

# **Teacher and Student Perspectives on the Effectiveness of First-Year Composition in Preparing English Language Learners for Discipline-Specific Writing**

**ELENA SHVIDKO**

*Purdue University*

The study described in this article was conducted to gather teachers' and students' perspectives about the effectiveness of a first-year composition course in preparing students for discipline-specific writing in college. Data were collected in a large research U.S. university through a student survey (n=32) and teacher interviews (n=5). The results show that the majority of the students and all instructors found the course effective and its assignments helpful in preparing students for writing in their university classes. In addition, all participated instructors also tried to improve the course by employing a variety of approaches and strategies, such as implementing assignments and skills generalizable across the disciplines, emphasizing the connection between general and discipline-specific writing, and encouraging students to do research on topics relevant to their fields of study. The article concludes with the recommendations on how to increase the effectiveness of first-year composition to better prepare students for their academic literacy experiences at the university.

*Keywords:* discipline-specific writing, first-year composition, English language learners, international students

## **INTRODUCTION**

There has been much research in recent years on academic writing across the disciplines. Some studies looked at the function of writing and the role it plays in the university-level content

classes. Others investigated the nature of writing assignments and genres that undergraduate students are expected to do in their university content classes. One of the most significant findings in this research is the notion that “students entering academic disciplines need a specialized literacy that consists of the ability to use discipline-specific rhetorical and linguistic conventions to serve their purpose as writers” (Berkenkotter, Huckin & Ackerman, 1991, p. 19). Clearly, this specialized literacy does not automatically emerge once students enter their fields or disciplines; rather their writing knowledge, abilities, and skills “build on what they learn in introductory writing courses” (WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition, 2014, p. 3).

Taking this into consideration, it is important to examine how well English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing classes and first-year composition (FYC) courses prepare English language learners (ELL) for their future disciplinary writing. Accordingly, the primary goal of this small-scale study is to contribute to the discussion on the efficacy of general writing instruction (i.e., EAP writing, FYC) and examine students’ and teachers’ perspectives about the effectiveness of first-year composition in preparing English learners for discipline-specific writing in college.

## **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

There has been much debate among writing professionals about the extent to which EAP writing courses should socialize students into their discipline-specific writing practices (Spack, 1988). Some scholars believe it is the EAP writing teachers’ responsibility to provide students with specific aspects of discipline-specific writing (Braine, 1989; Johns, 1988; Leki & Carson, 1997). Leki and Carson (1997), for example, argue that the purpose of EAP courses is “to enable

students to write better not for EAP writing classes but for academic purposes” (p. 39). In the same vein, Johns (1988), claims that “general academic English, employing artificially constructed topics and materials, is insufficient for students who are exposed daily to the linguistic and cultural demands of authentic university classes” (p. 706).

The opposing view maintains that socializing students into disciplinary writing practices should not be on the agenda of writing instructors. According to Spack (1988), “English teachers cannot and should not be held responsible for teaching writing in the disciplines” (p. 40). She also conducted a longitudinal case study (Spack, 1997) on the acquisition of university-level academic literacy, and came to the conclusion that “academic skills are not fixed” and “can be understood only within specific contexts” (p. 50).

Both positions in this debate are represented in Zhu’s (2004a) study, which was conducted to examine university professors’ views on academic writing and writing instruction. The results showed that academic writing should be based on the foundation of general writing skills, but include “particular disciplinary thought and communication processes” (p. 42); therefore, writing instruction should entail collaboration of both writing/language instructors and content course professors, in which the former “would be charged with the task of teaching basic/general writing skills,” and the latter “would assume responsibility for teaching those aspects of writing related to a specific discipline” (p. 42).

Research has also investigated types of writing that are required in university content courses (Horowitz, 1986; Ostler, 1980). Horowitz (1986), for example, analyzed writing assignment handouts and essay examinations collected from 36 university professors in order to identify writing tasks that students are required to do in their disciplines. The analysis of these documents allowed Horowitz to identify seven categories of writing tasks: summary or/reaction

to a reading, annotated bibliography, report on a specified participatory experience, connection of theory and data, case study, synthesis of multiple sources, and research project.

While Horowitz (1986) did not focus his study on particular disciplines, other researchers examined writing expectations in specific content courses, both on the undergraduate and graduate levels (Anderson, Evans, & Hartshorn, 2014; Braine, 1989, 1995; Carson, 2001; Johns, 1991; Hale et al., 1996; Zhu, 2004b). For example, in her study on faculty views on academic literacy, Johns (1991) conducted interviews with two political science professors and found the following difficulties: lack of disciplinary schemata; weakness in understanding the purposes of academic texts; little planning when reading and writing; lack of ability to provide connections between concepts, examples, and facts; lack discipline-specific vocabulary; and not being objective when dealing with texts and topics representing conflicting values. A recent study by Anderson, Evans, and Hartshorn (2014) showed that the three majors that required the most research writing were biology, psychology, and engineering, and that the main purposes of writing assignments, according to the university faculty, is demonstrating and synthesizing knowledge. In addition, the top five most common writing difficulties identified by the professors were genre, clarity, grammar, organization, and the ability to produce concise writing.

Another line of research focused on transfer of learning and sought to understand whether writing skills, strategies, and knowledge obtained in English as a Second Language (ESL) writing classes are applied by students to their writing in university content courses (Currie, 1999; James, 2006a, 2006b, 2009; Leki, 1995; Leki & Carson, 1997; Snow, 1993). James (2009) argued that “students do not inevitably transfer learning outcomes from an ESL writing course to a task that appears to be very different” (p. 78), and suggested that students should be taught to “not only *learn* how to state” various learning outcomes (e.g., describing, exemplifying, using

transitions), but also “to *apply* these learning outcomes in the variety of academic writing tasks they will do outside the L2 writing course” (p. 80).

