

## **An Analytic Description of the Role of Repeated Exposure to Content-Centered Writing assignment in Promoting Cross-Genre Academic Writing Skills**

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**[Abstract]** In academic content courses, the content is a major source of meaning-focused input; therefore, it is postulated that learning to write would be facilitated if the patterns in academic genres became explicit for the students through repeated exposure to content-centered writing assignments. To test the hypothesis, the study collected data from several writings of a sample of EAP students. To detect any differences between related means of the participants' written products and the treatment differences both in mean level and change patterns across time is one way Repeated-Measures ANOVA was employed. The findings indicated that the assignments not only promoted the participants' score on content course, but also contributed to their writing scores in academic writing skills measured by genre awareness, 2) text readability, and 3) written fluency. Moreover, according to the mean level and change patterns, it was observed that there was a cut-off point at which the influence of repetition was moderated and stabilized.

**[Keywords]** academic writing skill, genre awareness, written fluency, text readability, academic genre

### **Introduction**

Of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), writing is vital for non-native speakers of English (NNSs), as the skill helps them cross geographical boundaries, get connected to the world, and be heard by professionals around the globe. However, writing is unequivocally a challenging skill for many NNSs for at least three reasons: incomplete instruction, inappropriate teaching methodologies, and inconsistent theoretical bases (Wette, 2017). Teaching writing for NNSs is incomplete because it is usually limited to general English writing programs that are usually not directly related to the real-life purposes of all learners.

Moreover, the teaching methodology is inappropriate because many teachers in non-English speaking countries still employ the presentation, practice, and production (PPP) model of teaching writing, which addresses structures, functions, notions, skills, or sub-skills (Sato, 2010); this is in sharp contrast to the concept of genuine tasks that fulfil some social purpose in the language community in which they are produced (Little, Devitt, & Singleton, 1988), and with second-language acquisition (SLA) theories and their subsequent research findings, which require second and foreign language programs to meet the social, political, and economic needs of the language learners (Ellis, 2003).

Moreover, writing skills development is a dynamic longitudinal process (Penris & Verspoor, 2017), so learning how to write should extend well beyond the general English programs to, even, content-based academic courses if the learners are expected to write successfully in more genres and in more circumstances. This kind of writing instruction, which is associated with specific academic subject matter, is said to develop the writing skills needed for academic writing

tasks (Khonsari, 2005).

Now, considering that non-native English major learners are expected to use their writing proficiency in the content-based classes in EAP contexts, it can be inferred that planning and presenting content-based academic writing assignments, which involve learning strategies, repetition, and purpose, will find great importance. Such assignments require students to read the course book and any other related materials to gather information and structure the materials into a certain academic, genre-based pieces of writing. In other words, content-centered EAP writing tasks, which have the learners comprehend, manipulate, and produce the target language as they are usually expected to do in real life, would bring about language learning out of the linguistic demands of the content readings and address the NNSs' ongoing psycholinguistic and communicative needs for academic writing development (Lee, 2000:32).

However, mere provision of assignments will never be enough. Indeed, if students fall short of having right amounts of practice, the objectives will hardly ever be met (Maas, 2016). Therefore, teachers need ways that are relevant, focused, and purposeful to engage the students. Hence, the challenge for teachers in non-native academic context is to structure a mechanism that not only persuades content-related and meaning-focused interaction among the participants, but also overcomes the commonly cited barriers of time for real life written practices. The case gets even more critical if we remember that the social, personal, and educational factors that are related to writing in non-English speaking context vary so dramatically that they are likely to create expectations and conditions unique to the individuals involved and the specific contexts in which the skill is taught and learned (Cumming & Riazi 2000; Hornberger 2003; Jarvis, Holford, & Griffin, 2003).

Considering that content and genre-based writing tasks are inherently focused (Tardy, 2017), which is a necessary characteristic to guide writers in knowing what to attend to when they want to make choices about everything, this study postulates that content-centered writing assignments, if meaningfully practiced in EAP classrooms, are influential in promoting EFL learners' academic writing skills. It should be noted that as writing skill does not have a coherent definition, this study attributes genre awareness, written fluency, and text readability with writing skills and addresses the following research questions:

- 1- What is the role of the repeated exposure to content-centered writing assignments in promoting Iranian English major university students' academic writing skills (assessed by their genre awareness, written fluency, and text readability)?
- 2- What is the treatment difference in the patterns of changes observed in the English major university students' academic writing over short time series during the experimental period?

