

HOW FAR HAVE WE GOT IN PREPARING STUDENTS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS AT ENGLISH-SPEAKING UNIVERSITIES? IDENTIFYING THE NEEDS FOR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS OF THREE MEXICAN MASTER'S STUDENTS AT A BRITISH UNIVERSITY³

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Introduction

Each year many Mexican students enroll in US/British universities seeking postgraduate education where they will be confronted with writing demands. For instance, according to the International Institute of Education (IIE), Open Doors, approximately 6,500 Mexican students enrolled in US universities in 1991. On the other hand, the CONACYT granted scholarships to 1,171 students in US universities and 458 in British universities for the academic year 97-98.

There, these students are confronted with writing demands such as essays and dissertations or theses in English. These become important for the Mexican postgraduate students in English-speaking universities. The requirement for such tasks is even greater than those of the undergraduate students in English-speaking universities (Froedsen, 1995). Usually, it is the case that most of the postgraduate students' assignments at a Master's level, for example, need more focus on specific topics, handling of the theory (support claims with evidence) and argumentation about the theory used. Moreover, they have to write a final project or dissertation (thesis) so as to accomplish their studies successfully (Cadman, 1997; Dong, 1998). Conversely, undergraduate students are not required to cover these demands for their written assignments or write a final project.

The students' preparation for these requirements is imperative, but we need to ask ourselves as EFL teachers how are Mexican universities or language schools preparing these students to confront them with these writing demands. My experience as an EFL teacher at the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, Campus Ciudad de México (ITESM-CCM) indicates that the only preparation offered focuses on obtaining the required score for the TOEFL by US/British universities.

The demand for preparation for presenting the TOEFL is so overwhelming at the ITESM-CCM by the external community and the community on campus that extra curricular courses are offered. This, perhaps, has limited the teachers' attention only to prepare students for placement exams where their fluency is tested. In this way, they may obtain the score required by US/British universities to cover the prerequisite for admission. Apparently, other campuses of the ITESM System, universities and language schools share this concern as well.

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However, it seems that proficiency or fluency is not enough for achieving success in the students' studies (Blanton, 1994; Froedsen, 1995; Schneider and Fujishima, 1995; Grabe and Kaplan, 1996). Fluency in English is only one aspect of what it is needed to write for a Master's or PhD degree (Blanton, 1994; Schneider and Fujishima, 1995; Cadman, 1997). The preparation for meeting and dealing successfully with demands of academic writing is important as well (Currie, 1991; Bizzell, 1992; Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1995; Dong, 1998).

Thus, being aware of the need for preparing postgraduate students for the academic writing demands of English-speaking universities, a pilot study was carried out which dealt specifically with the academic writing of three Mexican Master's students coming to further their education at Lancaster University in Britain. It was aimed at exploring the students' needs for presenting written assignments, and learning about the students' preparation before coming, and the demands they confront for two of their courses. In this way, I would have a better understanding of their writing situation, help other students with their writing, and contribute to upgrade the writing instruction among my EFL colleagues in Mexico who share the same concern for preparing/initiating their students into academic writing.

At the ITESM-CCM, undergraduate students take compulsory courses in English consisting of four remedial courses (from basic to intermediate levels) centered on listening, reading, speaking and writing and three advanced courses of one semester each. The advanced courses are centered on what teachers deem important since it is for more proficient students. They may be designed for TOEFL preparation, short essay composition (such as five-paragraph essay), business English, etc. Depending on the TOEFL score prior to enrolling, the students are placed in one of the remedial courses or in one of the three advanced courses (Camps, 1995). For postgraduate students, compulsory courses are not offered. The objective of these courses is the development/reinforcement of the students' fluency and the preparation for the TOEFL. Thus, by identifying the students' needs for writing abroad, this study also seeks contributing to the design of courses more related to academic writing for students pursuing postgraduate education in English-speaking universities.

In this article, I present the pilot study conducted during the academic year 97-98⁵. I have divided the article into seven sections. The first one describes the research questions used during the pilot study. The second section describes the participants. The third section describes the qualitative techniques used for data collection. The fourth section presents the findings. In the fifth section I discuss the findings and the issues raised by them. Finally, in the last section I present my conclusions and comment on possibilities for future research generated by this study.

⁵ The students' academic year was from October 97 to September 98. The academic year is divided into three terms of three months each. During the first two terms the students took courses and presented assignments and exams. During Term 3, the students concentrated on issues related to their dissertation or Master's thesis and during the summer, the students worked on their dissertation.

