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Article abstract

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A SELF-STUDY ACTION RESEARCH APPROACH TO ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effectiveness of a course for international Master's students integrating second language acquisition (SLA) content with English for Academic Purposes (EAP) development, using a two-layered action research approach. The students in the course created self-study action research plans to achieve their EAP goals, and designed instruments to assess their progress resulting from the implementation of their plans (the first layer). The instructor also used an action research lens through which to investigate this pedagogical approach and make adjustments to the course (the second layer). The research aimed to investigate the EAP developments that students achieved through their action research plans, and the aspects of the course that contributed to those improvements. Four focal student participants' electronic portfolios were analyzed using Scarcella's (2003) academic English framework. Findings suggest that the action research model benefited students by helping them develop their linguistic, cognitive and sociocultural/psychological dimensions of academic English, and encouraging learner autonomy. Furthermore, this model benefited the instructor and her future students in terms of insights gained which allowed for improvements to the course curriculum and delivery. Implications for supporting graduate students' EAP development and cultivating their research skills through action research are discussed.

KEY WORDS: Academic English; Action research; Diary studies; English for Academic Purposes; Portfolio-based assessment; Postgraduate studies; Self study

INTRODUCTION

International students in North America can face difficulties adjusting to the academic language requirements of their programs (e.g., Keefe, 2016; Lin & Morrison, 2021; Lin & Scherz, 2014). Therefore, many universities provide institutional language support through student success centres, academic advisors, English language programs, workshops and social events. At the graduate level, these supports are usually separate from students' coursework in their program. Experts suggest, however, that academic language support should be developmental and integrated within the curriculum and disciplinary discourse, rather than separate and remedial (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007; Di Maria, 2020). In line with these suggestions, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of a Master's level course integrating second language acquisition (SLA) research content with English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The course, *AR416: Academic English Through Research*, was created as a response to a perceived need to improve training and resources for graduate students whose first or dominant language was not English. The course curriculum was informed theoretically and methodologically by action research and self-study. The action research inquiry process includes four stages, which take place in a cyclical rather than linear manner: (1) identifying a focus area; (2) collecting data on the focus area; (3) analyzing and interpreting the data that have been gathered; and (4) developing a plan of action (Mertler, 2019). A two-layered action research approach was used in this course. On the first layer, students in the course utilized an action research framework to design and conduct empirical self-studies to improve aspects of their EAP development, and on the second layer the instructor also used an action research lens to investigate this pedagogical approach and make adjustments to improve the delivery and impact of the course.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research suggests that the mastery of study skills, academic socialization, and academic literacies leads to international students' greater satisfaction and confidence in completing their programs and in their language ability and academic skills (e.g., Rodríguez et al., 2019; Telbis et al., 2014). Correspondingly, the challenges that many international students face in coping with language socialization and cultural integration (Schecter & Bell, 2021) and the academic language demands of their programs may lead to feelings of self-doubt, low self-esteem, segregation, stress, and anxiety (Andrade, 2009; Brown, 2008; Liu, 2011). Unfortunately, the academic and language courses offered to these students often follow a one-size-fits-all approach that overlooks their diverse needs. Writing classes for international students are often modeled after writing classes for dominant English-speaking students, which focus on developing arguments more than building language skills (Cortes, 2019). Regarding listening and speaking, many international graduate students feel unprepared to participate in or lead class discussions, give oral presentations, use English colloquialisms, and engage in group work with English-dominant students (Lan, 2018; Lin & Scherz, 2014). All of these skills require academic English competence.

Academic English

Essential for student success in English-language higher education institutions (Redden, 2008; Scarcella, 2003), academic English has been defined as a "variety or a register … characterized by the specific linguistic features associated with academic disciplines"

(Scarcella, 2003, p. 9), and encompassing diverse genres and uses. Scarcella (2003) posits that academic English is not a fixed construct; rather, it is dynamic and constantly evolving within educational contexts which, themselves, are changing. Students must continually learn new academic language skills and literacies to meet the demands of their respective developing disciplines.

Scarcella (2003) identifies three dimensions of academic English competence: (1) the linguistic dimension, which includes phonological, lexical, grammatical, sociolinguistic, and discourse components; (2) the cognitive dimension, which includes knowledge, higher order thinking, metalinguistic awareness, and strategic components; and (3) the sociocultural/psychological dimension, which includes norms, values, beliefs, attitudes, motivations, interests, behaviours, practices, and habits. This study draws on Scarcella's (2003) framework to identify the types of academic English competencies, skills, and literacies students cultivate through their self-studies.

The Use of Diary Studies and Peer Feedback for Improving Academic English
Keeping diaries or journals[1] documenting their learning has been shown to have positive effects on learners' language skills development as well as on their attitudes towards and emotions about their language learning (e.g., Cenoz & Lindsay, 1994). Self-reflection in diaries enables learners to develop an awareness of their specific difficulties, which helps them to customize their language learning strategies (Klimova, 2015). Instructors can also use their students' diaries to understand their challenges and, correspondingly, to scaffold their students' learning through the feedback they provide as a response to the diary entries.

Instructor feedback plays a critical role in the academic success of international students (e.g., Hyland & Hyland, 2019; Ravichandran et al., 2017). However, studies indicate that feedback from instructors often arrives too late or is perceived by students as insufficient (Spear, 2000). In response to the need for more detailed and timely feedback, researchers have proposed various models of online and face-to-face peer feedback (e.g., Yang, 2016; McCarthy, 2017). Chen (2016) suggests that the use of peer feedback among English as an Additional Language (EAL) students can foster peer collaboration, learner autonomy, and a sense of ownership among language learners. Other studies on peer feedback in EAP contexts highlight students' supportive comments that boost their peers' writing skills, collaborative skills, critical thinking ability, self-confidence, and ability to acculturate into their academic discourse communities (Ma, 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). Online and/or asynchronous peer feedback can, furthermore, help to create a friendly and equitable environment in which students exchange suggestions without experiencing the pressure of face-to-face, synchronous interaction (Warschauer, 2002). Peer feedback can lead to knowledge building and transformation, as students offer each other suggestions for revisions and observe each other's writing as references for improvement (Yang, 2016). This demonstrates the need for guidance and practice in developing feedback skills.

