

Chapter 22

Students' Conceptions of Academic Writing in a Second Language: Perspectives of Advanced Students of English



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Abstract In today's globalised world, English is the dominant language in academic writing contexts. While mastering academic writing is a demanding task in itself even in one's first language, undertaking this task in a second language clearly poses unique challenges to learners and teachers alike. Recent research has shown that learner beliefs seem to constitute an important influencing factor in this language learning process. Thus, the present study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of students' conceptions of academic writing in their second language (English) by adopting a contextual, student-centred approach. Data collection involved 50 advanced students of English comprising written guided reflections on their experiences as academic writers at the beginning of the semester and a follow-up questionnaire at the end. A category-based qualitative analysis identifies students' perceived challenges of academic writing in English and similarities and/or differences to first language contexts, as well as shedding light on the development of students' perceptions over the course of one semester with English for Academic Purposes teaching input.

Keywords Learner beliefs · Learner needs · English for Academic Purposes · Guided reflections · Qualitative analysis

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215

22.1 Introduction

With the rise of globalisation, English has become the prevailing medium of choice in academic writing contexts. Clearly, mastering academic writing is demanding in itself, regardless of whether it is approached in a first language (L1) or a second language (L2), since it involves adherence to specific conventions approved by a certain discourse community (Ferguson et al., 2011); however, learning how to (inter-)act effectively in an L2 in these contexts poses unique challenges to learners (e.g., Lillis & Curry, 2010; Tang, 2012a) as well as teachers (e.g., Cumming, 2006). Not only does it involve acquiring new linguistic competencies but it also requires mastering cognitive skills and socio-cultural practices (Barkaoui, 2007; Hyland, 2002a) in a highly specialised context. Thus, developing academic writing expertise in an L2 is equivalent to twofold foreign language learning (Knorr & Pogner, 2015).

Research has shown that learner beliefs seem to have an important impact on the language learning process when developing competences (Barcelos, 2003; Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011; Mercer, 2011). Hence, the present study adopts a contextual (Barcelos, 2003), student-centred approach and, in this way, aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of students' conceptions of academic writing in their L2 (English). Data was gathered from 50 advanced students of English attending the course English for Academic Purposes (EAP) at the University of Vienna, Austria (see Rieder-Bünemann, *this volume*), involving written guided reflections on their experiences as academic writers in the L1 and L2 at the beginning of the semester and a follow-up questionnaire at the end. The data were analysed using Kuckartz' (2014) category-based qualitative analysis. This facilitated an explorative analysis of students' experiences in and attitudes towards academic writing while still ensuring the comparability of students' responses.

This way, the study identifies students' past and possible future challenges for academic writing in English and similarities and/or differences to L1 contexts. It also sheds light on the dynamic development of students' perceptions over the course of one semester.

22.2 Theoretical Background

22.2.1 *Academic Writing*

Due to the fact that English is used as a global language in academia, research on academic writing in English as a Foreign Language has experienced enormous growth (e.g., Lillis & Curry, 2010; Tang, 2012a). Within this extensive research landscape investigating problems faced by scholars and students writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), two complementary strands can be identified. The first research tradition tends to focus on L2-specific academic writing issues, such as L2 competence problems (e.g., lexis, grammar, or sentence construction issues, see Chan, 2010), contrasts between L1- and L2-specific features (e.g., Connor,

1996), or psychologically motivated problems like cultural differences and clashing expectations or attitudes (e.g., Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Hinkel, 2005).

The second research tradition developed from an awareness of the limitations of a 'deficit' view of the learning process, which was countered by adopting a social-constructivist viewpoint that is discipline sensitive and discourse based (Hyland, 2000). Here, the central hypothesis is that the problems academic writers face in an L1 or L2 are not fundamentally different (Ferguson et al., 2011). As Tang (2012b) puts it, "'academic discourse' is not the natural 'first language' of any writer." (p. 12) In consequence, academic discourse is seen as social practice (Fairclough, 1992) rather than as a set of skills to be learnt, where each discipline might be compared to a tribe with its own particular norms and practices (Becher, 1989). Being able to engage in these practices thus involves acquiring the agreed conventions of the particular academic discourse community one is part of (Swales, 1990). Within this social-constructivist view, academic writing is intrinsically linked to a writer's identity, since the former is seen as an interrelation of cultural practices in academic discourse, critical thinking, and writer identity (McKinley, 2015). It is within this framework that the EAP course is positioned, and, accordingly, the concepts of writer identity, academic genre conventions, and writing as a social practice feature prominently throughout the course.

At the same time, however, it is also acknowledged that the foreign language component can lead to additional obstacles for academic writers, which is nicely illustrated by Knorr and Pogner's (2015) characterisation of learning to write academic texts in an L2 as learning a 'doubled' foreign language (p. 16). Accordingly, the EAP course contains targeted activities focusing on textual competence (e.g., academic lexico-grammar, signposting, hedging) in each unit.

As regards the position of advanced English language students among L2 academic writers, these learners seem to constitute a specific group that stands out from other L2 academic writers in two ways. Firstly, they exhibit language competence and an awareness of textual properties that go far beyond that of non-language students; secondly, they also receive explicit training in academic writing and reflect on language conventions as part of their studies, which is usually lacking in many non-language university subjects. Since the study focuses on a group of advanced English language students, it was hoped that the increased awareness and reflectivity of its participants would lead to rich response results.

22.2.2 *Learner Beliefs*

Research into learner beliefs has become increasingly popular in the context of second language acquisition (SLA) in the past 30 years. Their previous neglect in scientific investigations was partly due to the fuzziness of the concept (Barcelos, 2003). From the lack of agreement and vagueness as to what beliefs are in educational psychology, Pajares (1992) concludes that defining them "is at best a game of player's choice" (p. 309).

