedness, referring to the number of words before the main verb.

67. Left embeddedness

<b>Descriptive Statistics</b>					
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
V67Pre	3	4.400667	1.1499941	3.2860	5.5830

V67post	3	7.225667	5.3558495	3.8330	13.4000
V67fup	3	3.600333	2.7212233	1.3330	6.6180

**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

<u>N</u>	3
Chi-square	2.667
<u>df</u>	2
Asymp.sig.	.264

a. Friedman Test

The Friedman’s Chi-square ANOVA results for changes in all three stages show no significant difference in left embeddedness where  $p > .05$ .

Here are the results for Coh-Metrix indice 68, number of modifiers per noun phrase, referring to the mean of modifiers in the noun phrases of the writing samples of all three stages.

68. No. modifiers per n. phr

**Descriptive Statistics**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
V68Pre	3	.782667	.0945004	.6880	.8770
V68Post	3	.932333	.1935777	.7420	1.1290
V68Fup	3	1.054000	.1707718	.8570	1.1600

**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

<u>N</u>	3
Chi-square	4.667
<u>df</u>	2
Asymp.	Sig. .097

a. Friedman Test

Again, there is no significant change across the writing samples at all three stages where  $p > .05$ , although there is an increase.

For Coh-Metrix indice 70, minimal edit distance all, referring to the least number of words between recurring parts of speech, the results are below.

**Descriptive Statistics**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
V70Pre	3	.862333	.0405504	.8230	.9040
V70Post	3	.889667	.0337244	.8510	.9130
V70Fup	3	.898333	.0197569	.8770	.9160

**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

N	3
Chi-square	.66
df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.717

a. Friedman Test

The results here show no change at all between the writing samples at all three stages for this indice where  $p > .05$ .

The results for the fourth and final syntax indice, 73, sentence syntax similarity all, referring to the similarity between all the sentences in the writing sample, are here.

73. Sentence syntax similarity all

**Descriptive Statistics**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
V73Pre	3	.087000	.0311769	.0510	.1050
V73Post	3	.067667	.0265769	.0370	.0840
V73Fup	3	.071667	.0505404	.0200	.1210

**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

N	3
Chi-square	2.000
df	2
Asymp. sig.	.368

a. Friedman Test

Once again, there is no significant difference in the writing samples for this indice at all three stages where  $p > .05$ , although similarity does fall slightly, indicating improvement in sentence variety.

**Coh-Metrix cohesion indices**

Below are the tables for the two Coh-Metrix cohesion indices.

For indice 33, argument overlap all, referring to the connectedness of arguments throughout each writing sample at each stage, the results are here.

32. Arg. Overlap all

**Descriptive Statistics**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
V32pre	3	.786333	.1854625	.6670	1.0000
V32post	3	.577000	.2417995	.3200	.8000
V32fup	3	.629667	.2114529	.3930	.8000

**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

N 3
Chi- square.667
df 2
Asymp. sig. .717

a. Friedman Test

The Friedman’s Chi-square ANOVA reveals no significant change for this indice across the three stages of the study where  $p > .05$ .

The second Coh-Metrix cohesion indice was 33, stem overlap all, referring to the distance between a noun in one sentence and a content word. The results are below.

33. Stem overlap all

**Descriptive Statistics**

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
V33pre	3	.885667	.1030356	.8000	1.0000
V33post	3	.645000	.2398145	.4240	.9000
V33Fup	3	.782667	.2363775	.5310	1.0000



**Test Statistics<sup>a</sup>**

N	3
Chi-square	
	1.273
df	2
Asymp.	
sig.	.529

a. Friedman's Test

Yet again, the results reveal no significant change for this indice across all three stages where  $p > .05$ .

This concludes the SPSS tables for the six Coh-Matrix indices. No significant change from the pre-workshop writing samples' results to the post-workshop and follow-up results was found. The implications of this are discussed in section 5.

***Researcher's questionnaires self-reported confidence by participants***

Unlike the machine analysis of participants' writing samples presented above, participants' responses to the researcher's pre-workshop, post-workshop, and follow-up questionnaires reveal an increase in their confidence in approaching English academic writing. For the 16 participants responding to the pre-workshop questionnaire, the average score for question 1, "How confident do you feel in your English academic writing ability?" was 2.875 on a Likert scale, indicating rather low self-estimations. Among the eight participants who responded to the post-workshop questionnaire, however, the average Likert response to question 5, "Do you feel more confident in your English academic writing ability as a result of the workshop?" was 3.875. Finally, the average self-reported confidence boost among the three participants who responded to the follow-up questionnaire one year after the workshop was 4.666, indicating a significant increase in their self-confidence in English academic writing.

