The impact of L2 students' self-efficacy on the perception of and approach to their academic writing practices in their first year of study at an EMI university: A longitudinal case study

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Abstract

Academic writing is a key skill through which students demonstrate knowledge of their subject areas and is most often the basis for assessing students' work (Uysal, 2010). Unfortunately, international second language (L2) students often find academic writing challenging and confusing. Students need to be able to deal with these challenges by drawing on their resources, that is by demonstrating self-efficacy. The current research aimed to explore how self-efficacy impacted on L2 students' perception of, and approach to, their academic writing practices, in their first year of study in New Zealand (NZ) universities. The study employed a longitudinal case study as its research methodology. Four study participants were interviewed regularly during the academic year. They also provided the researcher with their assignment instructions, marking criteria, and later, with the graded assignment and lecturer feedback. Findings indicate that the L2 learners' self-efficacy fluctuated throughout their first year of study, which, in turn, was reflected in the ways the participants approached and responded to the challenges of their written assessments at different stages of their studies.

Keywords: academic literacies, academic writing, self-efficacy, second language students, higher education

Introduction

Over the past few decades the student population in Higher Education (HE) has transformed from being largely homogeneous, i.e., local students from higher social and economic communities, to being culturally, linguistically and socially diverse (e.g., Altbach et al., 2010, 2017; Lillis, 2003; Tran, 2013; Turner, 2011). This is primarily the result of changes in the participation policy in higher education (HE), commonly understood as massification (Altbach et al., 2017; Lillis & Turner, 2001; Marginson, 2016). Furthermore, in the era of neoliberalism, when tuition fees for full-time studies

have become the responsibility of the students, rather than the government (Shaw, 2017), the international student market has become one of the main drivers for the massification of education. As a consequence, HE institutions worldwide have viewed international student enrolment as a partial answer to their fiscal problems (Altbach et al., 2017) and since 2012, the number of international students worldwide has more than tripled; from over 2,000,000 in 2012 (OECD, 2013) to over 6,000,000 in 2020 (UNESCO, 2023). It should be noted that the growth in the international student numbers was not as prominent in the recent years, mainly due to the COVID-19. Namely, the student numbers increased by nearly 400,000 students in the period 2018 – 2019, but only by just over 260,000 in the period between 2019 and 2020 worldwide (UNESCO, 2023). Statistics provided by the NZ Ministry of Education indicate that international student numbers increased from 76,145 in 2012 to 106,225 in 2016 (EducationCounts, 2023). This number, however, dropped to 87,195 in 2019 (EducationCounts, 2023) due to the spread of the COVID-19.

Studying in an unfamiliar sociocultural environment means that the majority of international L2 students face a range of challenges, many of which require internal readjustment (Choi, 2006; Ivins et al., 2017; Koval et al., 2016; Lau et al., 2019). One of these challenges involves academic writing (Elder, 2003; Elton, 2010; O'Loughlin, 2013; Storch & Hill, 2008; Thompson et al., 2013). For example, L2 students report having difficulties with paraphrasing, referencing, or incorporating secondary sources into their writing. One way that students can address the challenges of academic writing is through the demonstration of self-efficacy; that is, an individual's belief in his or her capacity to execute behaviours necessary to produce specific performance attainments (Bandura, 1977; 1981; 1982).

This article builds on prior research which highlights the importance of self-efficacy in students' writing success (Raoofi, et. al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2019; Waddington, 2019). This prior research alerted us to the importance of the motivational and self-regulatory factors related to writing (Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2015; Pajares, 2008; Schunk & Usher, 2011). However, most of the research on the role self-efficacy plays in writing is done at a certain point in time, providing a static view of self-efficacy. There is little longitudinal research that has a focus on the changing nature of L2 students' self-efficacy when it comes to academic writing at English-medium institutions, particularly in the NZ context.

In the light of the scarcity of writing research in relation to self-efficacy of L2 first-year undergraduate writers in NZ, the primary aim of this research study was to investigate how self-efficacy impacts on the ongoing writing practices of first-year undergraduate L2 students in an English-medium institution. The research made use of

the academic literacies framework which recognises the influence of the sociocultural context in which students undertake their studies (Hocking & Fieldhouse, 2011; Lea & Street, 2006).