Broadly speaking, learner beliefs refer to “opinions and ideas that learners have about the task of learning a second/foreign language” (Kalaja & Barcelos, 2003, p. 1). These include, amongst other things, beliefs about themselves as language learners and their own language learning abilities, their own goals, views on language learning strategies, but also teaching practices and classroom interaction (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). As every language learner is unique, there is great individual variation. Still, investigating learners’ beliefs is crucial as “understanding students’ beliefs means understanding their world and their identity” (Barcelos, 2003, p. 8), which is a prerequisite for fruitful foreign language learning and teaching.

Approaches to investigating learners’ beliefs differ as do the terms used for the concept in the past, including “folklinguistic theories” (Miller & Ginsberg, 1995, p. 294), “foreign language self-concept” (Laine, 1988, p. 9), and “learners’ philosophy of language learning” (Abraham & Vann, 1987, cited in Leskovich, 2014, p. 26). According to Kalaja and Barcelos (2003), socio-culturally oriented approaches and cognitively oriented ones form the two ends of the spectrum of researching learners’ beliefs about language learning.

Whereas cognitive aspects were mostly in the focus in the beginning and included studies investigating metacognitive knowledge (e.g., Wenden, 1998), there has since been a trend towards socio-cultural approaches, proponents of which acknowledge the social nature of beliefs (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011). According to Mercer (2011), considering “their situated, dynamic and complex nature” (p. 336) is important when conducting research into learner beliefs. This means that they need to be understood contextually as they are often socially situated (Horwitz, 1999), they are not static as they can change over time (Ellis, 2008; Mercer, 2011; Tanaka & Ellis, 2003), and they are multiply determined (Mori, 1999).

Methodology-wise, this change in perspective has also led to a stronger focus on qualitative analyses (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011; Ellis, 2008), for they are often thought to capture the complexity inherent in beliefs more effectively than quantitative analyses. Still, the latter also need to be acknowledged for their strengths as they, for example, allow us to understand links between learner beliefs and other variables (see, e.g., Horwitz’s well-known “Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory” [BALLI]; for a review of BALLI studies, see, e.g., Horwitz, 1999). Clearly, there are multiple expedient ways to investigate learners’ beliefs.

Generally, previous research has shown that learner beliefs are influential in language learning and achievements (Bernat, 2006) and that teachers play a decisive role in shaping students’ beliefs about language learning (Horwitz, 2007). Thus, investigating learners’ beliefs has strong pedagogical implications, as a deeper understanding clearly equips teachers with the knowledge needed to adequately support students. Overall, learners’ beliefs “seem to play a crucial role in [learners’] agentic efforts to engineer their environment toward their language learning process. In this effort, reflection is decisive” (Barcelos & Kalaja, 2011, p. 287). This view of learner beliefs and reflection as key factors is the foundation our study builds on.

22.3 Research Questions

The research questions the study aimed to answer were twofold: On the synchronic level, the investigation tapped into the beliefs and perceptions of advanced English language students as participants in the academic writing community by addressing the following questions:

1. What are the individual experiences and challenges perceived by these learners when engaging in L2 academic writing?
2. How do they rate their perceived competence in academic writing in their L2 in comparison to their L1 academic writing competence, and what similarities and differences do they see?
3. What is their perception of the role of writer identity in academic texts, and what conceptions do they have of how it can be realised in academic writing?

On a complementary level, the diachronic component of the study addressed the effect of the EAP course on the three levels of student conceptions listed above.

22.4 Study Description

22.4.1 *Participants*

Fifty advanced students of English who attended the EAP course at the Department of English and American Studies in either summer or winter semester 2016 participated in the study. Their age ranged from a minimum of 21 to a maximum of 47 years, the mean age being 26.42 ($SD = 4.94$). Female students (86.00%, $n = 43$) by far outnumbered the male ones (14.00%, $n = 7$), which is a common pattern in survey-based research in SLA but also reflects the typical gender ratio of English language students at the Department of English and American Studies in Vienna (Unit for Reporting and Analysis of the University of Vienna, personal conversation) and females' greater interest overall in language-related professions (Wilson & Dewaele, 2010).

The most frequent L1 was German (76.00%, $n = 38$), followed by Croatian (4.00%, $n = 2$). Two students (4.00%) reported having grown up bilingually with German and Croatian, whereas another one grew up using German and English. The following L1s were spoken by one student each: Armenian, Chinese, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, and Ukrainian. Thus, the sample mostly consists of foreign language users of English. The majority of the students (78.00%, $n = 39$) were enrolled in the teacher education programme, and 11 (22.00%) were pursuing an MA in English and American Studies. The second subjects studied by those aiming to become teachers were rather diverse, with the most popular ones being history (26.32%, $n = 10$), German (23.68%, $n = 9$), philosophy/psychology (7.89%, $n = 3$), and physical education (7.89%, $n = 3$).

22.4.2 Methodology

Data collection involved guided written reflections on the students' experiences as academic writers in their L1s and L2s at the beginning of the semester and a follow-up questionnaire containing open-ended questions at the end of the course. The first survey focused on students' past academic texts and included questions on the text types they had produced prior to taking the course, the challenges they had faced, what they liked about academic writing, and the way they used source material. More specific questions on L1 versus L2 academic writing were included as well, as were questions on the role and place of writer identity in academic writing and possible realisations of it in such texts. A final set of questions focused on future academic texts. The second survey was similar in structure and included the same aspects, thereby allowing for an analysis of the dynamic development of students' perceptions of academic writing over the course of one semester, including possible changes in their attitudes towards academic writing as well as themselves as academic writers. To ensure that students were familiar with their previous answers, they had access to their filled-in initial survey while completing the second questionnaire. Overall, the students' responses amounted to a corpus of 48,655 tokens.

