

# A Pedagogical Intervention Experience to Improve the Disciplinary and ESL Academic Writing Abilities of Applied Linguistics Students

## Experiencia de intervención pedagógica para mejorar los aprendizajes disciplinares y de escritura académica en inglés de estudiantes de lingüística aplicada

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### Resumen

This article presents the characteristics and results of a pedagogical intervention experience intended to improve the academic writing abilities in English of a group of university students of applied linguistics. The intervention adopted a socio literacy approach. It consisted in giving students a variety of opportunities for oral and written interaction to help them develop their abilities to write argumentative essays. To determine the impact of the intervention, we examined the interactive linguistic resources used in the essays and we conducted an open discussion session at the end of the experience. The interactive linguistic resources were not always useful for the students, although in combination with other learning aids, they raised the students' awareness of the dialogic nature of argumentative discourse. Students learned academic English expressions that they used in their oral classroom communication, although they were not always able to incorporate them into their essays. Through reading and writing students participated for the first time in the periphery of the social and discursive practices of expert members of applied linguistics. At the end, the article presents the limitations of the interventional study.

**Keywords:** academic literacy, second language teaching, writing instruction, higher education, disciplinary community

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### Abstract

En este artículo se presentan las características y resultados de una experiencia de intervención pedagógica dirigida a mejorar el aprendizaje de la escritura académica en inglés de un grupo de estudiantes universitarios de lingüística aplicada. La intervención se basó en el enfoque social de la alfabetización académica y consistió en ofrecer a los estudiantes múltiples y diversas oportunidades de interacción, oral y escrita, para desarrollar habilidades de escritura de ensayos argumentativos. Para determinar el impacto de la intervención, se examinaron los recursos lingüísticos interactivos que utilizados en los ensayos y se llevó a cabo una sesión de discusión libre, al término de la experiencia. Los recursos lingüísticos interactivos no en todos los casos fueron de ayuda en la escritura de los ensayos, aunque en conjunto con otros recursos de apoyo al aprendizaje, crearon conciencia en los estudiantes sobre el carácter dialógico del discurso argumentativo. Los estudiantes aprendieron expresiones académicas en inglés que utilizaban en la comunicación oral en el aula, aun cuando no siempre lograron incorporarlas a sus ensayos. A través la lectura y la escritura, los estudiantes participaron por primera vez en la periferia de las prácticas sociales y discursivas de los miembros expertos de la lingüística aplicada. Al final del trabajo se discuten algunas de sus limitaciones.

**Palabras clave:** alfabetización académica, enseñanza de una segunda lengua, enseñanza de la escritura, educación superior, comunidad disciplinar

Argumentative writing, in which the writer defends a certain point of view and persuades the reader to agree or carry out an action related to that perspective, is a crucial skill during and at the completion of university studies. Academic communities use argumentative discourse to articulate their own ideas with those of other authors, solve problems of comprehension, and produce knowledge. The undergraduate program in Applied Linguistics, which is part of the context in which this intervention study was designed, requires first year students be able to use written argumentation, in Spanish and English, to conduct academic activities in a variety of contexts. The ambitious aim of this program is to train professionals who have the capacity to work as researchers, language teachers, translators of specialized texts, and leaders in the processes of preservation and dissemination of the country's linguistic heritage in both national and international contexts. Acquiring written argumentation skills is not an easy task, as shown by three studies conducted with language students in Mexican higher education, which formed the basis of this intervention (Bañales Faz, et al., 2015; Castro & Sánchez, 2013; Moore & Andrade Meyer, 2016).

The first study considered is that of Castro and Sánchez (2013), who evaluated the quality of opinions expressed in 40 argumentative essays written in Spanish by undergraduate students in applied modern languages. The texts were presented as final works to assess the subject of Discourse Analysis. The students were asked to review the theoretical proposals, contrast their foundations and, based on that contrast, assume a position stating the contributions, applications, successes, or weaknesses. The students did not receive instruction on formal conventions of presentation, citation and reference models, or any content related to argumentative writing.