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[1] We use "diaries" and "journals" interchangeably in our discussions of diary studies, self-reflection in diaries, etc.

Research Literacy

Developing research literacy is a complex undertaking that involves not only academic language competence but also reconciling sociocultural and institutional differences between students' home and host countries. Other than writing in an additional language, international graduate students often need to adapt to new ways of thinking critically, "…learning…discursive practices within the context of an academic discipline" (Simmons, 2005, p. 299), and expressing their ideas effectively. Graduate programs rarely include formal training in research literacy, relying instead on faculty members' individualized academic supervision of students (Elliot et al., 2016; Han & Schuurmans-Stekhoven, 2017).

Research literacy training is also important for international graduate students on their way to becoming teaching professionals. Davies (1999) argues that *all* educators should be able to engage with research by asking answerable questions; knowing how to find relevant evidence; gathering and analyzing evidence systematically; and evaluating and applying the evidence to their educational needs. Educators' decisions can be informed not only by published research but also by the data produced from their own practices and classrooms. The student participants in the *AR416* course learned and applied research literacy skills to formulate their research questions for their action research projects, find resources, create pre- and post-intervention measurements to observe their EAP development, and examine their own acquisition of academic English through action research.

Action Research and Self-Study

Action research is a systematic reflective inquiry into one's own educational practice, which results in improved teaching and learning (Johnson, 2008; Kemmis et al., 2014; Lewin, 1946). Feldman et al. (2004) suggest that the ways in which action research makes use of the researcher's own experiences render it a valuable and systematic tool for the kind of critical inquiry that takes place in self-study research. Action research aims to improve one's practice through multiple cycles of data collection and analysis, while self-study is more concerned with intimately examining one's own beliefs, understandings and feelings. Self-study can act as a springboard for action research, as it can help the researcher to identify the problem they would like to investigate and take action on (Kitchen & Stevens, 2003; The University Edinburgh, n.d.).

While many action research projects in the field of education have focused on teachers and teacher educators studying aspects of their instructional methods, assessment practices, and what their students are learning (e.g., Peercy & Sharkey, 2020; Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015), only a few student-researchers have combined self-study and action research to examine and improve their own language learning. One example is provided by Carter (2012), a doctoral student who used action research to improve her writing habits and develop her skills in formulating written academic arguments. In Rajendram and Shi's (2022) study of an academic English course for international students in a Canadian university, students were taught how to design an action research project to improve a self-selected area of their academic English. They worked with their peers in communities of practice to provide feedback and support to each other throughout their action research

projects. The study found that the communities of practice model facilitated the giving and receiving of constructive peer feedback, affirmed students' diverse linguistic and cultural identities, and provided a safe space for academic socialization.

In this study, the participants' self-studies took the form of action research, in that they identified their areas for improvement, collected artifacts of their academic English, and analyzed them for signs of improvement or change.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To examine the effects of students' self-study action research projects, and peer and instructor feedback on their academic language development through the *AR416* course, we posed the following questions:
1. Through their self-study action research plans, what developments did the students demonstrate as EAP learners?
2. Seen through an action research lens, what aspects of the course were most effective towards improving the students' academic English competence?

METHODS

The AR416 Course

AR416: Academic English Through Research was a graduate-level course offered at a faculty of education in a public university in Ontario, Canada. Participants in this class included: 16 Master of Education students, ranging from recent university graduates (Bachelor's degree) to seasoned professionals; a volunteer teaching assistant (TA) named Yvonne (a pseudonym); and the instructor, Julie (a co-author of this article). Pseudonyms were used for all participants and other identifying features of the course, except for the course instructor, Julie.

Students were eligible to take *AR416* because they had self-identified as non-English-dominant graduate students in their programs. They enrolled in the course specifically to improve their academic English and related skills for graduate studies. With guidance from the instructor at the beginning of the course, each of the 16 students identified a "problem" or challenging area of their EAP proficiency requiring improvement, such as producing genre-appropriate academic writing; increasing their academic vocabulary; developing reading comprehension strategies; and improving pronunciation. They each created a self-study action research plan and pre- and post-measurement instruments to identify the improvements that resulted from the implementation of their plans. In groups of 3-4 students with complementary goals, they designed and carried out their plans, which consisted of exercises to achieve their desired improvement in academic English competence. The students created individual electronic portfolios using the university's online Canvas platform, to share multiple drafts of their work as well as feedback they received from each other, the course instructor, and the TA. At the conclusion of the course, students presented their final empirical studies of their EAP development to a class of undergraduate English as a Second Language (ESL) students in a conference format, during which they also responded to their audience's questions and comments about their research.

