14 The Impact of the BA (TESOL) on the Writing Skills of Graduates from Batinah North Cohort 2

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1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports on an investigation carried out in 2004-2005 into the impact of the BA (TESOL) Programme on the development of academic writing skills of graduates from Batinah North Cohort 2. During the BA Programme students had the demanding task of writing twelve 3,000 word assignments and a 6,000 word dissertation. This meant that the teachers on the programme had to acquire a whole range of new skills with regard to academic writing. Our aims as researchers were to find out to what extent and in which ways students on the BA had developed as academic writers, including their critical skills. Additionally we wanted to find out the BA students' own perceptions of their development as academic writers, and the factors which influenced this development.

Our main professional interest in this information was in reporting to the Ministry and to the University on the extent to which the project is meeting the goal of producing academically literate graduates. We also wanted to make recommendations to tutors for supporting students' development as academic writers, and to markers on the kinds of feedback that supports this development. Just as importantly, it was an opportunity to develop the research skills of Omani BA graduates.

The researchers were the late John Holmes (University of Leeds), Ewen Arnold (BA Regional Tutor, Batinah North region), and five BA Programme Cohort 2 students (Anwar Al-Balooshi, Jassim Al-Beloushi, Shamsa Al-Rashdi, Nasra Al-Sa'adi and Talal Al-Shiyakh). The BA students were selected because they had performed well on the programme.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected. All the data was sampled from assignments done by BA Programme Cohort 2 students from Batinah North region. Assignments from the five Cohort 2 students who were researchers (listed above, group 1) and from five other randomly chosen students from Batinah North

Cohort 2 (group 2, see tables 2, 3 and 4) were used. The first assignment written by students on the BA, for the module Teaching English to Young Learners was analysed to provide a baseline and the last assignment, Teaching Writing, written over thirty months later, for comparison. These assignments were analysed quantitatively using the criteria of fluency, grammatical complexity, lexical complexity and accuracy. For each of the criteria, two measures were chosen from among the best measures of development as analysed in Wolfe-Quintero's (1998) meta-study of writing development (see Appendix 3). The first 1,000 words at the beginning of each assignment were analysed.

Additionally, qualitative data was collected by interviewing each of the ten Cohort 2 students using a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix 4). These interviews were carried out by the Cohort 2 students themselves and lasted between 20 and 45 minutes.

3 MEASURING WRITING DEVELOPMENT: FLUENCY, ACCURACY, COMPLEXITY AND T-UNITS

As writers become more proficient they write more easily: they are relaxed and they write more in a given time. This is what we refer to as 'fluency'. At the same time the command of language grows so that the number of errors is reduced: this is referred to as 'accuracy'. The writer also develops with regard to 'complexity'. This refers to the way that the writing is organised, both at the level of the paragraph and at the macro level relating to the assignment as a whole. Grammar also develops as sentences become more complex, with more subordinate clauses, while lexis also becomes more complex, in that there is a greater variety of vocabulary and less frequent lexical items are used. To us, these three parameters of writing development seemed intuitively sound and we could relate them to our experience.

However, measuring concepts such as fluency is not straightforward. The most direct measurement would be to simply record the time taken to write a certain amount of text, but this was not possible in the circumstances. We opted therefore to follow Wolfe-Quintero et al. (1998) and measured the number of words per T -unit, (W/T) and words in error-free T-units per error-free T-unit, (WE/EFT). The T -unit is taken as the basic measure of language, since it is a good measure of writing development (Wolfe-Quintero, 1998:32). An alternative such as sentence length is not related to development since even at an early stage it is possible to string simple sentences together with co-ordinating conjunctions, such as 'and' or 'but', and produce a long but grammatically simple sentence. A T-unit is the "shortest grammatically allowable sentence into which (writing can be split) or minimally terminable unit" (Hunt, 1965). It consists of "one main clause with all subordinate clauses attached to it" (Hunt, 1965). So if we look at lines 7-9 in Appendix 1, we see one sentence but two T-units (from 'The teacher' to 'understand' and from 'and' to 'real life'. Using WE/EFT allows us to take into account the fact that words per T -unit might increase, but only at the cost of a larger number of errors. (Wolfe-Quintero, 1998:56)

The measures of accuracy we chose are related to the frequency of errors. These can be measured as errors per T-unit (E/T) or error-free T-units per T-unit (EFT/T). Naturally we would expect EFT/T to increase as the teachers became more

proficient writers and E/T to decrease.

