

Writing an Academic Paper: The Trials and Tribulations of Malaysian Tertiary Students

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Abstract Tertiary students need to write academic papers. Producing a good essay calls for meticulous attention. This case study focuses on the problems faced by tertiary students when writing introduction and background sections. Twenty samples are taken from a group of social science students studying an English Academic Writing module. The study was conducted over a period of four months and involved content analysis of the elements associated with introduction and background sections, and the language used. A questionnaire was administered upon the completion of the academic essay writing task. The results showed that writing in-text citations, differentiating between introduction and background paragraphs and constructing interesting introductions were clearly difficult tasks for the students.

Keywords: academic writing, introduction paragraph, background paragraph, discourse competence, student

***Abstrak** Para penuntut pusat pengajian tinggi perlu menghasilkan penulisan ilmiah. Namun, menghasilkan penulisan yang baik memerlukan perhatian yang serius. Kajian kes ini memfokus kepada apakah masalah yang dihadapi oleh pelajar apabila menulis perenggan pengenalan dan latar belakang. Kajian ini melibatkan 20 responden dari aliran sastera yang mengikuti modul English Academic Writing. Modul ini menggunakan struktur karangan yang dicadangkan oleh kajian ini yang dijalankan selama empat bulan dan melibatkan kajian kandungan perenggan pengenalan dan latar belakang serta penggunaan bahasa. Borang kaji selidik juga telah digunakan. Penemuan kajian ini menunjukkan bahawa penulisan sumber*

maklumat (in-text citation), dan juga membezakan antara kandungan perenggan pengenalan dan latar belakang adalah suatu tugas yang sukar bagi pelajar-pelajar.

Kata kunci: *penulisan ilmiah, perenggan pengenalan, perenggan latar belakang, kecekapan wacana, pelajar*

INTRODUCTION

English Language still plays an important role in the Malaysian society even though it is not considered as Malaysia's legitimate second language. It is still maintained as a means of communication among Malaysians, particularly in commercial and academic fields. English is undoubtedly the tool for accessing scientific and technological knowledge, as well as academic, professional and recreational materials. In tertiary institutions, the need for English Language proficiency is essential as most of the resources or reference materials are generally only available in English. In fact, most of the undergraduate programmes currently offered at local universities require students to write their assignments in English, especially in the science and engineering fields.

Thus, in view of the importance of the English Language as a means of acquiring knowledge and its status as a "world language," the Malaysian English Language syllabus is geared towards providing the basis for these post-secondary school needs and enabling Malaysian students to become proficient in English (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2000:1). English Language is taught as a second language to all students from their first year at primary school right up to the end of their secondary education. After completing Form Five, students have the option to either start working, go to college or sit for their pre-university courses. Up until 1999 however, the English Language was not offered as a subject at the Sixth Form or Matriculation level; the only exception being English literature. Realising the vacuum between Sixth Form or Matriculation level and Tertiary level, in 2000, the Malaysian Ministry of Education developed the Malaysian University English Test (MUET).

... with the aim of improving the teaching and learning of English as an important second language as well as consolidating and further enhancing the English language ability of Sixth Formers and other

pre-university students. The syllabus aims to equip students with the appropriate level of proficiency in English so as to enable them to perform effectively in their academic pursuits at tertiary levels; it also broadly seeks to bridge the gap in language needs between secondary and tertiary education by enhancing communication competency and by providing the context for language use that is related to the tertiary academic experience. Specifically, the syllabus deals with all the four components of language, i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing.

(ELS Language Centers Malaysia, n.d)

In tandem with national educational aspirations, Malaysian public universities have made English Language a compulsory entrance requirement. In most Malaysian public universities, the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) English paper or the MUET result is used to determine whether students who enter university will be exempted from taking English Language proficiency papers at university.

At Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), all first year students with MUET Bands 3, 4, 5 and 6 are only required to register for one paper under the English Language programme (either English for Academic Reading and Writing, English for Research Purposes or Grammar in Context) which they take in the first semester; in the remaining three semesters, they are given the opportunity to study foreign languages. Conversely, students with MUET Bands 1 and 2 are required to take four English proficiency papers, namely, Communicative English Grammar, English for Oral Communication, English for Reading and Writing, and English for Academic Reading and Writing (Osman & Abu Bakar, 2009).

Tertiary English Second Language Learners and Writing

Writing is part and parcel of academic life—something that a student cannot run away from. Term papers, laboratory reports, presentation papers, biographical studies are just some examples of the anticipated written output. Graduates are expected to be knowledgeable and critical, and one way to prove that they have these abilities are by looking at their written work.