DePalma and Ringer (2011) claimed that most research on learning transfer in L2 writing and composition studies had “focused primarily on the reuse of past learning” and as a result, it had not “adequately accounted for the adaptation of learned writing knowledge in unfamiliar situations” (p. 135). Given this view, DePalma and Ringer proposed a new framework, which they called adaptive transfer and defined it as “the conscious or intuitive process of applying or reshaping learned writing knowledge in order to help students negotiate new and potentially unfamiliar writing situations” (p. 135). From their perspective, this reconceptualization of learning transfer does not only emphasize the agency of L2 writers, but it also provides a better understanding of how students reshape their prior writing skills in new contexts, and thus it helps L2 professionals to make appropriate “curricular and programmatic decisions” (p. 141).

As seen, previous research attempted to investigate the relationship between general and discipline-specific writing, requirements that university professors have for student writing, and the issue of transfer of writing skills. It is also evident that researchers have reached no consensus in terms of the extent to which writing courses should prepare students for writing in their disciplines. Nevertheless, one of the purposes of first-year composition courses is to “create opportunities for students to recognize expectations for writing within their discipline and use writing to help them prepare to participate in their intended disciplines” (CCCC Position Statement, 2015; see also WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition, 2014). Therefore, it is important to understand what writing skills are emphasized in composition classrooms and how students perceive the applicability of these skills to writing in their majors. Accordingly, the purpose of the current study was to examine the effectiveness of first-year

composition in preparing ELLs for their discipline-specific writing. The study included both students' and teachers' perspectives.

## **METHODS**

### **Context**

The study was conducted at Purdue University, which has long been hosting a large population of international students who are English language learners. According to the International Students and Scholars (ISS) Enrollment and Statistical Report (2015), in fall 2015, there were a total of 9230 international students representing 125 countries, which comprised 23.4% of the entire student population.

Regardless of the major, all students must meet the university foundational learning outcomes by completing a minimum of 30 credit hours in the core curriculum (Purdue University Core Curriculum, n. d.). These outcomes include: written communication (one course), information literacy (one course), oral communication (one course), science (two courses), technology and society (one course), mathematics/quantitative reasoning (one course), human cultures: humanities (one course), and human cultures: behavioral & social sciences (one course) (Expected Outcomes, n. d.).

Written communication—one of the Purdue foundational learning outcomes—includes the successful mastery of the following key skills: 1) “understanding of context, audience, and purpose that is responsive to the assigned task(s)”; 2) using “appropriate and relevant content to explore ideas” and demonstrating “mastery of the subject”; 3) demonstrating “attention to and successful execution of organization, content, presentation, format and stylistic choices in writing”; 4) demonstrating “use of credible, relevant resources to support ideas that are situated

within the discipline and genre of writing”; and 5) using “language that effectively communicates meaning to readers with clarity and fluency” (University Senate Educational Policy Committee, 2012, p. 2).

To fulfill the requirements of the core curriculum, all incoming freshman students are required to take a first-year composition course offered through the composition program (ICaP: Introductory Composition at Purdue) in the Department of English. The program aims at helping students to “build confidence in their abilities to create, interpret, and evaluate texts in all types of media; develop knowledge by inspiring new ideas through writing; understand, evaluate, and organize their ideas; articulate, develop and support a topic through first-hand and archival research; become an effective writer who can respond credibly and accurately to a variety of writing situations” (ICaP Advisor Guide 2015-2016, p. 2).

There are currently two placement options available for international L2 students: the mainstream section of first-year composition—ENGL 106, and the section created exclusively for L2 writers—ENGL 106i. Whereas in both sections, students are taught to compose in various rhetorical genres for different audiences and purposes and use digital technology, the aim of ENGL 106i is to “meet the unique cultural and linguistic needs of second-language writers” (ICaP Advisor Guide 2015-2016, p. 3).

New ENGL 106i instructors receive a master syllabus and a description of course assignments from the director of the ESL Composition. The instructors are advised to follow the syllabus during their first semester of teaching, but they are given more flexibility in the subsequent semesters. The master syllabus includes five writing assignments and one oral presentation. The first assignment—*Writer’s Autobiography*—allows students to reflect on their development as writers both in their native languages and in English. This narrative-based

project requires no academic research and is given to students primarily as a “warm-up” for subsequent writing. The other four assignments comprise a sequenced writing project (Leki, 1998), which provides students with the opportunity to gain expertise on a topic of their interest over the course of the semester by formulating their research questions (*Research Proposal*), consulting with an expert (*Interview Report*), synthesizing information from multiple academic sources (*Synthesis Paper*), making an argument on a particular issue within their topic (*Argumentative Essay*), and finally presenting the findings of their research (*Oral Presentation*). Thus, working with the same topic and approaching it from different angles, students develop various rhetorical skills, such as interpreting, comparing and contrasting, analyzing and evaluating, arguing, defending an opinion, synthesizing and summarizing, describing causes and effects, resolving, and proposing.

### **Participants**

**Survey.** The survey participants were undergraduate students at Purdue University, who had taken ENGL 106i prior to participating in the study. A total of 32 students took the survey. Table 1 shows Purdue colleges represented in the participant sample, as well as indicates the participants’ length of study at Purdue at the time of this research.