Literature Review

International students often seek to gain their HE qualifications in English-speaking countries because they also want to learn English, which is recognised as the most influential global language (Graddol, 2010). However, mastering the language while simultaneously studying towards a qualification can prove problematic as students might not have sufficient writing skills to achieve successful learning outcomes. Research indicates that most students at tertiary institutions experience difficulties with academic literacy and in particular reading and writing academic texts (Adams & Blair, 2019; Thompson et al., 2013). For students at English-medium tertiary institutions in Western countries, the ability to write academically is a key skill. It is the most common way in which students demonstrate knowledge of their subject areas, and is most often the basis for assessing students' work (Uysal, 2010). Apart from the linguistic challenges that students often face, there are also non-linguistic ones, such as library skills and time management (Huddleston et al., 2019; Nayak, 2019). Although both native and non-native speakers of English may find both types of challenges difficult to deal with, academic literacies present an even bigger challenge for international students whose first language is not English (Akbari, 2021; Junina et al., 2022). Specifically, research indicates that writing provides one of the greatest challenges for international L2 students in the university context (Elder, 2003; Elton, 2010; O'Loughlin, 2013; Storch & Hill, 2008; Thompson et al., 2013). This may be for several reasons.

The first is L2 students' command of English (Huang & Klinger, 2006) is not sufficient for academic purposes. This can affect their ability to engage with written assignments, oral presentations, examinations, and class participation. Because they lack confidence in their English, international students often refrain from being active participants in class (Zhang, 2016), which influences their marks as they often lack opportunities to practice formulating and giving opinions (Wu et al., 2015; Zhang, 2016).

Secondly, international L2 students studying in a foreign country face a set of unfamiliar academic norms and conventions (Cartwright & Noone, 2001; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). For example, many international students find it difficult to transition from the learning that takes place at high schools in their home country, to the emphasis on critical thinking and interactive learning found in Western universities (Liberman, 1994; Torenbeek et al., 2011; Skyrme, 2007; Zhang & Brunton, 2007).

Thirdly, writing requirements differ within and across universities and departments (Woodrow, 2006). As a result, students may find it confusing when their written assignments in one discipline receive high grades, while assignments written in a comparable way are not well received in another discipline (Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2003; Wingate, 2012). Students' confusion is compounded when they seek their lecturers' assistance with guidance for writing assignments and receive unclear advice, as lecturers are not always able to describe what constitutes a well-written piece of work (Lea & Street, 1998). This inability to provide step-by-step instructions for effective writing often leaves students on their own.

Lastly, there is the discrepancy between the writing demands of HE and those of the preparatory language courses that students attend (Moore & Morton, 2005). The type of general academic writing that preparatory courses focus on is different from the discipline-specific writing required in students' courses at university (Hyland, 2013; Hyland & Shaw, 2016). To become a competent writer in a particular discipline, students must learn the conventions and genres that expert members of the discipline consider to be the effective means for presenting knowledge in that discipline. Hence, international L2 students who have successfully gained their university entrance requirements through IELTS and other preparatory courses find academic writing particularly challenging during their first year of study at an English-medium instruction (EMI) university (Elder, 2003; O'Loughlin, 2013; Storch & Hill, 2008; Thompson et al., 2013).

When L2 students face challenges with academic writing, they demonstrate the level of their self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to one's perceived ability to succeed and accomplish a certain task even in a novel and unpredictable situation (Bandura, 1977; 1981; 1982). Some studies suggest that learners with a high sense of self-efficacy display more flexibility in their own learning strategies, and are also often less anxious and stressed (Joet et al., 2011; Moos & Azevedo, 2009; Sardegna et al., 2018). In contrast, students with low self-efficacy may feel that a task is more difficult than it really is. Such potentially erroneous perception about the task have shown to lead to elevated anxiety and stress, as well as making students feel there are few choices as to how they successfully complete the task (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016).

Since the mid-1980s, the research on writing self-efficacy has investigated relationships between writing self-efficacy and a range of other variables, such as level of writing apprehension, gender, and age (Bruning, et al., 2013; Pajares, 2008; Pajares & Valiante, 2001). This previous research has shown that students' high level of self-efficacy may increase their agentic behaviour and determine the approach they choose

to achieve academic success in their writing tasks. However, it appears that most of the research on writing self-efficacy has either been done with school-aged students (e.g., Bulut, 2017; Bai & Guo, 2018; Camacho et al., 2021; Pajares, 2003), second-year bachelor students (e.g., Chea & Shumow, 2017; Sun & Wang, 2022) or post-graduate students (e.g., Mitchell et al., 2017; Jonas & Hall, 2022). There seems to be a lack of research on L2 students who are at the beginning of their undergraduate studies at English-medium institutions.

