

A Research Paper: Our First Steps into Academic Writing

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1. Introduction

Learning to write academically is a central component of teacher education. It is through writing that students in teacher-training programmes construct, question, and reorganise knowledge. During our fourth year at Instituto Superior de Formación Docente y Técnica N° 88 “Paulo Freire,” we experienced for the first time what it meant to undertake an extended piece of academic writing: the research paper required in *Written Expression IV*. Looking back on that experience now, as qualified teachers of English, we recognise that the real value of the task was not the finished document but the long process of learning to think, plan, draft, and revise in academic ways.

The aim of this article is to reflect upon that formative process, to describe the stages we went through, and to discuss the pedagogical implications of writing a first research paper within an English-language teacher-training programme. We draw on both personal experience and relevant theoretical perspectives on writing, using the same authors who informed our original work—Brown (2002, 2003), Tribble (1996), Badger & White (2000), Nunan (1988, 2004), and Richards (2001, 2002)—to situate our reflection within recognised approaches to the teaching of writing.

2. Academic Writing in Teacher Education

Academic writing plays a decisive role in shaping reflective and critical professionals. According to Brown (2002), writing is “a process of thinking, drafting, and revising that enables learners to clarify

ideas and communicate effectively” (p. 391). Within teacher education, this process supports future teachers in articulating pedagogical reasoning and connecting theory with classroom practice.

Nunan (1988) defines curriculum as “a plan for learning which involves the planning, implementation, and evaluation of instructional activities to achieve specified educational goals” (p. 14). When the curriculum explicitly includes academic writing tasks, as in *Written Expression IV*, it recognises writing as both a learning outcome and a means to deeper understanding. Tribble (1996) similarly emphasises that writing is “a composing process which normally requires multiple drafts before an effective product is created” (p. 115). These views position writing not as a mechanical exercise but as a developmental cycle in which students refine both language and thought.

For future teachers of English, academic literacy is fundamental. It enables them to engage with professional literature, design materials, and later guide their own pupils in literacy practices. At ISFD 88, the inclusion of a small-scale research project within the fourth-year syllabus provides a first encounter with the conventions of academic writing—structure, citation, coherence, and argumentation—while still offering a supportive environment for experimentation.

3. Our Experience as Students

In *Written Expression IV*, the research paper served as our first introduction to academic writing. The task required us to engage critically with theory and demonstrate our ability to construct an organised, coherent piece of research. Guidance from our instructor was provided mainly during the proposal stage, which helped to frame the task as an exploratory and guided project rather than an independent investigation. After this point, the writing process became self-directed, and we had to make decisions about structure, sources, and analysis on our own. As the research paper was the final requirement to promote the subject, it

demanded considerable commitment and academic responsibility.

We worked in pairs, each analysing the writing approach in a different level of the *Hey Friends!* series used in primary state-run schools of La Matanza. One paper focused on *Hey Friends 1* (Argañaraz & Valdez, 2023), while the other analysed *Hey Friends 3* (Mendoza, 2024). Both followed a similar structure: introduction, theoretical background, description of the textbook, analysis of selected units, and conclusions.

Developing each section required skills that were still emerging. Topic selection involved aligning personal interests with the curricular focus on writing approaches. Once the topic was approved, we moved into extensive reading—consulting authors such as Badger and White (2000), Brown (2002), and Tribble (1996)—to understand the evolution from product-oriented to process- and genre-based perspectives. Translating that theoretical understanding into academic prose proved challenging, particularly in maintaining coherence and adopting an appropriate formal register.

4. Challenges and Strategies

Writing a first research paper exposed multiple challenges—linguistic, methodological, and affective. Linguistically, mastering formal register and cohesion devices required deliberate effort. As Brown (2003) notes, “writing is not a natural skill; it must be taught and learned through conscious attention to language form and rhetorical organisation” (p. 220). We often struggled to paraphrase appropriately or to integrate quotations smoothly. Creating transitions between theory and analysis was another difficulty. We relied heavily on examples from Tribble (1996) and Badger & White (2000) to model how to link conceptual frameworks with empirical description.