Lester and Lester (2010:1) say that,

Choosing a format, exploring sources through critical reading, and then completing the writing task with grace and style are daunting tasks . . . writing is an outlet for inquisitive and creative nature in each of us The satisfaction of writing well and relating our understanding to others provides intellectual stimulation and insight into our own beliefs and values.

In Malaysian schools and throughout the world in general, English Language education is primarily the four main skills of the language: listening, speaking, reading and writing, and also grammar (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2000:4). In a second language classroom,

. . . writing is an extension of listening and speaking. Therefore, the student must be provided opportunities to build, extend, and refine oral language in order to improve written output. Since writing involves some risk taking, it is important for students to be comfortable taking risks. They need to know that their efforts are appreciated and that the message they are trying to convey is valued over the form.

(North Carolina Board of Education, n.d)

Academic Writing Discourse Competence

Moving on from the issue of tertiary English second language learners and writing in general, this paper aims to narrow the discussion to academic writing discourse. Bruce (2008:1) has this to say on this matter:

During the last few decades, the worldwide phenomenon of the increasing use of English as an international language, and the accompanying demand to learn English as an Additional Language (hereafter EAL), have given rise to exponential growth in the activities of language teaching, materials publishing, and research that further informs these activities. Increasingly, the motivation of students to learn English is for the purpose of participation in higher education at English-medium universities. Thus, for many teachers, a major focus of their work is on preparing learners to cope with the language requirements and, in particular, the writing requirements of university courses.

It is acknowledged that discourse competence is a crucial aspect of a person's overall communicative competence. For second language learners to be competent in academic writing, it has been the task of the teacher to “develop a clear understanding of the types of knowledge and process that need to be integrated into the syllabus, pedagogy and teaching materials in order to support the development of this area of language knowledge” (Bruce, 2008:5). Discourse competence can be developed if a learner is familiar with a particular discourse, which in the context of a university is the discourse of the subject discipline in which he/she is studying. This is confirmed by Irvin (2010), who stressed the success in academic writing depends on how good one understands what he/she is doing and the approach used in the writing task. As learners progress from high school to tertiary education, their writing tasks and requirements also change. Irvin (2010: para 2) states,

. . . early research done on college writers discovered that whether students produced a successful piece of writing depended largely upon their representation of the writing task. The writers' mental model for picturing their task made a huge difference. Most people as they start college have wildly strange ideas about what they are doing when they write an essay, or worse—they have no clear idea at all.

What is Academic Writing?

Thaiss *et al.* (2006) define academic writing as writing that is required and used in educational establishments such as colleges and universities. Students' assignments and lecturer's papers (for publication or conference presentation) are typical representations of academic writing.

Jones (n.d.:para 1) defines academic writing as being, “. . . based on analysis the process of breaking down ideas - to increase one's understanding. It uses deductive reasoning, semi-formal voice, and third person point-of-view.”

The Massey University website (n.d.) states that,

. . . academic writing does many of the things that personal writing does not: it has its own set of rules and practices.

- *These rules and practices may be organised around a formal order or structure in which to present ideas, in addition to ensuring that ideas are supported by author citations in the literature.*
- *In contrast to personal writing contexts, academic writing is different because it deals with the underlying theories and causes governing processes and practices in everyday life, as well as exploring alternative explanations for these events.*
- *Academic writing follows a particular 'tone' and adheres to traditional conventions of punctuation, grammar, and spelling.*

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study will focus on the writing of introduction and background paragraphs as required in the English for Academic Reading and Writing (UB00402) module of the UMS English Language programme. The main objectives of this study are to identify:

1. The structure of organisation, language use and content of the introduction and background paragraphs of an academic paper produced by social sciences students.
2. The social sciences students' perception of their problems in writing the introduction and background paragraphs.

Academic Reading And Writing Module (UB00402)

This module was first offered by the Centre for the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning in July 2008. According to the UB00402 Malaysian Quality Framework (Pusat Penataran Ilmu dan Bahasa, 2010) document:

This module aims to equip students with the advance skills of writing and reading. It is also to enhance students' ability in reading and writing academic texts. Texts from related journals will be used as materials in teaching this module. Students will be exposed to and trained in using strategies that can help them in reading academic texts in their disciplines. They will also be taught academic writing strategies like forming and arranging relevant ideas accordingly, developing and supporting appropriate and specific opinions, and writing effective introduction and conclusions thus, producing an effective piece of academic writing.

