

Enhancing undergraduate students' academic writing skills through self-assessment

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Abstract: Developing the knowledge and the skill to master academic writing in higher education constitutes a challenge for most undergraduate students. However, learning about this style of writing opens students' doors to the wide world of academia. Thus, some undergraduate students were invited to become members of a Writing Feedback Center in which they worked with a tutor and a self-assessment sheet on different writing assignments following an eclectic approach to writing. In this work we analyzed students' and tutors' perceptions on self-assessment in relation to the development of their academic skill.

Keywords: Academic Writing. Undergraduates. Second Language Learning. Self-assessment.

Ana Cecilia
Cad

Paul Alexis
Carrera

174

1. Introduction

Academic writing is a style of writing employed in higher education to help students develop their language and critical thinking skills, and to assess students' performance at the end of a module or term (CARLINO, 2006). Some basic features constitute this type of writing: a) audience, b) register and c) purpose (HYLAND, 2003; MARTINEZ; ROMANO, 2019). However, quite often undergraduate students face difficulties when drafting an academic essay as they are not typically familiarized with the genre requirements of academic writing. Thus, undergraduates from second and third year of the School of Languages, National University of Cordoba (henceforth, UNC), were invited to become members of a Writing Feedback Center (GONZÁLEZ; ROMANO, 2018) in which they worked together with a tutor on different writing assignments following an eclectic approach to writing. Each student was assigned five different writing tasks in which they were supposed to write a draft, analyze it in the light of a self-assessment sheet (SAS), and then submit it to the tutors. Then, tutors conducted their feedback sessions taking into account students' performance and self-evaluation. After the virtual or face-to-face feedback session, students were supposed to produce an improved version of their written task. To most undergraduate students, this constituted the first time in which they had to self-assess their written productions. Thus, the SAS was carefully designed to guide the students into the analysis of their productions by paying closer attention to the use of language, content and genre requirements. A closed questionnaire was administered to explore students' beliefs about the usefulness of the SAS to help them meet linguistic as well as genre requirements. Some tutors were also interviewed to find out their perceptions regarding students' development of self-assessment. In this article we analyzed students' and tutors' perceptions on self-assessment.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Academic writing: expository essay

Hinkel (2004, p. 9) claims that good academic writing is characterized by the presence of three essential components: "(1) the process of writing with self-revision and editing, (2) formal rhetorical organization, and (3) quality of language (e.g., grammatical and lexical accuracy)". Academic writing differs from other types of writing that favours the

use of impersonalized structures in an attempt to avoid linguistic expressions that imply a higher degree of subjectivity. Other important characteristics are that authors generally make references to other authors, ideas are properly expressed, and the subject matter is developed from a critical stance (FITZMAURICE; O'FARELL, 2014). There are different types of academic texts, but in this work, the focus is on expository writing.

According to Melissourgou and Frantzi (2017), in expository texts, text producers are required to “put forward a viewpoint, provide arguments in defense of or as objections to the proposition made. They need to justify their position and reach a conclusion” (MELISSOURGOU; FRANTZI, 2017, p. 381). As taught in our context, its common structure is constituted by an introductory paragraph, in which a thesis statement is introduced to announce the purpose and topic of the text, followed by two or three body paragraphs that develop the ideas presented in the thesis statements, and a concluding paragraph, where a restatement of the thesis statement or a summary of the ideas discussed in the body paragraphs is carried out. The main purposes of this genre are to explain, illustrate, clarify or explicate a topic in a way that the information presented is clear for the audience. In this work, we attempt to develop students' genre awareness by helping them focus on certain aspects of the expository essay, especially their choice of lexical items and linguistic structures in relation to the intended audience of the text and the formal structure of the genre (introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion). Genre awareness may promote students' comprehension and production of how this type of essay is written. Our SAS would allow students to acquire what Hyland (2007) proposes as four types of genre knowledge:

- a) knowledge of the communicative purposes of the genre
- b) knowledge of the appropriate forms
- c) knowledge of content and register
- d) knowledge of context

Mastering these types of knowledge would have a positive impact on students' academic writing proficiency necessary to successfully engage in the world of academia.

