

Exploring graduate writing retreats as additional support for the EAP classroom in English-medium settings in Finland and the UAE

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Abstract

This study explores multilingual graduate students' expectations of and experiences of participating in writing retreats as a form of academic writing support. The literature acknowledges that graduate students within English Medium Education in Multilingual University Settings (EMEMUS) often encounter challenges in developing academic writing practices. A particular concern is that English for Academic Purposes courses may not always provide sufficient support given the complexities of teaching and learning academic writing, particularly through the lens of genre knowledge. Although previous research has highlighted the benefits of writing retreats for experienced scholars, considerably less is known about their potential to support multilingual graduates in English-medium contexts. This study addresses that gap, by exploring writing retreats involving nine multilingual graduate students in English-medium programmes in Finland and the United Arab Emirates. Data were collected from multiple sources including semi-structured interviews, daily intentions and reflections, and field notes which were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings indicate that participants valued the retreats for the emotional support, shared learning moments, and awareness of self and writing habits. Participants also described the retreats as providing an informal, situated learning environment in which they felt comfortable discussing writing-related challenges with peers. The study contributes to socio-cultural perspectives of academic writing by illustrating how writing retreats may create opportunities for multilingual writers to articulate tacit understandings of genre through collaborative reflection, making metacognitive thinking more explicit.

Keywords

EME, EMEMUS, EAP, academic writing, genre knowledge, writing retreats

1. Introduction

The current study explores writing retreats as additional academic writing support for multilingual students studying in English-medium programmes at a university in Finland and in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). These contexts are referred to throughout the paper as English Medium Education (EME) in Multilingual University Settings (EMEMUS). Typically, in these settings, academic writing support is offered in the form of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses anchored in Swales' (1990) grounding work of genre studies which aligns classroom pedagogy and learning outcomes with the linguistic features of academic communication (Charles, 2025). Fundamentally, EAP instruction emphasises the iterative nature of writing and the value of peer and teacher feedback. Whilst EAP classes do not explicitly teach content, many activities use discipline-specific materials for critical analysis of discourse features and language of the field, and in using these materials, awareness of rhetorical knowledge is also acquired.

Teaching academic writing and raising awareness of the complexities of genre knowledge is “complicated and nuanced” (Tardy et al., 2022, p. 9) and requires EAP practitioners to understand the multifaceted nature of genre knowledge. To support this understanding, Tardy et al. (2020) propose a theoretical framework (explained in detail in Section 2) which the present study adopts as a lens to examine how writing retreat practices may contribute to the development of genre knowledge and metacognitive development. Despite growing recognition of the importance of genre-based approaches, studies continue to observe language-related challenges amongst students in EME contexts (Athirah, 2024; Galloway & Rose, 2021; Hakim & Wingate, 2022; Kamaşak et al., 2021; Macaro & Aizawa, 2024; Rose et al., 2023; Willans, 2022; Wingate & Hakim, 2022). Therefore, the current study responds to calls for greater institutional support to address these challenges (Gallagher & Hopkyns, 2025; Macaro & Aizawa, 2024) and contributes empirical insights on writing retreats as a possible additional form of language support.

The challenges of academic writing are not limited to multilingual graduates. Academic writing has also been identified as an anxiety trigger amongst university faculty members due to the pressures of the academy and can contribute to a sense of isolation among scholars (Grant, 2006; Murray & Newton, 2009; Tremblay-Wragg et al., 2022). Therefore, writing retreats have been recognised as a tool to bring together writers with a common goal into a shared “imaginative space(s)” to support each other and enjoy writing” (Grant and Knowles, 2000, p. 6). Research on writing retreats has explored productivity and output for busy faculty members or early career researchers (Johnson et al., 2017; Kornhaber et al., 2016; McGrail et al., 2006; Murray, 2014a) as well as the sharing of good writing habits amongst scholars (Sword, 2017) and discussing writing strategies (Grant, 2006). Given that established academics need support in this regard, it seems probable that writing retreats may also help students to overcome the challenges of academic writing. Yet little scholarly work exists on retreats for multilingual students studying in EMEMUS, although studies conducted in Anglophone higher education have found that writing retreats can support and motivate undergraduates in writing their theses (Sangster, 2021) and help graduate students to sustain regular writing habits (Quynn & Stewart, 2021). This current study expands on this body of research to explore whether the provision of social and cognitive resources may contribute to the development of genre-specific knowledges and the genre awareness required for academic writing. Accordingly, we designed a qualitative study with multiple data collection tools to explore writing retreats as additional support for academic writing in EMEMUS.

The article begins by positioning academic writing through the lens of Tardy et al.'s (2020) theoretical framework. It then synthesises existing literature on writing retreats before outlining the research design, data collection and data analysis. The findings are then presented and discussed,

before considering the study's limitations and future directions. It concludes with the study's contribution to research and practice.

2. Genre Knowledge and Academic Writing

For the purposes of the current study, Tardy et al.'s (2020, p. 306) theoretical framework for genre knowledge, metacognition and recontextualisation best describes our view of academic writing practices. Figure 1 illustrates the development of Tardy's (2009, p. 22) conceptualisation of genre knowledge into a theoretical framework that brings together genre knowledge, metacognition (Devitt, 2015; Negretti & McGrath, 2018), multilingualism (Tardy et al., 2020) genre-specific knowledge and genre awareness.