### **Review of the Related Literature**

It was only during the past decades that academic writing found its right place in academic circles from simply being a secondary support skill to being a primary ability with its own techniques and strategies. Moreover, a social ingredient in writing argued by Halliday (1993) and Swales (1990) that the writer is a social being who writes with purpose for an audience that also shares some of those communicative purposes. Consequently, situational and contextual dimensions were considered the key to textual interpretation and shaped the schematic structure of the discourse and choice of content and style. Moreover, errors which were once regarded as something to be

avoided at all costs, were treated as productive and developmental. Other researchers, too, started to regard writing as a process that involves a combination of sociolinguistic, personal, and educational variables to determine the progress that individuals make in writing (Valdes, Haro, & Echevarriarza, 1992; Cumming & Riazi, 2000; Hornberger, 2003; Jarvis et al., 2003). From this perspective, “writing is at once an individual, creative process and a socially constrained normative process” (Kern, 2000: 186), which involves linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural factors. Therefore, to learn to write in a second or foreign language, learners should improve in at least three areas: 1) the features of the texts they write, 2) the processes of composing, and 3) appropriate interaction with literate social contexts (Kroll, 2003; Silva & Brice, 2004).

Research on academic writing has had a varied scope, including the written product (Johns, 1986; Hyland & Tse, 2004), the writing process (Li & Schmitt, 2009), the writing course syllabus (Shih, 1986), teaching writing (Zhu, 2004; Ryan, 2011), writing evaluation (Topping, Smith, Swanson & Elliot, 2000; Shrestha & Coffin, 2012), writing tasks (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Nelson, 1990; Strijbos, Narciss & Dünnebier, 2010), writing strategies (Graham, Harris & Mason, 2005), technology-based writing (Yoon, 2008; Spiliotopoulos, 2002); writing motivation (Winstead, 2004); authorial identity (Lea & Street, 1998; Pittam, Elander, Lusher, Fox, & Payne, 2009); and feedback on writing (Tuzi, 2004; Chukharev-Hudilainen, & Saricaoglu, 2016; Pham & Iwashita, 2018). However, despite so many studies, many teachers are still uncertain about how they can practically help their students to improve their writing (Hartshorn, Merrill, Sudweeks, Strong-Krause, & Anderson, 2010).

This implies that the findings have been limited for pedagogical applications. The appearance, disappearance, and reappearance of suggestions on how to teach writing, especially to non-native speakers of English, is another piece of evidence for the argument that the results were not inclusive enough for pedagogical applications. For instance, in the case of content and language integration, Gordimer in 1982 suggested that if teachers integrate writing with content at every level of instruction, they will provide the learners with the chance to find their own voices in their new language and communicate effectively in different contexts and with different audiences. Yet, the idea was set aside for a while and the researchers, obsessed with the importance of form, forgot all about the importance of content (Truscott, 1996; Ferris, 1999; Zhou, 2009). However, once again, the old idea appeared and researchers, such as Yang (2017), claimed that the content and language integrated learning approach would promote learners' cognitive flexibility, communication skills, meaningful interaction, and intercultural awareness.

Moreover, intercultural diversity has also added another dimension to non-native teachers' confusion. For instance, Fox (1994) discusses that it is difficult for the students from Asia, Latin America, and Africa to learn academic writing because in their cultures, unlike English-speaking communities, people communicate indirectly and holistically, respect the wisdom of the past, and downplay the individual in favor of the group. This diversity stimulated another line of research on writing. For example, Al Fadda (2012), drawing upon systematic conversations and interviews with 50 postgraduate students from King Saud University, concluded that the participants had their own culture-specific difficulties, such as distinguishing between spoken and written English, making an outline before writing a draft, identifying the skills needed for successful writing, and avoiding plague words and phrases. Similarly, Cumming, Lai, and Cho (2016) after examining 69 empirical studies from journals or books for academic purposes, argue that synthesizing source materials is not similar for L1 and L2 learners. Although both groups experience problems in writing, there are differences between L1 and L2 students in their understanding and use of sources