- **Research questions**

This pilot study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What difficulties and demands confront the students when writing in English?
 2. What sort of EFL preparation did the students bring with them to Britain that may help them with their writing?
- How useful may the identification of these difficulties and demands contribute to the upgrading of the EFL academic writing instruction in Mexico, specifically at the ITESM-CCM?

2. The participants

The participants were three Mexican students taking Master's courses at Lancaster University's Management School, three of their subject tutors (content-specific teachers), and three EFL teachers at the ITESM-CCM.

The criteria for the selection of the Mexican students were that they should be on a Master's course of studies in which they would write assignments. Each student was asked to provide a copy of two of his/her written assignments. A copy of the first assignment was provided at the end of Term 1 and a copy of the second assignment at the end of Term 2.

The request for the first assignment was with the purpose of learning more about the students' needs, checking the students' writing, comparing my approach to the subject tutors', and establishing a relationship between these two approaches. Basically, my approach consists of checking essays based on the criteria I had used as an EFL teacher in Mexico. In addition, I comment on and discuss mistakes and problems with the students. All of these shall be described later on.

The request for a second assignment in Term 2 was with the purpose of comparing both assignments, determining areas of progress, and finding out more about the students' needs when undertaking their assignments.

Two of the students are called by their real names: Mónica and Miguel Ángel. Alberto was given a pseudonym. Mónica holds a Bachelor's degree in Industrial Engineering from the ITESM-CCM. She took English courses throughout her school life (from primary school to undergraduate studies) in Mexico but never had an academic English writing course. She encountered problems in obtaining the requested TOEFL/IELTS score of 580/6.5; for this reason, she had to take an intensive course prior to commencing her formal studies at Lancaster University. Miguel Ángel holds both a Bachelor's degree and a Master's degree in Accounting from the ITESM-Campus Monterrey. He never had an academic English writing course. After his Master's studies, he had the opportunity to take an intensive business English course in the US. He obtained a score of 8.0 on IELTS. He learnt English at a language school during his primary and secondary education. Alberto holds a Bachelor's degree in Economics from the ITAM. He did not take an academic English writing course during his undergraduate studies. He learnt English in the US when studying one year of high school. Afterwards he took English courses at a language institute. He obtained a 6.5 score on the IELTS.

Alberto decided not to continue being part of this study after the second interview. However, having had the opportunity to interview him twice and check on his assignments his case still provided sufficient data for it to be included in this pilot study.

Monica is studying an MA in Accounting and Finance. Miguel Ángel is studying an MSc in Finance. Alberto is studying an MSc in International Trade and Finance. Thus, the assignments are from the courses of the Accounting and Finance Department and the Economics Department of the Management School at Lancaster University. The task for the assignments and the courses are set out in the students' assignment subsection.

The subject tutors of the first assignment and the EFL teachers were also considered as participants of this pilot study. The subject tutors were involved because they checked the students' first assignment, taught the course and assessed the students' work for that particular course. Thus, these tutors knew about the students' needs and the demands placed upon them in their written assignments. My colleagues in Mexico participated in this study as well. They teach essay writing at the ITESM-CCM and were not familiar with the students' work. Their role within the study was to provide complementary data regarding their views on the teaching of academic writing, their opinions about these students' comments regarding their preparation before coming to Lancaster, and whether their views in providing feedback match with those of the subject tutors.

3. Description of techniques used for data collection

The following qualitative techniques for data collection were used:

- a. Interviews with students and their subject tutors.
- b. Analysis of the students' written assignments.
- c. Meetings with the students.
- d. Survey of EFL teachers in Mexico.

a. Interviews

Three interviews were carried out with the students and one with their subject tutors. The interviews with the students and their subject tutors were different. The interviews with the students were semistandardized (Berg, 1995). This means they were rather informal with digressions from the prepared questions and the questions did not follow a specific order. In contrast, the interviews with the students' tutors were standardized which means that the questions were set in a given order and presented in a more systematic way (Berg, 1995). The reason for this criterion was that I deemed that by having informal interviews with the students it would create a friendlier and more personal relationship. However, the interview with each of their subject tutors would be more formal and not personal since I did not intend to develop a similar relationship.

For each interview with the students, a questionnaire with open-ended questions was prepared (see Appendix A). The purpose of this questionnaire was to obtain personal information from the students such as: course studied at the university, placement exam scoring, reading practices in English, EFL courses taken, difficulties encountered when writing assignments at Lancaster, and any issue generated during the process of writing the assignments.