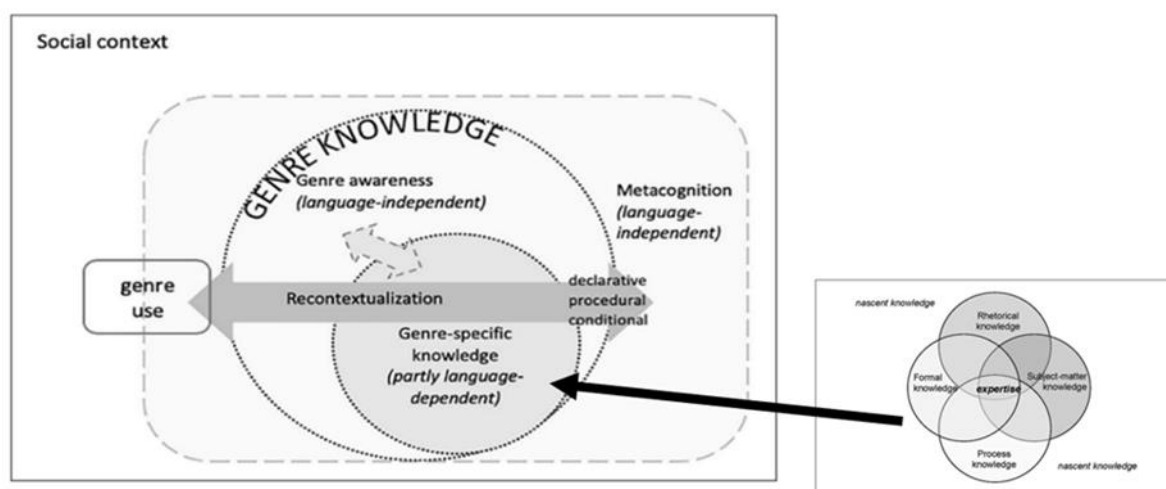


Figure 1. Combined visual of 'The theoretical framework for genre knowledge, metacognition, and recontextualization' Tardy C.M., Sommer-Farias B., & Gevers J. (2020). *Teaching and Researching Genre Knowledge: Toward an Enhanced Theoretical Framework*. *Written Communication* 37(3), 287-321. Copyright © 2009 by (Sage). Reprinted by Permission of Sage Publications. And *Integration of genre knowledge* (Tardy, 2009, p. 22). Used with permission from *Building Genre Knowledge* by Christine Tardy. © 2009 by Parlor Press. All rights reserved.

As Figure 1 shows, genre-specific knowledge was previously termed the integration of genre knowledge (Tardy, 2009) and comprises four overlapping forms of knowledge – rhetorical knowledge, subject-matter knowledge, process knowledge and formal knowledge. Rhetorical knowledge is the understanding of the purpose, audience, author positionality and values of the discipline. Subject-matter knowledge refers to the discipline's content and the terminology. Process knowledge is an understanding of the research skills required to write a specific genre – from searching for credible sources, processing the information, paraphrasing, to the iterative nature of writing an academic text. Finally, formal knowledge refers to the organisation, lexicogrammar and the expected conventions of a specific genre of text. Multilingual writers may draw on previous genres of writing across languages to navigate similar and differing conventions from one familiar text to a new, unfamiliar one (Tardy et al., 2020). Tardy et al. (2020) draw on Cheng (2018) to present genre knowledge and genre-specific knowledge as two interconnecting dimensions whereby writers develop a broader awareness of how genres function across contexts as they gain an understanding of conventions, rhetorical purposes, and disciplinary expectations of different genres. Genre awareness thus enables writers to draw upon knowledge of previous genres to adapt and recontextualise in new writing situations, and in this sense is seen as a "kind of metacognitive knowledge" (Tardy et al., 2020, p. 296). In the case of our two retreats, participants worked on authentic academic writing tasks: their master's theses in Finland and their first academic article in the UAE.

Several empirical studies have explored tasks to promote the awareness of genre knowledge (see for example, McGrath et al., 2026; Negretti & McGrath, 2020; Negretti & McGrath, 2018), demonstrating the importance that metacognition (thinking about thinking) plays in the development of genre knowledge and academic writing practices. These practice-oriented studies indicate the necessity for classroom activities that promote and encourage writers to adopt the self-awareness strategies that they need for effective learning. Tardy et al.'s (2020) theoretical framework acknowledges these strategies as knowledge of cognition which is sub-divided into three knowledges: declarative knowledge, which refers to what one knows about oneself and the strategies used, procedural knowledge, which indicates an awareness of how to approach and apply a specific task or strategy, and conditional knowledge, which is the understanding of why this strategy is relevant to one's own writing process (Flavell 1979; Schraw & Dennison, 1994). Therefore, opportunities to develop these strategies that are central to successful academic writing should be shaped by the linguistic and academic support structures available within higher education institutions.

Whilst it is established that teaching and learning the necessary genre knowledge for successful academic writing is “complicated and nuanced” (Tardy et al., 2022, p. 9), the delivery of EAP support in EMEMUS remains varied. For example, a study conducted in Finland and the UAE found that whilst the Finnish institution provided compulsory EAP courses, many students in the UAE did not engage with the voluntary support offered by the university writing centre (Chell et al., 2026). The need for language support to be institutionally- rather than student-driven, has also been highlighted by academic leaders across EMEMUS in Europe and Asia, calling for varied forms of support that foster “greater levels of inclusion, equity and belonging” (Gallagher & Hopkyns, 2025, p. 11).

In response to calls for more inclusive and varied forms of support, opportunities for social participation in academic communities may play an important role in the development of academic writing. Similar to more experienced scholars, graduates require socialisation with others within their discipline or the local academic community (Swales, 1990; Tardy et al., 2020; Wenger, 1998; 2013). These social interactions provide informal opportunities for discussion, guidance and the development of understandings about disciplinary practices, while also supporting the clarification of learning (Tardy, 2009). Accordingly, our writing retreats aimed to provide a situated learning opportunity where writers could interact with and learn from one another within their local academic community (Lave, 1991; Tardy & Gevers, 2024; Wenger, 2002). In organising a writing retreat, we attempted to create a socio-cultural ecology (Van Lier, 2008) where multilingual graduates could openly discuss challenges relating to form, rhetoric, content and the writing process (Tardy, 2009; Tardy et al., 2020) with peers and more experienced others in a non-hierarchical setting.