According to the synopsis, the main focus of the module is to produce a piece of academic writing. Students learn about their subject via reading samples of academic text and through the preparation of an academic paper. Assessment is based on two short reading tests, a final examination and a project paper that relates to their field of study. The paper should have issues to discuss and present more than just a statement of the facts. Since the paper is to be based on secondary research, students are only expected to read up on their selected topic; no field work is required. The written assignment is assessed through a subjective assessment using an analytic scoring procedure to evaluate the overall rhetorical features and quality of the writing. Assignments are divided into sub-components which are assessed individually so that the authenticity of the students' works can be more easily determined.

Academicians and scholars have different ideas about what constitutes a model academic paper; it varies from country to country and from university to university. No model can be said to be totally correct or incorrect.

As “discourse competence” is crucial for a learner’s “communicative competence in a language,” the design of UB00402 (Academic Reading and Writing Module) is based on the convention introduced by Tunceren and Cavusgil (2006). It is a 5-paragraph essay format that all Malaysian English Language learners are familiar with. They have been taught this basic essay writing structure throughout primary and secondary school.

Since UB00402 is taken by students from different disciplines (including both science and non-science subjects) with varying levels of English Language proficiency, the potential for confusion over which approach to use is high; consequently, only one model of academic writing is utilised throughout the course.

Tunceren and Cavusgil (2006) module of an academic essay generally includes five to nine main paragraphs, i.e., an introductory paragraph, a background paragraph, up to six body paragraphs and a concluding paragraph (see Table 1), and also in-text citation and end-of-text references.

Table 1: Organisation of expository essays

Sub-heading	Elaboration
Introduction Paragraph	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- stimulate your readers' interest in your topic.- provide brief information (about one to four sentences) about the topic.- include a clear thesis statement that explains the focus of your paper.
Background Paragraph	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- include information that is factual and/or historical, explaining the background of the topic that readers need.- ask yourself information questions like Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? Responses to these questions and citations of sources where you found the answers may be included in your background paragraph.
Body Paragraph(s)	<p>For each body paragraph,</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">- begin with a topic sentence that relates directly to the thesis statement and contains both a main idea and controlling idea(s).- illustrate the major ideas with specific examples and details.- use logical organisers to show the relationship between ideas.- include in-text citation for any sources used.- end with a brief concluding sentence.
Concluding Paragraph	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- remind readers of the main points developed in your essay.- relate the conclusion to remarks in the introduction.- provide the reader with final comments on the topic.- do not introduce more information or a new angle on the topic.
End-of-text Reference Page	On a separate page, list all the sources referred to when you wrote your paper.

Source: Tunceren and Cavusgil, 2006: 18, cited in Osman and Abu Bakar, 2009.

METHOD

This is a content analysis research that examines academic papers written by tertiary learners of a public university. It is a continuation of a research conducted earlier on a few medical students who also sat for the same module (Osman & Abu Bakar, 2009). However, the samples used in this present research are second year social science students of UMS who are taking the UB00402 module. In Semester I, 2009/2010, 430 students attended the course. However for the purpose of this case study, only 20 students from the social sciences were selected, based on their performance at Levels 1, 2 and 3. Selection was based on the students' results, which were generally low (i.e., C and below) and was restricted to four classes because only a few lecturers or tutors agreed to participate in the study.

The duration of this research is four months, i.e., the beginning of the July semester until the end of the semester (Semester 1, 2009/2010). The students were briefed on the objective of the module and also the project paper (refer to Table 2 for structure of evaluation).

Table 2: The format for the term paper

Component	Ref. Page	Submission Week	Marks	Remarks
Essay Map	College Writing pp. 26–27	Wk 5–7	10 marks	Wk 5—1st draft. No marks. Wk 6—return draft with comments/suggestions. Wk 7—final draft and graded Refer to marking scheme.
Introductory Paragraph	College Writing pp. 37 & 38–40			
Background Paragraph	College Writing pp. 29 & 69–73	Presentation Wk 10 & 11	5 marks	Use Peer Review Form & Tutor Review Form.
Body Paragraphs	College Writing pp. 33 & 97–99			
Concluding Paragraph	College Writing pp. 41, 42 & 91			
Final Product	College Writing pp. 18 & 252	Wk 13	15 marks	Refer to marking scheme.

Source: UB00402 Syllabus: p. 3.