in writing. L2 students develop certain strategies, such as getting help from prior knowledge and experience. Besides, it was shown that task conditions and types of texts written and read would influence performance in tasks that involve writing from sources, which implied that instruction can help L2 students improve their uses of sources in their writing. Morss and Murray (2001) provided data in support of these claims and verified that a structured program in writing development can enable academics to improve their written output and writing process. Similarly, Boscolo, Arfè, and Quarisa (2007), based on their study on the role of an intervention in improving the written ability of 52 non-native undergraduate students' academic writing, supported the significance of instruction in improving students' abilities to write academically.

Despite the abundance in the studies of how to improve writing products and processes, the promotion of writing through practicing authentic interaction with real-life texts has received little attention (Silva & Brice, 2004: 72). To this end, the present study suggests that repeated content-centered writing assignment in EAP classrooms would promote academic writing skills. However, bearing in mind that the elicitation tasks in this study must allow meaningful comparisons to be made between subsequent writings in terms of genre awareness, fluency, and readability, the focused on the following academic genres: summary/paraphrase and response/reflection. The research is significant because although the effects of content-based tasks are already investigated for the development of written skill, most studies focused just on written accuracy (Ahmadian & Tavakoli, 2011; Polio & Fleck, 1998), while the other areas, such as written fluency, genre awareness, and readability in EAP classroom, are still under-researched. Therefore, this study can be both theoretically and practically valuable.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

For this case study, 11 university students (9 females and 2 males, 24- 30 years old) who were doing a course in English teaching methodology at the master's level, were assigned seven writing assignments based on the readings of the course to be done both on their personal computers at home and on paper in class prior to the classroom discussion in each session. The topics of each of the tasks was based on the readings assigned from the course book with related chapters on second language teaching and learning. All participants had already done their BA at universities across the country and entered the MA program at the University of Guilan based on a nation-wide entrance exam. Since it is the research purpose that will determine the sample size in time series design, 77 writing sample obtained from 11 participants (11\*7) is acceptable because according to many statisticians, if the observations are to be used for causal inference, even as few as 4 observations in each pre-post period may be enough (Lenth, 2001).

### *Procedures*

Right from the start of the course, the participants were informed through the course syllabus that on a weekly basis, they were expected to read certain pages from the assigned textbook (the book was on teaching and learning English as an International Language) and then summarize the author's opinions by putting the main idea(s) into their own words in a more condensed length than the original ( in the form of summary/ paraphrase), and add their own views about and experiences with the text or to express their ideas (in the form of a response/ reflection note) and

upload the completed task in a .doc formatted file to the teacher through a free classroom communication hub (EDMODO) for the teacher to grade based on a rubric selected for this research purpose. It should be mentioned that as the participants were graduate students, the responsibility of learning how to write a summary/paraphrase or response/ reflection was given to them; that is, no instruction of genres was provided for the students and, instead, based on the teacher's feedback, they could review the comments and improve their scores. However, as one of the components of writing skill was writing fluency, which necessarily involves time, the researcher required the participants to re-write what they had written prior to the discussion in each class. This activity was considered appropriate for gauging fluency, as fluency practice should not involve any unknown words or concepts. Therefore, each participant had a separate score for each in-class and at-home task.

### ***Instrumentation: Writing Skills***

Growth in students' written skill is a key instructional objective for which teachers gather information either to adjust instruction or to make decisions. As this process is ongoing, any research that intends to estimate the gained ability of the participants to show growth in their written skill must collect data at many different stages throughout the course, namely the beginning, the middle, and the end. Accordingly, this research used the difference in the mean scores obtained by the participants at various stages to estimate the gain score obtained by each, which, in turn, acted as the indicator for growth in the participants' written skill. However, as the tasks were content-based and the acquisition of the integrated content knowledge and writing skills was primary, the researcher employed the rubric, which assessed both the content knowledge and the language knowledge, for evaluating the participants' writing. The rubric included the following components: content, genre specific rhetorical organization, academic word choice, formal voice, written conventions (sentence structure, grammar, mechanics, and spelling), total number of words, and words' T-Unit.