3. Writing Retreats

Scholarship on writing retreats has established a range of benefits for experienced academics working within the academic pressures of *publish or perish* culture. Research on writing retreat studies has frequently focused on writing productivity, with retreats often organised as interventions to support researchers in increasing publications (see, for example, Jackson, 2009; Kornhaber et al., 2016; McGrail et al., 2006). In addition to this primary focus of productivity, studies have identified additional benefits, including increased motivation for writing (Moore, 2003), positive impacts on writing habits and a reduction in the barriers to writing (Grant 2006; Kornhaber et al., 2016; Moore, 2003). Furthermore, research on early-career academics suggests that retreats may facilitate

information exchange with more experienced colleagues, fostering a sense of community, guidance and belonging (Grant, 2006; Kent et al., 2017; Murray & Newton, 2009). These academic communities have been shown to enhance understanding of the scholarly writing process, provide emotional support, and create opportunities for peer review (Ratković, et al., 2019). In this sense, retreats may foster the three dimensions of a Community of Practice (COP): mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 2002). Moreover, Hammond (2021) argues that participating in a writing retreat can transform the idea of research and writing from pressure for output into an experience of viewing research through a lens of joy, engagement and personal transformation.

Despite these well-documented benefits of writing retreats for experienced academic writers and early career researchers, less attention has been paid to their use with graduate students, in particular master's students and early-stage doctoral researchers in EMEMUS. Where such studies do exist, the context is in English-speaking countries and the primary focus is on productivity and the development of sustainable writing habits (see for example, Quynn & Stewart, 2021; Sangster, 2021). To our knowledge, little research has examined writing retreats for multilingual students in EME contexts, particularly with regard to student interaction and learning moments. Given the relatively informal nature of retreats compared with classroom settings, we anticipated opportunities for participants to verbalise knowledge, discuss challenges, and seek support from others on issues that they were unable to resolve independently. Specifically, we were interested in exploring whether discussions about the writing process might contribute to greater understanding and clarification of participants' own learning. To address these areas, we designed a retreat (described in more detail in Section 4.1) that incorporated established good practices from previous studies to answer the following two research questions:

- 1) What are multilingual graduate students' expectations of a writing retreat?
- 2) What are multilingual graduate students' experiences of a writing retreat?

4. Methods

A qualitative approach was chosen to align with the study's socio-cultural perspective on academic writing. We used multiple data collection tools to collect rich data (Geertz, 1973) on participants' feelings and experiences of the retreat to explore how and why writing retreats might support graduates in the development of their academic writing.

4.1 Participant Selection

The approach to delivery of EAP varies widely between EME contexts, thereby influencing students' access to academic writing support (Chell et al., 2026; Gallagher & Hopkyns, 2025). Accordingly, the retreats were organised at two universities symbolically representing the diversity of EMEMUS in non-anglophone contexts. In Finland, a compulsory thesis support course was adapted as a writing retreat and attended by six master's students. The students had previously completed a compulsory academic writing course grounded in genre pedagogy. In contrast, master's students at a higher education institution in the UAE were invited to voluntarily participate in a retreat offered as additional support for their thesis. As no master's students enrolled, three first-year doctoral researchers at the same institution agreed to participate in a two-day retreat conducted over two consecutive Sundays.

In Finland, the three-day writing retreat was facilitated by the first author (a doctoral researcher and an academic writing teacher) and attended by the six master's students together with another academic writing teacher and researcher who was not a participant in the study. The UAE retreat

was facilitated by the first and second authors, the latter an Associate Professor in Education. The three Emirati doctoral researchers were working on their first article for their article-based PhD. A sociological perspective informed the assignment of participant pseudonyms (Deakin-Smith et al., 2024). Participant characteristics for both retreats are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants' Backgrounds

Pseudonym	Anna	Ned	Boris	Joyce	Ben	Iida	Morag	Laila	Fara
Mother tongue	Sinhala	Bengali	Russian	Sinhala	Bengali	Finnish	Emirati Arabic	Emirati Arabic	Emirati Arabic
Previous medium of instruction	EMI BA & previous MA	EMI (Translanguaging) BA & previous MA	EMI BA	L1 BA EMI Previous MA	EMI (Translanguaging) BA	BA L1	EMI BA MA Scotland	EMI BA & MA	EMI BA & MA

4.2 Retreat Design

The retreats were designed to introduce participants to social writing practices through activities intended to foster reflection, metacognitive awareness, and productive writing habits. For example, participants recorded a daily intention for their writing to encourage purposeful goal setting. The first author then guided participants through a mindfulness or breathing technique to help clear their minds of noise before settling down to write (Woloshyn et al., 2022). To promote regular mental and physical breaks, a movement activity was incorporated after each hour of writing. During the second day of the retreat, participants took part in peer review to encourage the exchange of ideas and feedback. In addition, participants were offered an individual feedback session with the first author, an EAP practitioner. At the end of each day, participants completed a post-writing reflection log designed to stimulate metacognitive reflection using the following prompts:

- What was most helpful today?
- What were today's successes (or not)? Why?

Because the study sought to observe natural and informal exchanges between the participants, shared breaks, walks and lunch were intentionally incorporated into the retreat design. The full retreat schedule is presented in Appendix 1.

4.3 Data Sources

Following the ethical guidelines of both institutions, written informed consent was obtained from all participants. Semi-structured interviews, conducted pre- and post-retreat, were the primary sources of data and were chosen to encourage openness and a natural conversation between interviewer and respondent (Cohen et al., 2018). As the first author was also the teacher of the participants in Finland (but not those in the UAE), there was a possibility that students may have provided more positive responses in an effort to please the interviewer (Bispo, 2022). This potential for social desirability bias represents a limitation for the research. To enhance credibility of the findings, additional supporting data were collected (Table 2) and participants were also reassured, in line with the institutional ethical guidelines, that their decision to participate would have no influence on their course grades.