2.2 Self-Assessment Sheet (SAS)

Self-assessment is defined by Boud (1991, p.5) as “the involvement of students in identifying standards and/or criteria to apply to their work and making judgments about the extent to which they have met these criteria and standards”. Stiggins and Chappuis (2006) and Joyce, Weil and Calhoun (2009) concurred with the idea that self-assessment is the active and purposeful engagement of students in the different stages in the assessment process. Davis (2000), Stiggins et al. (2006), Chappuis and Chappuis (2008) and Andrade and Valtcheva (2009) claim that, by means of reflection, students will develop a deeper understanding, remember ideas or concepts in a longer period of time and take responsibility in their own learning process. Dunning, Heath, and Suls (2004, p. 85) also reported on the long-term benefits of this assessment: “Accurate self-assessment is...crucial for education to be a lifelong enterprise that continues far after the student has left the classroom”. Davies (2000) associates effective strategies of self-assessment with independent students. As Stiggins (2002) claims, this assessment allows students to be in charge of their own learning and act accordingly.

The SAS (see Figure 1) employed in this study was crafted to be used with the students of the Writing Feedback Center (WFC) since it could help them develop autonomy. The SAS guided the students into assessing their work critically by providing them with clear objectives.

Figure 1. Self-Assessment Sheet – Writing Feedback Center

Full name: _____

Post-essay Writing Self-assessment Sheet

1. What's the essay **topic**?
2. What are the **subtopics**?
3. What **type of essay** am I required to write about? What am I supposed to do?
4. INTRODUCTORY PARAGRAPH: (✓ or X)
 - 4.a. Have I written the **thesis** statement? ____
 - 4.b. Is there a clear connection between the thesis statement and the **general statement/s**? ____
 - 4.c. Are the topic and subtopics clearly identified? ____
 - 4.d. Is the thesis statement too **general**? ____
5. BODY PARAGRAPHS:
 - 5.a. Have I included **supporting** ideas? ____
 - 5.b. How many? ____
 - 5.c. Do the supporting ideas **develop** the topic sentence? ____
 - 5.d. Do the supporting ideas provide enough **support** to the topic sentence? ____
 - 5.e. Have I included **appropriate** connectors? ____
 - 5.f. Have I included **specific** vocabulary related to the topic? ____
 - 5.g. Have I checked **spelling** and **grammar** mistakes? __ (have I checked **agreement, verb tenses** and **articles**?)
6. CONCLUDING PARAGRAPH
 - 6.a. Have I written at least a **three-sentence** long paragraph? ____
 - 6.b. Have I established a **connection** with the thesis statement? ____
7. FINAL ANALYSIS
 - 7.a. What I like best about this essay is ____
 - 7.b. Some of the difficulties I have experienced while writing this essay are ____

Source: Elaborated by the authors

This SAS presented has short questions with key words in bold to call the students' attention and to help them focus on the most important information and promote reflection. The objective is to help students notice high-level aspects, such as topics and genres, i.e., the "understanding, or recognition of a general rule, pattern, or principle" (OXFORD, 2017, p. 38). In the SAS, the low surface aspects would be those related to the use of connectors, spelling, and the connection between ideas. An interesting aspect of these questions is that they are written in the first person singular, which emphasizes the purposeful nature of the activity and the agency which may lead to keeping the writer on the alert. Focal attention is given to structural aspects, such as thesis statements (4.a.), general statements (5), and genre (3), and also aspects related to grammar (5.g), punctuation (5.g), and self-reflection on the part of the student (7).

2.3 Writing Feedback Center (WFC)

The WFC is the brainchild of two English Language teachers, Marcela Gonzalez (PhD) and María Elisa Romano (MA), which was created with the aim of helping second- and third-year English Language students who are studying to become English teachers, translators and/ or researchers to improve the quality of their compositions. They summoned a group of eleven language teachers who worked in the WFC ad-honorem. The WFC took place during the year 2018, and a group of students who were taking the courses English Language II and III were invited to enroll in. Students could enroll on a volunteer basis, or they could be referred to the center by their teachers who noticed that those students could benefit from producing extra assignments and receiving further feedback. The students who were part of the WFC were asked to sign a Commitment Form as a way to show their willingness to be part of the center. Students who were referred to the WFC presented clear difficulties to master academic writing.