The final measure of complexity has a number of dimensions. We first have grammatical complexity, relating to grammatical variation and sophistication. In practice this is shown through the changes in sentences, clauses and T -units. One of the most useful measures appeared to be the number of clauses per T -unit (C/T) or the number of dependent clauses per T -unit (DC/T). We chose to use both measures.

With regard to lexical complexity this is usually considered to be related to the type-token ratio; the number of different lexical types or families compared to the total number of words (tokens). Thus, a word family would consider that a word such as 'happy' was the same type whether it appeared as 'happier', 'happiest' or 'unhappy'. As the writer's command of lexis increases then the ratio of type to token would tend to increase. Thus the word type to token ratio would be WT/Tk. We also decided to count only lexical words, so that function words are not taken into account. This gave us lexical word types divided by T -units as our second measure of lexical complexity, LWT/T. There are a number of other measures of lexical complexity which involved identifying 'sophisticated lexical types' as well as 'basic lexical types' but we did not attempt to use them at this stage as they were difficult for non-native speakers to apply.

This gave us eight measures in all, two for each of the four parameters as shown in Appendix 3. All of these criteria seemed valid measures of writing skills development in the review of such research done by Wolfe-Quintero et al (ibid).

4 FINDINGS: QUANTITATIVE DATA

Table 1 shows the results for Alia. (All names are pseudonyms.) Tables similar to Table 1 were produced for each of the students. The arrows in the difference column show whether there was an improvement or not. If the percentage change was less than 10%, an equals sign was used.

Table 1: Quantitative results for student A

Measure (see Appendix 3 for full details of each measure)	First assignment	Last assignment	% change	Difference
Fluency				
W/T	13.2	14.9	+13%	↑
WE/EFT	11.2	11.4	+2%	=
Grammatical Complexity				
C/T	1.34	1.49	+11%	↑
DC/T	0.33	0.49	+48%	↑
Lexical Complexity				
WT/Tk	4.5	5.9	+25%	↑
LWT/T	3.9	5.0	+24%	↑
Accuracy				
EFT/T	0.63	0.32	-49%	↓
T/E	1.96	0.93	-54%	↓
	Average % change		+3%	=

As can be seen from the table, Alia seems to have improved as a writer in some aspects, but not others. She has become slightly more fluent, writing more words per t-unit, and wrote more grammatically complex text (improving on both measures), as well as lexically complex text (again improving on both measures). However, she became less accurate, making more errors per t-unit and had writing fewer error-free t-units per t-unit.

Table 2 shows the sum of the differences (from the last column of Table 1) for each student and the average percentage change between first and last assignments (from the last row of Table 1).

Table 2: Differences between first and last assignments for all students

Name	↑	=	↓	Average % change	Difference
Group 1 (the researchers)					
Ali	7	1	0	+39	↑
Alia	5	1	2	+3	=
Badr	3	4	1	+33	↑
Bakr	8	0	0	+67	↑
Nour	6	0	2	+24	↑
TOTAL	29	6	5		
Group 2 (the non-researchers)					
Ahmed	6	0	2	+32	↑
Hind	1	0	7	+1	=
Laila	8	0	0	+40	↑
Maha	2	3	3	-2	=
Muna	1	5	2	+1	=
TOTAL	18	8	14		
GR Total	47	14	19		

Taken as a whole there seems to have been a general improvement in writing skills, with improvements in 47 measures, with only 19 declining. The difference column shows six students improving and four staying roughly the same. Two students (Badr and Laila) improved on all eight measures. Only one student (Hind) declined on a large number of measures (seven out of eight), although her average percentage change showed little change (+1%).