Two-layered Action Research as a Method

While the students in this course created their own action research projects (first layer) to understand, analyze, and improve their academic language proficiency, the instructor also used an action research lens (second layer) through which to investigate this pedagogical approach and make adjustments to improve its delivery. The instructor met weekly with the TA to discuss the progress of each student, feedback for the students, and modifications they wished to make to their lesson plans for the following weeks. She examined the effects of the class activities and assignments on the students' behaviours in the class: their self-reflections expressed on the classroom online platform and in class discussions, and the observable changes in the work they produced during the term and in their final projects. This approach is depicted in Figure 1.
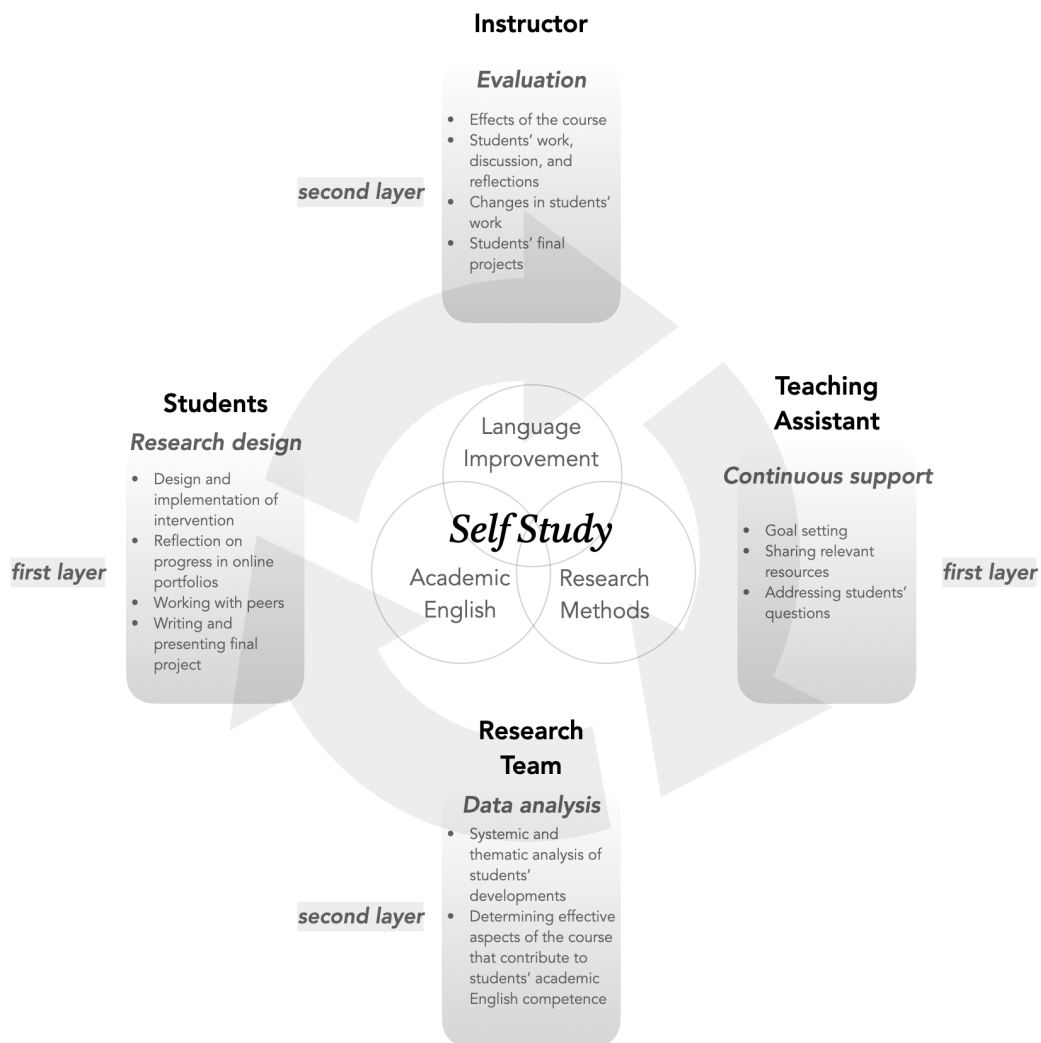

Figure 1. *The stakeholders in this two-layered action research.*

Participants

Ethics approval was obtained from the university, and consent to participate in the study was sought after the course had concluded. Participation entailed allowing the researchers to analyze the data already produced by the students during the course. Of the eight students who agreed to participate, the researchers selected four focal participants who represented the diverse learning objectives and linguistic backgrounds of the students in the class; that is, their learning goals covered spoken and written English, and their language/national backgrounds represented the two largest groups in the class (South Korean and Chinese). Choosing this small subset of participants was necessary to allow in-depth analyses of individual cases. Table 1 indicates basic demographic information for these four focal participants and their goals for their action research:

Table 1
Demographic Information and Learning Goals of the Four Focal Participants

	Clea	**Vivian**	**Skyler**	**Jenna**
Gender	Female	Female	Male	Female
Nationality	South Korean	South Korean	Chinese	Chinese
Languages	L1: Korean L2: English	L1: Korean L2: English	L1: Mandarin L2: English	L1: Mandarin L2: English
Action Research Goals (Selected Areas for Improvement)	-Academic writing	-Vocabulary -Academic writing	-Academic writing -Reading	-Impromptu speaking -Oral presentation skills

Data Sources

The course consisted of twelve 3-hour sessions and ongoing asynchronous instruction and interaction online over a 6-week period. Data analyzed for this study consisted of the materials used and produced by the instructor and the students throughout the course. Each student's electronic portfolio included all drafts of their work (written and/or audio-recorded); diary entries (oral and written); peer, instructor, and TA feedback; recordings of their final oral presentations; and their final research papers.

Data Analysis

Students' portfolios were evaluated by the instructor at the end of the term. After the completion of *AR416*, our team selected and carried out repeated readings of the portfolios of the four focal participants in two stages, using both inductive and deductive approaches to data analysis. Our analysis, from the perspective of the researcher-instructor (the second layer of action research) examined drafts of students' work inductively to identify changes from early to late drafts, and to compare our observations to their self-reported

developments (i.e., the first layer of action research). Any improvements in students' academic English competence (e.g., more cohesive and coherent writing, expansion in their academic vocabulary, fewer grammatical errors, etc.), or lack thereof, were identified. We then related our findings to Scarcella's (2003) three dimensions of academic English competence. For example, improvements in grammar and vocabulary were connected to Scarcella's (2003) linguistic dimension of academic English. Drawing from the data analysis, we discuss below the key developments the participants made.