2.3.1 An eclectic view of writing

The essay writing approach to work on the WFC was eclectic. The influence of process-oriented composition pedagogy is seen in teachers' interventions throughout the writing process to guide students at the different stages of writing. From genre approaches to writing, we borrow the concept of genre as defined by Martin and Rose (2003,

Ana Cecilia
Cad

Paul Alexis
Carrera

178

p. 8): “a genre is a staged, goal oriented social process”. Genres are social since they emerged from the interaction with other people; it is goal- oriented since it is written to achieve a specific purpose; and it is stage-oriented because the writing process follows different stages to achieve different goals, e.g., writing the introductory paragraph, the body paragraphs and a concluding paragraph. It is important that students learn that academic genres are constrained by requirements of the academic discourse community. Thus, learning about writing conventions of a particular genre is key to be accepted within that community. To promote the learning about these conventions, instruction should favor the noticing of lexicogrammatical features and rhetorical structure of the genre. In this research, we have drawn on the classifications provided by Melissourgou and Frantzi (2017) in which essays are described as text types and the expository essay is defined as an academic genre given its communicative purpose.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

3.1.1 Students

The participants of this study were thirty-one undergraduate English Language II students from different courses of second year from the School of Languages, National University of Cordoba (UNC), who were invited to become members of the Writing Feedback Center (WFC). In the WFC, they worked together with a tutor on different writing assignments following an eclectic approach to writing. They had B1 according to the European Framework of Reference for Languages. During the year, second year students regularly attended classes in which content specific vocabulary was introduced and content knowledge was discussed. Then, to obtain extra practice, the thirty-one students attended the WFC in which they were assigned extra writing tasks. The topics of those tasks were related to their course content. Each tutor assigned a topic per week to the students who had to write the essay and self-assess their production with the help of the SAS. Both the essay and the SAS were sent as word documents to the tutors. The tutors checked both files and returned them to the students with comments to help the students improve their production. The students reviewed their production in the light of those comments and re-send their essay. This process is repeated as many times as the tutor and the students consider it necessary.

3.1.2 Tutors

Even though the WFC was not part of any particular course, it was intimately connected to English Language II. Thus, the first teachers to be invited to be part of this study were teachers currently teaching that course. Then, former teachers of the course and colleagues who taught similar subjects were also invited to become tutors. A total of 11 tutors worked with the second-year students. All of them were also invited to participate in the teaching-training sessions where some aspects regarding marking and feedback were further explained, and strategies to improve the tutoring session experience and to provide feedback effectively were shared. The number of students each tutor was in charge of varied from five to three, depending on the tutor's personal time.

3.2 Research methodology

In order to analyze both students' and teachers' perceptions of the usefulness of the SAS, three different research tools were employed. The questionnaires allowed the researchers to obtain information from a larger group of participants: the students and teachers. However, to obtain deeper insights on teachers' perspectives, interviews were conducted in this research to gather information firsthand.

3.2.1 Tutors' questionnaires

A questionnaire is defined as "any written instruments that present respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to react either by writing out their answers or selecting them among existing answers" (BROWN, 2004, p. 6). The number of tutors who completed the questionnaire (Appendix A) were six out of eleven. The questionnaire was sent through email. It consisted of eight statements on a numerical rating scale (1-3 where one means not useful and 3 means very useful) and four open-ended questions. The aim of using this numerical scale was to measure the effectiveness of the SAS in terms of the different areas it was posited to guide the students in the assessment process from the point of view of the tutor. For example, the first statement focused on the identification of the topic of the composition. The open-ended questions were behavioral questions that aimed at finding out "what the respondents are doing or have done in the past" (DÖRNYEI, 2007, p. 102). For example, in the statement

“checking that what was planned, then it was executed” the open-ended question aimed at inquiring about the correspondence between what the students claimed they did in the SAS and what they did in their compositions.

3.2.2 Students’ questionnaires (Appendix B)

Ana Cecilia
Cad

Paul Alexis
Carrera

180

The number of students who completed the questionnaires were 16 out of 31. It was sent through email and it was made of nine statements on a numerical scale (1-3) and three open-ended questions. The aim of using the scale was to measure the effectiveness of the SAS in terms of the different areas this instrument was posited to guide the students in the assessment process from their point of view. The purpose of choosing the same behavioral questions in both questionnaires was to analyze how the different participants evaluated the implementation and benefits or drawbacks of the same instrument.