The secondary data sources included the participants' daily intentions and end of the day reflections and field notes. Field notes were recorded throughout the retreats by the first author in Finland and

by both the first and second author in the UAE. Following Deggs & Hernandez (2018), the field notes comprised jotted notes (memory triggers), observation notes (written immediately after the daily sessions), and inference (thoughts about social relationships, emotions, and the activities being observed). Consistent with Rovegno (1992), intentions and reflections were designed to encourage participants to value and trust their own knowledge and writing processes. Every effort was made to create a safe and supportive environment that encouraged reflective practice (Ortlipp, 2008; Paterson & Groening, 1996; Rovegno, 1992).

Table 2. Overview of the Data Sources

Data Source	Aim	Details
Pre-retreat interviews	build rapport background data • multilingual academic writing experiences • writing habits • previous writing retreat experiences • expectations for the current writing retreat	Conducted in English 30 – 60 minutes Semi-formal – open-ended questions (Appendix 2.)
Daily writing intentions & reflections	Pre-writing: Intention for the session Post writing: Reflection of the writing day • feelings • achievements • challenges. Encouraged to make notes about ‘what next?’	UAE – Participants given a notebook to record Intentions & Reflections Finland- Shared spreadsheet to record Intentions & Reflections
Field Notes	Notes taken throughout the day • inferences • social relationships & emotions • activities observed	(UAE) End day of day discussion (1 st & 2 nd authors) (Finland) End of day reflection on notes (1 st author)
Post-retreat interviews	Impressions of the different aspects of the retreat • mindful activities • setting intentions • peer review process	Language: English Duration: 30 – 60 minutes

4.4 Data Analysis

Following Braun & Clarke (2006; 2013; 2019a; 2021), Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was adopted for data analysis. RTA aligned with the qualitative design of the study and provided a flexible approach for exploring how and why writing retreats may offer additional academic writing support for multilingual graduates in EMEMUS. Consistent with Braun & Clarke’s (2006) six phase approach, the analysis involved familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a report.

The analysis was iterative, with themes continuously reviewed, refined and defined throughout the process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013; 2019a; 2021; Guest et al., 2013). Figures and diagrams helped to organise the data into concrete thoughts and ideas during the preliminary, meaning-making stage of analysis (Cloutier & Ravasi, 2021). Interview data were considered alongside participants’ intentions and reflections and field notes to help strengthen the credibility of the analysis through data triangulation (Mohiya, 2024). This process also helped identify patterns across data sources while reducing the influence of potential social desirability bias associated with the first author’s dual role of researcher and teacher in the Finnish context (Bispo, 2022). Throughout the data analysis, emerging interpretations were continually questioned, (for example, *What does this theme mean? What are the implications of this theme?*) (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Nevertheless, consistent with Braun & Clarke's (2021) reflexive approach, interpretations and generation of themes were inevitably shaped by the authors' research perspectives, teaching experiences and disciplinary knowledge. For clarity, Table 3 provides an example of this analytic process.

Table 3. Simplified Codebook

Reflections	Observations/Field notes	Post retreat interview	Initial Codes	Further thoughts & Codes	Final code
		This retreat has helped me fight feelings of <i>loneliness</i> and powerlessness in academic writing (Boris Finland) Sense of community helps...it's all on Moodle so you feel so <i>alone</i> (Iida Finland) That sense of community kind of helps you feel like you're not <i>alone</i> (Fara UAE)	Loneliness - Alone Alone	Retreat helped Community Community	Emotional Support (5.2.1)
I've set the outline for my discussion part and now have a solid structure to stick to[...]conclusions and connecting my findings to the existing literature is still a struggle for me as I tend to insert conclusions into the discussion part. (Boris Reflection Day 1 entry)	Iida (Finland) started discussion How do you approach reading literature and writing- do you read first then write or do the two simultaneously? Boris (Finland) over lunch - asked others about strategies used when writing discussion/conclusion	Iida (Finland) I really like the discussion because it really helps me when other people talk about how they do because I get this kind of tunnel vision of only <i>just one way of doing things</i>. So, it's really helpful for me when other people....and then it starts to click. Boris - follow up on reflection I tend to think that I'm the worst, that everyone is doing great and I'm the one who is like a loser, cannot produce anything, cannot	Others available Freedom to ask questions? Reflection - Self - realization that (formal knowledge) needs to change Talking to others - journey - realizations	Others' strategies? 'Self' - verbalise thoughts declarative, procedural knowledge (metacognition) Talking to others helps with looking at self too	Experiences of others and self (5.2.3)

5. Findings

Our findings are organised around the two research questions to present meaning-making of participants' expectations and experiences of a writing retreat. We present the main themes that emerged from the data sources under the following sections:

- Participant Expectations
- Participant Experiences

5.1 Participant Expectations

The first research question explored multilingual graduates' expectations of a writing retreat. Although only one participant had previously attended a writing retreat, the pre-retreat interviews revealed three clear expectations of the retreat:

- a productive writing space
- a learning space
- an emotional support space

Figure 2 presents key participant quotes and the themes that emerged, illustrating expectations of the retreat as both a solitary writing endeavour and a shared experience.