FINDINGS
Through the curriculum of *AR416*, students were able to engage in action research projects that helped them to identify their learning challenges and goals, strategize ways to overcome the challenges, experiment with ways to improve their academic English, observe their learning processes, reflect on their progress, and plan new ways to facilitate positive change. Participants noted the positive impacts on their growth and development in various dimensions, including linguistic (grammar and vocabulary improvement), cognitive (self-reflection), and sociocultural (increased motivation and confidence) dimensions. Given that the researchers/co-authors who analyzed the data for this article including the course instructor, findings from the first layer of action research – students' self-studies – are necessarily presented in combination with findings from the second layer – the instructor's analysis of her students' self-studies and, thus, of the effectiveness of her pedagogical approach.

In this section, we respond to our first research question: Through their self-study action research plans, what developments did the students demonstrate as EAP learners? We do so by presenting the profiles, learning experiences, and developments of each focal participant.

EAP Learners' Development Through the Course
Clea
Before beginning her graduate studies in Canada, Clea had been a secondary school English teacher in South Korea. She observed that, just as her students had not enjoyed learning how to write essays, it was challenging for her to write coherent academic papers, particularly persuasive essays. Clea identified her action research goal as learning *to develop coherent and cohesive arguments in academic writing.* In response, Yvonne, the TA, suggested that Clea "approach cohesion in three levels - word, sentence, and paragraph."

Clea assigned herself four academic writing prompts for her plan of action, without specifying the length of each writing task:
1. What is the best age to start learning a second language?
2. Are English-only classrooms in elementary schools beneficial?
3. Lecture vs. seminar: which course delivery format is a better learning environment?
4. Online class vs. on-campus class: which course delivery mode is more beneficial to students?

For each topic, she wrote three drafts (A, B, & C), reflecting progressive revisions. Clea received peer and instructor feedback on Draft A, which she incorporated into Draft B. She wrote Draft C after reviewing self- and instructor feedback. She evaluated her progress through reflections in journal entries, compared the initial and final drafts, and finally, wrote a self-progress report.

Throughout her self-designed plan, Clea focused on vocabulary expansion to enhance coherence and cohesion in her writing. She employed linguistic and cognitive strategies such as reading scholarly articles and creating synonym lists from her readings. In her weekly writings and journal entries, she practiced using these synonyms. Additionally, she underlined repetitive and redundant words in early drafts, replacing them with suitable synonyms in later versions. To improve coherence, Clea practiced explaining concepts, adding adjectives and relative pronoun clauses to her sentences; she circled and counted the frequency of keywords; and she received peer- and self- feedback to edit her writing.

For each of the four topics Clea wrote about, she demonstrated clear and steady improvement which incorporated feedback from peers, the instructor, and the TA. Table 2 exemplifies developments in Clea's active vocabulary, as illustrated in the changes she made between drafts B and C.

Table 2
Examples of Clea's Development in her Active Vocabulary

Draft B	Draft C
"I believe that an age between 10 and 13 is the **best** time to learn a second language…."	I believe an age between 10 and 13 is an **optimal** period to start to learn a second language …."
"… in seminars, students take on **bigger** responsibility in class…"	"… in seminars, students take on **substantial** responsibility in class…"
"In addition, online courses offer learning opportunities to **more people**…"	"Additionally, online courses offer learning opportunities to **a larger public**…"

Table 3 demonstrates Clea's experimentation with cohesive devices. From draft B to draft C, she revised several phrases to show more clearly how they were connected.

Table 3
Examples of Clea's Development in Coherence and Cohesion

Draft B	Draft C
"Although I agree that an age **before the end of puberty** is a good time to start learning a second language, I do not agree with the notion 'the earlier, the better' entirely."	"I agree that an age **before the end of puberty—puberty occurs at a different age depending on the individual between ages 9 and 14—**is a good time to start learning a second language. However, I do not agree entirely with the notion "the earlier, the better.""

Draft A	Draft B
Although some people caution against **the increasing number of online courses for being distracting** and hampering interaction, **I see many benefits** of online courses and support the current trend.	Some people caution against **this popularity of online education, arguing that** it hampers students' interaction and concentration. **However, I support** the increase of online courses as it makes education service easily accessible and available to the public.

Clea actively expanded her vocabulary and experimented with sentence structures, improving the linguistic and strategic dimensions of her academic English skills (Scarcella, 2003). As these examples show, her drafts did not progress linearly from less to more coherent. Instead, they demonstrate her ability to experiment by practicing using new phrases, sentence structures, and vocabulary. These were necessary steps toward creating cohesive arguments. According to Clea's final self-evaluation and reflection on her research plan, from week 1 to week 5 in the course, the coherence of her writing progressed from band 7 to band 8 on the IELTS descriptors, and her vocabulary use moved from band 6 to band 7. Our analysis concurs with Clea's final written report, in which she stated that, by the end of the action research, her writing demonstrated more logical sequencing, improved cohesion and coherence, and more accurate lexical choices.

Vivian
Like Clea, Vivian wished to improve her academic writing. In particular, she wanted to reduce repetitive language. At the beginning of the course, Vivian aimed to expand her vocabulary and improve the overall coherence of her writing. She chose vocabulary learning strategies from the literature on text-based learning (Lesaux et al., 2014), which informed her about learning new words in authentic contexts. She assigned herself the following tasks:
1. Read one journal article on English vocabulary acquisition per day for 15 days, circling all unfamiliar/new words.
2. Count and keep track of the total number of new words found on each page.

Additionally, inspired by Barker's (2007) research on students using personalized vocabulary lists for vocabulary acquisition, she incorporated these tasks:

3. Create a customized dictionary, entering all the new words with their definitions.
4. Write journal entries for each article, including summaries, personal reflections, and lists of new words.
5. After reading the 15 articles, select 25 words from the customized dictionary.
6. Commit to learning those 25 words and use them in future journal entries as much as possible.
7. Make index cards of new vocabulary and corresponding definitions for self-testing.

