

# Academic Writing Conventions Traveling by Negotiation with Reviewers

FIGURAS REVISTA ACADÉMICA  
DE INVESTIGACIÓN

ISSN 2683-2917

Vol. 5, núm. 1,

noviembre 2023 - febrero 2024

[https://doi.org/10.22201/  
fesa.26832917e.2023.5.1](https://doi.org/10.22201/fesa.26832917e.2023.5.1)



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## *Las convenciones en la escritura académica que viajan en negociación con revisores*


<https://doi.org/10.22201/fesa.26832917e.2023.5.1.291>


**Recibido:** 27 de marzo de 2023

**Revisado:** 8 de junio de 2023

**Aceptado:** 20 de julio de 2023

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**Abstract:** Accomplishing a publication in English represents a challenge for scholars in Mexico (Hanauer and Englander 2011; Díaz-Sosa and González-Videgaray 2019, 39), where Spanish is the national language and academic writing mentors are scant. Like Bal (2002), this narrative explores the concept of Academic Writing Conventions (AWC) in English as an additional language that traveled through interactions between a Mexican scholar and reviewers of research articles for publication. The narrative allowed the researchers to identify the AWC concept based on the analysis of the narrated data gathered from the Mexican scholar, while trying to fulfill the AWC in order to publish in English, and the comments provided to standardize academic writing in English for the international disciplinary community through the *revision* tool in *Word* by the reviewers. This main AWC concept involved grammar, rhetorical structure, clarity, and style. In conclusion, AWC are a differing concept traveling disciplinarily through the interaction of different stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Traveling concepts, academic writing conventions, narrative inquiry, research article.

**Resumen:** Publicar en inglés representa un desafío para muchos académicos en México (Hanauer y Englander 2011; Díaz Sosa y González-Videgaray 2019, 39), donde el español es el idioma nacional y los mentores de escritura escasos. Similar a Bal (2002), esta investigación narrativa explora el concepto Convenciones de la Escritura Académica (AWC) en inglés como lengua adicional que viajó mediante las interacciones entre una académica mexicana y revisoras de artículos de investigación para publicación. La narración permitió a las investigadoras identificar el concepto AWC con base en el análisis de datos narrados recolectados de la académica mexicana, mientras trataba de cubrir AWC con la finalidad de publicar en inglés, además de los comentarios proporcionados por las revisoras mediante *revisión* en *Word*, para estandarizar para la comunidad disciplinaria internacional la escritura académica en inglés. Este concepto de AWC incluyó gramática, estructura retórica, claridad y estilo. En conclusión, AWC es un concepto diferente viajando disciplinariamente a través de la interacción de diferentes interlocutores.

**Palabras clave:** Conceptos viajeros, convenciones de escritura académica, investigación narrativa, artículo de investigación.

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## Introduction

In Mexico, Spanish is used as a first language in different contexts including higher education. However, in postgraduate studies, students and scholars must write academic English for research publication. Publication is often a requirement to graduate, to compete for full-time positions in higher education, and to apply for membership in the Sistema Nacional de Investigadores (SNI). The SNI is a Mexican organization housed under the Consejo Nacional de Humanidades, Ciencias y Tecnologías (Conahcyt), which offers economic support to scientists. SNI<sup>1</sup> evaluates scientists' production on publications in international peer reviewed journals that generally accept papers written in English. However, postgraduate students' general English level is often 'upper intermediate' (i.e., B2) according to Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), and some reviewers and professors in non-English dominant contexts (e.g., Mexico) assume that AWC concept is understood or clear to all writers of academic English publications; regardless this concept can mean different things to writers of different disciplines.

Academic Writing Conventions (AWC) refer to an overall agreement among scholars of a target discipline on the way writing needs to be done involving mechanics, the use of rules for clarity and comprehension, and specific genre conventions (Rambe 2015; Rai 2004). However, postgraduate science students and scholars often struggle with writing research articles that meet journals' demanding English AWC (e.g., grammar, rhetorical structure, clarity, style) and audience expectations. Struggles are not limited to different factors such as style (e.g., APA 7th edition), which changes and travels worldwide to contexts with English as an Additional Language (EAL). Thus, if PG students and scholars want to achieve their academic goals, they might seek academic writing support in English, and/or collaborative work with international scholars, journal reviewers, writing mentors, proofreaders, editors, or literacy brokers. In this context, English as an additional language postgraduate writers' understanding of concepts such as English AWC are frequently shaped and clarified by interactions with scholars, editors, reviewers, and others from different cultures who are involved in the publication process, and who sometimes might lack publishing experience in English (Arizmendi González and González-Videgaray 2022). Therefore, AWC are culturally and socially constructed.