The questionnaire to interview the students' subject tutors was designed with open-ended questions (see Appendix B). These were drawn from the correction and evaluation made to the students' assignments and the comparison of the graded assignment by the subject tutors. In this way I could compare my approach to revising the assignments to those of the subject tutors and determine any connections.

b. Analysis of the students' written assignments

The students were asked to provide one copy of two assignments. For their first assignment, they gave one copy of their written assignment without being graded and another copy once their subject tutors had graded it. Mainly, this was requested, firstly, because I wanted to check each assignment in order to find out about the students' needs. The checking of the assignments was drawn from the criteria I used as an EFL teacher in Mexico. Secondly, I sought to compare them with each of the graded assignments by the subject tutors. In this way, I would learn about the students' needs, be able to design a questionnaire based on the information provided when revising the assignments, establish a comparison between my approach and the subject tutors' and then make a connection between the approaches.

Each of the students' first assignment was from one of the courses they took during Term 1. Mónica provided a copy of her assignment for the Accounting and Taxation course where she had to analyze a company to determine its suitability for foreign investment. Miguel Ángel submitted a copy of his assignment for the Foundations of Finance course in which he was asked to report on the correlation of samples of Latin American markets and to assess them. Alberto gave a copy of his first assignment for the Macroeconomics course in which he had to analyze how the concept of Monetary Theory influenced the economies of Chile and Mexico.

Additionally, I asked each student for a copy of another assignment at the end of the second Term. This was with the purpose of comparing both assignments. Thus, for the second assignment, Mónica provided a copy of her essay for the Contemporary Issues in Financial Reporting and Policy Making course in which she was required to explain a conceptual framework and identify its users and the benefits of using this framework. Miguel Ángel submitted a copy of his essay for the Management Control Systems course in which he was asked to write about the main issues of international financial reporting. He had to establish which countries might gain advantage from these issues. At this stage, Alberto did not provide a copy of his second assignment.

For their two assignments, the students were given a pass mark by their subject tutors. According to the students' *Courses Handbook*, the marks for the their assignments are presented in the following table:

Table 1
Marks for Assignments

Mark	Description
70-above	Distinction
50-69	Pass
40-49	Marginal pass
0-39	Fail

For her first and second assignment, Mónica obtained 60 and 64 respectively. For his first and second assignments, Miguel Ángel obtained 62 and 67 respectively. Alberto obtained 56 for his first assignment.

The following criteria for checking the students' first assignment and for comparing these assignments with the second assignments are presented:

1. Adequate use of standard spelling and punctuation according to well-known dictionaries such as *Oxford Advanced Learner's* and *Webster's New Collegiate*.
2. Adequate use of combining simple, compound, complex and compound-complex sentences and their connectors, and other applications of grammar usage (subject-verb agreement, parallelism, coherence in pronouns, etc.) such as those proposed in *Interactions II: A Writing Process Book* by Segal and Pavlik (1995), and *Writing Paragraphs and Essays* by Wingersky and others (1995).
3. Adequate paragraph structure (thesis sentence, topic sentences, supporting sentences and concluding sentences) such as those presented in *Interactions II: A Writing Process Book* by Segal and Pavlik (1995), and *Writing Paragraphs and Essays* by Wingersky and others (1995).
4. Adequate use of introductory, transitional and concluding paragraphs (each must have a full description, discussion and conclusion), such as those presented in *Interactions II: A Writing Process Book* by Segal and Pavlik (1995), and *Writing Paragraphs and Essays* by Wingersky and others (1995).
5. Adequate presentation of references such as those required by academic standards.

Each of these five points is considered when checking assignments. Nevertheless, more attention is given to points 2, 3 and 4 for they have a closer relationship with each other. There is also attention paid to the relationship between these points with point 5 in the way the students present their claims with references.

As I will discuss in Section 5, my criteria were not shared by the subject tutors of the first assignment for they concentrated on more related content-specific aspects. Mainly, these aspects were response to the questions set, analysis of the problem stated, address an issue with some depth, proper use of the theory, discussion of the content within which the work is being done, documented description of works, etc. The three students were faced with these demands when they wrote their first assignment and similarly when they wrote their second assignment.

c. Meetings with the students

The utilization of interviews and commenting to the students about their assignments enabled me to have a closer relationship with them; consequently, I had the opportunity of having informal meetings with them.

During the meetings we discussed my comments and I answered any questions related to aspects of their writing. It enabled me to understand their writing better, to learn more about what they were going through in this process and to have more data. Additionally, I had the opportunity to check other assignments written by Alberto which enabled me to learn more about his writing.

d. Survey of EFL teachers

The participation of my colleagues in this study was with the purpose of obtaining complementary data. I would find out about their role as EFL teachers, their opinions about the students' comments regarding their preparation before coming to Lancaster, and whether their views in providing feedback match with those of the subject tutors. It would enable me to compare my data of the subject tutors' views with their views. Their involvement came about after I had interviewed the students and their subject tutors and analyzed the students' assignments.