Vivian's action research plan enabled her to add 25 words to her academic vocabulary knowledge, accurately using 6 out of the 25 words she had learned in her final paper (see bolded words in Table 4). Vivian's writing progression from earlier to later drafts, shown in Table 4, also exhibits her acquisition of an essential strategy for achieving coherence in academic writing: introducing broad ideas and then narrowing down to a focused topic or thesis (Swales, 2004; Swales & Feak, 2012). Initially, Vivian compared native speakers (NSs) to non-native speakers (NNSs) as two parallel subjects: they both have difficulty with reading comprehension when confronted with unknown vocabulary. By her final draft, she adopted a general thesis ("Individuals in general") and then narrowed it to focus on the challenges NNSs face in reading comprehension. Beyond learning to utilize this general-to-specific rhetorical strategy, typical of academic writing (Swales, 2004; Swales & Feak, 2012), Vivian's final draft expanded on ideas in earlier drafts.

Throughout her project, Vivian enhanced the linguistic and cognitive dimensions of her academic English competence (Scarcella, 2003) to discover effective strategies for vocabulary acquisition. Reviewing the literature, she found value in a "consistent text-based, process-oriented, and interactive approach" (Lesaux et al., 2014, p. 1185), which she applied in her research design. She also developed her research literacy skills, exploring various theories of vocabulary acquisition, academic writing, and peer feedback. In her final diary entry, Vivian reported a positive experience in the course, highlighting the opportunities to read widely, study new vocabulary, engage with peers, and successfully conduct her action research project.

Skyler
Describing himself as "a passionate English learner," Skyler took *AR416* after a professor from a different course commented that he needed to improve his academic writing. He believed he should begin by building his vocabulary skills, which would help improve his reading, and, subsequently, his writing skills. Therefore, he first aimed to read more scholarly articles and improve the breadth of his vocabulary to understand articles "with accuracy and efficiency."

Table 4
Vivian's Development, as Shown in her First and Final Abstracts

First Draft	Final Draft
<u>Native speakers of English</u> do not always understand everything they read. They can stumble upon one or two new words every now and then, be them technical, academic, or jargon. For <u>non-native speakers</u>, their reading comprehension may be thwarted because of the **dearth** in their knowledge of English. <u>Both native and non-native English speakers</u> undoubtedly find plenty of literature **imbued** with new terms. Their approach for vocabulary acquisition, however, could be the same. <u>They can utilize a **plausible** learning technique</u> for studying new words. This self-study project looks into the **myriad** of research on vocabulary acquisition. <u>An analysis of 15 journal articles provided the means for learning 25 new low frequency words</u>, personally selected following Barker's (2007) cost and benefit approach. The consistent use of the new words in diary entries and oral communication provided the context, **unequivocally**, for their memorization and retention.	<u>Individuals in general</u>, whether they are native or non-native English speakers, do not always understand everything they read. They can stumble upon new words every now and then, be them academic, technical, or jargon. <u>Non-native English speakers, in particular</u>, may experience a harder time, as their reading comprehension gets thwarted due to the **dearth** in their knowledge of English. There is, undoubtedly, plenty of literature **imbued** with unknown terms, and studying new vocabulary words may feel like a never-ending word battle. One **plausible** <u>technique for learning new words</u> is the self-study method. In this method, the participant looks into the **myriad** of research on vocabulary acquisition, and utilizes the journal articles as the source for new words. In this self-study project as part of a summer course on Academic English, <u>25 new low-frequency words were personally selected after reading 15 different journal articles of one's choice, one article per day for 15 days.</u> The selection of words followed Barker's (2007) 'cost and benefit' approach. The consistent use of the new words in diary entries and oral communication provided the context, **unequivocally,** for their memorization and retention.

Note: Bolded are some of the 25 words from Vivian's customized dictionary; Underlined parts indicate the changes in the coherence of her writing.

At the beginning of the course, Yvonne advised Skyler to acquire specific academic vocabulary by examining words in their environments, suggesting he find definitions in the text and infer word meanings from context and word/sentence structure. Skyler's plan included writing daily diary entries in order to use new vocabulary in context. His initial research question was: "What interventions shall I take and how do I implement them to

enhance the study of academic writing?" Julie then suggested that Skyler should decide on interventions before implementing his project. In response, Skyler revised his research question to: "How effective [*sic*] the interventions can [*sic*] enhance the coherence and cohesion in academic writing?"

Skyler's study included the following interventions:
1. Practice summarizing paragraphs and articles, paraphrasing sentences, and organizing paragraphs.
2. Write multiple drafts for self-assigned writing tasks using IELTS prompts.
3. Read journal articles on academic writing techniques and theories to inform the study.
4. Incorporate feedback from peers, instructor, and TA to improve word choice, sentence structure, punctuation, and coherence.
5. Compare the cohesion and coherence of writing from previous courses with writing for *AR416*, using IELTS assessment criteria.

Skyler rated his previous writing (from other courses) at band 6, and his final writing in *AR416* at band 7. Our analysis corroborates Skyler's findings. Table 5 compares excerpts from his first and final draft abstracts. Development in Skyler's use of cohesive devices (bolded) and sentence grammaticality are indicated (i.e., ungrammatical phrases are underlined and grammatically correct modifications italicized).

In these excerpts, the final draft differs from Skyler's first draft in three significant ways. First, in Excerpt 1, Skyler moves from a third person voice ("The aim of this study is to investigate the efficacy of interventions implemented by using language learning portfolio...") to an active first person voice ("I conducted this study to investigate"; "I implemented several interventions..." and "I examined and recognized the progress of my learning..."), demonstrating progress in the sociocultural/psychological dimension of his academic English competence (Scarcella, 2003). Second, he shortened some sentences and added more details to his final draft. Third, the final draft of Excerpt 2 exhibits improved grammar; the underlined phrases in the first draft, which are grammatically inaccurate, have been replaced with grammatically correct phrases. The last two changes show Skyler's improvement in the linguistic dimension. Note that, like Vivian's paper, Skyler's final draft is neither error-free nor as cohesive as it could be, but it shows that Skyler's writing has improved in significant ways. At the end of his action research project, Skyler reflected on his growth as a writer, acknowledging the roles of ongoing communication with his peers, the instructor, and the TA in his writing development.