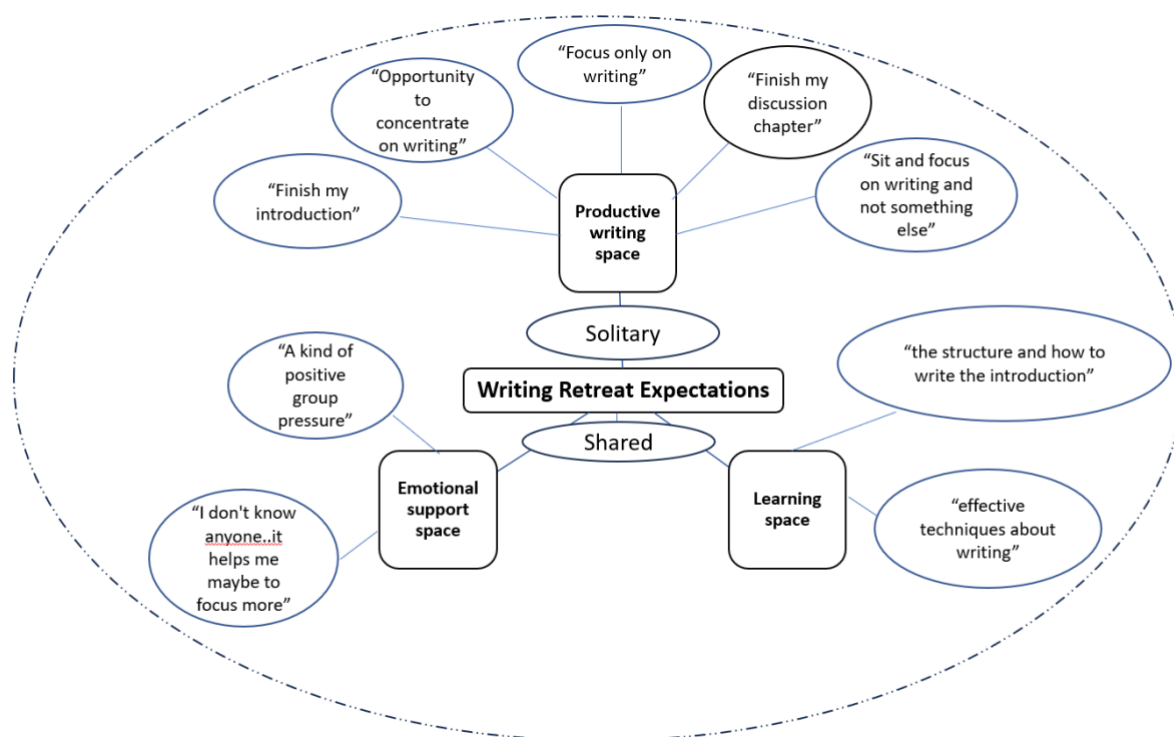


Figure 2. Pre-retreat participant expectations

Certain participants expected the writing retreat to be a solitary writing experience dedicated to productivity, for example, Fara (UAE) states “an expectation that I’ve set for myself was that by the third day, I would have written something like a complete piece that I can share with my supervisors to get feedback”. Similarly in Finland, Amy expected to simply have a quiet space to write “[...] get to sit somewhere and focus on writing and not something else”. These expectations mirror previous notions of a writing retreat as being purely for productivity.

In contrast, others, like Ben (Finland) expected to gain explicit writing techniques or feedback on their text “So, I hope I can find out some effective techniques about writing, yes, which will help me a lot to write thesis because I want to write my thesis in a good way”. Morag (UAE) had similar expectations “Hopefully the structure and how to write the introduction and do it nicely so everything flows and the ideas like just get out there”. Others envisaged an environment where peers would help support their writing. For example, Iida (Finland) expected the retreat to hold her accountable “I think the kind of positive group pressure like I notice when [...] the kind of like accountability”. Boris (Finland) also felt he would benefit from others around him: “We’re kind of different and I think it kind of helps me maybe to focus more so and [...] I think this inspiration can help me also right now”.

Both Iida and Boris’s responses highlight an expectation that peers would provide emotional support. More generally, participants demonstrated declarative awareness by revealing an awareness of their own writing needs and in viewing the retreat as a means of supporting productivity, learning from others and receiving emotional encouragement.

5.2 Participant Experiences

Research question two explored multilingual graduate students' experiences of a writing retreat. Analysis of the multiple data sources identified four interrelated themes, which are presented in the following sections:

- experiences of emotional support
- experiences of shared learning moments
- experiences of others and awareness of self
- experiences of writing habits

5.2.1 Experiences of Emotional Support

While the retreat was primarily designed to support academic writing, participants also highlighted its emotional and social benefits. Across the data, evidence emerged of participants building connections through informal interactions during coffee breaks, lunchtime conversations, group discussions and peer review activities throughout the two-to-three-day retreats. For example, in Finland, Boris reflected on the isolation that international students can experience when studying abroad and suggested that the retreat provided a valuable opportunity to counter these feelings:

This retreat has helped me fight the feelings of loneliness and powerlessness in academic writing. Seeing different people with similar problems and discussing your problems with them are very important to me. So, you know that you're not alone and it helps [...] as a sense of belonging.

Similar benefits were reported by participants studying in their home country. Being physically present with others at the retreat appeared to foster a sense of connection that was often absent from other academic experiences. For example, Iida (Finland) highlighted the limited opportunities for community building, citing an example of asynchronous peer review:

I think that sense of community helps. I think it's very important because in psychology we don't really do that for master's thesis seminar you get peer reviewed, but it's all on Moodle (an LMS), so you feel alone.

Similarly, at the retreat in the UAE where all participants were local citizens of the UAE, Fara reflected on the value of the shared experience "That sense of a community kind of helps you feel like you're not alone, we are all doing it and working towards the same thing".

These excerpts from both the retreats in the UAE and Finland suggest that shared writing practices may foster a sense of belonging and community. This finding aligns both with participants' expectations of a writing retreat and with previous research on writing retreats.

5.2.2 Experiences of Shared Learning Moments

Our findings suggest that the writing retreats facilitated learning through two complementary forms of knowledge sharing. First, participants benefitted from peer review, gaining insights from another reader's perspective. Second, learning occurred more informally through conversations during shared breaks, illustrating how situated learning can emerge through social interaction and participation in a community of practice.

