



# What happens to ESL students' writing after three years of study at an English medium university?

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## Abstract

The number of international students coming to study in Australian universities has increased exponentially in the past decade, mirroring trends in other English speaking countries. For the majority of these students, English is an additional language. The motivation for studying in an English medium university is presumably not only to gain a degree but also to improve English language proficiency. Studying in an English-medium university provides these students with a rich immersion environment. However, research on whether these students' English proficiency does improve has to date been scarce, and has generally examined students' gains after a relatively short duration (e.g., 12 weeks). The current study examined 31 undergraduate students' L2 (ESL) writing proficiency following a three-year degree study in an Australian university. The study used a test–retest design which required participants to write a 30-minute argumentative essay on the same topic at the commencement and at the end of their degree program. A range of measures was used to assess writing, including global and discourse measures. All participants were also interviewed about their writing experiences at the university. The study found that students' writing improved after three years of study but only in terms of fluency; changes in accuracy, grammatical and lexical complexity, as well as global scores of writing fell short of significance. The students reported in the interviews that they were not required to do much writing in their degree studies and when they did, their lecturers almost exclusively commented on the content of their writing. We discuss our findings in relation to the students' L2 proficiency, the nature of the test, and the nature of their immersion experience.

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## Introduction

The number of international students coming to Australian universities to pursue their degree has increased greatly in the past decade. In 2013 international students formed a substantial proportion (almost 20%) of the 1.1 million higher education students in Australia ([Australian Government Department of Education, 2014a](#)). These students come from a diverse range of countries, but predominantly from Asian countries ([Australian Government Department](#)

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of Education, 2014b). For the majority of these students English is an additional language (EAL). Thus studying in Australia presents for these students not only an opportunity to gain a degree but to concurrently attain higher proficiency in English. Hyland (2013, p. 54) suggests that English language skills are “becoming less a language than a basic academic requirement for many users around the world.”

The attainment of high levels of language skills is indeed what universities expect from all their students. The published graduate attributes of leading universities in Australia state explicitly that all students are expected to develop excellent communication skills in addition to acquiring disciplinary knowledge when studying for a degree course. These attributes often single out written communication. For example, at the University of Melbourne, the document “Melbourne graduates” (University of Melbourne, n.d.) states that Melbourne University graduates are “effective oral and written communicators.”

However, research on whether students’ second language writing develops as a result of studying in L2-medium universities is scant. What research exists suggests that these learners’ writing does not necessarily improve whilst studying for their degree courses (e.g., Humphreys et al., 2012; Storch, 2007, 2009). The findings of such studies bear theoretical and pedagogical implications for the field, as well as political implications for the educational policy makers at universities who need to examine the extent to which this particular graduate attribute (i.e., written communication skill) has been achieved. However, most of these studies have examined writing development following usually one semester of study (i.e., 12 weeks) which is a period of time perhaps not long enough to record improvement.

The present study set out to investigate second language writing development of EAL students following three years of studying an undergraduate degree course in an English-medium university. In addition, the students’ perceptions and reflections on their writing development were examined through individual interviews at the end of the third year. We begin with a review of the available studies on L2 writing development before describing our study.

## Research on L2 writing development

There is a small but growing body of research on second and foreign language writing development. Studies on foreign language writing development have been conducted either with young learners (in high schools) receiving limited language instruction (e.g., Gunnarsson, 2012; Verspoor & Smiskova, 2012) or adult learners who were beginners (e.g., Vyatkina, 2012). Of more relevance to our research are studies on second language writing development with adult learners of high intermediate proficiency in immersion environments. These studies have been conducted following either a specific course of instruction in the L2 or an immersion experience in the L2-medium university without formal language instruction. All these studies have tended to employ a test–retest design and writing development is gauged by using composition/band scores (e.g., Sasaki, 2007, 2009, 2011; Storch, 2009) and/or a range of discourse-analytic measures (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2006). These discourse-analytic measures attempt to assess improvement in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity, the latter distinguishing between grammatical/syntactic and lexical complexity.

Our discussion of these studies is organized under three sections. The first two sections distinguish between research based on the length of time between test and retest. We start with studies whose duration was shorter than one year. This is followed with studies that were one year or longer in duration. In our third section we review the studies that examined the factors that could explain writing development or lack thereof.

### *L2 writing development after less than one year*

The bulk of research on second language writing development has focused on development following one semester of study in the L2 medium university. In some of these studies, the students participated in a course of language instruction (e.g., Elder & O’Loughlin, 2003; Humphreys et al., 2012; Larsen-Freeman, 2006; Storch & Tapper, 2009) with only scant research (e.g., Storch, 2007, 2009) available on writing development of students without formal L2 instruction. The studies have employed a range of measures to gauge development in L2 writing, and their results suggest some improvement, albeit depending on the measures used.

Available research using composition/band scores of writing suggests that the writing of second language learners improves following three to six months of instruction (Green, 2005; Hu, 2007), or even following 8–12 weeks of instruction (e.g., Archibald, 2001; Elder & O’Loughlin, 2003). Sasaki (2007, 2009) showed that study abroad (ranging

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