**Genre awareness.** Writers typically use language to respond to recurring situations in a discourse community (Hyland, 2004). As a result, they are required to be aware of the common genres of discourse communities, which exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of rhetorical structure, style, content, and intended audience, if they want to be accepted by their members. Bhatia (1999) points out that professional genres are often the "products of a set of established procedures that form an important part of the disciplinary culture within a profession" (p.23). Therefore, both writers and readers are expected to possess a metacognitive understanding of genre or genre awareness and be able to manipulate and exploit its rules in what they write and read to make connections between the types of writing assigned in the writing course (Bhatia, 1999, p.24). This study focused on the following academic genres: summary/ paraphrase and response/reflection

**Written fluency.** An important measure that assess students' writing achievement and monitors their progress is written fluency, which is generally defined as clear, smooth, and seemingly effortless use of language in writing. Nation and McAlister (2011) argue that having a substantial fluency development strand in the writing course is necessary because learners' knowledge is not of much use to them if it is not readily available when they want to use it. They further reason that as fluency development activities involve helping the learners make the best use of what they already know, this strand of the course should not involve any new vocabulary

or grammatical features, and instead should make use of texts and topics that are largely familiar to the learners. In other words, being message focused, fluency development activities involve very familiar materials but large quantities of language use and some pressure to perform at a faster-than-usual speed. Another characteristic of fluency-development activities is meaningful repetition of the task without any intervening tuition (Bygate, 1996). This is also supported by Lynch and Maclean (2000, 2001) who reported a general repetition effect on students' language development. Therefore, tasks that address written fluency should be designed in a way to require learners to work and re-work meanings and their formulations through constructive repetition.

Writing fluency is measured in various forms (e.g. Chenoweth & Hayes, Hatasa & Soeda, 2000), such as measuring the composing rate, i.e. the number of words written per minute, obtained through dividing the text quantity by the time spent writing, holistic scoring of the text (Ballator, Farnum, & Kaplan, 1999), the number of words and t- units (Elola, 2010), number of correctly spelled words, number of sentences, and number of letter sequences( Martínez-Avenidaño & Rosenthal, 2007). Of all these, the composing rate has been the most frequently used for assessing writers' fluency. In this study, writing fluency was assessed in terms of sentence fluency because the tasks assigned to the students were curriculum-based. The participants were asked to re-write a summary of what they had read prior to the class prior to the class discussion. The papers, which were written in real time, were gathered at the end of each class and scored for writing fluency. Therefore, the total number of words and sentences written during a short writing time was counted, and the writing samples were scored based on a 6-point scale where 1 indicated frequent run-ons or fragments, with no variety in sentence structure, and 6 represented consistent variety of sentence structure. As the focus was frequency, components such as mechanics, word choice and spelling were not considered.

**Textual readability.** Writers write texts for audience to read. The extent to which the content and meaning are easy to understand to the reader is known as text readability. Various measures have been suggested to assess this aspect of the text. Of all, the following measures are most frequently employed by the researchers: the Gunning fog index, the Flesch-Kincaid formula, the SMOG, the Coleman-Liau index, and the Automated Readability Index. A brief explanation of each is presented below. The Gunning fog index is commonly used to confirm that text can be read easily by the intended audience. Texts for a wide audience generally need a fog index less than 12. Texts requiring near-universal understanding generally need an index less than 8.

The Flesch-Kincaid index computes readability based on the average number of syllables per word and the average number of words per sentence. The score of 8.0 means that an eighth grader would understand the document. Standard writing approximately equates to the seventh- to eighth-grade level. The SMOG index is a simple method used to determine the reading level of the written materials. Generally, a reading level of sixth grade or less is what teachers aim at. Coleman-Liau holds value is in measuring readability of texts written in non-English languages of Western-European origin. For these non-English texts, the Coleman-Liau provides a marker for comparison of ease of reading rather than the meaning of the individual scores. Coleman-Liau calculates using the number of letters in words rather than syllables. This index is recommended and found to behave most consistently across the research. Finally, the Automated Readability Index (ARI) was designed for real-time monitoring of readability on electric typewriters. It relies on a factor of characters per word instead of the usual syllables per word and is used to gauge the understandability of a text.