Table 5
Excerpts from the First and the Final Drafts of Skyler's Abstract

	First Draft Abstract	Final Draft Abstract
Excerpt 1	I have been regularly critiqued by language exams and paper feedback from professors. **Even though**, I was unaware of how much cohesion and coherence can affect the success in academic writing. The aim of this study is to investigate the efficacy of interventions implemented by using language learning portfolio to enhance the cohesion and coherence in English academic writing through the six-week class of academic writing.	I have been critiqued in a number of exams and papers from different professors. **Therefore**, I conducted this study to investigate the efficacy of portfolios to enhance the cohesion and coherence in academic English writing in a six-week master level course. I implemented several interventions, **such as** exercise, writing drafts, peer feedback, and theoretical support. I examined and recognized the progress of my learning goal by collecting data from my previous and current written work.
Excerpt 2	Academic writing in English is a critical and mandatory skill that a <u>master</u> student <u>should equip with</u>. However, the difficulty of completing an academic writing production is beyond imagination, not only for <u>student</u> whose first language is not English, but for those native speakers. Multiple aspects are considered while assessing <u>a writing work</u>, which makes the work more challenging. **Thus**, learning and improving academic writing is a task requiring diligence and consistence.	Academic writing in English is a critical and mandatory skill that a *master's* student *should be equipped with*. However, academic writing is difficult beyond imagination, not only for *students* whose first language is not English, but also for native speakers. The reason why academic writing is challenging is that multiple aspects such as words choice, grammar accuracy and others must be considered while assessing *a written work*. **Therefore**, learning and improving academic writing is a task requiring diligence and consistence.

Jenna

Unlike the first three participants, who focused on their academic writing skills, Jenna aimed to enhance her oral academic English skills for her action research project. As a former English instructor at a Chinese university, she sought to improve her academic speaking skills to gain confidence, elaborate on her arguments with fluency, and reduce grammatical errors. Jenna's research question was: "Does frequent practice of impromptu speech improve grammatical accuracy and fluency of my impromptu speech?"

Jenna's intervention plan included the following:
1. Practice daily using IELTS Speaking Task 2 from previous years, discussing a given topic for three to four minutes.
2. Record three of these practices each week.
3. Transcribe and review the recordings, focusing on grammar and fluency.
4. Seek feedback from the TA, the instructor, and classmates on the recordings.
5. Actively take part in class discussions.
6. Use spoken (recorded) diary entries for practice and reflection on speaking development.

By the end of the course, Jenna observed improved accuracy and fluency in her speaking, which our analysis supports. Table 6 compares fillers (bolded), repeated phrases (italicized), and grammatical errors (underlined) in the transcripts of her first and last speaking practices. Her final transcript shows reduced use of fillers and increased fluency in her impromptu speaking.

Table 6
A Comparison Between the Transcripts of Jenna's First and Last Speaking Practices

First speaking practice	Final speaking practice
It was when I still worked **um** in a college. I remember **um** I was so busy in that semester. I had two courses to teach and one of them was totally new to me. So I needed to make lots of preparation for it. Also, **um**, I had to supervise my students' graduation dissertations and I needed to provide help to **um** a group of students to um to help them prepare *for for* context. One day, **um**, one of my colleagues asked if I could **um** translate some materials into English. **You know**, *it it* was not like one page, two pages thing. *It's it* was this thick. My instant reaction was **um** oh no, I really can't do that. But **um** maybe I was just so afraid of disappointing others. So **um** instead of *refusing refusing* her, I said oh yes of course no problem. **Um** But the reality was **um** I was *really really very very* busy, I had to manage *so* **um** *so* many tasks and I felt so <u>stressful</u> during that time. Anyway **um** I managed *to* **um** *to* do the translation for her. But **um** my colleague **um** she wasn't quite satisfied with the translation and I could feel that she didn't believe that I **um** tried my best to help her. **You know**, *I felt, I felt* very wronged as well	Just about two or three months ago, a former student consulted with me about applying for British universities. She asked whether I knew any reliable professional agencies that could help her. I suggested that instead of directly turning to a professional agency, she should try to do this by herself. I told her to **um** go to the website of the university where she can find all the relevant information she needs. **[Long pause]** *I suggest I suggest*ed that whenever she has problems, just send emails to the university. In addition, I advised her to talk with people who do have this kind of experience to share with her. The reason why I made this suggestion is that I used to talk with several so-called professional agencies. And it turned out that they were not that professional. For example, I talked with some consultants, and I found that both their written English and spoken English were terrible. Also, I believed that it does

because **um** I squeezed my time to **you know** *to do to do* this favor. So I complained a lot to my mother. And **um** she told me that "hey, *if* **um** *if* you really **um** *don't don't* like to do this, you should tell **um** your colleague at the first moment she <u>asked</u> you, you can explain to her. I believe she can understand. I think **um**, **well** I listened to my mother's *suggestion and* **um** *her suggestion* and this lesson *really* um *really* taught me that I shouldn't compromise my own feelings and **um** <u>willings</u> just to please other people.

no harm if the student can know <u>as much as information</u> about the university, the program she wanted to <u>apply</u> even if finally she still decides to use the professional agency to help her.