Furthermore, there is a paucity of longitudinal research on first year students as far as their writing is concerned. One study was conducted in Australia by McNamara et al. (2018) and involved a total of 22 participants who were mainly Chinese learners studying towards an Economics and Business degree. Although the research looked at the students' changing perceptions of academic writing from the beginning till the end of their first-year studies, its main aim was to reveal the extent to which the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) might serve "as the basis for decisions about the readiness of individuals to engage in academic writing tasks in undergraduate university courses" (McNamara et al, 2018, p. 16). Another longitudinal study which focused on 192 nursing students in Canada was carried out by Mitchell et al. (2017). The undergraduate nursing students were enrolled into the compulsory 'Scholarly Writing' course, which made use of scaffolding strategies. The quasi-experimental research project concluded that writing self-efficacy of full study participants, i.e. those who completed the pre- and post-course questionnaires, improved from pre- to post-course.

Although these studies provide valuable insights into students' experiences with academic writing, there is still not a great deal of qualitative research exploring first year L2 students' writing self-efficacy, and in particular the students' own perceptions of their academic writing practices. There is also a lack of research on the academic writing practices of students in the NZ university context.

In the light of this gap and paucity of longitudinal studies related to the changes of students' self-efficacy within their first year of undergraduate study experiences, the following research question was addressed in this study:

- What impact does self-efficacy have on L2 students' perception of, and approach to their academic writing practices, in their first year of study at an EMI university?

It is hoped that the findings of this research might help researchers understand how L2 learners' self-efficacy fluctuates throughout their first year of studies at English-

medium institutions. This understanding, in turn, can contribute to the design of teaching and learning practices for first-year undergraduate students in EMI contexts.

Methodology

In response to the research aim, four in-depth longitudinal case studies were carried out that examined the ongoing academic writing experiences of four L2 students throughout the first year of their studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2018). The recruitment process consisted of three components: written advertisements placed on student notice boards at the three local universities, electronic invitations sent to student emails by institutional gatekeepers, and participant recruitment at various university club events. The four participants were selected through purposive sampling from the pool of eight volunteers. Two levels of selection criteria were utilised as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Two levels of selection criteria

First level selection criteria (applied to all participants)	Second level selection criteria (applied in case more than six participants volunteered for the study)
Students had to:	Students had to:
1. Be international students	1. Be representative of a variety of nationalities and countries of origin
2. Have a first language other than English	2. Be a mix of genders
3. Have taken an IELTS exam	3. Be representative of a variety of study disciplines
4. Have met the language criteria for admission	4. Complete a varied range of written assessment genres throughout the first year of their studies
5. Be at the beginning of their undergraduate studies	

The four chosen participants were international students enrolled on undergraduate programs in different discipline areas across three NZ universities. Sarah (19) and Reema (30) were Arabic speakers, while Marina (21) was a first language speaker of Spanish. Harry (22) was a Sri Lankan, but spoke English as his first language. Although this study focused on L2 students, Harry was accepted as a participant because his fluency in English was limited to the spoken language. His IELTS scores barely met university entry requirements for the reading and writing components.

All four participants had their own unique study experiences and pathways to their current place of study. The demographic characteristics of the case studies' participants and their study experiences are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Participant's background information

Student	Demographic information				Study experiences		
	Age	*Gender*	*Place of origin*	*First language*	*Previous study in English*	*Pathway to current study*	*Place of current study*
Sarah	19	Female	Saudi Arabia	Arabic	• International school in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Oman • IELTS courses • Self-study towards IELTS • Foundation year at University A	Compulsory EAP course during the first year of undergraduate study	University B
Reema	30	Female	Saudi Arabia	Arabic	• English courses in NZ • Self-study towards IELTS	Foundation year	University C
Marina	21	Female	Mexico	Spanish	• Kindergarten • Primary school • IELTS course • Self-study towards IELTS • Business diploma	IELTS	University A
Harry	22	Male	Sri Lanka	English	• British school in Sri Lanka • BCIS certificate from an Australian college in Sri Lanka • IELTS course	IELTS	University C