### *Data Analysis*

The study used one-way repeated measure ANOVA, which is usually used to investigate the changes in mean scores either (1) over more than two time points, or (2) under more than two different conditions. As this study intended to investigate the effect of repeated content-based writing assignments on the NNSs' writing development in EAP context and wanted to measure the gain scores at 7 separate time points, a time-series course was designed for the exercise effect.

### **Results and Discussion**

To examine the role of repeated content-centered writing assignments in promoting academic writing skill in EAP classes, the participants' writing skill, including their a) genre awareness b) written fluency, and c) text readability, was measured through the tests whose results are quantified and described in the following section.

*Written fluency.* To assess the role of the treatment in promoting writing fluency, one way repeated-measures ANOVA was run on the data obtained through short assignments done in class prior to the start of the discussion in each session. A short time series was observed, and everyone was measured at 7 points in time. However, as the statistics were under constant threat by the violation of sphericity, the results were checked for this phenomenon. The probability of Mauchly's test statistic was found to be 0.14, which was greater than  $>.05$ . Therefore, it was concluded that the assumption was not violated. After checking for the assumption of sphericity, the researcher observed the fluency rate at seven short time series, one for each participant, to detect and gain a fuller understanding of the treatment differences, both in mean level and change patterns across time. Therefore, the independent variable was time and the dependent variable was the total number of words and sentences written in each short writing assignment. The writing samples were scored based on a 6-point scale where 1 indicated frequent run-ons or fragments and no variety in sentence structure; 6 represented consistent variety of sentence structure. As stated earlier, the significance of changes of all the calculations in the mean scores over 7 times (Tables 1 and 2) was examined via a one-way repeated measure ANOVA.

*Table 1*

*Mean Fluency Scores over 7 in Class Writing Tasks*

Factor 1	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	343.091	58.903	211.847	474.335
2	455.455	49.577	344.991	565.919
3	515.091	73.453	351.428	678.754
4	543.909	64.166	400.937	686.881
5	479.818	47.930	373.023	586.614
6	417.182	32.793	344.115	490.249
7	427.636	39.423	339.796	515.477

*Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Table 2

Measure: Fluency

Transformed Variable: Average

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Intercept	14746.797	1	14746.797	240.062	.000
Error	614.290	10	61.429		

The observed  $F$ -statistic in Table 2 with the sig value .000 means that there was a significant difference between the frequency means obtained from the writings produced by the participants. However, a closer examination of the data indicated that although the mean scores for written frequency increased over time, the pattern was not consistent (Figure 1). As illustrated in Figure 1, despite the increasing pattern in the fluency rate up to Time Point 4, this pattern changes to a downward slope after this point, indicating that repetition of a certain genre-based task has a cut off point for efficiency.