Length of segment: 1 minute 45 seconds	Length of segment: 1 minute 54 seconds
Number of fillers/pauses: 25	Number of fillers/pauses: 2
Number of repeated words: 14	Number of repeated words: 1
Number of grammatical errors: 3	Number of grammatical errors: 2

Through this self-study, Jenna gained confidence in her speaking skills, indicating a positive development in the sociocultural/psychological dimension of her academic English competence (Scarcella, 2003). While feedback from her peers focused on grammar and using examples to support her arguments, Jenna's spoken diary entries revealed that she progressed from struggling and being frustrated with her speaking, to being satisfied with her improved fluency and accuracy. In her final paper, she expressed a desire to continue practicing using more complex topics and sentence structures. Additionally, Jenna made several improvements in her final written report, compared to her initial, written, research proposal. She applied higher order thinking skills by substantiating her claims with appropriate literature, and framing her study with clear and relevant terminology, which demonstrates improvements in both the linguistic and cognitive dimensions.

Aspects of the Course that Supported Improving Academic English Competence
Here we answer our second research question through an action research lens: what aspects of the course were most effective towards improving students' academic English competence? We do so by examining the themes of feedback, motivation, and autonomy as features of the two-layered action research model which benefited each student.

Feedback
A key improvement that the instructor and TA made to the delivery of their course was to create more opportunities for students to provide peer feedback to each other, for example through in-person group discussions and on the course online platform. While feedback from the students' instructor and TA contributed primarily to students' identification of areas of EAP they wished to improve and their corresponding interventions, receiving ongoing peer feedback played an additional role in building students' confidence in their writing and presentation skills. Words of encouragement and praise from peers enabled them to implement suggestions made by their instructor and TA, and served as a catalyst to

peers' providing each other with constructive feedback. Table 7 shows examples of topics addressed in the feedback from the instructor, TA, and peers.

Table 7
Types of Feedback from Peers and Instructors & TA

Feedback from Peers	Examples
Building confidence	A student's diary entry stated, "their [my peers'] suggestions and encouragement made me feel motivated to work harder to achieve my goals in this class."
Providing positive, constructive feedback	Students learned to give 'sandwiched' feedback, using praise, followed by constructive suggestions with clear examples, and concluding with a word of encouragement.
Discrete points	Word- and sentence-level error correction (e.g., Vivian to another student in the class: "Overall, it's quite comprehensive. Do you think you could be more specific? For example, which 'certain skills' are you referring to? Also, add THE in front of 'author' in the last sentence. Well done!")

Feedback from Instructor and TA	Examples
Identifying areas for improvement	Vocabulary expansion (e.g., TA describing to Skyler specific strategies to understand unfamiliar vocabulary)
Creating research questions	Facilitating movement from process questions (e.g., "What interventions shall I take and how do I implement them to enhance the study of academic writing?") to research questions (e.g., "How do my interventions enhance coherence and cohesion of my academic writing?")
Helping students reflect on their practices	The instructor prompting Jenna to think about how to transcribe her speech helped her to improve her impromptu speaking: "What have you learned from transcribing your speech? Could you please share some of your insights in your diary? I would like to know whether transcribing has been helpful for you as a resource for making informed decisions about how to improve your impromptu speaking." Jenna then reflected and shared that transcribing enabled her to pay close attention to elements that had hindered her spoken fluency.

Peer feedback facilitated continuous dialogue among students, acknowledging each other's input on their projects. Although the students benefited greatly from their peers' comments, one shortcoming, as expressed by Clea, was that peers tended to focus on grammar, and they often lacked confidence when providing feedback. The effect of peer feedback also depended on and contributed to student group dynamics. For example, while Clea's group supported her suggestions, Vivian's feedback was sometimes met with mixed

responses from her classmates. This demonstrates the need for guidance and practice in developing feedback skills.

The instructor's and TA's feedback centred on the content of students' academic speaking and writing, cohesion of arguments, clarity of expression, and students' skills development. There were, however, missed opportunities. Given that the course content included not only academic language skills but also SLA research methods and EAP as a subject of research, it is surprising that their feedback to students did not address these areas with equal attention. For instance, with more effective feedback, Vivian's research question, "How can vocabulary acquisition be more effective and meaningful for language learners?" could have been revised to ask a question for which she could provide a more empirically measurable answer. Similarly, while Skyler received feedback on his original research question, "What interventions shall I take and how do I implement them to enhance the study of academic writing?", his final research question left much room for improvement ("How effective [sic] the interventions can [sic] enhance the coherence and cohesion in academic writing?").

Motivation and Autonomy
A priority of the instructor and TA in improving the design of their course during their action research was to ensure that the course would foster learner autonomy. An example of how they incorporated this into their lesson plans was by modelling to students how to incorporate feedback selectively, and to improve their grammatical accuracy and academic discourse through self-editing and correcting. The impact of this was evident in Vivian's portfolio. One of her diary entries revealed that she chose specific words for her study after careful consideration. She checked their definitions, used them in different contexts, and only selected the ones she could "handle and commit to long-term memory." Throughout the course, Vivian also remained highly motivated, setting concrete goals and following a practical research plan. Her progress demonstrates one of the advantages of self-study action research, namely, that it is driven primarily by the student's own interests and needs. Clea and Jenna designed their plans based on their professional interests, and discovered new ways to improve their teaching skills through their interventions. Furthermore, because students could decide the focus of their respective action research projects, they had the option to identify more than one focus area and research goal. Finally, the course motivated the students to continue their practice beyond the course: Both Clea and Jenna planned to cultivate the skills they had acquired in the course through continued, structured practice. Thus, the participants took ownership of their learning throughout their action research projects. The cognitive and sociocultural dimensions of their academic English competencies (Scarcella, 2003) improved as they became increasingly independent in their learning, and motivated to continue their practices beyond the course.