The research was addressed from a qualitative approach through a descriptive design framed within the linguistic analysis of discourse. It found that although the essays were presented as argumentative, they had an expository structure, they contained indirect quotes that incorporated information but did not produce any rhetorical effect, they showed the information of experts as unquestionable truths, and they expressed emotions and feelings instead of informed opinions. Castro and Sánchez (2013) concluded that the essays were monologues in which the students simulated having an opinion, since their views were projections of the views of the experts they had read. They proposed that in future pedagogical interventions, teachers should analyze texts written by experts with the students, making explicit the resources that experts use in specialized texts to incorporate their voice with that of other experts. The expectation is that this type of intervention will make

inexperienced writers aware of the dialogical nature of academic discourse.

The second study is by Moore and Andrade Meyer (2016), who described and contrasted the generic structures of 36 argumentative essays in English and Spanish written by 18 university students of English. In this case students were again not given instructions on writing argumentative essays. They were asked to choose two themes from a list of six, one for the essay in Spanish and one for the text in English. The general purpose of the writing was to generate a grade for a level B2 English course of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001).

The analysis focused on assessment of the segments of thesis and thesis reiteration. The use of assessment directly indicates the degree of openness or closure that the author allows in their argumentative process, which is why it is considered to be an important element in qualifying the rhetorical contribution to the essay. The study found that the authors reserved their opinion until the end of the essay or refrained from making strong statements, which contradicts the essence of argumentative discourse. The researchers reported that the essays did not display a generic structure; they either had a variety of references or did not have any. They attributed this variability to two factors. The first was the students had not received any guidance on the genre of argumentative discourse. The second factor related was their lack of linguistic competence in English. As the researchers explained, in striving to produce the arguments, the students forgot to reiterate or even establish the thesis. The study underlines out the need for further research to go into the details of previous instruction in essay writing, as well as students' beliefs and expectations about the social value of argumentation.

A third study on writing argumentative essays was conducted by Bañales Faz, et al. (2015), who explored the impact of a pedagogical intervention on the teaching-learning experiences of 2 teachers and 25 students on a course in Educational Linguistics. The intervention was based on the principles of inquiry-based learning, conceptual learning and critical thinking, and the strategic teaching method. Using a team teaching process, the two teachers, one a specialist in educational linguistics and the other an expert in academic writing, defined objectives, tasks, learning materials, functions, and assessment instruments. The task consisted of writing an argumentative essay in Spanish to answer the question: What has been the impact of the National English Program in Basic Education for the bilingual development of Mexican children?

In order to gather information on teaching-learning experiences, a questionnaire was used for the students and interviews were conducted with the teachers. The experiences recounted by the participants were grouped into three categories: disciplinary learning, conception of argumentation, and regulation of the argumentative writing process. Bañales Faz, et al. (2015) concluded that there were no significant impacts in any of the three categories. They suggest that, in order to learn written argumentation, future intervention studies should use examples of authentic texts of the discipline, which help to reflect and emulate good practices in textual genres and specific communicative situations.

The recommendations of the three aforementioned studies served as the basis to create the pedagogical intervention presented below. Following Castro and Sánchez (2013) and Bañales Faz, et al. (2015), the intervention includes a strategy to analyze authentic academic texts so that students have repeated opportunities to examine the linguistic resources through which experts in applied linguistics interact with their readers through their texts. Likewise, following Moore and Andrade Meyer (2016), the instruction on writing argumentative essays received by the students before participating in the pedagogical intervention was analyzed, as well as their beliefs and expectations about the teaching approach used in the intervention.