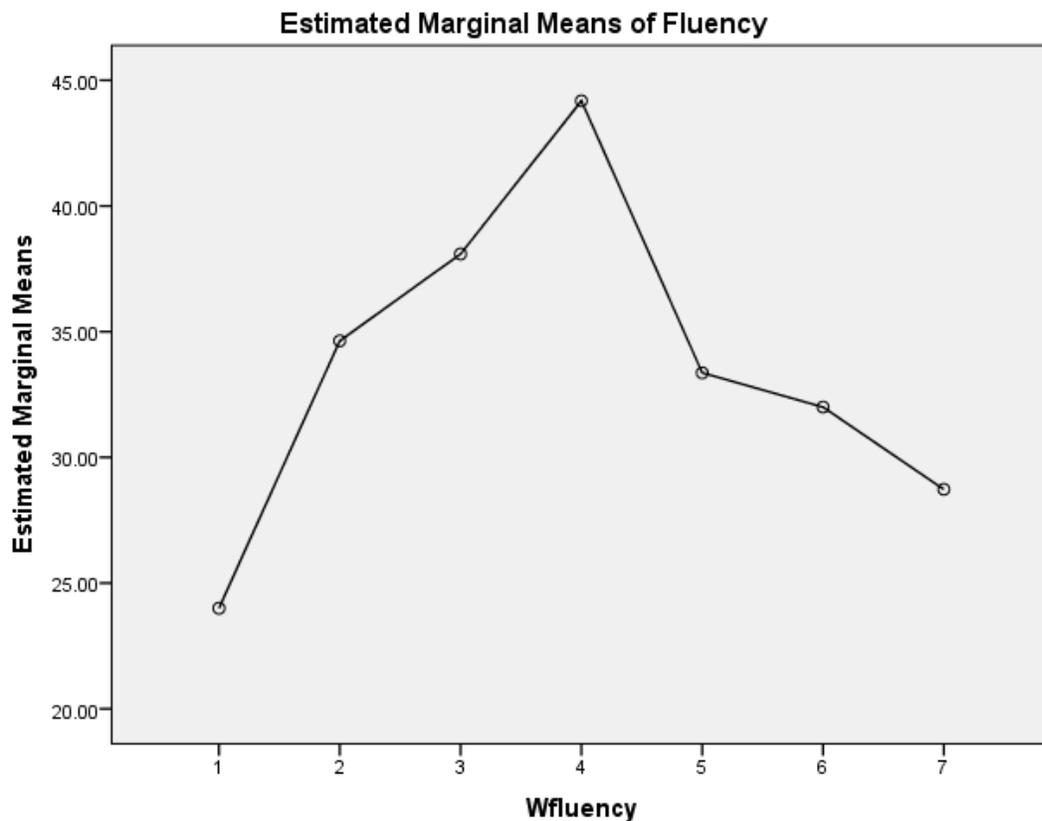


Figure 1. Pattern of fluency rate

**Text readability.** To assess the readability of the texts produced by the participants across 7 writing tasks, various measures of readability were used.

Table 3

*Text readability*

Task	N	Gunning fog	Std. Deviation	Flesch-Kincaid	Std. Deviation	SMOG	Std. Deviation	Coleman-Liau	Std. Deviation	Automated	Std. Deviation
1	11	12.6607	1.35752	10.1853	1.09403	12.0560	1.03605	13.9020	1.07340	11.7060	1.52058
2	11	12.5300	1.05336	9.9920	.82295	11.5593	.62641	14.7980	1.03279	11.4447	.96821
3	11	14.4480	1.79886	11.6140	1.71916	12.9307	1.19871	16.1540	1.27408	13.2833	2.04697
4	11	14.4847	1.79898	11.2600	1.45924	12.5787	1.00588	15.6067	1.39627	12.2413	1.96299
5	11	15.8293	1.25818	13.5147	1.34813	14.0373	1.07518	17.0487	1.10130	14.5113	1.96384
6	11	14.7053	1.87615	12.0220	1.85485	13.1047	1.33572	16.2107	2.05157	13.3520	2.33231
7	11	16.1887	1.67492	12.8613	1.54172	13.9447	.98150	16.5293	1.95258	13.8287	1.87018

As Table 3 reveals, in all of the measures employed, text readability substantially improved (the Gunning fog index from 12.66 in Task 1 to 16.18 in Task 7; the Flesch-Kincaid formula from 10.18 in Task 1 to 12.8613 in Task 7; the SMOG from 12.05 in Task 1 to 13.94 in Task 7, the Coleman-Liau index from 13.90 in Task 1 to 16.52 in Task 7, and the Automated Readability Index from 11.70 in Task 1 to 13.82 in Task 7). However, to test for the significance of the change over time, a one-way repeated measure ANOVA was run (Table 4).