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<sup>1</sup> The SNI is parallel to the European Research Council and in the US to the National Science Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Endowment for the Arts, and other agencies arranged by discipline.

## Traveling Concepts

According to Mieke Bal, traveling concepts are intellectual and intersubjectivity tools that travel across contexts—crossing borders, transcending, transforming, and influencing the way scholars understand themes, approach objects, and define questions to be answered. Concepts are “shorthand theories” (Bal 2002, 23), like memory, space, and gender, that operate in dynamic ways across cultures over time. They construct and change the same objects they analyze, “entailing new emphases and a new ordering of the phenomena within the complex objects constituting the cultural field” (Bal 2002, 33). The concepts “...are not fixed. They travel –between disciplines, ... individual scholars, ... historical periods, and... geographically dispersed academic communities” (Bal 2002, 24). Concept is “–something conceived in the mind; a thought, notion –a general idea covering many similar things derived from study of particular instances”<sup>2</sup> (Citado en Bal 2020, 22). A concept embodies a dual status, it is a product of philosophy and a tool of analysis; besides it is an embodiment of cultural practices people pursue to comprehend through them. This circularity might be best understood by the metaphor of travel (Bal 2002, 21). For instance, ‘culture’ can be understood as something different from the traditional or as something regarded from different perspectives; ‘translation’ implies changes from one language to another and changes from one tense to another; ‘subject’ means something to a philosopher and another thing to an architect, ‘tradition’ shows a practice in a culture someone both knows and cannot know. Overall, these concepts illustrate some form of traveling occurring in them as Bal argues (Bal 2002, 14). Therefore, like Bal, our interest is to reveal how concepts travel disciplinarily, and in the exploration and development of the transformations the concepts undergo.

For instance, Chemists might think of AWC in the way the paper is organized; a paper with a long results section, a short discussion, with methods focusing on detail procedures, and as a supplementary extended data section. They might think of AWC as in-text citations with a superscript numerical format; references listed sequentially with Arabic numbers rather than alphabetically ordered, and ending with the year of publication; texts with written symbols, Greek characters, algorithms, chemistry terminology; texts with tables including chemical structures; texts with quantitative analytical methods; and/or with graphical abstracts in the table of contents of journals like *Nature Chemistry* (Nature Chemistry 2023). In contrast, in humanities and social sciences, some writers might think of AWC concerning American Psychological Association (APA) or other style in-text citations

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<sup>2</sup> Longman Dictionary of the English Language. 1990.

and references lists; of AWC related to adequate terminology rather than equations; of AWC generally regarding qualitative data vs quantitative; or in some cases, AWC in relation to narrative inquiry, whose organization might not follow a rigid structure to be effective, but chronological events somehow need connecting. Hence, AWC is a concept that means different things to EAL writers when landing in different fields. Thus, studying traveling concepts engages differences, tensions, antagonisms, and local traditions in what Pratt (1991) calls the *contact zone*, “Referring to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (Pratt 1991, 34).

Concepts do travel, not by themselves, but through mediated negotiation with stakeholders. Working with writing stakeholders involves reflective feedback on AWC (such as grammar, rhetorical structure, clarity), which travel back and forth while contributing, influencing, and shaping the construction of academic texts among collaborators. Having said this, and like other traveling concepts, the AWC concept “generates difference and defies tendencies towards homogenization and universalization” (Neumann and Nünning 2012, 7). However, further research is needed on which and how concepts travel disciplinarily and explore the development of transformations concepts undergo as Bal (2002) argues.

## Methods

According to Barkhuizen’s “*Narrative Research in Applied Linguistics*” published by Cambridge University Press in 2013 (quoted in Benson 2014, 156), *narrative inquiry* is a social and cognitive process that allows researchers to build knowledge; it has been used in academic writing research (Benson 2014; Simpson and Matsuda in Pearson Casanave and Li 2008, 90–104). Ramadhani, Fauziati, and Suparno (2021) indicate this method allows researchers to know the stories of writers for publication and to make meaning based on life experiences and gathering of individuals’ personal reflections of events, causes, and effects (Ramadhani 2021, 2284). Participants narrate their stories in sequential and connected ways and position characters in time and space, allowing the existence of different stories (Ramos-Holguin and Peñaloza-Rallón 2020), especially in a time when English has become the language of scientific communication worldwide. To ensure trustworthiness, Pinnegar and Daynes (2006) suggested that the participant’s