As a method of data analysis, thematic qualitative text analysis was chosen, and a combination of deductive and inductive category formation was employed (Kuckartz, 2014) using MAXQDA2018 (VERBI Software, 2018) for the coding process. In other words, based on the research questions, topic categories were developed deductively before data collection in accordance with the questionnaire sections (i.e., perceived challenges, perceived L1 vs. L2 competence, conceptions of writer identity) and coded after a close, initial analysis of the responses by both authors. In a first step, 20% of the data were assigned to the main categories by both researchers to ensure category applicability (Kuckartz, 2014). After having coded the rest of the data, refined inductive subcategories and groupings were established and coded by both researchers as a team, involving various cycles of data processing and the re-arranging of categories before the category system was fixed (Mayring, 2015). This enabled an explorative analysis of the data, while still maintaining the strengths of conducting a category-based analysis, such as a quantification of the results to illustrate overall trends (Kuckartz, 2014).

22.5 Results

22.5.1 Academic Writing: Experiences and Challenges

22.5.1.1 Initial Experiences and Challenges

When asked about their previous experiences with L2 academic writing, 74.00% ($n = 37$) mentioned having written seminar papers in English in the past, 22.00% ($n = 11$) had written BA papers, and 4.00% ($n = 2$) an MA thesis. Thus, they were all experienced users of EAP at the beginning of the course.

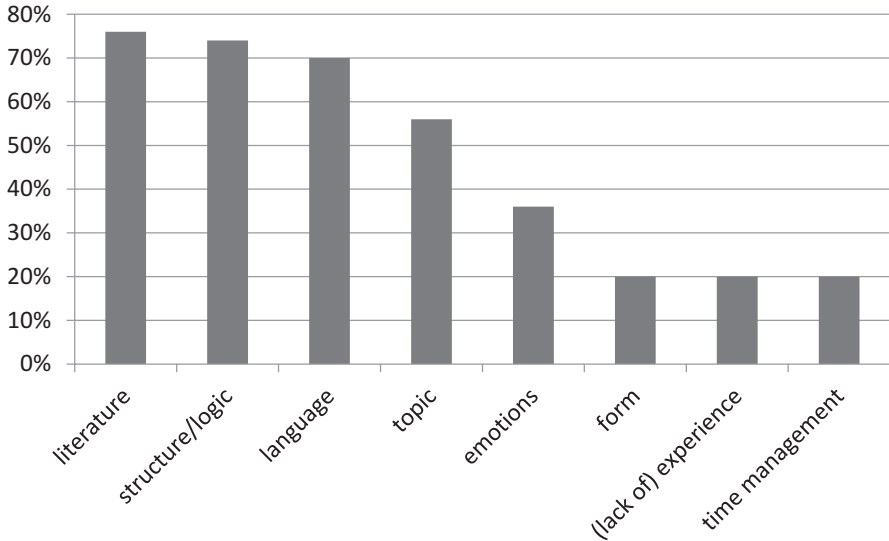


Fig. 22.1 Perceived initial challenges in L2 academic writing

In relation to the particular challenges in producing these texts, eight predominant themes emerged. As illustrated in Fig. 22.1, literature-related challenges were the most frequently stated difficulty. Of the 76.00% ($n = 38$) who mentioned them, 57.89% ($n = 22$) explained that finding or selecting sources was difficult due to the topic having been new to them, making it difficult “to ‘orientate’ myself ... before I was able to find appropriate sources” (JSJ_FI1). Others mentioned having “had problems deciding which ones [publications] were worth being read and cited” (KEC_FI1). They mostly seemed to struggle with the “quantity of information” (LUG_FI1) and, consequently, with “evaluating research” (LUF_MI1). In cases where they succeeded in the latter but could not handle the former, this led to frustration, as one student explains: “When the feeling remains that there is more literature that I should have included, it is a very difficult and dissatisfactory experience” (RTA_FI1). Organising sources (13.16%, $n = 5$) and avoiding plagiarism (10.53%, $n = 4$) were common difficulties mentioned here too.

Of the 37 students (74.00%) who mentioned structuring their texts as being an obstacle, 11 (29.73%) found it particularly challenging to produce a coherent, well-structured text; five students (13.51%) also described experiencing a lack of drafting competence, as illustrated by the following response:

I think my problems with text organisation were due to the fact that I did not see writing as a process requiring different drafts and various stages of revision. I always wanted to write a very good text in one sitting, which was simply not possible. (KNS_FI1)

Additionally, a majority (70.00%, $n = 35$) mentioned language-related issues in this context. These mostly related to academic vocabulary (42.86%, $n = 15$) – including register, accuracy, and range – but also an overall lack of language competence

(20.00%, $n = 7$), as described by participant GLL_FI1: “I am not a native speaker. Fluency will always be an issue.” In the same vein, six students (12.00%) referred to the formal and impersonal writing style separately, as this was something entirely new to them and was, consequently, often perceived as particularly challenging:

The greatest difficulty for me was to adapt an academic writing style that is more or less objective and impersonal. It was hard at times to completely exclude the “I” from my writing and act as if the essay or paper I was producing was itself an agent (e.g., “This paper will discuss ...”). At times, I find this way of writing rather alienating and quite unnatural. (KSF_FI1)

Topic-related difficulties were mentioned by 56.00% ($n = 28$) of the students; within this group, they mostly referred to topic limitation (46.42%, $n = 13$), staying focused on the topic (32.14%, $n = 9$), and formulating a research question (21.43%, $n = 6$).