DISCUSSION
The self-study action research pedagogical model used in *AR416* can potentially alleviate challenges international graduate students commonly face. While some students experience difficulties with academic English, many also struggle with conducting research

and collaborating with others (e.g., Abasi & Graves, 2008; Zhang, 2011). The action research model used in this course benefited students by helping them to make improvements in all three dimensions of academic English competence, which corresponds with the results of Rajendram and Shi's (2022) study. In the linguistic dimension, students reported acquiring greater breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge, improving coherence and cohesion in their writing, gaining confidence and fluency in speaking, increasing grammatical accuracy, learning more effective ways to paraphrase and summarize, and enhancing their reading comprehension.

The students also demonstrated developments in the cognitive dimension of academic English (Scarcella, 2003). In their diaries, self-studies, and final oral presentations, students described the procedural and declarative knowledge they had gained about action research and other topics related to their discipline. It was evident throughout their projects that students were exercising higher order thinking skills such as evaluating and synthesizing information from external sources, applying learning strategies such as brainstorming, idea mapping, and using contextual clues to determine meaning, and demonstrating metalinguistic awareness by editing and assessing their own work.

In terms of students' growth in the sociocultural/psychological dimensions of academic English (Scarcella, 2003), the self-study action research approach afforded them opportunities to learn about graduate school norms and routines, and to develop practices of inquiring into their learning, making a plan to improve aspects of their academic language, acting on their plans, tracking and reflecting on their progress, and identifying areas for further improvement, consistent with the action research approach.

The two-layered action research approach informed the instructor's and TA's pedagogical decisions as they moved through the course. They made important changes such as incorporating opportunities for peer feedback, and encouraging the development of learner autonomy through self-editing, which contributed to students' progress. Furthermore, through the collaborative discussions and knowledge-sharing with the TA, the instructor gained proficiency in incorporating asynchronous and synchronous computer-mediated communication into her instruction as well as tasks she suggested to her students. Substantiating the action research inquiry process outlined by Mertler (2019), the data and subsequent analyses performed by the instructor and her co-authors also informed the instructional design used in subsequent sections of the course. For example, informed by this study's findings on the importance of peer feedback, Rajendram (a co-author of this article), who taught a subsequent iteration of this course, used a collaborative action research model, whereby students were put into communities of practice with peers with similar goals, and they supported each other's progress through their action research projects (Rajendram & Shi, 2022).

Several aspects of the course were effective in facilitating the development of the students' academic English. First, as recommended by EAP experts (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007; Di Maria, 2020), the provision of academic language support was embedded within a credit-bearing graduate course, and was tied to a specific program. The integration of disciplinary

content into the course helped students to acquire discipline-specific, contextualized, and transferable language skills. Second, the action research that students undertook for the course supported the development of learner autonomy. The students became experts on their own learning by designing, implementing and assessing individualized self-study action research projects. Consistent with the results of Klimova's (2015) research, students' ongoing self-reflection in their journals helped them to become more aware of their own strengths and challenges, identify areas for improvement, and customize their action research plans. Thirdly, the feedback and instruction provided by the course instructor and TA showed students how to monitor their own progress, identify areas for further growth, and become better editors of their work. In addition, the feedback they received from their peers throughout their action research projects complemented the feedback from their course instructor and TA, and as prior studies have suggested (e.g., Chen, 2016; Rajendram & Shi, 2022; Warschauer, 2002), created an atmosphere of collaboration and support in the course.

Students' ongoing reflective self-evaluations, together with positive and constructive feedback from their peers, instructor, and TA, strengthened their confidence in their academic language abilities and identity as graduate students. They reported that they acquired important research literacy skills which they could apply beyond the course, while simultaneously improving their academic English discourse and critical thinking skills.

LIMITATIONS

Despite the benefits of this two-layered action research pedagogical model, several limitations were also apparent. First, the model is labour-intensive, as instructors must review each student's portfolio and provide individualized feedback across each stage and draft of their projects. This limitation manifested, for example, in opportunities missed by the instructor to provide feedback on additional drafts of students' research questions. This model of teaching is thus best suited for small classes or classes with a TA or co-instructor.

Second, while the content of the *AR416* course addressed not only academic discourse development but also EAP and SLA subject matter, the instructor and TA applied the action research approach primarily to their reflections on the course's effectiveness in improving academic discourse, and they paid less attention to what scholarly, empirical research and skills were being learned successfully by the students. Given that this course had been newly designed and was offered for the first time, some of these areas can be improved upon in future sessions of the course.

Third, because informed consent to participate in this study was obtained from the students several months after the course had ended, many had graduated and/or moved away. It would have been informative to interview them immediately after having taken the course; as it was, we did not collect interview data but triangulated our findings from the student-produced data with the instructor's and TA's field notes and discussions with each other.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has highlighted the benefits of engaging educators and graduate students in ongoing self-study and action research to develop essential academic English and research skills. The approach we have described allows learners to take ownership of their learning and to utilize constructive feedback from their instructors as well as from their peers. While universities' pre-admission English language tests may determine international graduate students' preparedness to commence their graduate studies, further academic language and scholarship support should be embedded into their early graduate coursework so that they can continue to succeed throughout their studies. For university and EAP educators working with international students, engaging in action research affords them the opportunity to critically reflect on their pedagogical approaches, experiment with innovative approaches to academic English development, and tailor their instruction and activities to the specific strengths and needs of their learners.

As academic discourse involves competencies which are not acquired without sustained, direct study (Arkoudis & Starfield, 2007; Di Maria, 2020), much of the content of this course would likely benefit graduate students and emerging researchers studying in their dominant language as well as those acquiring academic proficiency in an additional language. Findings from this study have also demonstrated the benefits of technology in teaching SLA research methods and academic English, including extending learning and collaboration beyond the physical classroom; providing a space for students to document and showcase their research and learning progress; and making support from peers, the TA, and the instructor readily available.

While the findings from this study come from a pilot project, we can attest to its success by the fact that the course, because of its initial positive impact, is now offered 2-3 times a year, and is regularly over-enrolled. Future initiatives are necessary to develop and analyze applied EAP/self-study courses in collaboration with colleagues across the disciplines.

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