I designed a questionnaire with open-ended questions (see Appendix C) and sent it by email to my colleagues who were teaching essay writing. At that time, three of my colleagues were teaching essay writing at the ITESM-CCM. Their experience in teaching and knowledge of the problem provided useful data, which I will discuss in the following section.

These EFL teachers taught an essay writing course for advanced students at the ITESM-CCM. Basically, the course was aimed to develop the ability in students to communicate by writing paragraphs and essays in English. During the process of writing, the students would learn to plan, organize, draft, revise, edit, and so on. The lessons, materials, and activities depended on the teachers' criterion and responsibility. This meant that each teacher conducted the course as he/she deemed pertinent and the emphasis given on each of the topics was solely his/her responsibility.

4. Findings

The presentation of the findings will be divided into four sections. Each section will consist of each of the findings obtained from the students, their assignments, their subject tutors, and the EFL writing teachers.

a. The students' interviews and meetings

The following data concerning the three students' writing were obtained during the interviews and meetings:

1. The students considered that the writing practices that helped them in their writing in English were acquired during their work experience. They agreed that their English courses taken before coming to Lancaster or during their time as undergraduate and graduate students in Mexico did not equip them for the writing demands they would face while studying at a British university (Camps, 1998).
2. The students would have preferred more feedback on grammar, punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary from their subject tutors so they could know how good their written English was (Leki, 1991; Ferris, 1995; Schulz, 1996).

3. Miguel Ángel affirmed that his improvement in writing was achieved by reading and feedback from his subject tutors. In general, he said that the reading helped him to acquire more vocabulary, to learn to shift from one idea to another, to use connectors properly and to write sentences such as those native writers of English would employ that he only knew in Spanish. His subject tutors contributed in providing feedback on content (Santos, 1988; Janopoulos, 1992).
4. Mónica also agreed that the required readings helped her to improve her writing, but also attributed the progress to a friend, a native writer of English, who helped her to check the language of the assignments. She said that the subject tutors' contribution to her writing progress was minimal.

b. The students' assignments

The following findings were provided during the checking of the students' assignments:

1. I found writing difficulties in Mónica and Alberto's assignments that in my judgement would have affected the clarity of a well-expressed written assignment and its content as required by the subject tutors, but that these were not corrected by them (Santos, 1988; Janopoulos, 1992).
2. Each of the students' subject tutors corrected errors related to content. These errors that affected the content of their assignments were in the argument, the support of the evidence with the theory, or the inappropriate handling of the questions set by them.
3. There was a clear and considerable progress in Mónica's second assignment in terms of form (grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc.) as well as content. She commented that it was one of her best essays ever written during her studies. In general, the problems I detected in her first assignment were subject-verb agreement, transitional sentences, spelling and vocabulary. Her second assignment on the other hand presented good development of her paragraphs, good referencing, and good handling of the vocabulary. The reason for this improvement in form was because she asked a friend, a native writer of English, to check on her writing. According to Mónica's comments she said that the corrections made by her friend were few. As for content, she worked very hard in this assignment to become successful.
4. Both of Miguel Ángel's first and second assignments showed no language problems. There were no mistakes of this kind in his paragraphs that could have affected the communication on content. According to Miguel Ángel, his improvement regarding content was that he had learned to provide evidence for his statements.
5. Alberto did not provide a second assignment but the meetings I had with him towards the end of the second Term showed that he still made serious grammatical mistakes. There was no improvement as far as language is concerned. Basically, the problems found in the first assignment were developing introductory paragraphs, handling of independent and subordinate clauses, making subjects agree with their verbs, and spelling words correctly. The problems detected in the other assignments were very similar to those found in his first assignment.

c. The subject tutors' interviews

In this section I will describe the comments of the subject tutors regarding the students' first assignment. For this, I divided the section into two parts. The first one deals with the commonalities between all three students, and the second deals with particular aspects of the students' writing.

Commonalities between each student

The commonalities expressed by the subject tutors concerning the writing of each of the students were the following:

1. The assignments must have documented and sustained evidence of the theory used, clear, well-expressed statements, arguments and analysis of the literature used, and full discussion.
2. The mechanical aspects of the work such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation are not considered to be important in terms of marking/evaluation, but if the student continues making the same mistakes, they will mark these and provide feedback so that the student may not continue repeating the same mistake.
3. The three Mexican students are well prepared to confront the demands of good written assignments.