Table 1

#### *Survey Participants*

Purdue College	Year at Purdue
Engineering – 11	Freshman – 6
Technology – 7	Sophomore – 18
Science – 4	Junior – 6



Management – 4                      Senior – 2

Liberal Arts – 3

Health & Human

Sciences – 2

Agriculture – 1

**Interviews.** The interview participants were five ENGL 106i instructors. All participants were graduate teaching assistants pursuing their doctorate degrees at Purdue University. Their demographic information is provided in Table 2. Pseudonyms are used to preserve anonymity.

Table 2

*Interview Participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Department</b>	<b>Place for undergraduate degree</b>	<b>Length of teaching ENGL 106i</b>
Ken	English	Algeria and U.S.	4 semesters
Christie	English	China	2 semesters
Sarah	English	Korea	2 semesters
Alice	Linguistics	U.S.	4 semesters
Mary	English	Afghanistan	4 semesters

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The survey (see Appendix A) was designed to find out what international L2 students think about first-year composition in terms of its effectiveness in preparing them to write in their disciplines. The 19-item survey also included questions about the types of writing assignments that students have in their content classes, and the challenges that students currently experience in disciplinary writing. The invitation to participate in the survey was sent by the Purdue ISS Office.

After the survey was administered and partially analyzed, the interviews were conducted with five composition instructors. Each interview followed the same protocol. However, during the discussion with each participant, some slight modifications were made in terms of the order of the questions on the protocol, and several follow up questions were asked. The interviews were audio recorded using *QuickTime Player*; the average length of the interviews was 20 minutes. Following the interviews, the recordings were partially transcribed. In addition to the recordings, the researcher took notes during the interviews that reflected some of her impressions and thoughts that emerged in the discussions.

The survey data were organized into three general categories: the effectiveness of ENGL 106i, types and amount of writing in content classes, and students' writing challenges in content classes. These general categories were further divided into specific themes and patterns. The interviews with the instructors were first transcribed from the digital recordings. A preliminary system of coding categories was developed based on the research goal of this study—to examine the effectiveness of a first-year composition course in preparing students for discipline-specific writing in college—and the data analysis of the survey responses (e.g., course effectiveness, skills taught, connection with disciplinary writing). When analyzing the interview transcripts, new coding categories were identified, and the initial categories were further refined. Thus, by

implementing both deductive and inductive approaches, several categories were modified (i.e., combined, specified), and new categories were added. After all coding categories were identified, the segments from the interviews pertaining to these categories were sorted out and analyzed.

## **RESULTS**

### **Students' Perspectives**

The results of the survey indicated that the vast majority of the participants evaluated the class as either effective (n=15) or very effective (n=13). The rest of the students (n=4) evaluated the effectiveness of the course as average. In addition to the overall effectiveness of the course, the participants were also asked to indicate whether or not they saw a connection between writing in first-year composition and writing in their content classes. The result showed that all students saw at least some degree of connection: 3 students believed this connection was “very strong;” 19 participants found this connection “strong;” and 10 students identified it as “average.” No one chose the options “weak” or “very weak.”

A better understanding of these students' opinions can be gained when looking at their explanations, which they were asked to provide in the open-ended questions<sup>1</sup>. Among the comments of the students who believed the connection was either strong or very strong, not uncommon were the following: “It gives us a base in writing before we engage in other classes,” “Writing skill is used everywhere. It helped to improve my ability to answer the questions of other courses more accurately,” and “Lots of assignments require skills from ENGL 106.” In addition to these general remarks, some participants identified particular skills that they believed were transferable from first-year composition to their disciplinary writing. To illustrate, several

students indicated that the knowledge of how to document sources was applicable in their other writing assignments at Purdue: “Learning how to cite sources and writing formal documents was a very useful exercise that has been used in many classes,” “APA citations was helpful,” and “It taught me how to use APA style and this is very helpful.”

Furthermore, some students who identified the connection between writing in first-year composition and writing in content courses as “average” included suggestions. To illustrate, one student wrote: “I think we need to have more professional assignments.” Another comment was along the same line: “I would like to learn more about how to write different types of papers which we will use in the future, for example, resume.” And yet another statement was related to the student’s need to learn how to compose in professional genres: “I think we need to learn how to write a statement of purpose to apply to grad school.”

In addition to the perceived lack of professional writing in first-year composition, another reason for the “average” connection was also found in the differences between the amount of writing required in ENGL 106i and students’ content courses. Some believed they did not learn enough in first-year composition: “For example, my POL classes require a lot of writing. The requirement is way beyond the requirement, or what I have learnt in ENGL 106I.” Others, on the other hand, thought they would not need all the knowledge acquired in first-year composition based on the nature of their major: “I am an engineering student, so I don’t have so much work that require writing,” My major doesn’t require high level of writing skill” (expressed by the student of Electrical and Computer Engineering Technology major).

The participants were also provided with a list of composition skills usually targeted in ENGL 106i and asked to indicate how well they acquired these skills in the course. Table 3 shows these skills and students’ self-assessment. According to Table 3, the participants believed that they had

acquired most composition skills effectively. It can also be inferred from students' responses presented in Table 3 that all of these skills, with the exception of integrating visual components (which apparently were not taught in two sections) are taught in all sections of ENGL 106i.

One survey question asked the participants to identify the assignments or activities in their first-year composition class that they found the most useful to their writing in other classes at Purdue. Consider some of the students' comments: "Argumentative paper provided me enough experience organizing my ideas in a logic manner," "There was an assignment requiring me to interview a professor and describe the interview. This was a very unique experience," "My instructor introduced the manner of emailing, that is very helpful to me," "The sequential assignments helped developed a sense of writing formal papers," "All the essays are useful because they are 5 different kinds of essays that I might to have written one day during the university," "I liked the assignment that taught us to use Purdue resources like online library."