Turning now to the measures themselves, Table 3 (below) shows the percentage changes on each of the eight measures as well as the average percentage change for each of the students. Most of the students became more fluent writers. Furthermore, most of the students wrote more grammatically complex text with three students showing a very large increase in grammatical complexity (>100%). Figures for lexical complexity also increased. For accuracy the results were more mixed with all of group 2 seeming to write more accurately (as measured by EFT/T), but with two group 1 members becoming less accurate. This interesting finding will be considered in more detail when Table 4 is discussed.

Table 3: Percentage change in each of the measurements for each student

Name	W/T	WE/EFT	C/T	DC/T	WT/Tk	LWT/T	EFT/T	T/E	Ave
Group 1									
Ali	+42	+5	+29	+112	+41	+41	+19	+19	+39
Alia	+13	+2	+11	+48	+25	+24	-49	-54	+3
Badr	0	+36	+42	+226	-5	-2	-31	-6	+33
Bakr	+57	+82	+20	+52	+51	+53	+58	+163	+67
Nour	+17	-27	+34	+159	+27	+25	-12	-34	+24
Group 2									
Ahmed	+15	+22	-8	-22	+66	+70	+87	+27	+32
Hind	-14	-1	-11	-37	-12	-7	-9	+82	+1
Laila	+47	+34	+23	+59	+40	+39	+33	+45	+40
Maha	-5	-34	+5	+16	-12	-14	0	+37	-2
Muna	+2	+5	0	-3	-11	-16	-4	+36	+1
Ave	+17	+12	+14	+61	+20	+21	+9	+32	

Table 4 shows the relationship between grammatical complexity as measured by DC/T, and accuracy, as measured by T/E. No students became both less grammatically complex writers and less accurate writers. All three students who wrote less accurately wrote more grammatically complex text. All three who wrote less grammatically complex text became more accurate. The other four students wrote both more accurately and more grammatically complex text. There therefore seems to be an inverse relationship between grammatical complexity and accuracy, with some students seeming to trade complexity for accuracy and some students trading accuracy to write more complex text.

Table 4: Relationship between grammatical complexity (DC/T) and accuracy (T/E)

Name	DC/T	T/E
Group 1		
Ali	+112	+19
Alia	+48	-54
Badr	+226	-6
Bakr	+52	+163
Nour	+159	-34
Group 2		
Ahmed	-22	+27
Hind	-37	+82
Laila	+59	+45
Maha	+16	+37
Muna	-3	+36

5 FINDINGS: QUALITATIVE DATA

All ten research subjects were interviewed in English by an Omani team member. We adopted a semi-structured interview, which was audio taped, and focussed on

analysis of an assignment and recall of how the writing took place. We used copies of the same assignments that were used for the quantitative measurements. Both the interviewer and interviewee read the two assignments in detail before the interview, and the assignments were used as evidence during the discussion, thus grounding the interviews in the assignments. Unfortunately, most (6/10) of the interviews were conducted before completion of quantitative analysis of the data, which did not allow deeper exploration of the reasons for the quantitative findings. After the interviews, the team met to identify 'themes' which emerged from the data. The main themes are discussed below.

All interviewees thought their writing skills had improved during the BA course. However, many found the writing process rather 'daunting' and 'intimidating' (their words) at first, with the word 'fear' or its near synonyms used frequently. The fears themselves were varied, including fear of making mistakes, of changing the meaning when paraphrasing, of the marks and failure, and fear of what others might think if they did fail. Students reported not knowing where to start or what to do, with many of them believing that there was one right answer to the assignment question. Their whole approach to the task changed over time. Some students reported relying less on their tutor and deciding on their own interpretation of the question, trying to find a 'gap' or a niche, and/or organizing ideas under headings rather than starting from the introduction and writing one section after another in a linear fashion.