**Tests of Between-Subjects Effects**

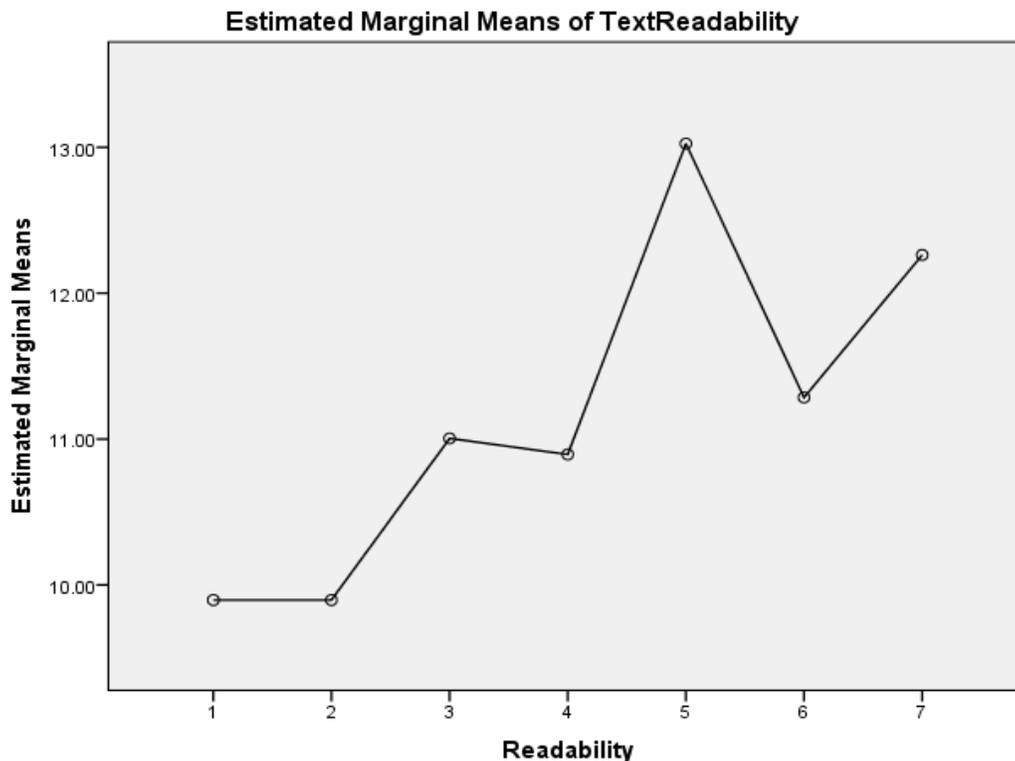
Table 4

Measure: Text Readability

Transformed Variable: Average

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Intercept	9625.309	1	9625.309	1274.919	.000
Error	75.497	10	7.550		

As indicated in Table 4, the F value with the sig.000 indicates that the change over time was significant. That is, text readability improved significantly over time. However, a close examination of the scores does not show a consistent change pattern (Figure 2).



*Figure 2. Readability pattern*

As Figure 2 indicates, although the mean difference in the readability scores is significant with a  $p$ -value = .000, and this significant interaction between times of repetition and task readability confirms that the pattern of change over time differs for the treatment; however, the ups and downs illustrated by the graph point to certain other factors at work, which provides evidence in support of the inconsistency in the repetition effect on the participants' text readability.

*Genre awareness and writing skill.* Finally, to estimate the gain score obtained by each participant, this research used the difference in the mean scores obtained by the participants at various stages of the study, which, in turn, acted as the indicator for growth in the participants' genre awareness and written skill (Table 5).