Particularities for each student

The particularities expressed by the subject tutors concerning the writing for each of their student are as follows:

1. For Mónica, who is studying an MA in Accounting and Finance, the subject tutor for the Accounting and Taxation course said that the main problem found in her work was that she had an engineering background and that some of the problems found were the same ones he would have found in other native speakers. These the tutor termed "technical problems."
2. As for Miguel Ángel, who is studying an MSc in Finance, the subject tutor for the Foundations of Finance course said that the student's assignment lacked "a clearer analysis."
3. As for Alberto, who is studying an MSc in International Trade and Finance, the subject tutor for the Macroeconomics course said he needed to write longer reports, "to address himself to an issue in some depth", since he had a background in writing shorter reports such as those employed in the United States, to write more coherent arguments and to confront the "theoretical view point with specific circumstances."

d. The EFL writing teachers' survey

The EFL teachers' comments regarding their views on and roles in the teaching of essay writing are the following:

1. There is a discrepancy among EFL teachers as to how much emphasis should be given to content or form when teaching essay writing as well as how much weight in its assessment (Shi and Cumming, 1995).

2. Two EFL teachers disagreed with the fact that the subject tutors did not provide feedback on form to each of the three students.
3. In order to seek a better understanding of why the students in this study affirmed that in Mexico the teaching of English had not helped them with their writing, I asked the EFL teachers for their response to the students' assessment. They agreed that their undergraduate students lack both motivation for the writing course and an awareness of its importance. The students give priority to other subjects and fail to see writing in English as something useful for the future. This may be one of the reasons why the students in Lancaster expressed the opinion that the English courses did not equip them to confront the demands that would have to face.
4. Two EFL teachers agreed that they might be capable of detecting inconsistencies in content-specific assignments due to the fact that they have a university level background and training in applied linguistics.

5. Discussion of findings

The data provided by this study lead to several points for discussion. The first one is regarding the students' capability to write well-expressed assignments. For the most part it is the case that the students' work displayed language problems that could have affected the content of their assignments. This would lead me to say that they were having difficulties in writing their assignments. Although their subject tutors said that they were adapting well to the demands of the courses and during the interviews they never stated any difficulties that could have really hampered their adaptation to those demands, there may be a relationship between their mistakes in form and their problems in content. For instance, the vocabulary problems found in Mónica's essay could be because she entered a new discipline. She was learning the terminology used in this new field and perhaps did not use it appropriately. As for Alberto, his inability to write more coherent paragraphs could be related to the difficulty to present his ideas in paragraphs and to express these ideas in independent and subordinate clauses as well (Barton and others, 1998).

Mónica's second assignment was impressively better than her first one in both content and form. For instance, she used more vocabulary, adequate transition words, her connectors were not repetitive in the same paragraphs, and there were no spelling mistakes at all. Further, the use of references to specialized literature was consistently applied throughout and sustained her statements in the main paragraphs of argumentation. However, it raises the question as how much her friend really did contribute to her progress. The reason why Mónica asked somebody else to correct her English was, she said, that she wanted her assignments to be read easily but it was never absolutely apparent how much her friend's feedback contributed. This contribution may have helped Mónica to realize the nature of the errors such as those I found in her first assignment and, consequently, helped her to become more aware of her mistakes and improve.

A second issue to be discussed is the connection resulting from checking the assignments and comparing the criteria for a good written assignment between the subject tutors' and mine. What I found when checking the assignments was that the content-specific aspects such as technical words, tables of interpretation, corroboration of results consistent with the students' development of the theoretical issues were not checked by me as these were not from my field of expertise. However, as I said before, I did find writing difficulties in Mónica's and Alberto's

first assignments that in my judgement would have affected the clarity of a well-expressed written assignment as required by the tutors, but these were not corrected by them.

The subject tutors corrected errors where they considered that these would have affected the content (Santos, 1988; Janopoulos, 1992). Mainly, they were to do with the argumentation, support statements with theoretical evidence, or inappropriate handling of the questions set by the tutors. As the corrections made by me are not the same as those made by the tutors, it may be assumed that they were unimportant, as they do not affect what the students were communicating. However, I may also assume that it was not the tutors' responsibility to stress those errors, but the students' responsibility, since, according to the tutors' comments, they come with sufficient mastery of the language to avoid these errors, and it is not the policy among the tutors to penalize the language errors except when these appear insistently and affect the communication of clear ideas, statements, analysis, argumentation and so on.