Interestingly, 36.00% ($n = 18$) described coping with their emotions as a perceived difficulty in the writing process. Half of those students based their explanations on self-doubt or a lack of self-confidence; as one student stated: “I always felt like I was just rephrasing what other people, who are much smarter than myself, have already said in a better way” (HGB_FI1). Approximately a quarter of them (27.78%, $n = 5$) found it particularly challenging to motivate themselves, and another 22.22% ($n = 4$) had difficulty coping with anxiety, nervousness, and feeling intimidated:

It is difficult to start usually because I have waited too long and then get scared about not being able to finish. As a consequence of this anxiety I postpone the beginning of the work even further. But this anxiety also depends on the pressure the teachers put on us. ... I don't feel like I can adhere to the standard. (REV_FI1)

Students typically struggled with formal aspects at the beginning too (20.00%, $n = 10$), including citations, the bibliography, and sticking to the word limit. Additionally, they frequently perceived time management (20.00%, $n = 10$) and the overall lack of experience in academic writing (20.00%, $n = 10$) as challenging.

Students also explained what they enjoyed about academic writing. Nineteen students (38.00%) mentioned that they take pleasure in the sense of accomplishment (LUL_FI1) that comes with finishing a paper, which they described as “satisfying” (BAS_FI1), “rewarding” (KSC_FI1), “relief” (AAS_FI1), and making them proud (HII_FI1).

Another 10.00% ($n = 5$) explicitly mentioned the satisfaction when elements fall into place: “I like the feeling when I can finally begin to see a red [common] thread while reading the secondary literature and the vision of my paper starts to appear in front of me” (RTE_FI1). Additionally, students frequently mentioned that they appreciated becoming informed about a topic in the process of writing a paper and gaining expertise in a certain research area (32.00%, $n = 16$), which not seldom (14.00%, $n = 7$) increased their interest in the topic, as the following response indicates: “When you choose an interesting topic, research can actually be a lot of fun, since there are always new things to learn about certain areas of research” (BAS_FI1). Students also explained that they enjoyed experiencing and/or reflecting on their progress in developing academic texts (18.00%, $n = 9$) and working with sources (16.00%, $n = 8$).

22.5.1.2 Perceived Changes in Challenges

While 28.00% ($n = 14$) reported no change in the perceived challenges of academic writing, the vast majority (72.00%, $n = 36$) did indeed observe changes on this level. Twenty percent ($n = 10$) stated they had generally improved their writing skills throughout the course, and 18.00% ($n = 9$) observed an improvement in their knowledge of the typical genre conventions. The latter often also boosted students' confidence in themselves as academic writers, as one student explained: "I am now more confident with regard to producing written/spoken academic texts because of this term's material that provided basic guidelines and features of academic texts" (KIL_MI2). Six (16.67%) of the students who perceived changes on this level linked them to having fewer difficulties in organising their ideas. Additionally, 13.89% ($n = 5$) reported feeling more confident in selecting sources, and the same number of students observed an improvement in language competence. Besides mentioning fewer precision problems (11.11%, $n = 4$), students also found it easier to argue for their own views (8.33%, $n = 3$) and to structure their papers (5.56%, $n = 2$). An increase in drafting competence was listed among those changes as well, as were fewer problems with starting the writing process as such (2.78%, $n = 1$ each).

22.5.2 Academic Writing: L1 vs. L2 Competence

22.5.2.1 Initial Perceptions of L1 – L2 Competence

In the first survey, students were asked how competent they felt when producing academic texts in English compared to writing such texts in their L1. Of the 43 students who answered the question (seven students had not written an academic text in their L1), only 4.65% ($n = 2$) mentioned feeling equally competent in both their L1 and L2. The vast majority (72.09%, $n = 31$), however, reported perceived differences in competence, as illustrated in Fig. 22.2.

Sixteen students (37.21%) stated that their competence in academic writing was much higher in their L1. This was most often linked to greater experience in producing academic texts in the L1, but students also felt "more eloquent in German" (KCT_FI1) and had the impression that their "German writing sounds more sophisticated" (WLT, MI1). The following response sums up the general tenor underlying students' explanations nicely:

I am very critical about formulations and it is important to me that I express myself as well as I possibly can. I think this might have its origins in my great respect and love for language and all its possibilities. Naturally, as German is my native language, my lexical and grammatical competences are more developed and I find it easier to write in higher registers. (RTE_FI1)

As mentioned by numerous other students too, she described her lexical repertoire as broader and her grammatical accuracy as much higher in her L1 than in English,

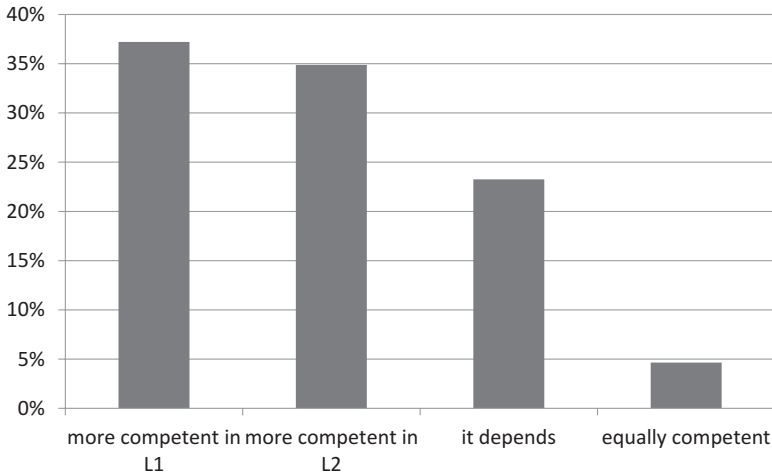


Fig. 22.2 Perceived competence in L1 and L2 academic writing (reflection 1)

which frequently made students feel more confident in the L1 as they felt they made fewer mistakes. Additionally, they described producing such texts as less time consuming in the L1, especially when paraphrasing. Their comparatively higher L1 competence also allowed them to review literature more effortlessly in the L1 than in the L2: “I can easily find synonyms even for complicated concepts. This makes me quicker in writing texts in my first language. Also, I can read German texts much faster than English ones” (REV_FI1).