A key component of the case studies were the semi-structured interviews. Each participant was interviewed three times during the 2017 academic year, (approximately eight months), and each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. Depending on students' availability, the interviews took place at the beginning of Semester 1, at the end of Semester 1 or the beginning of Semester 2, and at the end of Semester 2. We took advantage of mid-semester and semester breaks to schedule interviews. In addition, students' assignment requirements for their semester-long courses, marking criteria, and lecturer feedback on the written assignments were examined. The participants were asked to share as much documentation of their courses as possible, but it was their decision as to what they shared with the researchers. For some

assignments, the participants were not provided with written feedback. In these instances, they were only able to offer their assignment grade. In three cases, students did not provide us with any feedback on their assignments, so this data was considered missing. Table 3 indicates the number and type of documentation received for each participant.

Table 3. The number and type of documentation received for each participant

Type of documentation	Writing assignment requirements	Marking criteria	Written assignments	Lecturers' feedback
Participants				
Sarah	7^1	6^2	10	10
Reema	8	8	8	7
Marina	5^3	2	5	3^4
Harry	8	5	8	8^5
Total	28	21	31	28

Note. [1]involved only requirements for resources to be used in the assignment; [2]marking criteria for Communicating for a Knowledge Society Assignment 1 (Research Summary) involved only names of the criteria without explanation of what they involved; [3]assignment requirements for the Communication course Assignment 1 (Source Justification) involved only assignment template; [4]lecturer's feedback consisted of the assignment grade and a comment on the research question identified by the student; [5]four examples of feedback for the Programming 1 course in Semester 1and 2 involved Peer Review and Critique Forms.

Approval from the Ethics Committees at the universities where the participants were studying was obtained before the data collection was carried out. Before participating in the qualitative interviews, all participants were required to sign a Consent Form, which provided information about the research purpose and objectives. It was made clear to the participants that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time without any effect on their academic grades. They were also informed that any data collected would be used for analysis purposes, and they were entitled to know the results of the study. The ethics committee ruled that the lecturers' written feedback on the students' assignments was the students' property, therefore no permission from the lecturers was needed to use their comments in the research. It should be noted in this regard that the universities were not identified.

Once all the data was collected and organised, it was then analysed and categorised using NVivo software. A triangulation approach to data analysis was employed, i.e. data was examined in terms of "how different sources of data on the same topic may complement each other to deepen understanding of the study topic" (Lapan et al., 2011,

p. 99). Triangulation happened through the constant comparison and cross-checking of the findings emerging from different data sets. In brief, the data analysis processes and attention to triangulation were intended to produce rigorous findings that would result in an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study, as well as the development of a theory based on the themes and categories emerging from each case study.

Results

The case studies indicate that at the beginning of Semester 1 the participants had a high degree of self-efficacy as they felt empowered by the knowledge, they had acquired in their IELTS, Foundation Programme (FP), and EAP preparatory courses. The participants believed that their pre-degree courses had equipped them with knowledge related to academic writing. This, they thought, mainly involved expressing their own opinion in coherent and cohesive writing. Marina, for example, believed that academic writing is all about essay structure and cohesion, which were well presented to her at the pre-degree stage and which she believed would be the way of approaching any academic assignment at university. She commented:

> IELTS gives you the keys that will stay for all your life: the structure of an essay, attracting attention with the first sentence, developing ideas, using connectors. (Marina)

On the other hand, Sarah believed that she had fully mastered the technical aspects of academic writing, particularly the APA referencing conventions, and that would make academic writing easy for her. She confidently stated:

> I practiced it [APA referencing] a lot in the Foundation Programme. So, I didn't really need this [written explanation from her lecturers about APA referencing]. (Sarah)

Participants also believed that the amount of academic vocabulary that they had acquired in the course of their pre-degree education was sufficient to deal with their academic work. Overall, it appears that in their pre-degree courses, the participants were mastering only surface-level writing skills, which solidified their perception of academic writing requiring largely attention-grabbing hooks and linking phrases.