5.2.2.1 The Reader's Perspective

Almost all participants revealed that, prior to the retreat, they rarely asked peers to read their writing because they perceived this as an imposition. Therefore, the retreat gave them an opportunity to share and gain a reader's perspective of their work. Many participants found great value in the peer review, including Iida (Finland):

I think it was really good to hear from another person what they thought that OK, this was readable, but I didn't understand in these parts. So, it really helped me think and also took away the fear of giving your writing to someone else.

Iida's account suggests that peer review functions as a reciprocal metacognitive process which benefits both the reviewer and the writer whose work is being discussed. Similar benefits were evident in the UAE retreat, as indicated by Fara and Morag valuing the reciprocal nature of the peer review process and expressing a willingness to continue the practice beyond the retreat. However, Fara acknowledged that time constraints could limit these opportunities: "I think that I'll incorporate more of it [peer review]. I would love to get at least once or twice a chance to share my writing with my peer but I'm not sure that is just because of the time limitations".

In Finland, Boris demonstrated reflective thinking when discussing the value of a reader's perspective:

It helps you see things [...] that sentence that my peer pointed out, like for me, it was totally clear, like natural but she didn't understand what I meant by that. This is interesting, that makes you think, and that makes you more careful.

Boris' account illustrates how feedback from peers can support reflective thinking by making implicit assumptions visible and prompting writers to reconsider how meaning is communicated to readers.

In contrast, Joyce (Finland) had an upsetting experience with her peer reviewer, Ben. In the post-retreat interview Joyce reported that Ben had claimed, "Your topic is not relevant, I can't understand anything from your topic". Joyce reported being very distressed by the interaction "What are you writing? This is not suitable". Following the peer review activity, Joyce reported that she sought reassurance from her supervisor about her topic and her academic writing. In contrast with the predominantly positive accounts of peer review, Joyce's experience highlights the potential risks associated with feedback when it is perceived as dismissive, personal or overly critical. Overall, our findings suggest that peer review can stimulate metacognitive reflection by encouraging writers to examine their assumptions, consider alternative perspectives, and refine their communication. At the same time, the process can be emotionally significant and may shape writers' confidence and sense of identity in both positive and negative ways.

5.2.2.2 Situated Learning

The findings suggest that the retreats fostered an informal learning environment that facilitated peer learning and knowledge exchange. For example, during the final interview, Fara (UAE) explained that their initial scepticism of the retreat had changed during the retreat:

After the first day, I felt like apart from having a dedicated time to work, I did not learn anything additional, but today it's completely different because there was like tips being given, resources being shared, that part I found very valuable.

Fara's reflection suggests that extending the retreats over multiple days may enhance opportunities for knowledge sharing and peer learning.

Field notes recorded by Author 1 on Day 1 in Finland documented a lunchtime discussion about structuring thesis introductions and clear communication of the research gap. The notes also included details of participants discussing how they could demonstrate their contributions to current research in their field. This discussion appeared to influence Ned's (Finland) subsequent reflection "It was a great day. I was able to formulate my research objectives after finding what my research gap really is".

Similarly, during an afternoon walk-and-talk break on Day 2 of the UAE retreat, Author 2 recorded a discussion between participants and the first and second author. The discussion focussed on selecting appropriate academic journals for publication and identifying current scholarly conversations related to participants' research topic. The discussion also explored the importance of research gaps, during which the first author introduced Swales (1990) Create a Research Space (CARS) model. Following the session, participants were provided with additional resources about creating a research space and applying the CARS framework. This subject was revisited by Morag (UAE) during the post retreat interview:

[...] especially after today's session when the CARS method was discussed, it's the first time I've come across it, but now after (reading about and applying the CARS method) the paragraph just flows so much more beautifully now and it makes more sense.

Together, the field notes and accounts from both Ned in Finland and Morag in the UAE indicate that writing retreats may create opportunities for informal dialogue between peers and more knowledgeable others about the writing process. These exchanges often focused on how research is positioned within a disciplinary conversation (rhetorical knowledge) and on the structure and organisation of academic texts (formal knowledge). The relatively informal setting of the retreats appeared to support situated learning by creating opportunities for contextualised meaning-making around genre-specific writing practices and scholarly communication.

5.2.3 Experiences of Others and Awareness of Self

During a discussion opportunity, Iida (Finland) asked the rest of the group, "How do you approach reading literature and writing, do you read first and then write or do the two simultaneously?" (Day 2, Author 1 Field Notes). Iida's search for advice concerning strategies used in the reading process was acknowledged and discussed. During the post-retreat interview, Iida (Finland) referred to this discussion:

It really helps me when other people talk about how they do things because I get this kind of tunnel vision of only just one way of doing things. So, it's really helpful for me when other people [...] and then it starts to click. I liked [the advice of] note taking whilst reading and keeping a spreadsheet of important facts and things.

Iida's account suggests that the discussion helped them to articulate aspects of their thinking about reading and writing that were previously implicit. They were able to communicate what they knew about their own strategies (declarative knowledge), reflect on how others approached a particular task and how those approaches might be applied to their own writing (procedural knowledge), and

explain why such strategies are relevant to the writing process (conditional knowledge). Overall, Iida's reflections suggest that discussing writing strategies with peers may support activation of the metacognitive processes. Her comments also indicate that these discussions led to a greater sense of agency for Iida and highlight how informal learning environments can create opportunities for learning that may not always arise in more formal educational settings. This is further illustrated by Iida's reference to an asynchronous course delivered through the learning management system (LMS) Moodle:

Yet nobody tells me about that [reading strategies] the seminar we have on Moodle, there's nothing about that. They only tell you how to look for information, but they don't tell you how to go about the reading process. Yeah, but it's true that when we spoke, I thought about it [reading strategies] and it kind of clicked.