(e.g., in the current study Paz) voice be prioritized in the narration and maintained in the data samples.<sup>3</sup>

In narrative inquiry, stories as data are commonly analyzed by following standard procedures for qualitative thematic analysis (Benson 2014). To Braun and Clarke (2006, 83), inductive thematic analysis is a data-driven process that implies coding the data without considering any anticipated coding frame or researchers' preconceptions. The research team followed the preceding procedures in their analysis. Since we proceeded with narrative inquiry, the study does not impose pre-designed research questions that are more common to experimental studies.

## Procedures

Three co-authors examined the traveling concepts through narrative inquiry of co-Author1, i.e., Mexican scholar's (henceforth Paz) narration and the negotiations she made with co-Author2, co-Author3, and several anonymous journal reviewers. Co-Author2 began as an anonymous reviewer, who indicated in her review she was willing to interact with Paz regarding her feedback. After that, they found common ground and began working together as collaborators. Paz is an L2 Mexican Spanish-dominant scholar, and both co-Author2 and co-Author3 are English-dominant scholars living in the US. All three female co-authors have expertise in the field of academic writing, publication (e.g., articles, book chapters, conferences) in diverse journals and countries, and research collaboration on different academic writing themes.

To engage in narrative scholarship, Paz engaged in freewriting as an initial step in the narrative data collection process (see Figure 1). Then, the three co-authors iteratively and collaboratively revised, refined, and narrowed down the narrative. Afterwards, a rigorous analysis based on Braun and Clarke (2006, 12), co-Author1, co-Author2, and co-Author3 read and re-read the participant's narration and reviewers' past written feedback to identify emerging writing concepts (e.g., grammar, rhetorical structure, clarity, style). These concepts emerged from addressing a writing issue Paz was concerned about or an AWC that diverged from reviewer's expectations. Through dialogue, the research team categorized the concepts of feedback that are presented in the results as part of AWC.

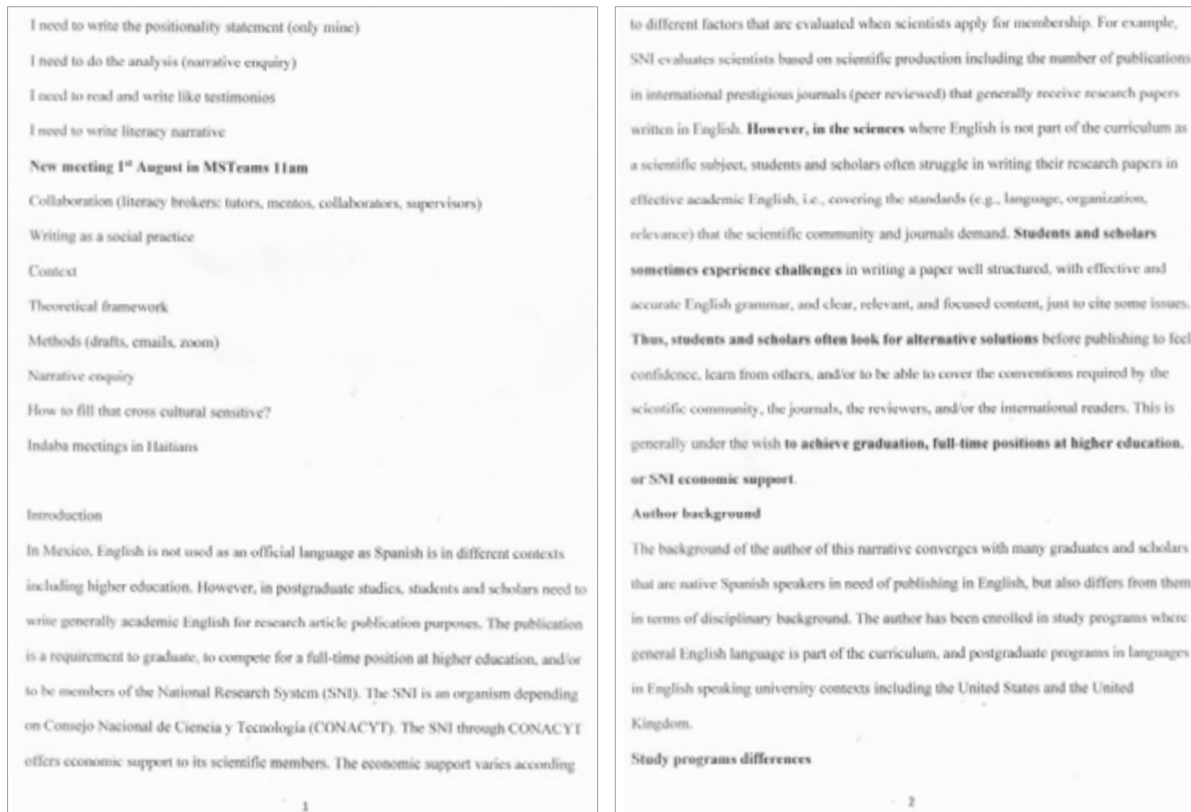
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<sup>3</sup> Impersonal writing is an academic writing convention required in some fields and some venues (e.g., *Figuras* at UNAM). However, narrative inquiry generally prioritizes the use of the first person.