Some students reported improvements in the organization of their assignments, with better use of headings and linking devices. Others talked about the way they supported points and developed arguments, using less direct quotes and more paraphrase in later assignments. In early assignments students tended to write the assignment and then search for appropriate quotes, which they often put at the end of a paragraph 'like a piece of decoration' as one student put it. They went 'from reading to find quotes to reading to understand the topic', as another student explained. All of this shows an increasing ownership of the writing process, captured in this quote from Halima:

> Now I have the ability to use the appropriate quotes … to link the ideas to each other, to take the writer's ideas and paraphrase them in my own words, and give my own opinion. Also I have the ability to use … the academic language.

Another interviewee (Ali) said, 'I can give my own ideas, own views, providing of course that they are genuine, they make sense and reflect the learning and teaching process in our schools'. This new voice, as the quote shows, comes from a depth of thought prompted by the BA Programme as a whole, not just from writing assignments. As this speaker says, it is difficult to separate writing improvement from overall improvement. Furthermore, alongside the development of writing skills per se students reported improvements in proofreading and editing skills, and the ability to collect, analyse and present classroom data.

A number of comments touched on how and why the students developed as writers. Many interviewees discussed the importance of their Regional Tutor and the kind of support they gave. Others made a link between the reading on the programme, and their development as writers. One noteworthy theme was the role

of 'imitation' with several students attempting to use stylistic features from their reading. Some students adopted other conscious strategies such as deliberately trying out new words in assignments, consciously structuring paragraphs in particular ways (e.g. problem-solution), or consciously creating topic sentences and structuring their writing around them. Sometimes the feedback from the markers led writers to adopt strategies such as simplifying the language or shortening sentences.

6 DISCUSSION

Many of the students reported great anxiety before starting the first assignment. Despite this, if the results are representative of Cohort 2 students, it seems likely that many students improved measurably, while a minority did not show any improvement. However, students understood improvement in different ways, some feeling they had improved by becoming more accurate, which often meant writing less complex syntax, others gaining the confidence to try out new things, taking more risks and developing their own voice. Maybe those who did not improve according to the quantitative findings either did not overcome their initial fears or failed to become engaged with the assignments they wrote.

Often teaching and learning academic writing skills seems to be treated as a simple cognitive process (one exception is Bereswill, 2005). However, if the research here is representative, writing tutors and others responsible need to deal with the affective factors such as fear and find ways of increasing learners' confidence, especially early in a programme. Voice and ownership also need to be cultivated. One suggestion is to encourage students to write their first draft freely without concern for accuracy, formality, etc, and then to go back and correct it, trying to keep their own words as far as possible (Kuhnline, n/d). This technique should also help overcome anxiety (c.f. expressivist approaches, Hyland, 2002).

Academic writing skills teachers need to be aware of the strategies their writers are adopting and guide them so that, for example, in reducing errors, students do not stop trying to develop their lexical and grammatical skills. Another implication related to reducing errors, concerns risk-taking. From the interviews it is clear that group 1 students who performed better on the BA also took more risks with their writing. Writing tutors need to find ways of encouraging risk-taking that do not result in too many serious errors.

The Oman-based tutor involved in this research subsequently made a conscious effort to use the data collected and the knowledge discovered from the research to support current students' writing development. For example, he tried to encourage (controlled) 'imitation' of discourse features from the literature and used samples of texts analysed by the research team to demonstrate, for example, the difference between quotes used 'as decoration' and quotes integrated into a paragraph and an argument. These tactics prompted discussions in the team about whether there might be stages in writing skills development, and to what extent they are natural developmental processes which are difficult to hurry up. But these questions too must await further research! (See below.)

7 CONCLUSION

The two main challenges the team faced concerned communication and time. Communication within the team in Oman and between Oman and University of Leeds often proved challenging. Time was a constant problem; time for mentoring graduate researchers in research skills, time to analyse data, time to sit and discuss interpretation of data, and finding time when those based in Oman could meet. One consequence of this was that possibly the graduate researchers did not have a clear overview of the data collected as they had only been involved in analyzing parts of the data. Nevertheless most interviewers collected high quality interview data. Overall, due to time pressures and communication problems, work on the project was rather unevenly distributed among the research team and graduate researchers had to be directed more than would have been liked.