It is clear that writing argumentative essays is not easy in one's first language and is more difficult when using a second language (Deane & Song, 2014; Neff-van Aertselaer & Dafouz-Milne, 2008). Although there are teaching strategies that can contribute to the development of skills for written argumentation (Lertpreedakom, 2009; Promwinai, 2010), they do not always achieve the expected objectives in all educational contexts. Therefore, some authors have pointed out the need for teachers of English as a second language to investigate the usefulness of strategies to teach argumentative writing (Hasani, 2016; Kaur & Ka-kan-dee, 2015). This pedagogical intervention, supported by a social perspective of academic literacy, should, in theory, help students learn to interact through their texts in order to agree and disagree with others. The intervention would also allow

the students to learn about the conventions and values of this discipline. Lastly, the pedagogical approach would develop competences in the use of academic English through frequent contact with texts, the comprehension of which requires an advanced level of mastery. Therefore, the questions that we intend to answer once the pedagogical intervention is over are: How do students use linguistic resources to interact with the reader in their argumentative essays written in English? How do students perceive the impact of the social approach to academic literacy on their learning of the conventions of the discipline, in their understanding of written argumentation, and their use of the English language?

The following sections describe the pedagogical intervention that was implemented to introduce students to argumentative discourse. First, we discuss the theoretical foundations of the pedagogical intervention. Specifically, we explain the assumptions of the social-constructionist perspective of academic literacy and the Hyland model (1990; 2005; 2007; 2008) on the interactive linguistic resources of argumentative discourse. Second, we describe the teaching methodology and the research methods through which evidence was collected on the impact of the intervention. The third section presents the results of the textual analysis of the argumentative essays produced during the intervention, as well as the comments made by the students during the interviews on the pedagogical intervention. Finally, the significance of the findings is interpreted in the Discussion section.

### **The social-constructionist perspective in the teaching of academic discourse**

Teaching of argumentative discourse can be approached from a cognitive perspective, in which writing is understood as a process of personal discovery; or from a social perspective, in which writing is assumed to be a communicative practice that depends on the purpose and customs of a certain social group. An example of this latter teaching perspective is the “socioliterate” approach to academic literacy (Hedgecock, 2002), which is the frame of reference in this study of pedagogical intervention. With this approach to teaching academic discourse, the teacher analyzes with the students the characteristics of authentic texts produced by experts in a discipline. Through this process, the students are expected to become aware of the ways in which experts in the discipline interact with readers for different purposes and acquire those skills. This approach is recommended for teaching both oral and written English for academic purposes (Bitchener, Storch, & Wette, 2017; Newton, Ferris, Goh, et al., 2018). However, in this classroom study we limit our attention to the development and analysis of written language, since this is the activity through which the quality or performance of academics—both novices and experts—are evaluated in most disciplines.

### **Social interaction as a requirement in knowledge building**

The social approach to academic literacy is based on the proposals of social constructionism regarding the nature of knowledge (Gergen, 2005, Hyland, 2008). Social constructionism is opposed to theories that assume that knowledge is the result of what the researcher observes and records about the material world (exogenous perspective) and theories that place knowledge in the mind of the researcher (endogenous perspective). Social constructionism considers that the generation of knowledge requires active cooperation of people in a relationship. The truth is built by members of a community; to be objective is to follow the rules in a certain tradition of social practices and generating knowledge is a continuous process through which a group of people act in a coordinated manner (Gergen, 1985, 2001; Gergen & Wortham, 2001).

To understand a discipline, students must interpret the knowledge embodied in the theories that are presented in the texts—both oral and written—that are typical to that discipline (Johns, 1997; Swales, 1998). However, entering into the discipline not only requires knowing the content and having practical experience, students must also appropriate certain values, concepts, and ways of being. They must also acquire credibility, and in order to achieve this they have to participate in discussion on the discipline. That is, they must have the skills to interact with other members of the discipline through written language (Geisler, 1994).

### **Written language and disciplinary learning**

Like other discursive communities (Swales, 1990) or communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), applied linguists express their knowledge and disciplinary skills in the texts they write. The different types of text represent not only the formal vehicles of their communication, but are also the artifacts they use to demonstrate their experience. Through texts, linguists in training can learn what the best prepared members of

that community do, their values, and their ways of collaborating and dissent. According to the social approach to academic literacy, the task of the educator is to introduce the students to the social and discursive practices of the best prepared members of the discipline, through reading and writing.