Table 3

*Students' Evaluation of the Skills Learned in ENGL 106i*

<b>Skill</b>	<b>Very well</b>	<b>Well</b>	<b>Adequate ly</b>	<b>Poorly</b>	<b>N/A (not taught)</b>
Developing and expressing your ideas clearly	13	15	4	0	0
Organizing your ideas in a coherent (logical) manner	13	16	2	1	0
Summarizing text information	12	17	2	1	0
Paraphrasing text information	14	14	2	0	0
Synthesizing information from multiple text sources	16	14	2	0	0
Comparing multiple points of view from written texts	14	14	4	0	0
Formulating coherent arguments	15	15	2	0	0
Documenting sources (writing references and citations)	19	9	4	0	0
Integrating quotations into written text	16	12	2	2	0
Conducting academic research using online library resources (e.g., databases)	15	13	4	0	0

Integrating visual components in your written text (e.g., charts, graphs, tables)	12	13	3	2	2
Providing critique of peers' writing	14	13	5	0	0
Evaluating and revising your writing	14	14	4	0	0
Editing and proofreading your writing	11	19	2	0	0
Applying academic vocabulary	12	10	9	1	0

Overall, among the most frequently mentioned assignments that students believed were helpful were: *Interview Report* (n=5) and *Research Proposal* (n=4). The *Argumentative Essay* and the *Synthesis Paper* were mentioned three times each, and students also indicated skills involved in these assignments, such as summarizing, synthesizing information, paraphrasing, and creating an argument. Five students also believed that individual conferences with the instructor were beneficial.

In addition to the helpful assignments of ENGL 106i, the survey also asked students to identify the assignments or activities that they did not find particularly beneficial. Of 32 participants, 18 believed that none of the assignments was unhelpful. The other 14 participants mentioned *Writer's Autobiography* (n=7), *Synthesis Paper* (n=3), *Interview Report* (n=2), and *Oral Presentation* (n=2). Some students also attempted to explain the reason why those particular assignments or activities were not beneficial. For example, two students expressed their concern about the *Writer's Autobiography* in the following terms: "It's not useful at all" and "I don't understand how it can help me in college." One of the participants who believed that the oral presentation was not particularly helpful explained: "All students have to take COM 114."

Some students also provided suggestions that from their perspective could make the course more effective in preparing students for writing in their content classes. For example, 11 students believed that assignments related to students' majors would significantly strengthen the course. Their comments were quite similar: "More major-related assignments," "Let students write papers related to their majors," and "More personalized to the major requirements." Nevertheless, it also became evident that in some ENGL 106i sections, instructors encourage students to research topics related to their fields of study; this can be inferred from the following



student's suggestion: "Instructors should pair students who write similar topics together for peer review. You understand your peer's writing better if you know that person's field of study."

As seen, the majority of the participants found ENGL 106i effective and its assignments helpful in preparing them for writing in other classes at Purdue University. Whereas a few students indicated certain activities or projects less useful for them, overall ENGL 106i is perceived by the students as a valuable course.

### **Teachers' Perspectives**

Interview responses revealed that the instructors participate in this study believed that ENGL 106i is overall an effective course, and that the assignments and genres introduced in this course are designed to help students in their future writing at the university. It also became evident that the instructors were keen on making the course more valuable for the students by modifying the assignments and class activities and "trying different things" as one teacher put it. During the interviews, several aspects were identified that, according to the instructors, made the course effective.

**Introducing students to the concept of academic writing.** All interviewed instructors believed that ENGL 106i effectively fulfills its purpose—to prepare students for their academic writing at the university. They explained that the major contribution of this course is lead students through the process of writing an academic paper. For example, Sarah stated,

I think it's very helpful because we give them a big picture about how to write an academic paper, starting with a proposal. We are showing them the process how to develop an argument and how to conduct primary research and secondary research.

Ken had a similar understanding of the purpose of first-year composition, which he mostly attributed to teaching students the skills of “doing research”. He believed that “being able to understand a little bit about academic writing, such as the importance of having an academic conversation around a certain topic, being able to sort of refer to authors that are prominent in a certain topic” are crucial skills that students are able to acquire in ENGL 106i. Ken also mentioned the importance of introducing students to research tools: “I noticed that a lot of my 106i students are not familiar with how to find books in the library, how to find articles and how to use the different resources that the library offers for research.” He explained that these skills are used in a variety of classes; therefore, composition instructors need to make room for them in their syllabi.

**Teaching students general writing skills.** All participants also mentioned that ENGL 106i does well on teaching students general skills for writing a research paper. To illustrate, Mary said, “The projects that we have in this class [...] it’s not only about the projects, but it’s about the writing skills that they learn in these projects.” She provided a few examples of these skills, which students are introduced to through the sequenced assignments: “They learn about writing the review of literature, synthesizing sources, citation, paraphrasing, summarizing information, interviewing someone, collecting data. They also learn about different types of sources.” Christie said that she incorporated several workshops in her syllabus that were focused on developing a clear thesis statement, writing topic sentences, and providing transitions between and within paragraphs.

**Teaching students language skills.** Along with the general academic skills, which are equally important for all freshman students—both native and nonnative English speakers, all instructors also emphasized the importance of language skills in their classes, which, in their

opinion, are essential for English language learners. Christie stated, “I feel like 106i is not only about writing, but it’s also about language skills cause I can see that my students are developing.” She explained that when comparing students’ drafts of the first assignment with the drafts of the final assignment, she is always able to identify the noticeable progress that students make in their language abilities. With respect to language skills, Alice, too, believed that the course was making a considerable contribution to students’ writing development. In her opinion, teaching English language writers is quite different from teaching native speakers of English; therefore, in her course, she makes room for language issues. She added, “I think this is where I make most difference, or I hope I make most difference!”