As a result of their high level of perceived self-efficacy, the participants set themselves high expectations for their own academic outcomes believing that their first written assignments would not be challenging. Consequently, they began working on their first

assignments close to the due dates, believing that their academic writing assignments would not take much of their time. This strategy created certain time constraints for the participants when they were completing these assignments. In other words, the participants' high perception of their own self-efficacy may have led them to put less effort into their written assignments at the beginning of Semester 1.

Once the participants began working on their first assignments, they began to question the validity of their previous language courses and their relevance to their university writing (see also Barkhuizen & Cooper, 2004; Read & Hayes, 2003; and O'Loughlin, 2013). The research indicates (Guan & Jones, 2011; Holmes, 2004; Hyland & Tse, 2007; Johns, 2008; Moore & Morton, 2005; Paltridge et al., 2009) that IELTS and EAP mainly teach students how to write essays, hence they do not prepare them for most of the written genres that may be encountered in the academy. The participants realised at this stage that they were not particularly well-equipped to write their assignments. In particular, they experienced difficulty writing lengthy texts that involved presenting information from a variety of sources in a succinct way. They also experienced problems with coherence and cohesion. The participants commented:

> [IELTS] is totally different. They give you one topic and don't go anywhere. Plastic bags, Ok, talking about plastic bags. But here if you go to the content categories, it's not from the same lecture. We took this in maybe four-five lectures for just this assignment. It's hard. (Reema)

> I was confused. Because, like, the author expanded and spoke about other things. But, then, kind of come back to the same point. So, I wasn't sure if I could put it together. (Marina)

It was also evident that the participants found that the amount of information related to each section of their assignments at university was much larger than the information provided in their pre-degree courses. Furthermore, in Marina's case, the student was confused as to how the information supplied in different parts of a single source could be combined in a single paragraph in her written assignment.

Apart from the realisation that pre-degree courses do not necessarily equip students with the academic writing skills necessary at university, the participants were also confronted with several other challenges, such as unclear assignment requirements and marking criteria. Figure 1, for example, provides an extract from a Lab Report assignment in a Computer Science course. The participant Sarah had difficulty understanding the question due to the poor visual quality of the image it referred to.

Figure 1. Lab report 1: The assignment question related to a specific icon (circled in red)
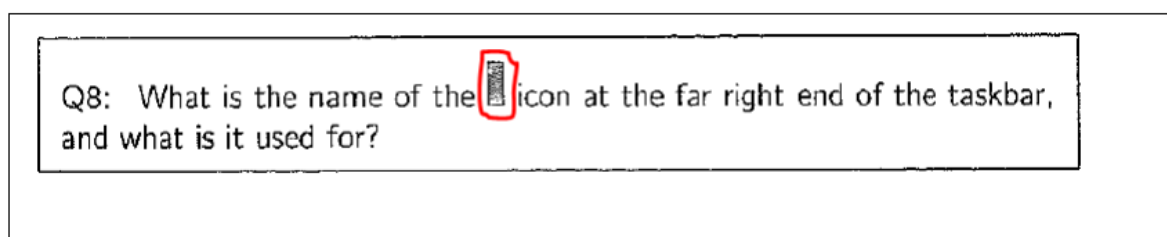
In another example, the lecturer failed to explain clearly that the first assignment (Source Justification) and the second assignment (Position Paper) for a communication course were closely linked. The student Marina only came to understand the link between the assignments later in the writing process when she was working under time constraints and increasingly concerned with completing the second of the two assignments. As a result, she struggled to properly complete the first of the two assignments by making the expected links as required.

> I did struggle with that… Because it was, like, thinking about the next assignment. (Marina)

Another example of unclear assignment requirements is found in Reema's case, where the In-Class Activity 1 assignment for her Understanding the Environment course was ambiguous as to genre, and as a result proved confusing for Reema. She was unsure whether to approach the assignment as a report, a case study, a case analysis, an essay, or an in-class activity. This confusion about genre began prior to the in-class activity, where students had to conduct a case analysis about the "Green Ox"; a business producing sport beverages with antioxidants. During the in-class activity, however, the students were required to write a coherent report in a form of an essay while also answering a list of questions on the case. In other words, the first year students were expected to demonstrate the complex skill of simultaneously engaging with multiple written genres. Nevertheless, Reema believed that the main requirement for the assignment was simply to provide a coherent and cohesive answer to all the listed questions on the case study, rather than identifying the rules of the genre that the assignment should follow. This belief stemmed from Reema's perception that lecturers did not know the difference between the genres mentioned in the assignment requirement, which was implied in her comment:

> I think they just give it a name. They don't know the difference.