Methodologically, understanding what counted as analysis posed initial confusion. In *Hey Friends 1*, for example, the activities followed what Badger & White (2000) describe as a product approach, focusing on

imitation and accuracy. Recognising this allowed us to interpret the textbook’s writing tasks within a clear theoretical lens. In *Hey Friends 3*, by contrast, we identified an eclectic combination of product and process elements, reflecting a gradual shift toward communicative and task-based approaches consistent with the *Diseño Curricular de la Provincia de Buenos Aires* (2018). These discoveries emerged through sustained comparison and re-reading of both theory and material.

Affective and organisational aspects also played a decisive role. Students were initially encouraged to work in pairs to make the process more manageable and to promote collaboration. As the semester advanced, however, some groups changed, and several students continued their projects individually. Once the proposal stage was completed, the development of the paper became largely autonomous, demanding sustained planning and self-discipline. The length and complexity of the task often led to frustration, and some students eventually abandoned the paper or the subject. Since completing the research paper was required to pass the course, this situation revealed how demanding the process could be. At the same time, it highlighted the importance of perseverance and peer support. Setting realistic goals, sharing progress, and maintaining motivation were key to completing the work successfully.

5. Lessons Learned and Pedagogical Reflections

Completing the research paper transformed our perception of writing. What had started as a course requirement became an initiation into academic literacy. As Tribble (1996) observes, effective writing involves “the generation of ideas, the collection of data, and the revision of drafts in a cycle that leads to a finished text” (p. 37). Experiencing that cycle firsthand allowed us to internalise writing as process rather than product.

We also learned the pedagogical value of scaffolding. Each stage of the assignment mirrored the support our future pupils would need when learning to write

in English: exposure to models, guided practice, feedback, and gradual independence. This alignment between learning and teaching reinforced the Freirean principle that teachers are simultaneously learners. Reflecting on our own struggles with organisation and coherence helped us empathise with the challenges our students now face in the classroom.

Moreover, learning to cite sources accurately was another essential outcome of this process. Using the APA style taught us not only to give credit to the authors whose ideas supported our analyses but also to position our own voices within the academic community. Citation is more than a technical requirement; it represents a form of dialogue with theory and a demonstration of academic integrity. Mastering this convention helped us strengthen our arguments, connect ideas coherently, and understand that research writing is built upon interaction with previous knowledge.

6. Rethinking the “Research Paper”

A recurring misconception among students concerns the nature and purpose of the research paper required in *Written Expression IV*. Many begin the course without a clear distinction between a research paper and a thesis or *tesina*, assuming all three refer to the same type of work involving extensive investigation, data collection, and original findings. This conceptual confusion often leads to unrealistic expectations about the scope and level of complexity required.

In reality, the research paper serves a different purpose. It is not a final or independent research project, but a first, guided approach to academic writing. Its main objective is to help students apply theoretical concepts, organise ideas coherently, and begin developing an academic voice. It is therefore a formative rather than a final piece of academic writing—a first step into academic literacy that emphasises process, reflection, and clarity of thought.

Recognising this distinction allows students to approach the task with more realistic expectations. As Brown (2002) and Tribble (1996) observe, writing competence develops gradually through practice and reflection. Understanding the research paper in this light encourages engagement and persistence, turning the experience into a meaningful stage in the development of future teachers of English.

7. Final Reflections

Looking back, we realise that the experience of writing our first academic research paper marked the beginning of our identities as teacher-researchers. It cultivated perseverance, analytical thinking, and collaborative learning. Today, as practising teachers, we often draw on those same strategies when guiding our own students through writing tasks.

For current students of the programme, it is important to understand that writing a research paper is a gradual process that requires time, dedication, and extensive reading. Building a solid theoretical foundation is essential for supporting ideas and interpretations. Once a topic is defined, starting with a word cloud or mind map can help visualise concepts and connections. Organising these ideas within the framework of the research structure then provides direction and coherence. Above all, students should be prepared to modify, expand, and rewrite their papers as many times as necessary. Academic writing evolves through revision, reflection, and persistence, and each new version represents a step toward greater clarity and maturity as writers.

Ultimately, the experience of writing a research paper showed us that academic writing is not only about producing a text but also about developing as writers. Each stage—reading, planning, drafting, and revising—contributed to our growth and confidence. What we learned through this process continues to inform our practice as teachers, reminding us that writing, like teaching, is a continuous process of learning and improvement.

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