In order to cover language concerns in their courses, the participants conducted various language-related workshops and provided handouts that help students with different grammatical issues, word choice, and punctuation. Mary, for example, explained that she paid particular attention to sentence structure and clarity: “I focus on sentence clarity because it's one of the major problems that international students have—basically they transfer the sentences from their own language to English, and so the first-language interference causes their sentences to be unclear.”

**Teaching students reflective skills.** Helping students become reflective writers was among other beneficial elements of ENGL 106i mentioned by all instructors participated in this study. Christie explained that reflection is crucial for students’ academic success, and students, in her opinion, should not only “create a product” but also “be capable of talking about their writing.” In her course, Christie used reflective journals to help students analyze their successes in writing as well as difficulties that they may encounter during the research process. Another instructor, Ken, implemented blogs to achieve the same purpose. In his course, blogs were

scheduled during the conference weeks to “keep students on task and help them stay in touch with their topic,” and these blogs gave students the opportunity to share the experiences they had during the times when they did not have lecture days.

In addition to blogs and journals, Sarah thought that the *Writer’s Autobiography*—the first writing assignment on the master syllabus—provided students with the opportunity to reflect on their writing experiences and to help students become aware of their own strengths and difficulties in writing. She explained,

I think it’s helpful because they haven’t thought about their writing experience at all. It’s time for them to think about what type of writer they are. So they just figure it out ‘Oh my style is this!’ So they just wake up. And I also encourage them [...] because here must be some moment, the joy of writing or at least joy of reading.

It is particularly interesting to learn about Sarah’s approach to the *Writer’s Autobiography* and her understanding of the usefulness of this assignment given that three instructors interviewed for this study reported that they removed it from their initial syllabi.

Along with analyzing writing experiences, reflections were also seen by some participants as a way of helping students see connections between ENGL 106i and their future writing in college. Christie explained that after each workshop, she asks students to reflect on the skills they learned and discuss how these skills can be applicable to their future writing experiences. Sarah and Mary also mentioned implementing reflections as a means of highlighting the relevance of skills and genres taught in ENGL 106i to writing in the disciplines.

**Effectiveness of course assignments.** During the interviews, all instructors mentioned the applicability of ENGL 106i assignments to discipline-specific writing. Christie, in particular,

had much confidence in the efficacy of the sequenced assignments approach. Although not fully aware of what types of writing students face once they leave first-year composition, she thought the genres introduced through the sequenced assignment project were both general enough and practical to have value in students' disciplines. In her opinion, "Whatever major they are gonna go to, it's gonna help." Almost echoing her, Alice stated,

I think the kinds of texts they do in 106i are pretty universal in most disciplines.

Of course you will have different genres and expectations, but I think the idea is, as I understand it, that these texts will be helpful to any student in any field.

Based on their own understanding of how ENGL 106i writing assignments may be applicable to students' future writing experiences, three instructors interviewed in this study eliminated the *Writer's Autobiography*—the first assignment included in the course master syllabus. They explained it in terms of the lack of usefulness of the autobiography genre in disciplinary writing. From their comments, however, it became apparent that the perceived usefulness of this assignment was based on the genre as a whole, not on the distinct writing skills that students may develop through composing the autobiography. To illustrate, Christie said, "This paper is the least relevant to their academic studies at Purdue. I don't think any of professors in their disciplines will ask to write something like that." Ken, who also removed the *Writer's Autobiography* from his course syllabi, offered similar explanations.

Alice, on the other hand, did not entirely remove the *Writer's Autobiography* from her course. Despite its disconnection from the other assignments of ENGL 106i she felt that it was important for students to reflect on their writing history. She found a solution by incorporating the *Writer's Autobiography* into the diagnostic writing administered during the first week of the semester.

Because the instructors were confident in the value of the ENGL 106i assignments for students' future writing experiences, they all tried to make it apparent for the students as well. Sarah believed it was one of her responsibilities "to remind them again and again, not just give away the syllabus and let them read." Ken said that he helps students clearly see connections between the course assignments and the writing in disciplines: "I try to make it explicit for each assignment why it's there and how they can use it in different classes." Similarly, Alice said she helps students see the relevance of ENGL 106i to writing in their majors:

I try to explain to them: "This is an exercise in writing, you are developing strategies that I want you to be able to use." I do tell them that, "You most likely will encounter these texts. You'll have to write a literature review; you may have to write some kind of proposal either for a class or for a grant." So I try to at least tell them that. Whether they believe or not.

To help students understand the applicability of the course assignments to their writing experiences in college, Sarah and Mary invite students to reflect on possible connections. Mary described:

Any new assignment or project that I start [...] I talk a little bit first, I ask them a few questions: "How can you apply this project to any other projects?" and they say, "Ok well we can use it, for example, in my discipline," or "I can use it for this purpose." So I think this helps students to form a positive image of this class.

Similar to Mary, Sarah directly asks students the question: "How can you relate this assignment to other writing?" and helps them make this connection. For example, when introducing the *Interview Report*, she refers to students' future interview experiences, in which they will have to follow similar steps. She emphasizes, for instance, the importance of

professional etiquette, including contacting an interviewee and sending a thank-you email—the concepts that are very important to grasp to any first-year students, and international learners in particular.

In their efforts to make first-year composition more effective and valuable for students' future writing at the university, some participants encouraged students to select topics related to their majors. Christie implemented this approach in her second semester of teaching ENGL 106i and found it successful. She explained: "I think they find it more difficult, but also more helpful.

Especially when they do their interviews—most of them went to professors or faculty members in their field." For someone in Christie's class, the interview helped to select their future major.