Lave and Wenger (1991) state that academic discourse is initially learned on the periphery of a disciplinary community and, as knowledge and skills are acquired, there is a tendency to move towards the center of that community, to gradually participate as expert members of the discipline. From this perspective, learning is a process of social participation in which one builds an identity in relation to the community of practice. Whoever learns not only puts their cognitive apparatus into operation, but mainly relates to other members of the community and negotiates with them about what “knowing” means (Wenger, 2010).

### **Academic genres and argumentative discourse**

This approach is also based on gender theory, which begins with the idea that writing is done for different purposes in different contexts, which implies that there are variations in the ways of using language (Halliday, 1994). The teacher supports student learning by emphasizing the directed, interactive, and sequential nature of different genres and the ways in which language is systematically linked to the context through patterns of use of lexical-grammatical and rhetorical resources (Christie, 2016).

Academics write essays, summaries, reviews, articles, books, papers, projects, and research reports, among other types of texts. Through written language they present their ideas, anticipate possible objections from the readers and direct them towards certain interpretations of the themes they address. They convince their readers of the validity and legitimacy of their statements, they convey a professional identity and an attitude towards other members of the community. They show their solidarity with the perspectives of other authors, assess the ideas presented in other texts, and propose alternative points of view. All of this is what the teacher attempts to make visible to the student.

Far from being an anonymous and impersonal form of discourse, academic writing is a persuasive, argumentative endeavor (Bazerman, 1988, 1993; Berenkotter & Huckin, 2016; Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Meyers, 1999). Arguing implies adopting a point of view in relation to the matter that is being discussed in the text and to other writers who have views on the same subject. In order to argue, the writer necessarily has to interact with the reader and this is something that the university student sometimes does not realize.

Analysis of written argumentative discourse can be done using various methods. Hyland (2007) constructed a method that allows analysis of the linguistic forms used by experts to interact with readers through their texts. It is a tool for textual analysis and production that is seemingly useful in the implementation of the social approach to academic literacy. Based on a series of studies in which he analyzed research articles in mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, marketing, philosophy, sociology, applied linguistics, physics, and microbiology, Hyland (2005) found that in argumentative discourse, the writer interacts with the reader in two ways: through what he calls stance and through what he calls engagement.

The stance expresses the textual voice or personality of the writer. By using certain words and phrases, the author demonstrates his attitude when communicating judgments and opinions. Textual markers of the stance include litigators (e.g., *it is possible that, it could be that, it seems that*); emphasizees (e.g., *clearly, obviously, this shows that*), attitude markers (e.g., *unfortunately, fortunately*), and self-mentions (e.g., *I consider that, in my opinion*).

Through engagement resources the author acknowledges the presence of the reader, draws their attention to an argument, and takes into account their possible objections to guide them to a certain interpretation. Linguistic engagement resources include pronouns referring to the reader (for example, *you, you, your, and we*, which includes the reader and the writer), and directive expressions that engage the reader in textual actions (e.g., see Figure 3), physical actions (e.g., *distribute the materials*), or cognitive actions (e.g., *think about...*). Engagement is also achieved by using questions or appealing to shared knowledge (e.g., *as we all know*) and through personal comments in parenthetical insertions.

The Hyland model (2005) allows examination of the interactive language in argumentative discourse and the preferences of the different disciplinary communities to build and negotiate social relationships through the

texts. This model was used during the intervention to show the students how to analyze the interactive linguistic resources used by experts in research articles. The Hyland model (2005) was also used to analyze the interaction in the argumentative essays written by the students.

### **Methodology**

In order to answer the research questions, a methodological intervention was designed and implemented for an academic writing course in English that lasted for 16 weeks in a university undergraduate program in Applied Linguistics.

#### **The participants**

Fourteen women and 11 men took part in this study. They were students of a public university located in the northeast of Mexico. Their ages ranged between 18 and 28. Also participating was a teacher aged more than 50 with 25 years' experience in teaching English and two external researchers aged between 35 and 40 with experience in teaching academic writing in English.