All the eight questions required students to measure different aspects of the SAS on a scale between 1 to 3, in which one stands for not useful and 3 means very useful. The first four items asked students to assess whether the SAS had been useful to evaluate their compositions in terms of the structure and organization of the essay. The fifth and sixth questions inquired students about the development of their autonomy and their revision skills. The following queries, seventh and eighth, explored the aspects of improving the integration of vocabulary, the assessment of grammatical features and the process of planning an essay.

3.2.3 Tutors’ interviews (Appendix C)

The main aim of implementing this tool was learning about teachers’ beliefs in relation to the SAS. The interviews were open-ended as some questions were the same to all the teachers, but some others were added as the interview unfolded with the aim of clarifying some aspects that were not clear. The teachers who participated in the interviews were three teachers from the School of Languages, UNC. The interview was carried out using a structured questionnaire made of seven questions in a single session. In the interview, tutors’ responses were recorded and the data were analyzed by identifying the patterns “for consistency” (STAKE, 1995, p. 78). These patterns were coded with the aim of understanding “behavior, issues, and contexts” (STAKE, 1995, p. 78).

4. Findings

The findings from the research are presented considering the different aspects assessed in the SAS while comparing and contrasting teachers' and students' beliefs.

4.1 Findings from data obtained from questionnaires and interviews

One of the first aspects to be analyzed was students' production of ideas. According to the students' questionnaires, they said that the SAS helped them write arguments to support their ideas. However, teachers noted that what students could better achieve was to include the supporting ideas that sometimes they tend to forget. It is important to point out, though, that sometimes they should have strengthened the connection between their ideas. Apart from considering the quality of ideas, the SAS helped the students to fulfill the organization requirements in terms of the genre structure requested. The SAS worked as a helpful reminder to include all the obligatory sections of the genre they had to work on. Teachers commented that, when students were aware of all these sections, the SAS proved to be a really effective tool.

When students were inquired about the usefulness of the SAS to help them assess their grammatical mistakes (Figure 2), 62% of students claimed that the instrument was very useful to find out more about the grammatical mistakes while 38% indicated that the instrument was useful to find these mistakes. The analysis of grammatical structures proved to be a point of contention as teachers claimed that most of the students found it difficult to self-assess their production:

Not always. But in the vast majority of the cases, I noticed that writing the thesis statement and the supporting ideas, as well as use of the language, could have improved given the fact that there was a previous step where student could self-assess in comparison with the compositions from the first semester.
[TS1]

The same was pointed out in regard to the self-evaluation of vocabulary (Figure 3). In this survey, the category "collocation" is related to the use of collocations). In most SAS, students stated they had used content specific vocabulary; however, most of the time,

students employed vocabulary related to the unit but not vocabulary that showed intensive study work to learn lexical items:

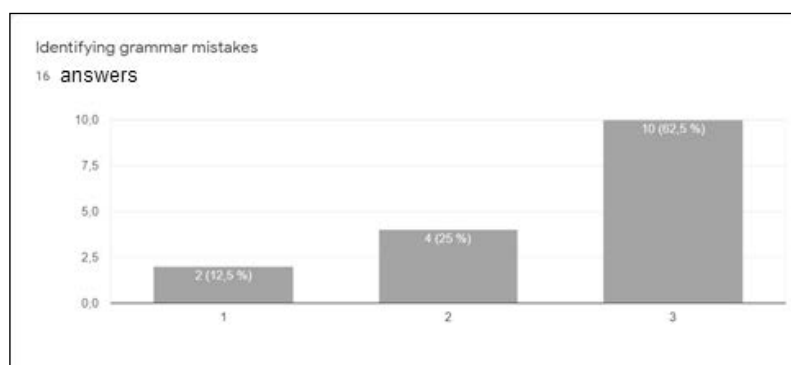
I think students can self-assess their own performance up to a point. Some aspects related to the use of specific vocabulary and grammar mistakes are difficult for the students to fix them. [I1]

Ana Cecilia
Cad

Most of the students surveyed did not believe that the SAS was particularly useful to help them improve their use of key vocabulary items.