Due to the struggles that the participants encountered at the beginning of their HE journeys, they seemed to develop a great deal of self-doubt in their own abilities, which, in turn, resulted in a decrease in their self-efficacy. As the result of the participants' realisation that the academic demands at university differed from those of their pre-degree studies, their self-efficacy had substantially decreased by the completion of Semester 1. This drop in the level of student's self-efficacy, in turn, led all the participants, with the exception of Harry who did not perceive the importance of improving his academic writing skills in Semester 1, to develop various help-seeking strategies. Sarah, for example, sought help with proof-readers, while Reema decided to approach her lecturers and seek clarification for each of her assignments. When her lecturer was unavailable, she directed her questions to the Student Learning Centre. The centre was able to help Reema better understand the assignment requirements and later provided her with feedback on her drafts. Sarah, who found it difficult at times to understand the lecturer's written feedback, met with her lecturer after classes to seek clarification. In other words, the participants' recognition of their lack of abilities to meet academic demands strengthened their help-seeking strategies.

By the beginning of Semester 2 the participants' self-efficacy appeared to rise. Three reasons were observed in the case studies as motivating this shift. Firstly, as a result of the lecturers' feedback and assignment grades, the participants began to develop a more reasonable and realistic understanding of their academic writing abilities and the challenges they faced. In one particular case, Harry failed a course. Harry did admit that his oral presentation skills had always been better than his writing. He also recalled that even during his school years he struggled to compose a decent writing assignment for his English class. However, even acknowledging his poor writing abilities, he chose simply to skim a six-page assignment requirements document and had little understanding of what was required from his Reporting Journals for the Programming 1 course. As a result of his half-hearted attitude to the assessments, he failed the course and had to retake it in Semester 2, as it was a pre-requisite to other courses. In Semester 2, Harry's earlier failure in the course led to him employing a help-seeking strategy of requesting assignment exemplars from his ex-classmates. Secondly, the participants' developing understanding of discipline-specific writing and ability to better scrutinise their assignment requirements resulted in higher grades. In Reema's case, this also led to a practical, and somewhat cynical approach. For example, she approached the marking criteria more critically, identifying those that would provide her with higher scores, i.e., criteria that focused on content knowledge – the Collaborative venture idea, Application of Theory, and Exploration of Market Segments (Figure 2). Furthermore, given the small percentage often offered for presentation skills (2% of the total grade as indicated in Figure 2), Reema came to realise that a focus on language, an area she had prioritised previously in her assignments, was less important:

English gives you only 2 points here. It's not that much. It's not that important.

Thirdly, the participants' fear of failure also appeared to drive those that were less self-efficacious to increase their self-efficacy in Semester 2. Marina, for example, attempted to reduce her fear of failure and boost her self-efficacy by seeking motivational and psychological support from her family. Her mother's visit that happened during the semester break seemed to have a huge influence on Marina's attitudes towards her academic studies. After this visit, Marina was no longer as concerned with getting top grades as she was before. Instead she focused on developing a more balanced study-life equilibrium, paying more attention to her friendships, relationships, and hobbies, which seemed to provide her with greater insights into what mattered to her the most. Interestingly, the other participants did not raise the issue of a study-life balance.

Figure 2. Segments and markets assignment 2: Marking criteria

Assignment 2: Collaborative Consumption Project – *Marking Criteria*

Objective/Criteria	Performance Criteria (columns show maximum marks for each criteria)			
	Needs Improvement	Met Expectations	Good	Exceptional
Collaborative Consumption venture idea/description –Describes the idea with specifics, grounding it both in how the market would use the innovation, how to recruit and cultivate "peer users" and "peer providers"	2	5	7	10
Application of Theory/Concept(s) – Articulates and demonstrates how the innovation proposed fits with concepts advanced by Jack Ma and Botsman and Rogers. What additional research might need to be done to reveal why, how and when the innovation may work? Shows good research ability and wide reading on the topic.	3	7	11	14
Exploration of market segments – Explores 2-3 target market segments. Comfortably employs statistical research from secondary sources to demonstrate market need. Based on research, develops market insights via a coherent consumer profile for the top market segment of consumer end-users exploring consumer behaviours, preferences, demographics, lifestage, unmet needs, and etc.	3	7	11	14
Presentation – use of academic and key professional resources. Clean and clear writing; Spelling, grammar, punctuation, and written presentation.	0.5	1	1.5	2
Total Possible Marks for Each Criteria	8.5	20	30.5	40