Thus, in the following narrative by Paz and analysis of reviewers' comments, the research team presents English AWC as a concept traveling across contexts and crossing borders. The narrative reveals how writing is a social practice with concepts traveling through negotiation of academic writing in English, entailing interactions between an L2 writer and reviewers.

Figure 1.



Structure and requirements written by Paz in order to initiate the process of narrative freewriting.

## Paz's Narrative

Two years after Paz concluded her bachelor's degree in languages in Mexico, she enrolled in a double certification masters' (MA) degree that involved studying and living one year in the US and another one in Mexico. While writing the MA dissertation, Paz experienced weaknesses in academic writing in English. To strengthen grammar, manage run-on sentences, and clarify text, she enrolled in composition and creative writing courses. Paz met personally with a PG student who read her MA dissertation and sent feedback about linguistic issues via email and through Word's tools such as revise-track changes. The proofreader created handouts for Paz to

develop her writing skills and manage the issues identified in her thesis drafts. After continuous hard work and attention to feedback, Paz achieved her MA dissertation written in English as an additional language.

Subsequently, Paz enrolled in a doctorate in Modern Languages in England. While writing the doctoral thesis, she experienced issues including rhetorical structure, establishing the gap in the literature, explaining how the research would contribute or add new knowledge, showing her critical voice in-text, coherently and cohesively connecting her ideas, writing succinctly, and maintaining the text's focal point. To manage these issues, Paz arranged monthly meetings with her supervisors to discuss her research progress and plans to develop it. The supervisors tried to develop her voice and criticality by asking her insightful questions, listening to her ideas, or by typing comments/suggestions in her *Word* file. However, supervision alone was not sufficient. Thus, Paz took training courses including academic writing in English, critical thinking, and writing the literature review, which were useful, but limited. Hence, Paz read articles about academic writing in English and books about writing a doctoral thesis to learn about diverse topics including writing cohesion and voice. Additionally, Paz studied academic writing, research, reading, and study skills on Blackboard.

Paz was studying to learn, but the way she continued writing her thesis did not improve. Accordingly, knowledge of English, theory, practice, and individual writing were insufficient for her. Thus, Paz sought assistance from undergraduate British students in Modern Languages to talk about the clarity and comprehensibility of her text because the way she wrote seemed to be insufficient for international readers' expectations. Paz printed a section of her thesis and a British undergraduate student read it aloud to her, asked what Paz wanted to express, then rephrased her understanding for Paz to confirm whether what she had understood was what Paz wanted to convey. However, although this proofreading strategy was useful to verify clarity, the undergraduate proofreader lacked experience in writing a doctoral thesis and could not give Paz more advice. That is why, when Paz learned about writing experts coming from the United States to the United Kingdom to mentor students in academic writing, Paz booked several appointments. Paz talked with expert tutors concerning her doctoral-thesis writing and concerns. They talked with Paz and gave her feedback, which caused Paz to reflect and change her thoughts. Despite Paz's efforts, her writing did not develop as much as her supervisors expected. Thus, Paz thought that writing an article for publication would allow her to apply knowledge learned, practice writing, and develop more as an academic writer. Paz confesses that writing the article was very difficult, she had to revise it many times; but in the end, she achieved its publication.



However, writing her doctoral thesis continued being a concern regarding an unclear research gap, contribution, cohesion between major sections and subsections, and focused theme, apart from clear writing. Paz was worried, so in an attempt to find new strategies to learn by sharing and hearing from other students' writing, Paz applied to a mentoring program for MA students in Modern Languages to receive writing support; Paz succeeded and became a writing mentor. Her success was due to writing knowledge gained and the diverse techniques she had used throughout her studies. Thus, Paz explained how to manage academic writing, and suggested that MA students take training courses and consult resources she had found useful. This mentoring experience allowed Paz to realize international students (e.g., Chinese), also struggled with English AWC.