### ***Tests of Between-Subjects Effects***

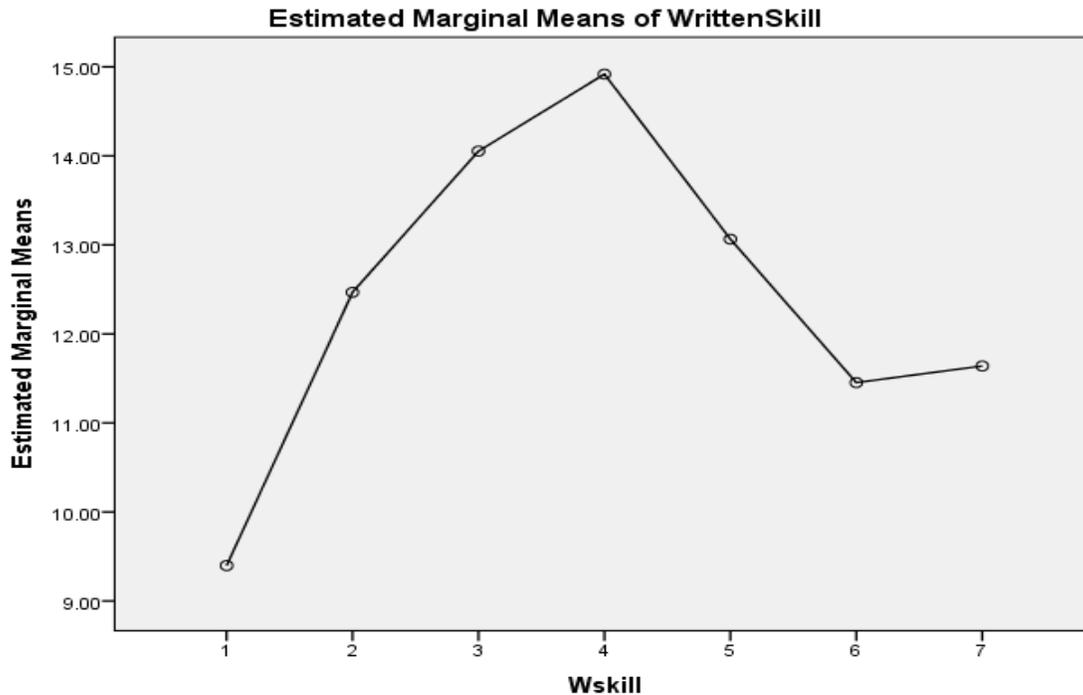
*Table 5*

*Measure: Genre awareness*

*Transformed Variable: Average*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Intercept	11892.589	1	11892.589	118.028	.000
Error	1007.605	10	100.760		

Based on the results presented in Table 5, it can be concluded that all the observed F scores with the sig values of .000 provide evidence for the hypothesis that the participants improved their writing skill throughout the experimental period. However, when the scores are plotted on a histogram, the sharpness of the effect decreases after a certain point (Figure 1).



*Figure 3. Genre awareness*

As illustrated by Figure 3, the treatment effect is sharper up to the Time Point 4, and after that, it changes to a downward slope and again upward, indicating that there is a cut-off point for the effectiveness of the treatment.

### Conclusion

This study was designed to provide an analytic description of the effect of content-based writing assignments on the promotion of academic writing skill in the EAP context. In addition, it intended to observe the pattern of change due to the treatment effect. To this end, the participants' writing skill development was measured over 7 time points, broken down by three components: genre awareness, written fluency, and text readability. The results indicated that the obtained mean scores over the experimental period was significant, indicating that the treatment was effective in yielding the postulated result. However, the pattern of change showed that the improvement is not unlimitedly upward. It reaches a plateau after Time Point 4 and moves slightly downward.

Supporting (Gordimer, 1982) the idea that if teachers integrate writing with content at every level of instruction, they will provide the learners with the chance to find their own voices in their new language and communicate effectively in different contexts and with different audiences, these observations imply that there is every reason to orient the non- native EAP

students to content-based writing to help their writing improvement. Moreover, using focused, purposeful academic genre-based contents in EAP contexts as the writing prompts may encourage students to set real-life goals and act on them autonomously. However, as writing is dynamic and contextualized, the variability in contexts invites a change in teaching methodology.

The experiment in this study showed that teachers may shift part of the responsibility of learning how to write to the learners. The observation in this study provided evidence that everyone, based on the feedback received from the teachers, decided what and how to write for different purposes and under different circumstances. Moreover, repeated practice of certain genres would lead students to learn to improve their writing by regulating their composing processes. Therefore, teachers can organize their courses to promote students' awareness of the most frequently encountered academic genres to respond to students' need so that all students be helped.

It should be admitted that due to a variety of constraints, the external validity of this research is limited. Consequently, the results should be re-examined in other contexts and with other participants. However, the number of the observations done by this study and the scrutiny of the examinations of each written text produced strong support for content-based written tasks and Hyland's (2003: 18) genre informed writing pedagogy as being a way of developing authentic writing skill.

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