The participants' self-efficacy then appeared to plateau throughout Semester 2, largely due to the participants' continuing realistic assessment of their own academic writing abilities based on the lecturers' feedback and summative course grades. Harry, for example, who had to repeat his Programming 1 course in Semester 2, realised the large difference between the amount of effort required to successfully complete his assignments when doing the course for the second time. Harry was satisfied with the way his Reporting Journals evolved. His second attempt at journaling contained a better presentation as it included page numbers, page breaks, more detailed explanations of the studied materials, and lengthier reflections on the learnt material. He commented:

> There's huge difference... [Reporting Journals in Semester 2] are pretty good. (Harry)

Discussion

Despite a small sample size, this research contributes evidence that writing self-efficacy, because of its shifting nature, should not be viewed as a static notion but instead as a dynamic socio-cognitive phenomenon. To illustrate this, Figure 3 represents the trajectory of the participants' self-efficacy, which was at a high point at the beginning of Semester 1, but substantially decreased by the end of the semester due to students' overestimation of their own abilities. However, the participants' increasing knowledge of the specific writing requirements of their courses resulted in a rise in their self-efficacy by the beginning of Semester 2 and remained stable until the end of their first academic year. The current research findings echo those of van Blankenstein et al. (2019) in linking the plateau effect to the fact that students' learning about their subject area mainly takes place at the beginning of the course. However, while van Blankenstein et al.'s findings indicate that the plateau of students' self-efficacy in the second half of an academic year is at the higher point compared to students' initial level of self-efficacy, the current research findings show the opposite. The case studies indicate that the participants' realistic expectations in Semester 2 produce a lower, albeit stable, level of self-efficacy than at the beginning of their studies. As evidenced in the case studies, one of the reasons for this plateau was the participants' realisation that their written assignments would vary, and that the knowledge they had gained from these assignments might not be applicable to their subsequent assignments. As a result of this stability in self-efficacy, one of the participants, i.e., Marina, appeared to review her study-life balance, perceiving it as an important component of academic experiences. Although her newly determined course of actions, which included the development of a stronger social network, did not indicate any enhancement in

Marina's academic success, it certainly resulted in an overall increase of the participant's self-efficacy and confidence when approaching academic assignments.