Paz realized she had learned, but despite all the strategies and social practices applied, her academic writing and thesis were still not fulfilling the academic community expectations. Then, Paz read a notice calling for reviewers in the journal where she had published her article. Paz thought that by reviewing articles she would learn and improve her writing, and consequently, she would achieve her thesis writing. Paz applied, achieved the reviewer role, and learned about reviewing and publication processes. However, although writing her doctoral thesis had improved, wording and cohesion issues continued existing. So, in the last stage of her doctorate, Paz encountered a British professor expert in English cohesion. Paz successfully contacted him and requested his teaching on academic writing. He planned an English cohesion intensive course, explained, exemplified, provided Paz with writing handouts to practice during the session, and asked her to revise the thesis at home, based on themes addressed. Eventually, thanks to Paz's interest, perseverance, motivation, strategies, social practices, and emotional management, she achieved her doctoral thesis and degree.

Later, in November 2018, Paz started research on academic writing in English and the implementation of a writing center for Mexican students, while she was enrolled in a postdoctoral program, which aimed to support across disciplines, postgraduate students who needed to publish their research and cover the expected AWC of target journals. The program was planned by the international office of Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM). In this program, Paz was not a second language student as in her MA and Ph.D. studies, but the scholar with expertise in academic writing in English. In a face-to-face format, Paz tutored Mexican postgraduate students in writing their research articles. Paz also designed materials entailing reading, writing, and research skills. Paz learned, shared knowledge with the national community, and invited international guest speakers to share writing knowledge with them through Zoom conferences. All these literacy practices or activities allowed students and professors to be more informed on academic writing

and on how other scholars experienced and developed their academic writing in English, but simultaneously, they contributed to Paz's writing knowledge and development on academic writing in English.

While reading literature for postdoctoral research, Paz learned about the International Writing Centers Association (IWCA), *Writing Center Journal* (WCJ), and Writing Research Across Borders (WRAB) conference. Besides, she learned about upcoming conferences, calls for papers, mentoring programs, scholarships, all opportunities she considered. For example, in the IWCA, Paz applied for a mentoring program through which she met co-Author2, and through the *Writing Center Journal*, where she submitted an article, she met co-Author3. Paz was in continuous communication via email with co-Author2 and co-Author3 respectively. She shared drafts in *Word* files and co-Author2 and/or co-Author3 used the *Word* tools to send feedback about AWC including grammar, rhetorical structure, clarity, and APA style. Their feedback allowed Paz to reflect on and develop her research paper.