The connection identified between the subject tutors and me is that it is important for the students to clearly express through writing what they are asked to write about. Any discussion, description, analysis, interpretation, and so on, written in their assignments must meet the required academic standards. The problems in form found in Alberto and Mónica's first assignment could be somewhat related to the content problems detected by their subject tutors (Barton and others, 1998).

The third point of discussion deals with the students' affirmation that the writing practice that helped them was acquired during their work experience. They agreed that the English courses taken in Mexico did not contribute to their essay writing at all. For Mónica, who holds a bachelor's degree in Industrial Engineering, she acquired the writing practice when she assisted the PhD research of the director of the Social Science Division at the university she worked for. She had to write up and revise parts of the thesis in English. This helped her to write her assignments. For Miguel Ángel, who holds both a bachelor's and a master's degree in Accounting, he acquired his writing practice when writing reports for the company he worked for and learnt some of the vocabulary used in the courses. For Alberto, who holds a bachelor's degree in Economics, he acquired the writing practice when he worked as a writer and journalist for a specialized Mexican journal in economics and international issues in Spanish, plus translations in English for a stock house. All this may imply that there was something missing in the EFL courses.

The students do not recall that writing for their undergraduate courses or their EFL courses may have contributed to their success. They do affirm that writing for their work did help them. It may be that the topics related to accounting, finance and economics learnt in Spanish during their work experience were easier to write about in English (Friedlander, 1990). Likewise, while working, they exercised genres (reports, articles, thesis) that might have assisted them with useful activities for the elaboration of their assignments, such as summarizing, paraphrasing, organizing, revising, calculating, and so on (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996). It seems that this experience plus the effort made for their courses benefitted them to become successful writers. Further, it is suggested that they were involved with writing activities, and that the EFL courses did not help them obtain this accomplishment.

There may also be other reasons for the students' comments regarding the scarce contribution of their EFL courses to their academic writing. The first one is that the language courses taken may have been more focused on developing spoken English than written English (White, 1988; Matsuda, 1998). The latter was probably not being emphasized as it should. Mónica recalls having writing activities but that they did not help her tackle with written assignments in Lancaster.

Secondly, if there was any teaching of writing during their EFL courses, and it should be emphasized that Miguel Ángel and Alberto did not recall receiving any, perhaps at that time they were not aware of the importance this would have for their future studies, and that therefore they had not worked at it in a motivated fashion. The comments of the EFL teachers reinforced my own experience of teaching that the students to whom we teach essay writing are not motivated enough and do not see writing as something useful for their future career. On the contrary, they believe that the writing courses are a burden for them and that such courses take part of their time which should be dedicated to their other subjects (Swales, 1990; Schneider and Fujishima, 1995). Miguel Ángel and Alberto confirmed the latter. They said that language support was offered by the University's IELE (Institute for English Language and Education), but their formal courses kept them too busy to have time for anything else. According to Miguel Ángel, this also happened to other students.

However, the study suggests that lack of awareness and motivation could not have hampered the students' writing in Lancaster. On the contrary, Mónica, Miguel Ángel, and Alberto were highly motivated and well aware of the importance of writing. They went through the experience of writing assignments. Also, they knew that they must write appropriately to achieve success in their studies. What they probably missed in their EFL courses was an emphasis on the written language (White, 1988; Godev, 1997; Matsuda, 1998). The EFL courses might not have provided what the students would need to become successful in their future studies.

The fourth issue to discuss is how much emphasis should be given to content and form. The study showed a discrepancy among EFL teachers as to how much weight should be given to content and form respectively. The study also showed that the students had problems with both the content and the form of their assignments. It may seem that both should be considered equally important in an EFL context for the students showed that they still needed to master grammatical aspects of the language. Therefore, it must be kept in mind that assignments should effectively communicate what the students are required to write and the use of grammar is needed for this achievement (Jernudd, 1993). In other words, the grammatical usage of the language should not be taught in isolation (Clark and Ivanic, 1997).

The fifth point of discussion concerns the capability of EFL writing teachers in teaching, checking and providing feedback on content-specific essays. Obviously, there are aspects that only the tutors of a specialized field of knowledge can deal with. This pilot study leads me to believe that there is no generalized answer to this question other than to refer to a teacher's competence in a specific area of study. Spack (1988) says that the teacher of writing to non-native speakers should teach "general academic writing . . . to initiate students into the academic discourse community [and] leave the teaching of writing in the disciplines to the teachers of those disciplines" (p. 30).