In order to obtain a diagnosis of the students' prior knowledge and skills in the English language, academic writing, and the contents of the discipline, the course started with an open group discussion session. The session lasted approximately 45 minutes and was recorded on video for analysis. The majority of the students considered that their level of English proficiency was intermediate mid (87%), although some said they had an intermediate low level (11%) and others an intermediate high level (2%). They stated that none of them had previously written an argumentative essay, either in Spanish or in English, and could not describe the characteristics of an argumentative essay. The students were also beginning their second year of studies and in the first year the courses had focused on basic university content, so their contact with applied linguistics was elementary. They still did not have mastery of disciplinary content and demonstrated great enthusiasm to begin learning about the themes of their degree.

#### **The intervention**

The pedagogical intervention was carried out in an academic writing course in English. The objective of the course was to provide guidance and opportunities to read, analyze, and evaluate the arguments of others, as well as develop their students' own arguments on topics of interest. Consequently, on the course they studied the strategies and linguistic forms with which the writer acknowledges the presence of the reader and communicates with them to determine their own and others' positions, evaluate reasons, present evidence, and write essays that present clear and convincing arguments.

Following the recommendations of Hedgcock (2002), during the course there were several opportunities for students to choose a subject of interest, learn about the features of argumentative discourse, and approach the standards, values, and ideology of applied linguistics. The teachers focused the students' attention on argumentative discourse used in research articles. To do this, they brought into the classroom several volumes of the journals *TESOL Quarterly*, *Modern Language Journal*, *MEXTESOL Journal*, and *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*.

The students worked in groups and in pairs to identify the sections of the journals, the types of texts (for example, articles with a didactic orientation, research reports, or book reviews), the textual organization of the articles, the rhetorical movements in the sections of the research articles, and the language used by the authors for different communicative purposes. On several occasions the teachers asked the students to identify and discuss the ways in which the authors used language to convince the reader of their points of view.

Throughout the course emphasis was placed on knowledge as a social construct, so classes were not only focused on teaching writing, but time was also spent discussing and reflecting on the contents of texts, exchanging texts and peer feedback, reading one's own texts and those of others out loud, and reviewing texts individually and in collaboration. The aim was for the students to become a community of practice through oral and written interaction (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and experience the dialogical dimension of written language (Bakhtin, 2010).

**Collection and analysis of evidence**

The study of the intervention consisted of three stages. In the first stage, students were prepared to recognize the structure of argumentative essays. In that preparation (which lasted a total of approximately eight hours) the purpose of the different sections of an argumentative essay was explained, they were given a list of phrases in English, examples were presented, and four readings were given in relation to the essay topics and a written description of the writing task to be performed. The themes of the essays were the following: (1) *Native English speakers are better teachers of that language*, and (2) *All English programs should include teaching of academic writing*. The students had a week to write the essay.

Once the participants finished the first version of the essay, they were asked to exchange their essay with a partner of their choice. The purpose was to write down questions and suggestions in the margins of the partner’s essays in order to help clarify and enrich the content. After giving and receiving feedback on their essays, they were given two days to make the changes they considered relevant. They were asked to send them to an email address and, after a week, their essays were returned with comments in the margin, written by one of the authors of this paper. The comments were written in the form of a question. The following are examples of those comments: *What do you mean? Could you explain this a little more? How does this happen? Could you be more specific?* After the second set of feedback, the students sent the second version of their essays for assessment. Four weeks after completing the first essay, the same procedure was followed for a second essay. The essays were 1,500 and 2,000 words long, respectively.

The second stage of the study consisted of analyzing the essays according to the Hyland model (2005) shown in Figure 1. Although, according to the author, the writer of academic texts uses stance and engagement markers to interact with the reader, for reasons of space, in this article we only report the results of the use of linguistic engagement resources in the two essays.

*ENGAGEMENT*

This refers to the linguistic forms through which the writer acknowledges the presence of the reader and communicates with them, directing their attention to the argument and guiding them to certain interpretations.

Linguistic forms	Code	Function
Pronouns referred to the reader	RP	Shows that the reader and writer have common objectives and understandings.
Directives	D	Instructs the reader to perform an action or to see things in a certain way.
Questions	Q	Invites the reader to engage in the discussion. It sparks interest and encourages the reader to take part on the exploration of an idea.
Shared Knowledge	SK	Asks the reader to remember or consider an idea that is known or accepted.
Personal assessments	PA	Allows the writer to address directly the reader, briefly interrupting the argument to express something related to a previous argument.