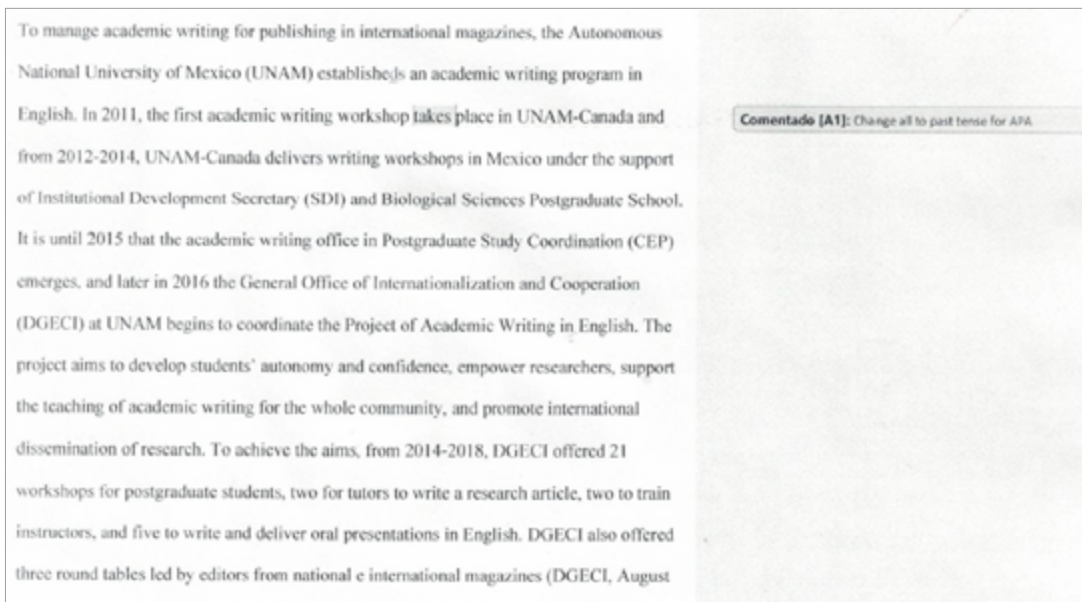
## Results

As part of Paz's postdoctoral studies, she sent a research paper for publication and it was returned with feedback, which she used to amend the paper. Then, as co-Author2 was her IWCA mentor, Paz asked for her support on it before resubmitting. So, below a set of Figures 2-5 present examples of the traveling concept AWC (e.g., grammar, rhetorical structure, clarity, style) in Paz's written article and feedback received.

Regarding grammar, traveling AWC concept includes the use of tense and voice. For example, Paz narrated in present tense the emergence and development of a writing program throughout almost a decade. Paz narrated it in the present, meaning the program was real, true, and ongoing in her context. However, co-Author2 suggested shifting from present to past because American Psychological Association (APA) requires past tense verbs (see Figure 2). In another example, Paz used passive voice in the analysis section. She focused on the object rather than on her as the subject, i.e., action agent, or doer because Paz knew that the use of passive was adequate in writing the analysis section. However, co-Author2 suggested staying away from the use of passive voice because passive voice is often avoided in APA conventions. Hence, APA is another traveling concept that although it might sound incongruent, (since it is the American Psychological Association. As far as we know, the Mexican Psychological Society does not publish a style guide), it can be used and accepted in Mexican-Spanish academic writing likewise in English.

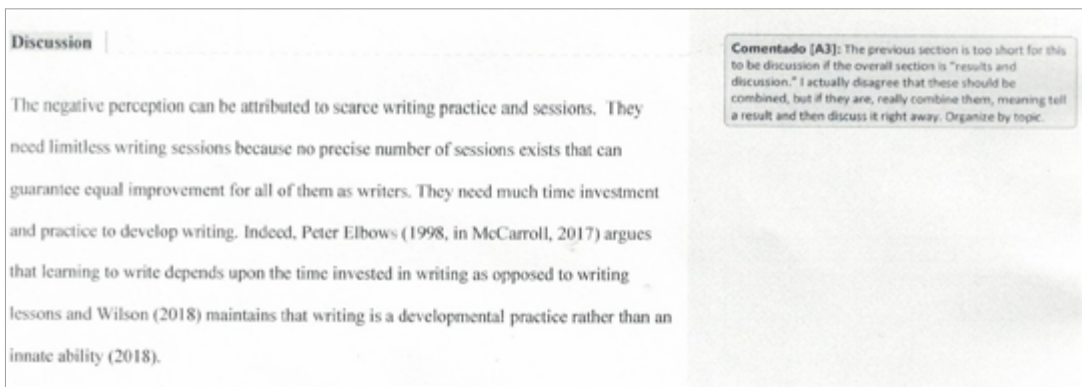
In terms of rhetorical structure, traveling AWC concept includes macro structural aspects. For example, an anonymous journal reviewer asked Paz to combine the analysis and discussion sections. Paz, instead, combined the results and discussion by presenting each finding followed by a brief discussion. However, this repetitive ‘finding–discussion’ structure adopted also changed before resubmitting the paper. Paz was suggested to separate the results and discussion (i.e., finding–discussion structure) and organize them by topic (see Figure 3). Again, this is a convention of APA that expects writers to follow an Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion (IMRAD) format.

**Figure 2.**



Feedback provided by co-author 2 suggesting the change of the tense to APA format.

**Figure 3.**



Presents feedback regarding the APA format and specifications of the results and discussion section.

In terms of format/style, traveling AWC concept includes Tables. For example, Paz presented the main research results in a three-column Table. However, Paz was suggested to use Graphs instead (see Figure 4). For co-Author2, the material was better suited to a graph. This was simply an opinion, not based on a rule of APA. In another example of AWC, Paz wrote the paper sections' and subsections' headings in bold font, justified on the left side, with a period at the end. However, co-Author2 suggested working on headings in accordance with APA standard headings.

**Figure 4.**

**Results and discussion**

Students' and professors' data reveal themes needed for opening a writing center in an EFL context (see Table), qualitatively and quantitatively supported.