However, it may prove to be the case that an individual teacher of writing can teach content or provide feedback, determining whether the content of a student's specialized essay is well written (Belcher, 1990). It may occur quite often that, due to being part of a tertiary institution as well as experienced and trained, teachers are capable of not only teaching language but also of providing useful feedback on content-specific essays (Belcher, 1990). For example, the EFL teachers surveyed affirmed that they were capable of detecting inconsistencies in content-specific assignments. This may be due to the fact that they have background in different disciplines, teaching experience, training in applied linguistics, and experience in having studied at English-speaking universities.

The pilot study has enabled me to realize my limitations in correcting content, but there may be other EFL teachers who have sufficient preparation to go even further than I may. In checking the students' assignments I was able to detect mistakes that could have affected the content of their assignment. However, I was not able to check their tables, specialized terminology, and other features more closely related to their disciplines. There were some elements of the content I detected that affected the students' communication, but the tutors' corrections showed that there were other aspects that I was not capable of identifying.

The last issue is whether the EFL teachers should solve all the students' writing problems, help them to handle writing problems and to write with less sense of uncertainty when confronted with academic demands. The study showed that the students had language problems, and that the students did not receive feedback from their tutors on these problems. Consequently, these problems led them to be uncertain about what they were writing. My response to this is that EFL teachers cannot solve all of the students' writing problems, since they will always experience different writing demands, conventions, and problems. However, teachers may prepare them with activities to make them aware of the fact that they will face demands, conventions, and problems during the process of writing an assignment, and that these are treated better when they arise. In this way, when dealing with them, I believe that the students may be more independent in making their own decision on what to write (Clark and Ivanic, 1997), and more certain of what they are doing regardless the tutors' lack of feedback on mechanical aspects such as grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.

Conclusions

The pilot study has answered the questions set. For the first question regarding the students' difficulties and the demands of writing assignments, the findings suggest that when faced with these demands, the students' needed to express clearly. The content of their assignments was sometimes obscured by lack of proper grammar usage. For the second question regarding the students' EFL preparation prior their studies in England, the findings show that the students did not receive adequate preparation and what helped them with their writing was their writing experience acquired during their work.

For the third question regarding how all this may contribute to the EFL teaching of essay writing, three implications are considered briefly: First, for various reasons discussed in the previous section, it is suggested in the study that grammar played an important role in the students' writing. It means that the emphasis on teaching grammar should be as equally significant as the emphasis on content. Second, the study showed that not only EFL teachers

might be capable of detecting deficiencies in the mechanics but also of inconsistencies in content-specific assignments. This may encourage us to teach and provide feedback on some content-specific aspects as long as we have the experience and training to do so. Finally, the findings suggested that the EFL courses in Mexico taken by the students did not contain any writing instruction to assist them with confronting the academic demands of their assignments in Lancaster. It is important to pause and reflect on what we have been doing regarding the emphasis on our courses. What is more, we must reflect on the kind of preparation we are offering our students who seek to further their education (Camps, 1998).

Also, the findings of this study opened possibilities for future research. For instance, how efficiently is the writing instruction in Mexico preparing students to further their studies abroad? How important is it to increase the motivation in students in writing courses? Are the EFL writing courses providing the students' needs for writing? To what extent is the feedback requested by the students' teachers or subject tutors useful to improve their writing? All these are important questions and, in my view, need to be addressed properly.

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Appendices

APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE TO STUDENTS

A. Antecedentes

1. ¿Dónde aprendiste inglés?
2. ¿Cuánto tiempo has estudiado inglés?
3. ¿Qué lees en inglés?
4. ¿Qué tan seguido lees en inglés?
5. ¿Qué escribes en inglés?
6. ¿Desde cuándo escribes ensayos en inglés?
7. ¿Qué licenciatura/maestría estudiaste?
8. ¿Dónde estudiaste tu licenciatura/maestría?
9. ¿Qué estás estudiando aquí en la Universidad de Lancaster?
10. ¿Cuándo iniciaste tus estudios aquí?

B. Examen de ubicación

1. ¿Qué examen de inglés presentaste para entrar a esta universidad?
2. ¿Te preparaste para dicho examen?
3. En caso afirmativo, ¿en qué área: escuchar, gramática, lectura, escritura, conversación?
4. ¿Tuviste que hacer parte escrita en ese examen?
5. ¿Tuvo relación con lo que estudiarías?
6. ¿Cuál fue tu puntaje (en lo posible desglosar por habilidad)?
7. ¿Este puntaje cubrió el requisito para ingresar a esta universidad?