Figure 1. Interactive Linguistic Resources of Academic Writing in English (Hyland, 2005)

The 50 argumentative essays were analyzed independently by the two researchers who did not teach the course. The essays were read several times until they had a clear idea of the content and a general idea of the linguistic forms used. Then they proceeded to code each of the linguistic forms used, according to the scheme shown Figure 1. Once the independent coding was done, the researchers met to compare the results and obtain reliability between the evaluators. The reliability was calculated by obtaining the percentage of codes on which the two evaluators agreed, which was 82%. The codes that were not within that 82% were discussed one by one until agreement was reached.

The third stage was carried out held a week after completing the analysis of the second essay and it consisted of an open discussion session with the students in the classroom. The purpose was to find out about their views

on the impact of the social approach to academic literacy in learning about the discipline, written argumentation, and the English language. The session was recorded on video for analysis with the consent of the participants.

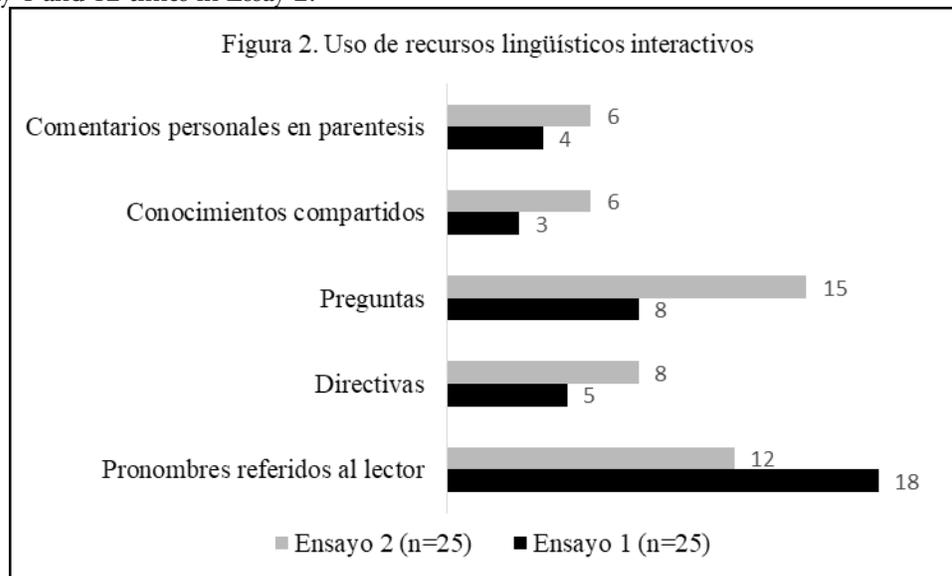
### Results

In this section we answer the research questions.

#### How did the participants use interactive linguistic resources in argumentative essays written in English?

In total, interactive linguistic resources were used 38 times in the 25 texts for Essay 1 and 47 times in the 25 texts for Essay 2. The ways in which each of them were used are described below.

**Pronouns referring to the reader.** As shown in Figure 2, pronouns referring to the reader were the resources used most frequently by students in this pedagogical intervention. This resource was used 18 times in Essay 1 and 12 times in Essay 2.



Personal pronouns are generally used in academic writing to incorporate the reader into the text as a participant in the discourse. The presence of the reader can be seen more clearly when using the pronouns *you* or *your*, but this is not common in any academic discipline. Personal pronouns are avoided in academic writing to mark distance. However, when they are used, they give an interactive sense to the text and demonstrate that the writer identifies the reader, anticipates their possible objections, gives voice to their questions, or expresses their points of view.

In this study, the personal pronouns used did not indicate understanding or common aims between the writer and the reader but provided informality to the texts. For example, in the statement below, the writer refers to the advantage of bilingual English and Spanish teachers, in contrast to monolingual English-speaking teachers, in understanding the problems faced by English learners in Spanish speaking contexts.