Themes	Qualitative	Quantitative results according to the number of participants and most important factors
Physical space	✓	
Tutors qualifications	✓	23/24
Tutors selection	✓	18/24
Training for tutors		21/24

**Comentado [A2]:** Maybe this would be better as a graph?

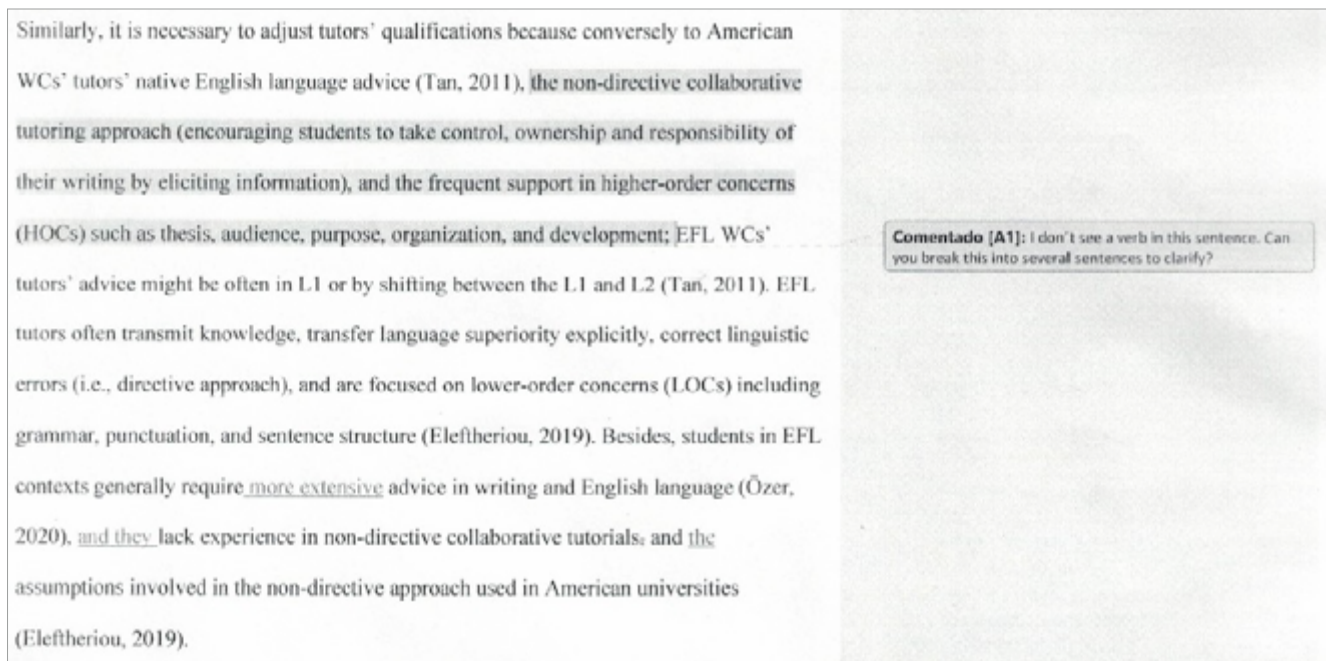
Author 2 suggests to change the table for a graph in order to better represent the collected data.

When the first anonymous journal reviewers' feedback was considered in the refinement of the article, Paz submitted it to the same writing journal, but it was returned again with major corrections concerning rhetorical structure, alignment of methodology, research questions, analysis, and discussion, which altogether made the article unclear. Thus, traveling AWC concept also includes clarity, which can be affected by lack of alignment in rhetorical macro structural parts and by linguistic issues (grammar and mechanics involving punctuation). For example, Paz wrote a paragraph in which the omission of a verb and the use of a run-on sentence caused the paragraph to be confusing or not clear for the reviewer (see Figure 5). The omission of verbs might be because in Spanish, a tacit subject is possible, and the use of run-on sentences possibly due to a transfer from Spanish writing to English.