Alice almost echoed Christie: "If they interview a professor from their program, then they get to make a connection, they get to make some relationship and learn more about something they are interested in that can help them in their future research."

However, while the instructors agreed that encouraging students to do research on the topics related to their fields of study is advantageous for students' future studies at the university, they also admitted that not all instructors would be willing to implement this approach due to the additional effort required on the part of the teacher. Mary shared her position: "I tell them they can choose topics relevant to their majors, but I tell them not to make it too technical because it will be hard for me to understand." Christie provided a similar explanation: "By having them write on the topics related to their disciplines, I have to read articles in their disciplines for the synthesis paper, and that's a lot of work!"

It should also be noted here that while the interviewed instructors put much effort into making their courses effective for students' future writing experiences in college, they did it mostly based on their intuition rather than specific knowledge. During the interviews it became

apparent that all instructors had a somewhat vague understanding of the genres and writing assignments that students encounter in their content courses. Consider the following teachers' statements in response to the question: "Are you aware of the types of writing that students do in their content classes?": "No, I just guess. And I just focus on rhetorical knowledge" (Sarah), "A lot of them are engineering and management majors, which I know nothing about! I wanna say that I am not very familiar with the types of texts or genres they have" (Mary), "I have no idea what classes they have and how they build on the previous classes. I would think they would have a lot of reports, like I did in my biology class, but I am only assuming" (Alice), "Not exactly" (Ken), "No, but I don't think I need to be an expert in lab reports, for example, because all skills are transferrable" (Christie).

Overall, the instructors interviewed in this study acknowledged the effectiveness of ENGL 106i in preparing students for their future academic experiences at the university. They believed the course does it by introducing students to the concept of academic writing, acquainting them with the process of creating an academic paper, helping students develop composing and reflective skills, exposing them to various research tools and techniques, and improving students' linguistic accuracy. All interviewed instructors also tried to increase the effectiveness of the course by employing a variety of approaches and strategies, such as implementing assignments and skills generalizable across the disciplines, emphasizing the connection between ENGL 106i projects and writing in university content classes, and encouraging students to do research on topics relevant to their fields of study. Teachers' overall perception of the effectiveness of the course is nicely summed up in Sarah's statement: "So far, I think, we already provided the basic, the common ground for writing across the disciplines."



## DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Both the teachers and the students participated in this study believed that overall ENGL 106i was effective in preparing students for writing in their disciplines. On the survey, 13 students identified the class as “very effective,” and 15 students said it was “effective”. Additionally, most students acknowledged the connection between writing in ENGL 106i and writing in content classes. It also became apparent that the instructors interviewed in this study put effort into making this connection even stronger: some by asking students to write on the topics related to their majors, others by implementing activities that in their opinion were beneficial for students’ future writing.

Similar to the overall effectiveness of ENGL 106i, the students commented on the helpfulness of most skills taught in the course. This aligns with the position of the teachers who believed the course was able to provide students with general academic writing skills. All instructors also said they emphasized the importance of course assignments or skills in students’ discipline-specific writing.

However, reflective writing was one area where the students’ and the teachers’ reports did not match. All instructors in this study commented on the importance of reflection, and some implemented reflective journals or blogs in their courses to provide students with the opportunity to analyze and reflect on their writing processes. Interestingly, none of the students mentioned analytical or reflective skills as necessary or at least useful for their writing in college. However, no hasty conclusions should be made based on the small number of the student participants and the fact that reflections may not have been part of the courses taken by the students participated in this study.

Another area where students' opinions were different from those of teachers was professional writing genres, more specifically, grad school applications, resumes, cover letters, and professional emails. Students believed these writing genres were important to get exposed to in a first-year composition course; however, they were not mentioned by the instructors (except for Alice, who stated the importance of professional emails).

Since implementing professional writing genres in the course syllabus may not seem to be feasible, instructors should introduce students to professional writing resources online or on a local campus. One of such resources can be online writing labs, which normally offer a range of resources, including sample resumes, cover letters, and graduate school applications. Additionally, local campuses oftentimes have career centers that students can use to receive more assistance with professional writing. In fact, one of the instructors in this study, Sarah, introduced her students to the variety of professional writing resources provided by the Purdue Online Writing Lab. This is certainly a feasible task for all composition teachers.

Introducing students to campus resources can also be beneficial for students' academic writing experiences in college in general. Freshman students may not be aware of campus resources, such as writing lab tutorials, library workshops, research tools, and other programs and services available on campus that can help them improve their writing. Therefore, writing teachers are well positioned to expose students to the range of university academic resources and help them become better socialized into the academic community.

First-year composition instructors can also make professional emails parts of their course assignments. It is obvious that students have to write numerous emails while in college—to their professors, advisors, and other academic and professional staff. However, most freshman students are not familiar with the professional email genre, and this is certainly true not only for

international L2 students. The absence of a greeting, a signature, or a subject line in students' emails is a commonly observed phenomenon. However, instead of expressing frustration over the students' seeming lack of professionalism, appropriateness, or even politeness, teachers should introduce students to the conventions of professional email. Certainly, a composition course seems to be a suitable venue for it.