C. Preparación ante las exigencias académicas

1. ¿Se te exige buen nivel de redacción en inglés para tus trabajos?
2. ¿Con qué exigencias para escribir en inglés te has encontrado?
3. ¿Te has adaptado (conformado) a tales exigencias?
4. ¿Tuviste que tomar un curso de inglés en esta universidad antes de iniciar tus estudios formales?
5. ¿De qué forma crees que este curso te ha beneficiado para escribir en inglés?
6. ¿De qué manera crees que se deba recibir dicha preparación?
7. ¿De parte de quién crees que se debe proporcionar preparación para tales demandas?
8. ¿De qué manera crees que en la calificación de tus trabajos haya influido el uso apropiado del inglés?
9. ¿Qué representa el hecho de no haber recibido correcciones del idioma en tus trabajos?

D. Composición de trabajos académicos en inglés

1. ¿De qué manera las lecturas realizadas para tus cursos te han ayudado a mejorar tus trabajos académicos en inglés?
2. ¿De qué manera los cursos que has tomado te han ayudado a mejorar tus trabajos académicos en inglés?

3. ¿De qué manera sientes que haya dificultad para escribir tus trabajos académicos en inglés?
4. ¿De qué forma has sentido más facilidad para escribir tus trabajos en inglés ahora que cuando llegaste?
5. ¿Por qué considerarías un reto para ti escribir tus trabajos en inglés más que en español?

E. Conocimiento previo y habilidades

1. ¿De qué manera crees que te ha beneficiado tanto tu conocimiento previo de tus estudios profesionales como tu conocimiento de redactar en español para escribir tus trabajos en inglés?
2. ¿Qué habilidades aplicas para ambos idiomas?

APPENDIX B: QUESTIONNAIRE TO SUBJECT TUTORS

A. Academic demands

1. Do you think _____ has adapted well to the academic demands of written assignments?
2. What does she/he still need?

B. Language level

1. Is _____'s level English sufficient to fulfill the requirements of written assignments?
2. Did language deficiencies affect the content of _____'s essay and his/her grade?
3. Do any of the following deficiencies affect your marking? Lack of support, contradictions, and unclear ideas in the written assignment? Any other?
4. Did they affect the marking of this particular essay? Can we discuss specific instances?
5. Did any aspect other of her/his language affect you as you read her/his writing?
6. Did you tolerate the language of _____'s written assignment?
7. What recommendations do you suggest to _____ to upgrade his/her language proficiency for written assignments?

C. Criteria for assessment

1. What are the requirements of your course for a good written assignment?
2. How do you feel the criteria used are special to this particular course?
3. Do you think your criteria used should only be concerned with specialist matters and not the language usage for written assignments?

D. Feedback

1. Do you consider helping _____ to improve her/his next assignment when writing feedback?
2. Which parts of your feedback were designed for this?

APPENDIX C: QUESTIONNAIRE TO EFL TEACHERS

A. Correction/assessment of essays

1. What are your criteria for essay correction/assessment?

2. What should the EFL writing teacher correct/assess in discipline-specific essays, form (grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.), or content (analysis, discussion, description of data, etc.) or both? Please be specific and state your reasons.
3. Do you think the discipline-specific teacher should correct/assess form (grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.), or content (analysis, discussion, description of data, etc.) or both in English written essays? Please give reasons.
4. How do you think the correction/assessment of both content and form should be balanced?
5. Why and to what extent it is important to consider form in discipline-specific essays for correction/assessment?
6. To what extent do you think EFL writing teachers are capable of determining deficiencies in content of discipline-specific essays that are not their field of expertise?
7. The three tutors interviewed in Lancaster by me (from the Economics, Finance and Accounting Departments) agreed that they do not mark language "errors" (grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.) but only content-specific errors in analysis, discussion, description of results, etc. They would mark errors if the student makes the same mistake and if this mistake hampers communication. What could you comment on this?

B. EFL writing teaching

1. To what extent is it an EFL writing teacher's responsibility to teach content-specific essay writing in English?
2. How should EFL writing teachers prepare students who wish to further their studies in English-speaking universities?
3. Why do you think the EFL teaching of essay and thesis writing is important in the preparation of students who will study abroad?
4. How capable do you think the EFL writing teacher is to prepare students who wish to study at English speaking universities in content-specific essays and theses?
5. Do you think discipline-specific teachers at English speaking universities should also teach students to write content-specific essays in English?
6. The three Mexican Master's students (two were ex-a-tec) interviewed in Lancaster indicated that the practices ("skills") that helped them to write their essays in English were acquired during their work experience and not during their English courses for their studies. What do you think about this? Is something missing in the teaching of essay writing?