*If you are a bilingual teacher is easier for you to understand the processes the student is going through.* (J. L29).

The writer did not need to indicate any understanding or common objective with the reader, but rather to make a generalization and omit the agent with the third person pronoun *it*: *It is easier for a bilingual teacher to understand the processes the student is going through.* The use of second person pronouns had the effect of personalizing rather than depersonalizing the statement, as is customary in academic discourse.

In an extract of another essay in which personal pronouns were used, we can also observe the characteristics of oral language by the use of contractions and long statements that display various ideas joined by the conjunction *and*.

*At this stage you have a vocabulary of around 500 words and you still can't speak fluently and you sometimes use words that don't exist.* (R. L56).

Only two participants used personal pronouns as indicated by Hyland's description. The following test shows how the writer, who had a self-reported intermediate high English level, appeals to the knowledge they assume to have in common with the reader. This also suggests that this knowledge makes them part of the same disciplinary community.

*As we know, second language acquisition is an interdisciplinary field with many different theories about how languages can be learned.* (M. L18).

The other appropriate use of a personal pronoun was made by a student with a self-reported intermediate mid English level. As the statement below illustrates, the writer talks to the reader as a peer and incorporates their possible doubts into the argument.

*At this point the reader may be wondering what I mean by progressive feedback.* (L. L66).

As stated earlier, during the course the teachers explained the use of interactive resources to the students and asked them to identify them in the texts they read, which they did with ease. However, most of them did not manage to use them in accordance with the conventions of the disciplinary community. However, the mistakes made by the students do not mean that there was no learning. In accordance with Lave and Wenger (1991), the students were on the periphery of the disciplinary community and, should they continue to be immersed in the social practices of applied linguistics, with time they will be able to participate from the center of the academic discipline.

**Directives.** Directives serve to guide the reader to do or understand something in a certain way. These resources were used five times in Essay 1 and eight times in Essay 2. Most of the directives that were used were not used to dialogue with the reader and suggest some way of interpreting something. Sometimes the writers used directive resources to direct the reader to a specific place in the text, as illustrated by the following statement:

*Look at the books of this essay to see that no Spanish books I use.* (C. L 42).

There was one case in which the writer suggests to the reader what they should remember. This was the following:

*It is very important to remember that native speakers not always write in the correct way and cannot give guidance to others* (S. L. 79)

**Questions.** Questions were used 8 times in Essay 1 and 14 times in Essay 2. Questions serve to awaken the interest of the reader and although they were discussed extensively in class, they turned out to be used infrequently by the students in Essay 1 and used more in Essay 2. Those who did use questions did so in an appropriate manner, even though the statements required more precision, as in the following example:

*How many references we use in the essay? Depends on the number of words the teacher ask to write the essay.* (M. L21)

**Shared knowledge.** Shared knowledge was used in three texts in Essay 1 and six in Essay 2. These resources are used to ask the reader to recognize something that is assumed to be familiar or accepted by both parties. It is a way of involving the reader in the construction of an argument. One of the students used it in his first essay as follows:

*Although not allowing primary school children to speak in Spanish in the classroom is obviously unacceptable, some teachers think it helps improve speaking skills in English.*

**Parenthetical personal comments.** Personal comments were the resource least used in the essays, since they were only used four times in Essay 1 and six times in Essay 2. This resource allows the writer to interrupt the flow of the argument to comment on something more directly or personally to the reader. One of the students used it in the following way in their essay:

*Many migrants who are returning are finding jobs as English teachers, while we are struggling with classes and exams, only because they lived in USA* (M. L.31)

In general, interactive linguistic resources were used more frequently in Essay 2 (about English teachers) than in Essay 1 (about academic writing). The opposite was true with questions. While very students few used them in Essay 1, in Essay 2 their use of this resource almost doubled.