Interestingly, nearly the same number of students (34.88%, $n = 15$) mentioned the opposite, namely feeling more competent in L2 academic writing than when producing academic texts in their L1. They almost exclusively based their answer on “the constant training of writing English texts” (MCK_FI1), “the amount of input” (HLM_FI1), the explicit and clear instructions they had received on academic writing in English, and, along with it, the “opportunities to practice ... presentation and writing skills in the L2 at university” (BCY_FI1). One student also mentioned that socio-cultural differences in approaching academic writing led her to feeling more comfortable when producing such texts in English:

I actually feel more comfortable writing my papers in English. I reckon this is because of the German academic language tradition, which is generally highly nominalised and (in my opinion) overly complicated. In English academia there seems to be a trend of writing more reader oriented. To me, presenting the facts in a readable manner does not make them less scientifically relevant. (AAS_FI1)

Overall, those students who mentioned feeling more competent in the L2 almost exclusively based their choice on their studying the language, which made them feel “better prepared for writing academic texts in English” (WNM_FI1).

According to 23.26% of the students ($n = 10$), the question could not be answered in a straightforward manner as it depended entirely on the aspects of academic writing taken into account. While they usually reported feeling more competent in the

L1 on the level of linguistic mastery (HIA_FI1), they generally felt much better prepared regarding “genre-specific conventions of academic writing” in the L2 (KNS_FI1) on both macro- and micro-structural levels; in one student’s words: “I do feel more competent in terms of linguistic competence. However, when it comes to organisation, paragraphing or developing an argument, I feel more confident in English” (HIA_FI1). Overall, students often linked a higher awareness of and competence in following academic conventions in English to “extensive training at the department,” often making them “feel more at ease when dealing with English [academic] texts” (LUF_MI1).

22.5.2.2 Perceived L1 – L2 Competence after Having Taken EAP

In the follow-up questionnaire, students were again asked to rate their competence in writing academic texts in the L1 and English and the data were coded according to perceived changes over the course of the semester. The vast majority (93.33%, $n = 14$) of those students who observed a change in competence throughout the semester ($n = 15$) now reported feeling more confident in L2 academic writing. This boost in L2 competence was observed on various levels. While students mentioned having “gained deeper insight into the text types” (MCK_FI2) and “a much clearer view on how to structure a text in terms of cohesion and coherence” (HGB_FI2), they also reported on having expanded their vocabulary (JND_FI2) and improved their awareness of specific language choices having certain effects. One of the students, for example, stated that “the phrases and words for taking stance, expressing certainty or presenting points of view” helped him “put the right weight on my thoughts and arguments” (WLT_MI2). Furthermore, the EAP course made students notice that they had had ample opportunity to practice their L2 academic writing skills, which in the case of three students decreased their confidence in L1 academic writing. One student, for example, writes: “I am a little less confident in German writing now because I realised how much knowledge I lack concerning German academic writing style” (KTC_FI2). Noticing knowledge gaps in L1 academic writing because of the course not seldom made them draw a conclusion similar to LNM_FI2’s, who stated that “after this course I think I am more capable in English.”

Figure 22.3 summarises students’ perceived competence after having taken EAP and clearly illustrates the above-mentioned shift.

While 37.21% ($n = 16$) of the 43 students who answered the question initially perceived themselves as being more competent in the L1 when producing academic texts (see Fig. 22.2), only 27.91% ($n = 12$) reported the same after having taken EAP. The number of students perceiving their competence in L2 academic writing as higher than in the L1 increased from 34.88% ($n = 15$) at the beginning to 48.84% ($n = 21$) at the end of the semester. Whereas the number of those students who described their academic writing skills as being the same in both languages doubled from 4.65% ($n = 2$) to 9.30% ($n = 4$), the number of those stating it depends was reduced by almost half from 23.36% ($n = 10$) to 13.95% ($n = 6$). In the case of seven students, it was impossible to determine their overall self-rated competence after the

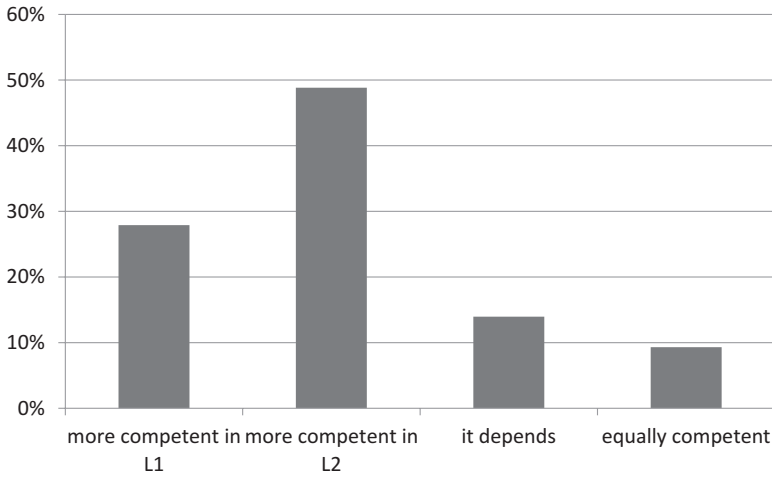


Fig. 22.3 Perceived competence in L1 and L2 academic writing after having taken EAP (reflection 2)

course because they either did not provide an answer to the question or provided an answer that illustrated isolated improvements which did not allow any generalised conclusions.

22.5.3 *Writer Identity: Conceptions of its Role and Realisation*

22.5.3.1 Initial Conceptions of Writer Identity

As regards familiarity with the notion of writer identity, responses at the beginning of the course showed that roughly half of all students (48.00%, $n = 24$) were either unfamiliar with the concept or considered writer identity unimportant for academic texts (see Fig. 22.4).