Finally, instructors should also try implementing topics related to students' majors in course assignments. On the survey, some students requested stronger connections with their majors. Although their responses did not make it clear what the students meant by "major-specific"--research topics, readings, or specific genres--teachers should strive to tailor course assignments and activities to students' disciplines. Certainly learning more about the types of genres common for particular majors would help teachers establish transparent connections between their instruction and students' future writing. From the interviews with the instructors it became evident that teachers have only very little understanding of what students are expected to write in their content classes. Therefore, more effort should be paid to raising composition teachers' awareness of discipline-specific writing, so they can better prepare students for their academic literacy experiences at the university.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study aimed at examining students' and teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of first-year composition in preparing students to discipline-specific writing. Although the teachers and the students participated in the study provided positive reviews, it was also evidenced that the teachers know little about the types of writing that students are required to do in their content classes at the university. While this apparent lack of knowledge did not affect the

effectiveness of the course overall, a better awareness of discipline-specific writing would help the teachers know how to better explain to the students the applicability of course assignments to writing in their majors. Indeed, many first-year students students may not be fully aware of the writing expectations in their content courses; therefore, a composition course can and should be, as stated by one of the instructors in this study, “the gateway” into their academic experiences at the university.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Elena Shvidko is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of English at Purdue University. Her research interests include second language writing, multimodal interaction, interpersonal aspects of language teaching, and teacher professional development.

Inquiries should be directed to [elenashvidko@gmail.com](mailto:elenashvidko@gmail.com)

### **REFERENCES**

- Anderson, N., Evans, N., & Hartshorn, J. (2014). *Reading and writing expectations of matriculated university students*. Paper presented at the TESOL International Convention & English Language Expo, Portland, OR.
- Belcher, D. (1995). Writing critically across the curriculum. In D. Belcher & G. Braine (Eds.), *Academic writing in a second language: Essays on research and pedagogy* (pp. 135-154). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

- Berkenkotter, C., Huckin, T., & Ackerman, J. (1991). Social context and socially constructed texts: The initiation of a graduate student into a writing research community. In C. Bazerman & J. Paradis (Eds.), *Textual dynamics of the professions* (pp. 191-215). Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Braine, G. (1989). Writing in science and technology: An analysis of assignments from ten undergraduate courses. *English for Specific Purposes*, 8, 3-16.
- Braine, G. (1995). Writing in the natural sciences and engineering. In D. Belcher & G. Braine (Eds.), *Academic writing in a second language* (pp. 113–134). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Carson, J. (2001). A task analysis of reading and writing in academic contexts. In D. Belcher & A. Hirvela (Eds.), *Linking literacies: Perspectives on L2 reading–writing connections* (pp. 48–83). Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Currie, P. (1999). Transferable skills: Promoting student research. *English for Specific Purposes*, 18(4), 329-345.
- DePalma, M. J., & Ringer, J. M. (2011). Toward a theory of adaptive transfer: Expanding disciplinary discussions of “transfer” in second-language writing and composition studies. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 20(2), 134-147.
- Expected Outcomes. (n. d.). *Purdue University core curriculum*. Retrieved from <http://www.purdue.edu/provost/initiatives/curriculum/outcomes.html>
- Hale, G., Taylor, C., Bridgeman, B., Carson, J., Kroll, B., & Kantor, R. (1996). *A study of writing tasks assigned in academic degree programs*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.
- Horowitz, D. M. (1986). What professors actually require: Academic tasks for the ESL

classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, 20(3), 445-462.

ICaP Advisor Guide 2015-2016. Retrieved from:

[http://icap.rhetorike.org/sites/default/files/AdvisorGuide2015-16\\_0.pdf](http://icap.rhetorike.org/sites/default/files/AdvisorGuide2015-16_0.pdf)

ISS Enrollment and Statistical Report, Fall 2015 (2015). International Students and Scholars.

Retrieved from

[https://www.iss.purdue.edu/resources/Docs/Reports/ISS\\_StatisticalReportFall15.pdf](https://www.iss.purdue.edu/resources/Docs/Reports/ISS_StatisticalReportFall15.pdf).

James, M. A. (2006a). Teaching for transfer in ELT. *ELT Journal*, 60(2), 151-159.

James, M. A. (2006b). Transfer of learning from a university content-based EAP course. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40, 783-806.

James, M. A. (2009). “Far” transfer of learning outcomes from an ESL writing course: Can the gap be bridged? *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 18(2), 69-84.

Johns, A. (1988). Another reader reacts . . . . *TESOL Quarterly*, 22, 705-707.

Johns, A. (1991). Faculty assessment of ESL student literacy skills: Implications for writing assessment. In L. Hamp-Lyons (Ed.), *Assessing second language writing in academic contexts* (pp. 167–179). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.

Leki, I. (1995). Coping strategies of ESL students in writing tasks across the curriculum. *TESOL Quarterly*, 29, 235-260.

Leki, I., & Carson, J. G. (1997). Completely different worlds: EAP and the writing experiences of ESL students in university courses. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31, 39-69.

Ostler, S. E. (1980). A survey of academic needs for advanced ESL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 14, 489-502.

Purdue University Office of Provost. (n. d.). *Purdue University core curriculum*. Retrieved from

<http://www.purdue.edu/provost/initiatives/curriculum/index.html>

- Snow, M. A. (1993). Discipline-based foreign language teaching: Implications from ESL/EFL. In M. Krueger & F. Ryan (Eds.), *Language and content: Discipline- and content-based approaches to language study* (pp. 37-56). Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Co.
- Spack, R. (1988). Initiating ESL students into the academic discourse community: How far should we go? *TESOL Quarterly*, 22, 29-51.
- Spack, R. (1997). The acquisition of academic literacy in a second language: A longitudinal case study. *Written Communication*, 14(1), 3-62.
- WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition. (2014). Council of Writing Program Administrators. Retrieved from <http://wpacouncil.org/positions/outcomes.html>.
- University Senate Educational Policy Committee. (2012). *Undergraduate outcome-based curriculum and administration & oversight structure*. Retrieved from <http://www.purdue.edu/provost/initiatives/curriculum/documents/Senate%20Document%2011-7%20Final%20Appendices%20and%20Rubrics.pdf>
- Zhu, W. (2004a). Faculty views on the importance of writing, the nature of academic writing, and teaching and responding to writing in the disciplines. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 13(1), 29-48.
- Zhu, W. (2004b). Writing in business courses: An analysis of assignments types, their characteristics, and required skills. *English for Specific Purposes*, 23, 111-135.