Further research could concentrate on the relationship between voice and ownership on the one hand (use of own words, ideas, experiences, etc) and development as an academic writer suggested in the interview data and represented in Figure 1 below.

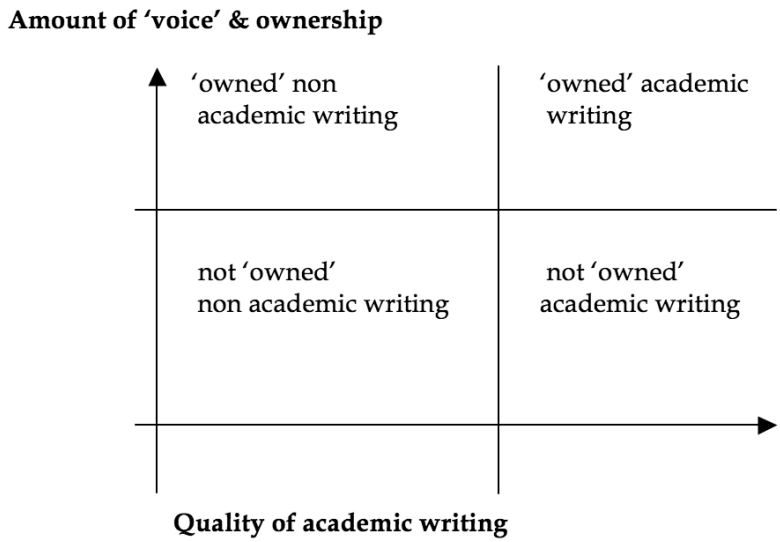

Figure 1: Suggested relationship between 'voice' and quality of academic writing

Other research could investigate:

- the extent to which affective factors such as fear affect progress.
- the extent to which conscious strategies for developing are adopted and what these are
- the relationship between the amount and kind of reading done and progress as a writer
- the relationship between voice and ownership on the one hand and improvement in academic writing quality on the other. This is suggested in Figure 1 above.

There is research evidence that this kind of increasing ownership results in deeper, more focussed editing and proofreading (Henning et al 2000). It would seem likely that it also results in better quality output .

The research reported on here shows that it is possible within the constraints of a programme such as the BA (TESOL) to conduct research that has some validity for the wider academic community. More importantly perhaps, it also shows that such research can meaningfully involve local co-researchers. The co-researchers here (Anwar, Jassim, Shamsa, Nasra and Talal) were all to some extent involved in the major aspects of the research, setting objectives and timelines, reading around the subject, framing research questions, deciding on research methods, collecting and analysing data, interpreting the results and writing up and reporting the findings. The skills they learned during this process will be/have been invaluable not only in allowing them to pursue further studies or research of their own, but also in giving them an experiential knowledge of educational research. This should enable them to better evaluate others' research. That this process was fun was an added bonus for all concerned.

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APPENDIX 1: SAMPLE FROM ALIA'S FIRST ASSIGNMENT

Line no	Text
1	**The characteristics of effective language practice**
2	There are so many characteristics that should be focused on
3	while practicing the language. Some of these are :-
4	
5	**1. Clear situation/topic :-**
6	This helps the pupils to identify where to use the appropriate
7	language. The teacher must set a clear situations for the pupils which
8	is easy to understand and they will probably face it in their real life.
9	i.e. he must put the children in the real life conditions to teach where
10	to use such language. For example, in a shop or how to make a kite.
11	These topics train the pupils to communicate with others outside. As
12	*Brumfit et al (1991)* P. 19 explain "a sentence without a context is hard
13	to understand'. Also Scott and Ytreberg (1990) P. 37 answer the
14	question why to practise the language "to train pupils to use correct,
15	simple useful language within a situation or context".
16	**2. Clear purposes for children :-**
17	Children must have a purpose for learning or doing some thing.
18	Any task having a valid purpose motivates them to learn more. This
19	also helps them to learn indirectly. The purpose might be enjoyment,
20	communication, challenge, coloring ….. etc. *Brumfit et al (1991)* said
21	that if the children have a genuine purpose for their learning they
22	will be interested in doing the activity.