Out of the 12 students (24.00%) who were unfamiliar with the concept, several misinterpreted the notion by equating writer identity with biographical information, as illustrated by the following student answer: “I think it is important to outline a writer’s identity (e.g., profession, academic education, publications) to a certain degree in order to establish credibility” (KEC_FI1). Others openly stated that they were unfamiliar with the concept, as is apparent in the following response: “I don’t think I can answer this question correctly since I am not familiar with the term of writer identity or its meaning” (BAS_FI1). A third group skipped the question entirely, which was interpreted as indicating that the concept was unclear to them (see also Sect. 22.5.3.2).

Another 24.00% ($n = 12$) of the students stated that in their opinion writer identity was not important in the text, stressing that academic texts should be factual

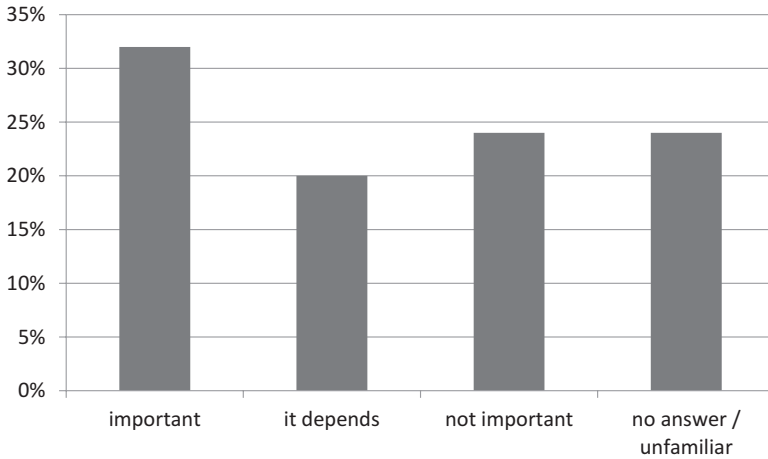


Fig. 22.4 Students' perceptions of the importance of writer identity for academic texts before the course (reflection 1)

rather than personal. This is shown by a range of student answers resembling the following: "I do not think that the writer should show his/her identity, as the text is meant to present a contribution to the pertaining field of study, and the identity of the author should not influence or determine this thesis" (LMN_FI1).

The remaining students (52.00%, $n = 26$) seemed to be more familiar with the notion of writer identity, either stating that it generally fulfilled an important role in academic writing (32.00%, $n = 16$) or specifying that the prominence of a writer's identity varied according to research fields and text types (20.00%, $n = 10$). This is apparent in the following response:

For some academic texts this is very important. Particularly, for texts in the cultural and language corner, as I believe that the cultural background of the writer does influence the text. The more texts move into the natural sciences, I think, the less it is important [sic] is the identity of the writer. Although one can always recognise the writer's identity on how things were analysed or done. (WLT_MI1)

In a separate question, students were also asked for their views on how writer identity could be realised in a text. Varying responses were given here (see Fig. 22.5), with the majority of students (64.00%, $n = 32$) providing some suggestions, while the remaining respondents either provided no answer (20.00%, $n = 10$), an irrelevant answer (10.00%, $n = 5$), or indicated that they were not sure (6.00%, $n = 3$).

Of those students who listed actual realisations ($n = 32$), the three most frequent responses were: expressing writer identity by including the writer's views, evaluations, or experiences (mentioned by 46.88%, $n = 15$), by means of the individual writing style (34.38%, $n = 11$), or by using personal pronouns (37.50%, $n = 12$).

Interestingly, quite a large percentage (20.00%, $n = 10$) of the students skipped the question on realisations entirely. In contrast, all of these students provided

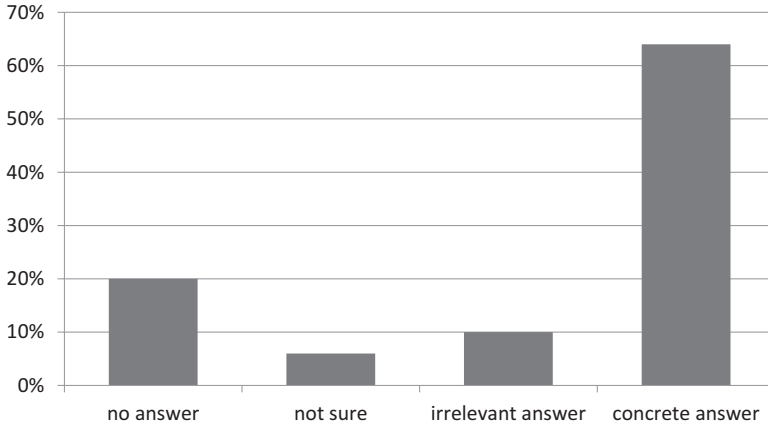


Fig. 22.5 Student responses to realisations of writer identity (reflection 1)

answers to this question after the course, which suggests substantial gains in awareness on the part of the students over the semester.

22.5.3.2 Writer Identity: Changes in Conceptions after Having Taken EAP

After having taken the EAP class, 80.00% ($n = 40$) of the students replied that their views about writer identity had changed through the course. Within this student group, 42.50% ($n = 17$) indicated that they were more familiar with the concept (see Fig. 22.6), as expressed by one of the students who had provided no answer to the questions on writer identity at the beginning of the course: “Before this semester I didn’t really know what to think about this question. Now I think that the writer’s identity plays an important role” (KSC_FI2).