Overall, differing AWC such as the use of grammar in Humanities (e.g., present vs past tenses; active vs passive voice; verb omission), rhetorical structure (e.g.,

Introduction, Methods, Results, Discussion), format (e.g., Tables, Graphs), style (e.g., APA, headings) do travel across contexts and do cross frontiers. Reviewers' feedback on clarity is overwhelming for writers, whose ideas were interpreted or understood differently, especially when cultural discourse conventions expected in English are different from or insufficiently mastered by non-English-dominant writers. The AWC do not travel themselves, but through the interaction among diverse interlocutors including the read literature, written thoughts, writings, reviewers, and feedback, as Paz, co-Author<sub>2</sub>, and co-Author<sub>3</sub> illustrated. Then, when the AWC travel and are continuously clarified by the interlocutors, the target texts are finally achieved, as it happened in this case. In other words, traveling happened when Paz read and wrote the paper, when Paz submitted the article, when the reviewers read the article and returned specific feedback, when Paz reshaped or adapted the article based on her understanding, reviewers' feedback, and expected AWC, generally and internationally, posited among scholars in target fields.<sup>4</sup>

**Figure 5.**



Presented a difficulty regarding sentence structure in both English and Spanish, a solution suggested by the reviewer in the comment.

<sup>4</sup> APA style has changed seven times, it is in its latest edition (7th) in 2022, but academic writing conventions could have been addressed by using another style which might not be limited to Chicago (which is also in its 17th edition) as required by *Figuras* at UNAM, to MHRA as required in *Emergence Journal*, or another style like MLA, which are used often in the humanities and social sciences, or another appropriate style required in other fields such as experimental sciences.



## Discussion

Based on Bal's (2002) definition, the study revealed that AWC are a traveling concept. AWC traveled back and forth across genres while Paz tried to achieve thesis and research publication in English. AWC traveled across delivery modes (written, spoken, digital) in Paz's text and through mediated negotiation with reviewers. AWC traveled across university contexts, nations, and points in time such as when receiving in postgraduate programs, feedback at American and British universities, and after postgraduate graduation while trying to publish research articles in international journals in English, and while being in a Spanish-dominant Mexican context. Shaping AWC enabled Paz to develop her writing and achieve both graduation and publication.

However, Paz continues developing AWC in English for a variety of reasons, including the fact that AWC themselves are constantly updated, as revised editions of APA and Chicago style are published. Because Spanish is her dominant language and because writing can always be improved, Paz's languages are highly tied to the social context of production and of interpretation. Ultimately, writers, contexts, and texts are also in continuous flux rather than static.

Paz's weaknesses in academic texts involved the use of language (grammar) that travels, unfamiliar text rhetorical structure (IMRAD), unclear coherence and cohesion, and stylistic conventions based on changes of new editions of APA (e.g., 6th-7th). These writing weaknesses might be due to different means (through readings, reviewers, mentors, negotiation) that enable concepts to travel and/or the different ways, unfamiliar, or scant academic writing instruction received in English. For example, Paz sometimes received academic writing advice through indirect or implicit tutoring, which is not at all a rule of thumb in Mexican education. Based on Paz's English as an additional language academic writing narrative, AWC do travel generally as abstract entities conveying concepts that are often insufficiently clear for a target reader/writer and/or audience. This can be because words that travel might mean different concepts or content to different people in diverse times and contexts as indicated by Hyvärinen (2013, 18). Moreover, AWC are frequently unfamiliar, ambiguous, confusing (Ballard and Clanchy 1988; Lea and Street 1998), and/or hidden to second language learners of English (Rai 2004). This last point suggests that second language writers need to receive instruction on AWC and make it explicit (Rambe 2015) rather than just students have to 'crack the code' or 'find the formula' (Rai 2004, 156).



## Conclusion

Overall, although AWC in English for interlocutors between two languages can entail differences, associations such as APA standardized AWC to publish fulfilling the international community's expectations. However, fulfilling prescribed-homogenized-expected AWC in English is challenging. Besides, living in a world, where academic writing is often standardized might deprive students, professors, researchers of knowing many words, phrases, and conventions of other English varieties.

Moreover, to better address the AWC among students, scholars, academic communities; academic writing from a social perspective, implying negotiation with reviewers or other writing stakeholders to (re)adapt the traveling AWC concept seems to be a useful alternative to consider. Specially because Bal (2002) argues that concepts are dynamic and flexible, moving back and forth while being shaped by national research cultures (Bal 2002, 24) and because they do not mean the same to everyone (Bal 2002, 11). —

## Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements are given to the anonymous reviewers that shared feedback to the Mexican writer throughout the journey while achieving research article publication, the supervisory team during the Mexican writer's doctoral and master studies, and the UNAM, DGEI, FES Acatlán and DGAPA, which funded the Mexican writer during her postdoctoral studies on the fascinating field of academic writing in English. Thanks also to Clark Moreland for assistance with formatting, and to the Verve Unplugged Writers' Retreat for support.

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