**Appendix A**  
**Student Survey**

*1. What is your college?*

- College of Agriculture
- College of Education
- College of Engineering
- College of Health and Human Sciences
- College of Liberal Arts
- College of Pharmacy
- College of Science
- College of Technology
- College of Veterinary Medicine
- Krannert School of Management
- Exploratory Studies (undecided)
- Other (please explain):

*2. What is your major?*

*3. What year are you in your academic studies at Purdue?*

- Freshman
- Sophomore
- Junior



- Senior
- Graduate student
- Other (please explain):

4. *When did you take ENGL 106-I? (semester/year)*

5. *Overall, how effective was ENGL 106-I in preparing you for your writing in college?*

- Very effective
- Effective
- Average
- Ineffective
- Very ineffective

6. *How well did you acquire the following skills in your ENGL 106-I class? (Please rank each*

*skill: (1) Very well, (2) Well, (3) Adequately, (4) Poorly, (5) Very poorly)*

- Developing and expressing your ideas clearly
- Organizing your ideas in a coherent (logical) manner
- Summarizing text information
- Paraphrasing text information
- Synthesizing information from multiple text sources
- Comparing multiple points of view from written texts
- Formulating coherent arguments
- Documenting sources (writing references and citations)

- Integrating quotations into written text
- Conducting academic research using online library resources (e.g., databases)
- Integrating visual components in your written text (e.g., charts, graphs, tables, images)
- Providing critique of peers' writing
- Evaluating and revising your writing
- Editing and proofreading your writing
- Applying academic vocabulary
- Other (please explain):

7. *What assignments or activities that you had in ENGL 106-I did you find the most useful for writing in your other classes at Purdue?*

8. *What assignments or activities that you had in ENGL 106-I did you NOT find useful for writing in your other classes at Purdue?*

9. *In your opinion, how strong is the connection between writing in ENGL 106-I and writing in your discipline: (1) Very strong, (2) Strong, (3) Average, (4) Weak, (5) Very weak?*

10. *Please explain your response to the previous question.*

11. *What would you personally change in ENGL 106-I to make it more effective in preparing students for writing in their majors?*

12. *How important are the following skills for the completion of the writing that your professors assign in your classes? (Please rank each skill: (1) Very important, (2) Important, (3) Somewhat important, (4) Somewhat unimportant, (5) Unimportant, (6) Very unimportant)*

- Developing and expressing your ideas clearly
- Organizing your ideas in a coherent (logical) manner
- Summarizing text information
- Paraphrasing text information
- Synthesizing information from multiple text sources
- Comparing multiple points of view from written texts
- Formulating coherent arguments
- Documenting sources (writing references and citations)
- Integrating quotations into written text
- Conducting academic research using online library resources (e.g., databases)
- Integrating visual components in your written text (e.g., charts, graphs, tables, images)
- Providing critique of peers' writing
- Evaluating and revising your writing
- Editing and proofreading your writing
- Applying academic vocabulary

- Other (please explain):

13. *What types of writing assignments do you do in your classes (NOT in ENGL 106-I)? Please check all that apply.*

- A research paper
- A literature review
- An annotated bibliography
- A lab report
- A research proposal
- A summary
- A professional/formal email
- Math problems
- Online discussions or blogs
- PowerPoint presentations
- None of the above
- Other (please explain):

14. *What do your professors in your major take into account when they evaluate your writing? (Please check all that apply)*

- Knowledge about the subject
- Clarity of your ideas

- Organization
- Grammatical correctness
- Mechanical correctness (e.g., punctuation, spelling, typos)
- Use of discipline or academic vocabulary
- Documenting sources
- Appropriate style and format
- Other (please explain):

*15. How often do the following take place in your classes at Purdue (NOT ENGL 106-I)? Please evaluate each: (1) Very often, (2) Often, (3) Sometimes, (4) Rare, (5) Never.*

- Peer review activities
- Consultations with your instructor about your writing/writing conferences
- Receiving feedback on intermediate drafts from your instructor
- Receiving explanation of your grade on the final grade
- Other (please explain):

*16. On average, how many pages per semester are you expected to write (all of your classes in total)?*

17. Which skills are you struggling the most with when writing in your classes? (Please check all that apply)

- Developing and expressing your ideas clearly
- Organizing your ideas in a coherent (logical) manner
- Summarizing text information
- Paraphrasing text information
- Synthesizing information from multiple text sources
- Comparing multiple points of view from written texts
- Formulating coherent arguments
- Documenting sources (writing references and citations)
- Integrating quotations into written text
- Conducting academic research using online library resources (e.g., databases)
- Integrating visual components in your written text (e.g., charts, graphs, tables, images)
- Providing critique of peers' writing
- Evaluating and revising your writing
- Editing and proofreading your writing
- Applying academic vocabulary
- Other (please explain):

18. What assignments do you find the most difficult in your major? (Please check all that apply)

- A research paper
- A literature review

- An annotated bibliography
- A lab report
- A research proposal
- A summary
- Math problems
- A professional/formal email
- Online discussions or blogs
- PowerPoint presentations
- None of the above
- Other (please explain):

*19. If there is anything else that you would like add, please do so below:*

---

<sup>1</sup> In presenting the results of the study, students' comments were not corrected for language.