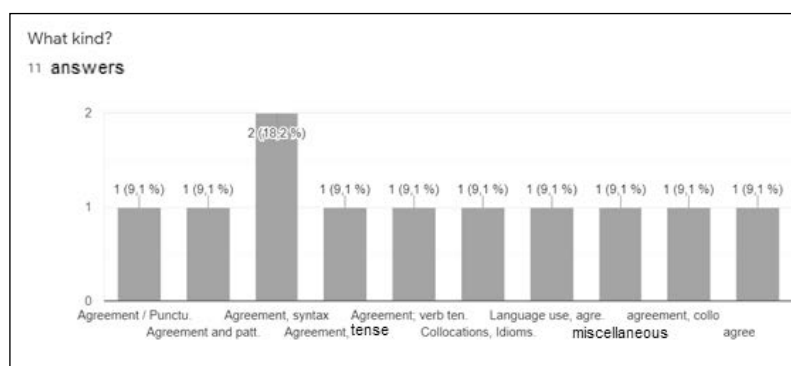
Paul Alexis
Carrera

Figure 2. Identifying grammatical mistakes



Source: Elaborated by the authors

Figure 3. Self-evaluating vocabulary



Source: Elaborated by the authors

Overall, teachers were left with the impression that students could self-assess their performance with mixed success:

Well, I think that this instrument has been very useful given the fact that students need more training into how to self-assess. [12]

There are aspects that they could assess with more ease than others, which tend to be the most “concrete” ones, such as the presence of different sections of a composition or vocabulary:

The essays and their parts. They [students] do not have difficulty in writing an organized text with an introduction, body paragraphs and conclusion. [TS2]

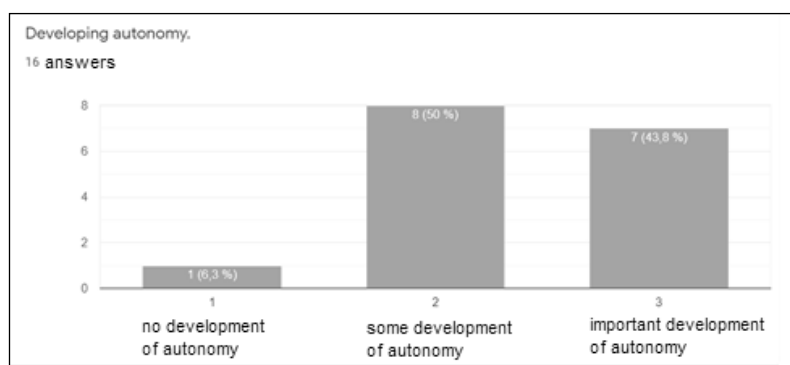
However, to promote a more effective analysis of grammatical features, more detailed descriptors were believed to be necessary.

It is interesting to mention that, as regards the development of autonomy (Figure 4), 50% of students stated that the SAS helped them to develop autonomy. Tutors mentioned that there was a movement towards the development of students’ autonomy (Figure 5) and a deeper reflection was exhibited in students’ academic writing process:

For sure, it helps students reflect on their own productions, and more specifically, on the structure. [11]

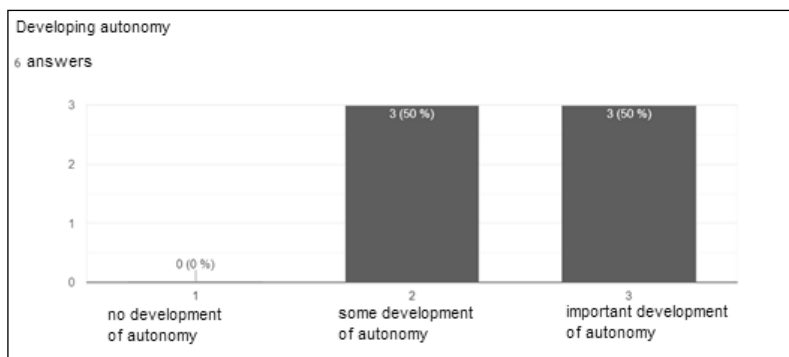
This careful consideration of their writing tasks allowed the students to internalize some structural characteristics of the academic essay:

Figure 4. Developing autonomy (students’ view)



Source: Elaborated by the authors

Figure 5. Developing autonomy (tutors' view)