Also, 20.00% ($n = 8$) explicitly indicated that they now attributed more importance to writer identity. As one student put it:

My view on writer identity have [sic] shifted towards acknowledging the author’s position and identity more over the course of the class. Now, I think that identity should have its place in academic writing. (LUF_MI2)

In turn, for the 20.00% ($n = 10$) whose perception of writer identity did not change through the course, it appears that most of them (80.00%, $n = 8$) were well informed about the notion of identity at the beginning of the course already, as is indicated in this initial student answer:

Every academic text ... necessarily conveys the opinion of the author. Thus, the identity (meaning the set of beliefs, the approach to the problem in question, the formulation of the thesis) is intrinsic to the process of academic writing in my opinion. (MLD_MI1)

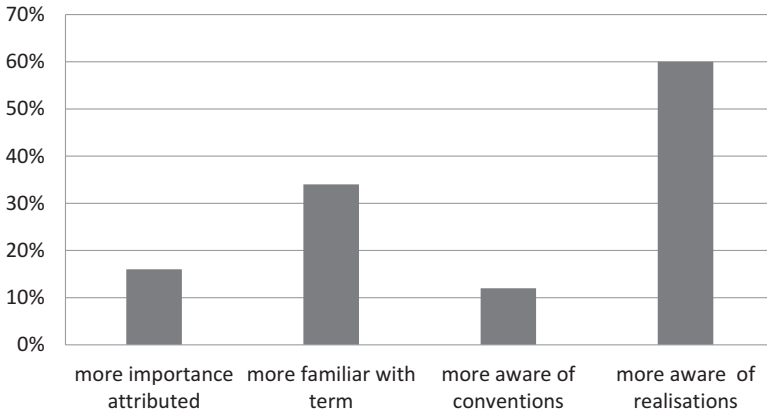


Fig. 22.6 Changes in student conceptions of writer identity after the course (reflection 2)

Only in two cases did the students' misconceptions remain unchanged after the course; that is, the concept was still misunderstood or writer identity was still considered unimportant.

Of the 20.00% ($n = 10$) of students who had not answered the question on realisations of writer identity before the course, all students provided targeted answers on writer identity realisation after the course. Of these answers, 80.00% ($n = 8$) mentioned explicit realisations, and 70.00% ($n = 7$) explicitly indicated that they had become more aware of different realisations.

The fact that the course seems to have achieved substantial gains in student awareness concerning writer identity is also reflected in the overall results. In the second questionnaire, two thirds of all students ($n = 30$) noted that through the EAP course, they had become more aware of different manifestations of writer identity (see Fig. 22.6). As one of the students (HIK_FI2) noted:

I assume my views have changed because before I have not been aware of the different meanings and implications of these techniques. Now I have developed a sense to recognise a writer's identity in a text and make use of it in my own texts.

22.6 Discussion

The findings from the category-based qualitative content analysis of the surveys (Kuckartz, 2014) indicate that even highly advanced EFL students face challenges when writing L2 academic texts and need explicit instruction on how to do so effectively.

Despite students' awareness of the conventions underlying academic writing in English (Swales, 1990), they found it difficult to adhere to the guidelines approved by the academic discourse community (Ferguson et al., 2011), partly because of a perceived lack of experience in academic writing. Finding or selecting relevant

sources and organising them in coherent and cohesive ways were difficulties a majority mentioned at the beginning of the semester. A lack of drafting competence, narrowing down a research topic, and not drifting off topic were also listed among the perceived initial challenges and so was adhering to formal criteria, such as word count and citation rules. A large majority added language-related difficulties to this list, principally academic vocabulary. Some mentioned an overall lack of L2 competence here.

After having taken EAP, the vast majority observed changes in the perceived challenges: they mentioned having improved their writing skills and having gained knowledge of the genre conventions. Moreover, students found it easier to select sources, organise their ideas, and argue for their views. Structuring their papers and drafting seemed less problematic too, and they also noticed improvements on the level of language competence. Thus, it seems the EAP course helped them indeed to overcome many of the initial obstacles.

Overall, students' perceived (initial) challenges illustrate that learning how to interact effectively in the EAP discourse community involves acquiring macro-strategies (e.g., planning and drafting) but also micro-strategies (e.g., academic vocabulary) (Cumming, 2001), and that students need awareness-raising, explicit instruction, and feedback on both to internalise these conventions and develop automaticity in applying them flexibly (Barkaoui, 2007). Grappling with the complexity inherent in academic discourse and grasping the specific ways of meaning making, which "represent particular social relations and ways of seeing the world" (Hyland, 2009, p. 18), require time and practice, and the EAP course seems to offer them a platform to do so extensively.

Another aspect that becomes evident from the perceived difficulties mentioned above is that apart from L2 language competence, which seems to pose unique challenges in the case of our students (see also Chan, 2010), many of the aspects mentioned are not language-specific. This supports Tang's (2012b) claim that academic writing is a variety in its own right and no one's L1. For instance, students need to develop a process-oriented approach to writing and realise that it is a dynamic, social practice and that nobody is born a good academic writer (see, e.g., Clark & Ivanic, 1997). Based on their responses to the second survey, the EAP course seemed to make them realise that EAP-specific expertise needs to be developed (Ferguson et al., 2011). They further noticed "how language is structured to achieve social purposes" in this very specific context of use (Hyland, 2007, p. 148). Still, according to our students, judging the appropriateness of academic vocabulary is easier in the L1 and so is expressing themselves in a nuanced way due to advanced linguistic mastery. As the responses to the second survey revealed, these skills, too, were improved in our learners after having completed the course, and the explicit instruction increased their confidence.