### **How did the pedagogical intervention impact learning on argumentative discourse?**

Three observations stand out from the discussion on the learning of argumentative discourse at the end of the intervention. The first is that the students said they were aware that their objective in writing an argumentative essay is not to present the ideas of the authors as they had previously thought, but to present their ideas to their readers (who in their case were their classmates) in connection with the ideas of the experts in their discipline who publish articles in academic journals. The majority agreed with a student who stated that the activities in which they researched the academic life of the authors had helped him to understand the interactive dimension of the texts. In particular, the student mentioned that it had helped them see the author's photograph and find out to which university they belonged.

The second observation is that the interactive linguistic resources were more useful for the students to gain insight into research articles than to write their own argumentative essays. They said that using them in essays represented an additional burden to them, as they were focused on understanding the ideas in the texts and connecting them with their own ideas to write them in English. The students appreciated that the use of these resources was not mandatory for the assessment of argumentative essays.

The third point is that exposure to a diversity of text types did not always benefit the students. Both during the classes and in the discussion session, they expressed their confusion regarding the structure of the research article and that of the essay, since they were asked to read journal articles and write argumentative essays. Some stated that they focused on imitating the examples that were presented during the preparation on essay structure to avoid being distracted by the structure of the research articles.

### **How did the pedagogical intervention affect use of the English language?**

As regards the impact of the social approach to academic literacy on the development of competences in English use, the students mentioned the new vocabulary and the forms of expression they had learned from the readings. However, they also acknowledged that although they identified and understood them, they had not been able to incorporate these expressions into their essays.

Another important finding is that when speaking in Spanish they were using the linguistic forms that they acquired in English and not in their translated form. Therefore, they perceived that the intervention had meant that there was greater presence of alternating codes in communication with their classmates. They were surprised by this change in the way they communicated.

The use of printed lists of expressions in English were well received by the students. However, the functions of some of the expressions that the students used did not correspond to the use they were given in the essays. Some of them commented that they found themselves trying to use the largest number of expressions they could or writing in order to use them and not to communicate something.

### **How did the pedagogical intervention affect the disciplinary knowledge of the students?**

The students tended to think that disciplinary knowledge was acquired on other courses, while in academic writing in English they learned about the ways in which to conduct research, in terms of qualitative and quantitative research. They found the qualitative research easier to understand than that based on statistics. They seemed proud to read research articles, which could reflect the beginning of the construction of an identity.

## **Discussion**

Teaching academic writing, writing argumentative essays in English, and determining the impact of a pedagogical intervention to develop academic discourse skills are all complex activities. They are an important part of higher education and it takes time to achieve expertise in any of them. In addition to time, as suggested by the social approach to academic literacy, dialogue and contrast of ideas is needed. That is the reason why this pedagogical experience was published.

The aim of the pedagogical intervention was to help the Applied Linguistics degree program achieve its objectives through the academic writing course. The contents and materials were not always used directly by the students, but they contributed to the construction of an environment of social interaction through texts in a community of practice. In general, in the words of the students and teachers who participated in the intervention experience, the impact was positive as regards becoming aware of the dialogical nature of academic discourse.

The suggestions by Castro and Sánchez (2013) and Bañales Faz, et al. (2015) to incorporate the analysis of texts written by experts in the discipline, referring explicitly to the resources they use to incorporate the voices of others in their own voice, was successful and made students aware of the social dimension of language.

Similarly, the recommendation of Moore and Andrade Meyer (2016) to investigate the students' previous knowledge about writing essays, allowed the contents and materials to be structured for the preparation sessions. This did not prevent most of the essays from containing inaccuracies in the structure and use of English. It must be remembered that students are not experts and cannot behave as such, but they act from *the periphery* of the disciplinary community (Lave & Wegner, 1991). By following the support on their study program, they will gradually move towards the center of the discipline, thus acting as experts in applied linguistics.

The study on the pedagogical experience was not free of limitations. Although a variety of supports were used to facilitate the students' interaction and learning, the effect that each of them experienced on the development of specific skills was not analyzed. Other studies could focus on researching how these instruments work.

In addition, the impacts on learning were only studied from the perspective of the participants. Future studies could seek strategies to produce a baseline of the skills or abilities of students to measure the impacts with greater objectivity.

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