Ana Cecilia
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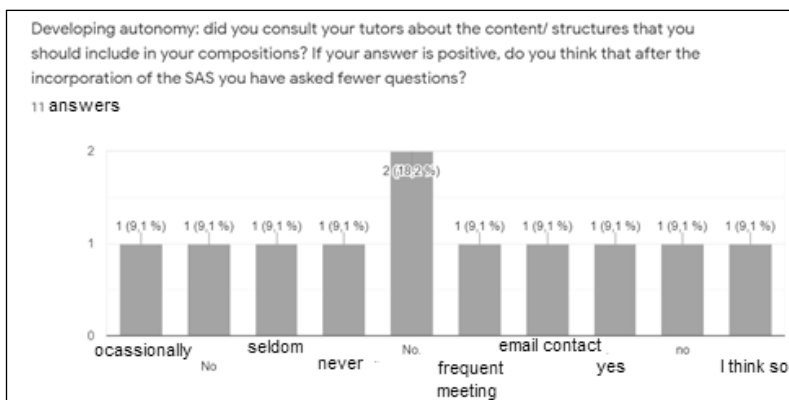
Paul Alexis
Carrera

Source: Elaborated by the authors

184

Teachers and students believed that the SAS helped them foster their communication with one another (Figure 6). 37% of the students used the SAS to communicate with their tutors. Students could ask questions and communicate problems they experienced. However, most teachers indicated that the instrument did not encourage deeper questions on the part of the student. As regards the systematization of the writing process (Figure 7), 68.8% of the students indicated that the SAS was very useful. 18.8% indicated that it was useful and 12.5% indicated that it was not useful. Those students who indicated that the instrument was useful and very useful explained that it helped them plan an outline, manage their time, control the essay extension, control aspects related to the type of an essay and organize ideas. Teachers' overall impression of the SAS was that the instrument helped the students reduce the number of mistakes they made, since the instrument provided students with the opportunity to reflect on their compositions before handing them in. Still, most of the problems solved were more at a surface level. Future research should dwell on how to effectively use a SAS to help improve complex grammatical issues and strengthen the connection of ideas.

Figure 6. Fostering communication

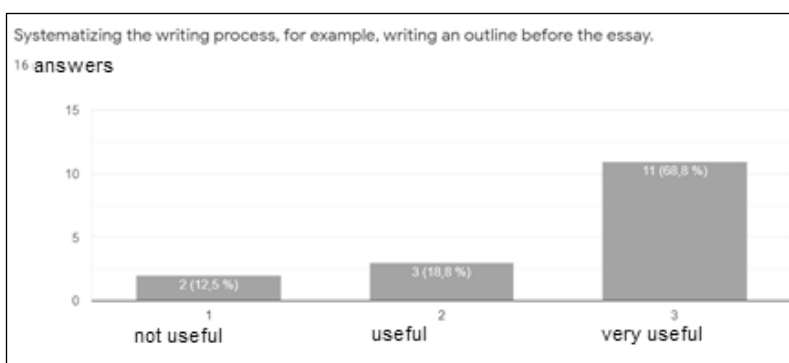


Source: Elaborated by the authors

Enhancing undergraduate students' academic writing skills through self-assessment

185

Figure 7. The systematization of the writing process



Source: Elaborated by the authors

4.2 Discussion of findings

These data have also provided some insights into how the SAS can be improved. Both teachers and students have assessed the instrument to identify its strengths and weaknesses.

Regarding the strongest aspects, tutors and students have agreed that the SAS has helped students to conquer the different parts pertaining the academic essay genre and has promoted the internalization of these sections. They have also claimed that the instrument has contributed to students' autonomy, since it has fostered students' development of strategies. Another positive aspect of the SAS is the identification of the topic, i.e., what the students are expected to

write about, and it has also helped students write the thesis statement and supporting ideas of their compositions. The last benefit of this instrument is that it has allowed students to develop certain degree of reflection in the whole writing process.

Regarding the weakest aspects, both parties have claimed that this instrument has not provided them with enough tools to improve grammar mistakes and vocabulary problems in a significant way. The tutors have also postulated that the instrument lacks the tools to help students reflect more deeply into their choices, since there are no opportunities for accounting for their choices.

To conclude, the SAS has been effective in promoting students' learning; still, there are aspects that could be improved. One of these aspects is the incorporation of more detailed sections within the SAS where students can account for their choices and not just provide a yes/no answer.