Daily reflections also revealed how the experiences and strategies of others can raise awareness of oneself as a writer. Boris's (Finland) reflection at the end of the first day demonstrated an awareness of his strengths and weaknesses as a writer:

I've set the outline for my discussion part and now have a solid structure to stick to. However, the thing that conclusions and connecting my findings to the existing literature is still a struggle for me as I tend to insert conclusions into the discussion part.

In the final interview the discussion turned to the progression of Boris's discussion and conclusion section during the retreat. Boris acknowledged that the retreat had prompted a shift in how he viewed himself as a writer:

I tend to think that I'm the worst, that everyone is doing great and I'm the one who is like a loser, cannot produce anything, cannot write things down. But actually, when you start like talking to people, writing together with them, you see that actually it's not true. I mean, everyone is struggling.

Finally, Fara's (UAE) enthusiasm for opportunities to discuss specific genres with peers highlights the important role that dialogue plays in the development of genre knowledge and academic writing:

Talking more with my peers about just the process like we've been doing I think it needs to be done more like [...] right now some of us are writing the full article, some of us are working on reviews, so we are helping each other through the process.

Taken together, the multiple data sources suggest that participants experienced the writing retreats as valuable spaces to discuss the writing process. Through dialogue with peers, participants reflected on their own approaches to writing, considered alternative strategies, and developed greater awareness of themselves as writers, indicating activation of metacognitive processes.

5.2.4 Experiences of Writing Habits

Pre-retreat interviews indicated that only a few of the participants had previously used writing rituals, such as goal setting, breathing techniques, timed writing sprints, writing together or peer review. Following the retreat, many participants described these practices as beneficial and reported their intention to continue incorporating them into their writing routines (Table 4).

Table 4. Pre-retreat and intended post-retreat writing rituals

Retreat Rituals	Pre-retreat	Post-retreat intention to implement
Pre- writing Mindfulness/Breathing Technique or other ritual	Ned, Morag	Boris, Iida, Morag, Ned, Amy
Goal setting/Writing Intention	Amy	Fara, Laila, Morag, Boris, Iida, Ned, Amy
Timed writing blocks with Stretching/Moving breaks	No participants	Morag, Iida, Amy
Discussions with peers/more knowledgeable others	Amy, Laila	Amy, Iida, Boris, Morag, Fara, Laila, Ned
Journaling/Reflection	Fara	Fara, Morag, Amy, Boris, Iida, Ned

With regard to setting intentions, Morag (UAE) revealed:

I always found it very hard to focus on writing whereas now I know to set intentions to come back to my focus; set those intentional breaks to stretch, get out, refresh your mind, and then come back [to writing].

Amy (Finland) also thought that setting intentions helped with focus and productivity: “It's very productive, we know what are the intentions when we start the day [...] it reminds me throughout the day that there's something that I have to finish and there's a target”. In the UAE, Laila reported that setting intentions and reflecting at the end of each day's writing session increased their awareness of self as a writer “specifically in thinking about what really I'm doing and what will work with me. I did not reflect to this level”. Laila's comments suggest an awareness of declarative knowledge – an awareness of what one knows about self and strategies, and procedural knowledge, namely, how to apply these techniques to one's own learning.

Regarding the mindfulness breathing ritual, participants described the technique as helping them transition between activities and prepare for focused writing. For example, Iida (Finland) noticed “it [the breathing technique] helps to calm oneself for a moment instead of just moving from the phone to the computer”. Boris (Finland) found the mindful breathing technique helped “set the mood” whereas Ned (Finland) described the technique as helping with focus “[Now] I use this technique after some certain period of time, then it helps me to keep concentration again and to keep focus on writing again”.

Concerning writing together, participants in Finland indicated that sitting together to write held them accountable for their own writing. Amy (Finland) explained that writing alongside others helped her maintain focus when she was distracted by her phone:

I was just distracted by a text message, but then I naturally open some kind of other app and spend some time, but when I see other people and when they're so focused on writing, so I just kept away the phone and then I continued to write.

Similarly, Iida (Finland) also found the retreat setting helped her to avoid being side-tracked:

Many times, today, I thought I want to look at my phone. I want to pick up my phone and then I think no, no, no, no, we are on this writing retreat, and we should be working now. So, I'm not going to.

For Boris (Finland), seeing others writing was also a source of motivation “Well, first of all, when you see that everyone around you is working, you also kind of have to work because it's just how you feel, you feel kind of urged to also start typing something”.

Taken together, participants' accounts suggest that the writing rituals experienced in the retreat supported productive writing habits through increased focus, accountability, and reflection. Participants also described these practices as raising their awareness of themselves as writers and encouraging reflection on the strategies they used during the writing process.

6. Discussion

This empirical study responds to calls for more varied forms of language support for multilingual learners in EME settings (Gallagher & Hopkyns, 2025; Macaro & Aizawa, 2024). Accordingly, it explored writing retreats as potential additional support for graduates' development of academic writing. The findings are consistent with previous research describing retreats as motivating spaces for writers to produce text and discuss ideas, challenges and solutions with peers (Grant 2006; Kornhaber et al., 2016; Moore, 2003; Sangster, 2021).

The study extends previous scholarly work on writing retreats by providing empirical insights of how multilingual students in EMEMUS experienced retreats as a form of academic writing support. Participants' accounts support Bojovic et al.'s (2024, p. 853) description of the “oxymoronic nature of being alone-together”, whereby writers work on individual projects whilst being available to support each other. Participants in both contexts described the retreats as providing emotional support during a time when feelings of loneliness and isolation were common, consistent with previous studies that reported experiences of isolation among students in English-medium settings (see for example, Bittencourt et al., 2021). Their accounts further suggest that the writing retreats fostered a sense of community and belonging, consistent with previous studies of writing retreats (Grant, 2006; Jackson, 2009; Kornhaber et al., 2016; Murray & Newton, 2009; Sangster, 2021). Participants also reported gaining a greater appreciation that writing does not need to be a solitary endeavour.