Figure 3. Change in the level of international L2 students' self-efficacy
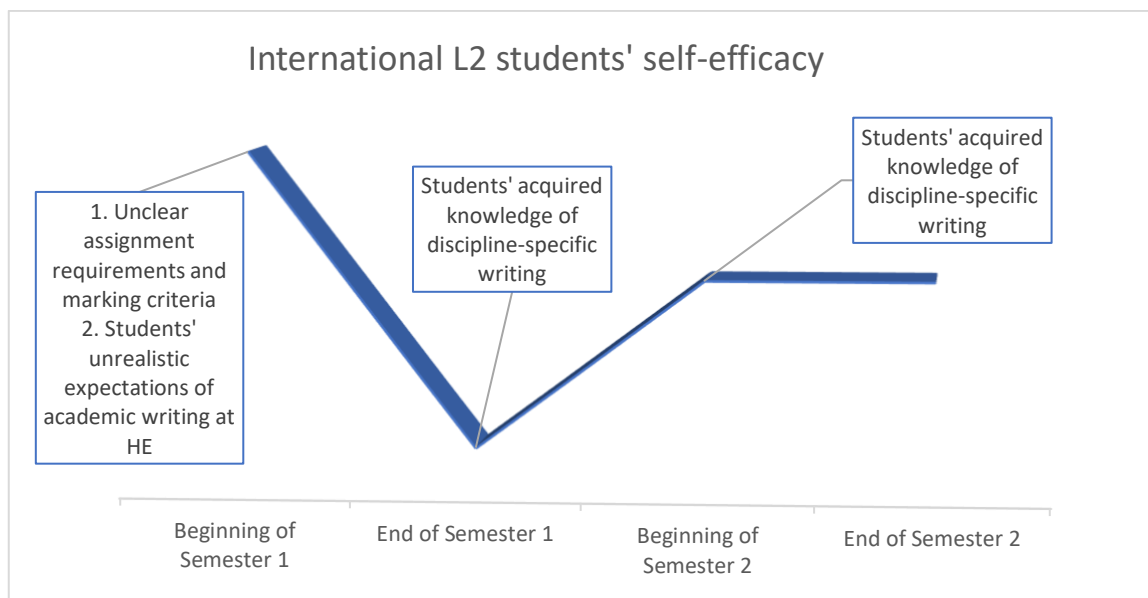
It may be concluded that previous research about self-efficacy, in particular, the traditional two-category division of students into those with high or low self-efficacy (Bandura,1982), does not provide sufficiently nuanced details of the phenomenon. The present case studies indicate that rather than seeing students as having a stable level of self-efficacy, students' self-efficacy should be viewed as continually shifting along a continuum. It should be noted that this changing level of students' self-efficacy throughout their first year of undergraduate study is influenced by a number of external factors, such as students' initial perceptions about academic writing and the level of ongoing support. These factors in turn, will influence the choices students make in their approach to written assignments. In addition, this study raises questions about the desirability of students always having high levels of self-efficacy. This is in contrast to the literature (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016; Joet et al., 2011; Moos & Azevedo, 2009; Sardegna et al., 2018) which indicates that those students consistently exhibiting high levels of self-efficacy are more flexible and resilient. In other words, the previous research appears to emphasise the importance of learners' belief in their own abilities. The results of this study appear to indicate that students' self-doubt about their own abilities may lead to positive outcomes. This is because students with low self-efficacy are forced to re-examine their perceptions of their own ability, potentially leading to an increase in decisions to take certain actions. Nevertheless, what appears to be important is that students have access to staff who are aware that students' sense of self-efficacy is not fixed, and that even the most confident of students can suffer self-doubt.

In order to better support student's academic journey, it is suggested that students' self-efficacy needs to be nurtured, developed, and strengthened by lecturers, particularly by providing students with an opportunity to participate in an open dialogue around academic writing and their assignment requirements. At the same time, lecturers need to ensure that students' self-efficacy remains realistic to the demands of the courses. Furthermore, lecturers need to be aware that students' self-doubt can affect their response to certain tasks and situations. Staff should utilise this knowledge about the shifting nature of students' self-efficacy to create potential spaces for learning and help students turn these moments of self-doubt and uncertainty into a positive reconsideration of what is needed for academic success.

Although the current research examined students' perceptions of academic writing at three stages throughout their first-year undergraduate studies, the findings also provide implications for IELTS/EAP/FP educators. The current research indicates the importance of making students aware that pre-degree writing is not necessarily representative of first year academic writing. This might simply involve discussing examples of two or three university writing assignments with pre-degree students. By better calibrating students for their future studies, educators may contribute to fostering the agency of international L2 students in their first year.

This research, nevertheless, comes with certain limitations. Firstly, it was conducted on a small scale and only involved documentation that the participants themselves selected to include. Therefore, a similar study with international L2 students in HE institutions with EMI in other countries may yield different results. In light of the research findings and limitations, more longitudinal research, preferably on a larger scale, is recommended in the area of academic writing and self-efficacy concerning undergraduate students. Furthermore, the time constraints for the current research did not allow interviews with university lecturers on their perceptions of students' academic writing skills. Such interviews could prove insightful. Future research may also involve students in their second and third years of undergraduate studies.

Conclusion

In summary, the current study suggests that international L2 first year students' perceptions of academic writing, as well as their self-efficacy, fluctuate throughout the course of their first year of undergraduate study. This change is reflected in the ways the students' approach and respond to the challenges of their written assessments at each stage of their study. This fluctuation in feelings of self-efficacy should be taken into account by lecturers of first-year students. While they need to provide students

with support for the different challenges that they will encounter in their first year of undergraduate study, they can also explain to students that feeling less confident is part of a natural process that can spur students on to improve their performance. This can largely be achieved by facilitating an open dialogue with the students regarding their academic writing practices.

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