Teachers have also recommended the incorporation of a more detailed grammar and vocabulary section where students reflect upon these two aspects more in depth. Another suggestion is related to the implementation of the instrument. Students were invited to explore and become familiar with the SAS after a one-hour tutoring session; thus, maybe not all the students had enough time to absorb how it worked. Consequently, it has been suggested the possibility of providing students with a different way of implementing the SAS, probably by means of a pedagogical cycle in which students have more time to experiment with this self-assessment tool. The last recommendation is the incorporation of a section where students can grade their compositions and explain why they would score their essays with a passing or non-passing mark. This is believed to foster a productive discussion between students and teachers about the former evaluation and, in turn, students would gain a better understanding of the assessment criteria that teachers use to evaluate their own performance.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the SAS has yielded promising results and some other aspects to be improved. On the one hand, the instrument has allowed students to manage different parts of the composition, and it has also helped them write the thesis statement and supporting ideas of their compositions. Also, in the teacher-tutors' view, the SAS has contributed to students' autonomy and the

Ana Cecilia
Cad

Paul Alexis
Carrera

186

identification of the topic, and it has allowed them to develop certain degree of reflection on the whole writing process. On the other hand, the instrument has not provided students with enough tools to improve grammar mistakes and the use of vocabulary, it has not helped them reflect more in depth into their choices, since the instrument does not offer opportunities for accounting for the students' choices. Further research is needed to provide students with a better instrument that satisfies their need of producing academic genres in times of internationalization.

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Ana Cecilia
Cad

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Paul Alexis
Carrera

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188

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writing skills
through self-
assessment*

189

Appendix A: Questionnaire for tutors

Ana Cecilia
Cad

Paul Alexis
Carrera

190

Self-Assessment Sheet Survey for Teachers

On a scale from 1 to 3, indicate whether the SAS has helped your tutorees in the following aspects:

Identifying the topic of the composition.

1	2	3
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Identifying the type of composition.

1	2	3
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Writing the thesis statement.

1	2	3
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Writing supporting ideas making reference to examples from the class material.

1	2	3
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Developing autonomy.

1	2	3
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Were you consulted about the content/ structures that that students were going to include in their compositions? If your answer is positive, do you think that after the incorporation of the SAS the students asked fewer questions?

Tu respuesta _____

Creating structures related to the type of essay.

1 2 3

What structures do students handle more skillfully?

Tu respuesta _____

Checking that what was planned, then it was executed.

1 2 3

Was there any correspondence between the SAS and students' performance?

Tu respuesta _____

Systematizing some sections of the composition.

1 2 3

Which one/s?

Tu respuesta _____

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Appendix B: Questionnaire for Students

Ana Cecilia
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Paul Alexis
Carrera

192

Self-Assessment Sheet Survey for students

On a scale from 1 to 3 , where 3 is the highest score, indicate whether the SAS has helped you in the following aspects:

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Identifying the topic of the composition. *

1 2 3

Identifying the type of essay. *

1 2 3

Writing the thesis statement. *

1 2 3

Writing supporting sentences making reference to examples from the class material. *

1 2 3

Developing autonomy. *

1 2 3

Developing autonomy: did you consult your tutors about the content/ structures that you should include in your compositions? If your answer is positive, do you think that after the incorporation of the SAS you have asked fewer questions?

Tu respuesta _____

Revising exhaustively my drafts/ compositions. *

1	2	3
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Organizing and controlling the different parts of the composition depending on the type of essay. *

1	2	3
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Identifying grammar mistakes *

1	2	3
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What kind?

Tu respuesta _____

Systematizing the writing process, for example, writing an outline before the essay. *

1	2	3
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What kind?

Tu respuesta _____

Systematizing the writing process, for example, writing an outline before the essay. *

1	2	3
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What aspects could you systematize?

Tu respuesta _____

*Enhancing
undergraduate
students'
academic
writing skills
through self-
assessment*

193

Appendix C: Interview for tutors

- 1) Name, years of experience teaching the subject and position.
- 2) What do you think are the most recurrent mistakes students make in their compositions?
- 3) Do you think students from the Writing Feedback Center can monitor their own writing production?
- 4) Do you think that the SAS has contributed to students' improvement of their writing process?
- 5) What advantages does the SAS have?
- 6) What disadvantages does the SAS have?
- 7) Would you like to comment on something else?

Ana Cecilia

Cad

Paul Alexis

Carrera

194