The findings suggest that the writing retreats created conditions consistent with the three dimensions of a COP proposed by Wenger (2002): joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoires. First, the retreats provided a shared space in which participants worked towards the common goal of producing a specific genre of writing while engaging with practices intended to support productive writing. Second, the situated learning environment facilitated mutual engagement as participants drew on their own experiences and those of their peers. Finally, these interactions appeared to contribute to the development of a shared repertoire as participants discussed writing practices, exchanged feedback and gained new perspectives of their work. Together, these shared learning experiences suggest that the retreats supported participants' understanding of academic writing and the associated norms and conventions. More broadly, the findings indicate that retreats may provide opportunities for multilingual students to negotiate academic writing practices within a supportive community, creating opportunities for the development of genre knowledge while responding to Gallagher & Hopkyns' (2025) call for more inclusive, institutionally-supported approaches to multilingual writers in English-medium education. In this respect, the findings further illustrate how structured writing retreats may extend academic writing support beyond the traditional EAP classroom.

As the writing retreat was attended by second year graduate students in Finland, and first year doctoral researchers in the UAE, participants were likely to have already developed some awareness

of the genre expectations associated with their academic writing (Tardy et al., 2020). The findings suggest that participants in both settings recognised the kinds of questions that facilitated rich peer discussion of genre-specific writing practices. Given that genre awareness and genre-specific awareness are “mutually supporting” (Cheng, 2018, p. 47), these peer exchanges, observed and documented by the first and second author, appeared to echo the classroom-based reflective commentary task described by Negretti & McGrath (2018). In responding to one another’s questions, participants appeared to articulate aspects of their tacit and emerging knowledge of genre awareness. These discussions also made visible elements of metacognitive thinking, particularly declarative and procedural knowledge, whereas evidence of conditional knowledge was less apparent (Flavell, 1979; Schraw & Dennison, 1994). Taken together, these findings suggest that writing retreats may provide situated learning opportunities that complement EAP provision by encouraging participants to articulate tacit understandings of genre and academic writing practices through collaborative reflection, making aspects of their genre knowledge and metacognitive thinking more visible.

Although EMEMUS contexts typically offer EAP support through multiple forms of provision, including credit-bearing courses and writing centres (Chell et al., 2021), not all multilingual students engage with these opportunities (Chell et al., 2026). This pattern was also reflected in the current study where master’s students in the UAE did not voluntarily attend the retreat, reinforcing the argument that language support should be proactively driven at the institutional level (Gallagher & Hopkyns, 2025). The findings therefore suggest that writing retreats may represent one additional form of academic writing support that complements EAP provision in EMEMUS.

Tardy et al. (2022) characterise the learning and teaching of academic writing through genre knowledge in the classroom as “complicated and nuanced” (p. 9). From a multilingual student perspective, this complexity may be further compounded by the language-related challenges reported in English-medium education, such as reluctance to contribute because of concerns about English proficiency, or requiring additional time to process and formulate answers (Wilkinson and Gabriëls, 2017). The present findings suggest that writing retreats may help address some of these challenges by providing an informal situated learning space in which participants felt more comfortable discussing writing related issues that arose. Unlike classroom activities, where writing strategies may be introduced for later application, the retreats created opportunities for participants to reflect on, discuss and immediately apply to their writing practices.

The current study also identified several considerations for the design and facilitation of writing retreats. Care is needed when bringing together participants from different cultures and genders to minimise the potential for uncomfortable interactions (Hansen & Liu, 2005), as illustrated by Joyce’s peer-review experience. Organisers should also recognise that each writing retreat is unique and may require adaptations in response to participants’ needs and prior knowledge. At the same time, it is important to maintain a balance between providing sufficient structure to support learning and preserving the informal, participant-led nature of a retreat. Optional, lightly structured activities may be incorporated to encourage reflection on academic writing and genre awareness without transforming the retreat into an extension of the EAP classroom.

7. Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved a small qualitative sample of nine participants across two writing retreats. While the study was not intended to compare the two contexts, the participants represented different stages of

academic journeys – second-year master's students in Finland and first-year doctoral researchers in the UAE. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as illustrating how writing retreats were experienced across two English-medium settings rather than as evidence of direct comparability between the two groups. In addition, one of the authors acted as both facilitator and researcher. Although this dual role enabled rich insights into participants' interactions during the retreats, it may also have influenced participants' responses and the interpretation of the findings. Therefore, to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis, multiple qualitative data sources were triangulated, and multiple authors were actively involved in interpreting the findings.

8. Future Directions and Conclusion

The present study explored participants' expectations and experiences of a writing retreat in situ. Future studies could adopt a longitudinal perspective by combining analyses of participants' developing texts with simulated recall interviews (Gass & Mackey, 2017) to explore how writers explain the revisions they make and how genre knowledge and metacognitive processes develop over time.

In summary, this study contributes to socio-cultural perspectives of academic writing (Tardy et al., 2020) by providing empirical insights into how multilingual graduates experienced writing retreats as a form of academic writing support in EMEMUS. The findings suggest that the designed affordances of writing together, structured reflective rituals and peer talk about writing practices created a socio-cultural ecology where participants could perceive, test and articulate writing strategies, making tacit genre knowledge and metacognitive thinking more explicit in relation to broader academic expectations (Tardy et al., 2020; Van Lier, 2008). In doing so, the study highlights the potential of writing retreats to complement existing EAP provision by extending opportunities for multilingual writers to negotiate academic writing practices beyond the traditional classroom.

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