***Researcher's questionnaires self-reported writing process awareness by participants***

Like the responses to items in the researcher's pre-workshop, post-workshop, and follow-up questionnaires about self-confidence, participants' responses to items about awareness of the English academic writing process also revealed an increase. In the pre-workshop questionnaire, participants responded to question 5, "How aware are you of the process you are following as you prepare to write academically and actually do so?" with an average of 2.75 on a Likert scale, indicating low awareness of what they were doing. For the eight participants who responded to the post-workshop questionnaire, the average response to question 1, "Did the workshop help you become aware of the overall process you follow when you write academic English?" the average response rose to 4.375. Finally, among the three participants who responded to the follow-up questionnaire one year after the workshop, the average response to question 1, "One year later, how much would you say the workshop helped your awareness of your overall process when you write academic English?" was 4.666.

Thus, the workshop participants' self-reported responses to the researcher's questionnaires' items on their self-confidence in approaching English academic writing and their awareness of how to proceed with it both reveal significant increases. The implications of this compared to the lack of improvement revealed in the Coh-Metrix analyses of their writing samples are discussed below.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The results of this study find no measurable improvement in the syntax or cohesion of participants' writing samples from before the workshop to after it and one year later. Their affective responses to the researcher's questionnaires for the three stages, by contrast, indicate feelings of strong improvement on their part. A possible explanation for these starkly contrasting results is that the researcher's workshop was not lengthy enough or contained some other defect that prevented it from having the desired effect under computational analysis. On the other hand, perhaps the researcher should have measured other Coh-Metrix indices. Nonetheless, it must be noted that indices 68 and 70, for number of modifiers per noun phrase and sentence similarity overall, respectively, showed slight improvement, which could have been due to the emphasis the researcher placed on syntax in his workshop, including compound, complex, and compound-complex sentence construction with clear examples on the slides. There was also time for some sentence-writing practice by participants during the workshop. Therefore, a future intervention of this kind might emphasize these aspects of academic writing. In sum, the Coh-Metrix results point to a need for more targeted instruction and probably more practice during future interventions for academic writing.

On the encouraging side, the finding that participants reported significantly higher self-confidence in what they are doing during the academic writing process may be explained by the upbeat tone of the intervention, the researcher's positive interaction with the participants and their responsiveness to it, and the care the researcher took preparing his slides to address issues that he knew from his experience and the literature were areas where the participants needed aid. Although brief, the workshop was a lively event, and many participants orally recounted their frustrations and anxieties about English academic writing to the researcher during it. Interaction among the participants, who were seated several each to several tables, was also eager; they had much to discuss among themselves. These observations by the researcher are consistent with the finding reported by scholars who conducted English academic writing workshops cited in the literature review.

A major limitation of this study, one that might mean its findings lack validity and reliability, is the very small sample size, especially for the follow-up questionnaire and writing sample. It might be that only participants who personally responded strongly to the workshop were affected by it enough to consider it worthwhile to respond to the follow-up questionnaire and writing sample request a whole year later; additionally, one year may have been too long a time to expect participants to clearly remember the workshop. Therefore, similar interventions in the future might conduct their follow-up stages three or six months following the event for better recall by participants.

This study's ambivalent findings should probably not dissuade other researchers or this researcher from attempting similar studies that last longer and have more participants and better selections of indices. It does find that an English academic writing workshop indeed produces a positive affective response among participants, and that itself might be enough justification for such an intervention. The practical implications for English academic writing pedagogy appear to be a need for greater emphasis on syntax, especially sentence construction with denser noun

phrases; more practice with sentence composition by students under professorial supervision to increase sentence variety; and greater emphasis on cohesion, especially argument overlap. Furthermore, given Vanbaelen and Harrison's (2011) finding that academic writing workshops provide writing process awareness results comparable to a semester of study, universities might offer such interventions to their students more frequently to better equip them for graduate-level writing challenges. Finally, since it apparently these interventions improve participants' feelings about academic writing, future studies might attempt to measure longitudinally whether the affective results benefit the practical ones over time.

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