Another frequently mentioned initial challenge was linked to learners' emotions: students reported self-doubt, a lack of self-confidence, anxiety, nervousness, and feeling intimidated as obstacles when having to produce an academic text in the L2. Still, they mentioned several aspects they enjoyed about L2 academic writing as well: they reported taking pleasure in the sense of accomplishment that comes with

finishing a paper and in elements falling into place. Additionally, they enjoyed gaining expertise in a research area and making progress in writing academic texts, including working with sources. This clearly demonstrates the crucial role emotions play in L2 attainment, and it shows that the presence of negative emotions does not necessarily imply a lack of experience of positive ones. While the former usually impede progress, the latter tend to have a broadening function and, thus, usually boost it (Fredrickson, 2003). Students' responses also illustrated that perceived challenges are not necessarily seen as something negative, as they frequently mentioned enjoying them too, which is in line with Dewaele and MacIntyre's (2016) definition of enjoyment. According to them, it is marked by complexity and "interacting components of challenge and perceived ability" (p. 216). Interestingly, negative emotions were no longer mentioned by the students in the second survey; the only emotion that was frequently mentioned was the confidence boost that came with improving their knowledge of genre conventions, for instance. This illustrates the power of positive emotions to undo negative ones (Rahimi & Askari Bigdeli, 2014) and suggests the importance of enhancing positive emotions in students to maximise their benefit from courses.

When asked about their overall self-perceived competence in academic writing in the L1 and L2, the EAP course led approximately one third of the students to observe a change on this level and to feel more confident in the L2 after having taken the course. This is in line with students' detailed responses, according to which they noticed having gained deeper insights into genre conventions, finding it easier to produce coherent and cohesive academic texts, and having expanded their academic vocabulary. The latter led them to state that they felt they were able to make informed choices, for instance, to express stance and interact with the audience (Hyland, 2005). Overall, approximately half of the students mentioned feeling more confident when producing academic texts in English than when doing so in their L1 at the end of the semester, which illustrates a sharp increase in their self-perceived L2 competence. Not only does this confirm that explicit instruction is much needed and useful, but it also illustrates that students developed an awareness and understanding of academic writing being a socio-cultural activity and that the approaches to it differ depending on the specific context (Hyland, 2002a).

As far as the notion of writer identity in general, and its role and realisation in academic writing in particular, is concerned, it seems that initially, the concept was fuzzy or unfamiliar to an astonishingly large number of the participants, with half of the students either deeming writer identity unimportant or presumably being unaware of the concept, and over one third of the students being unable to name linguistic realisations of writer identity. Not only does this point to a general lack of awareness of writer identity; it also speaks for the predominance of a skills-oriented view of academic writing (see Jordan, 1989) that views textual content as something 'objective' which is remote from the writer.

After the course, in contrast, writer identity was seen by almost all students as intricately linked to an academic text, and a more central role was generally attributed to the writer, which denotes a change in perspective, clearly acknowledging the social nature of academic writing (Fairclough, 1992). At the same time, the students

were also aware of the fact that the degrees of author visibility deemed appropriate varied between academic communities, or also between different genres within one community, which shows their familiarity with the notion of academic literacy practices in relation to writer identity (see Ivanic, 1998). On the level of linguistic features representing writer visibility, students were clearly more familiar with a range of possible realisations of writer identity, which is likely to impact on their ability to provide good academic arguments by showing effective authorial identity in their own future academic writing (Hyland, 2002b; Suganthi, 2012). This suggests that the course has succeeded in bringing about a paradigm shift in student conceptions towards a social view of academic writing practices in which students are aware that they have a place in the academic community as contributors to the discourse (Swales, 1990).

22.7 Conclusion

Tapping into advanced students' conceptions of L2 academic writing has yielded rich insights into their overall conceptualisation of writing processes, their perceived competences, and the challenges involved, as well as into the development of these conceptions through the EAP instruction received.

Regarding students' pre-instructional perceptions, it became apparent that even though they were at a relatively advanced stage, most students still seemed to have a rather partial, skills-based view of academic writing and to experience substantial and diverse challenges in the process. This is astonishing in view of the fact that students at the department should be familiar with process-oriented and genre-based approaches to (academic) writing, including formal conventions (e.g., referring to/citing sources, register), from their previous language classes (see Martinek & Savukova, [this volume](#); Schwarz-Peaker, [this volume](#); Bruno-Lindner, "English in a Professional Context," [this volume](#)), and points to a compartmentalisation of knowledge rather than knowledge transfer on the part of the students. Clearly, there seems to be potential for consecutive courses to address and exploit synergies more explicitly. Specifically, at the start of the EAP course, awareness-raising activities that explicitly pick up, combine, and expand on relevant notions from previous classes, as well as acknowledging typical student challenges, would be vital additions. This would also benefit those students who joined the department at MA level in order to identify possible knowledge gaps and offer adequate support. As far as the development of these perceptions throughout the EAP course is concerned, the results of the post-instructional reflections suggest that the course's targeted foci, which were aligned with student needs apparent from their initial perceptions, have both managed to increase students' confidence and perceived competences, and succeeded in inducing a richer, more refined view of academic writing.

Lastly, the results also underscore our conviction that gaining insights into students' beliefs is of major importance not only for the students themselves, because their beliefs are influential for their learning process and, ultimately, achievements,

but also for teachers, in order to enable them to provide targeted and meaningful student support. For instance, this study identified learners' initial misconceptions of the role of writer identity in academic writing; this flawed perception confirms the necessity of the approach towards writer identity taken in the EAP course for achieving a paradigm shift. At the same time, the encouraging results at the end of the course show that the EAP class seems to be successful in doing so.

Overall, the student perceptions confirm that both L2-specific and language-independent challenges are experienced when attempting to master EAP-related challenges, and that the combination of L2-specific input and focused discussions of the socio-cultural and context-specific nature of academic writing evidently lead to an increase in perceived competence; both these levels should thus be foregrounded in EAP-course conceptions. Furthermore, raising awareness of the complexities, conditions, and constraints of (L2) academic discourse, in combination with explicit instruction, opportunities for extensive practice, and feedback targeted to specific student needs, should form cornerstones of EAP classes, as they appear to support students significantly in overcoming their perceived challenges and becoming more confident and competent members of the academic community.

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