APPENDIX 2: SAMPLE FROM ALIA'S LAST ASSIGNMENT

Line no	Text
1	Reid (1995:205) explains that evaluation usually occurs as a grade on the
2	final draft of a student's paper. It consists of comments, which justify a
3	judgment. This approach is commonly focused on the product. Ur (1991)
4	adds that 'assessment' appears when learners are informed about how well or
5	badly they have performed to an attempted answer. Hamp-Lyons and
6	Heasley (1987) argue the disadvantage of this way. They write that the last
7	judgment could be influenced by many factors such as teacher tiredness,
8	students are not interested in the topic, handwriting.
9	
10	Another way of giving feedback is to 'respond' to the pupil's writing.
11	harmer (2001) suggests that we respond when we say how the text appears
12	and how it could be improved. Response or 'correction' as Ur (1991) calls
13	contains some specific information that is provided on aspects of learners'
14	performance through explanation or other alternative provision. Ur (1991)
15	concentrates on the correction feedback, which includes information about
16	what the learners did right as well as wrong. Responding to student writing
17	is an on going process. It consists of the writing process of generating ideas
18	and revising and starts when the student begins to write.

APPENDIX 3: QUANTITATIVE MEASURES OF WRITING DEVELOPMENT

No	Meaning	Measure
	Fluency	
1	Number of words (tokens) divided by number of T-units	W/T
2	Number of words in error-free T-units divided by number of error-free T-units	WE/EFT
	Grammatical Complexity	
3	Number of clauses divided by number of T-units	C/T
4	Number of dependent clauses divided by number of T-units	DC/T
	Lexical Complexity	
5	Number of word types divided by number of Tokens	WT/Tk
6	Number of lexical word types divided by number of T-units	LWT/T
	Accuracy	
7	Number of error-free T-units divided by number of T-units	EFT/T
8	Number of errors divided by number of T-units	E/T*

* We would expect that any improvement in writing skills would result in an increase in all measures except the last (E/T). For this reason, when we present data in this chapter, this ratio is inverted (T/E).

APPENDIX 4: POSSIBLE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL AND QUESTIONS

Protocol
Give the participant a copy of each of the two assignments. Ask them to look through them and think of whether they improved as academic writers, in what ways and to find specific examples of improvements by comparing the two assignments.

Look through the two assignments yourself and do the same thing. Try and work out how you think they improved, and areas where they didn't improve. Try to formulate these as neutral questions, e.g. Do you think your introductions improved? Do you think you are better able to use quotes and references in the last assignment than in the first? (Always ask for concrete examples of improvements, and try and say the page numbers onto the tape.)

Suggested Questions

Interpreting the Question
Do you feel that you are better able to interpret the question?

About the parts of the assignment
Do you think your introductions / conclusions / literature reviews, etc, have improved?
In what ways? Can you give specific examples?
Do you think that your assignment is better structured? In what ways? Can you give specific examples?

About the skills
Do you feel that your organisational skills have improved? In what ways? Can you give specific examples?
Do you feel that you are better able to support arguments you make in the assignment with references and quotations? In what ways? Can you give specific examples?
Do you feel that your assignments are more coherent? In what ways? Can you give specific examples?
Do you feel that you are better able to report research or evaluations of lessons? In what ways? Can you give specific examples?
Do you think your assignment presentation is better? In what ways? Can you give specific examples?

About reasons for the improvement
Why do you think you improved?
What were the factors that helped you improve?
Did the feedback help you improve? In what ways? Can you give specific examples?