Table 2 shows that the academic paper produced by the students is categorised as a process rather than as product-based writing. Students were allowed to produce multiple drafts so that they could correct and improve their writing. Before they submit their final draft, students were asked to present their work orally in-front of the class. This measure was taken in order to verify the students' work.

Students involved in this research were also given a questionnaire at the end of the semester, to ascertain the students' views on the teaching and learning of writing in the UB00402 module. The questionnaire used is adapted from a questionnaire that was used by Osman and Abu Bakar (2009) in their research with medical students. It contained three main sections entitled Demographic Information, Students' Perceptions Regarding the Teaching of Writing and Students' Feedback on the Course.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Questionnaire

Section A—Respondents' Demographic Information

Twenty respondents from the School of Arts, School of Psychology, School of Social Sciences and School of Education were involved in the research. Seventy percent of the respondents were Malay, while the remaining 30 percent were from other races. Their age ranged from 20 to 21 years. The distribution according to gender was 80 percent male and 20 percent female. All the respondents stated their spoken language as Malay. In terms of their English Language performance, 11 of the respondents obtained Band 1 and nine respondents obtained Band 2 for MUET in 2007. All the respondents admitted that their English writing skills were at beginner's level.

Section B—Students' Perceptions Regarding the Teaching and Learning of Writing

Section B comprised 22 questions and was divided into three parts: statement on effectiveness of the teaching and learning of UB00402, statements on writing skills acquired, and statements on problems faced during the course (Table 3).

Table 3: Teaching and Learning of UB00402: Students perceptions

a. Effectiveness of the teaching and learning of UB00402

Item (Part A)	Statements on effectiveness of the teaching and learning of UB00402	Disagree	Agree
1	Learning ways to write a specific essay is beneficial to me.	0	20(100%)
2	Writing is taught through activities carried out in the classroom.	0	20(100%)
3	Writing is an easy task.	20(100%)	0
4	I am already very good at writing essay related to academic writing.	20(100%)	0
5	I like writing because I can express myself.	17(85%)	3(15%)
6	The skill of writing depends on revision and practice.	5(25%)	15(75%)
7	I can reflect on my previous way of understanding how to write an academic paper.	17(85%)	3(15%)
8	I understand the techniques of writing an academic paper better now.	2(5%)	18(90%)
9	I am glad I could write about this topic to develop my skill and talent in writing.	1(5%)	19(95%)
10	Certain things that I have learnt in the past are clearer now after learning how to write this type of essay.	4(20%)	16(80%)
11	After attending this course, I could process points on what to write more easily.	9(45%)	11(55%)
12	This technique of writing has helped me to be a better writer.	4(20%)	16(80%)
13	I see “writing essay” the same now, as before learning this technique.	18(90%)	2(10%)
14	I can produce an academic paper within the time frame given.	20(100%)	0

b. Writing skills required

Item (Part B)	Statements on skill of writing acquired	Disagree	Agree
15	I have been exposed to different types of techniques on how to write an academic paper.	8(40%)	12(60%)
16	I am ready to act on what I learned in this writing class.	10(50%)	10(50%)
17	I like the technique/approach used by my teacher.	2(10%)	18(90%)
18	I gain extra credit because the technique has been valuable and meaningful to me.	10(50%)	10(50%)
19	The genre-based approach to writing has improved my writing skills.	3(15%)	17(85%)
20	The process of learning to write is a waste of time.	19(95%)	1(5%)

c. Problems faced during the course

Item (Part C)	Statements on problems faced during the course	Disagree	Agree
21	I always have problem starting my writing.	0	20(100%)
22	I really did not know what I was writing about in the writing.	18(90%)	2(10%)

From these tables, it can be said that most of the statements provoked positive responses towards the writing process as experienced in UB00402. Most respondents agreed that the experience was beneficial as it enabled them to develop their writing skills considerably. Students learnt how to reflect on their writing more consciously and after attending the course, they felt more confident about writing an academic paper in the English Language (items 10 and 12).

Section C—Respondents’ Course Feedback

The opinions of the respondents regarding problems encountered on the course are shown in Section C of the questionnaire, which documents students’ feedback. Table 4 summarises the feedback by listing the most popular responses of the respondents.

Table 4: Students' feedback on the course

Part C
Like
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Gained knowledge on academic writing skills.2. Essay topic related to own major/minor.
Dislike
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Feel bored because have to write and read academic material.2. Teaching does not focus on grammar.3. Hate writing essays.4. Limited vocabulary which makes reading and writing difficult.

From Table 4, it can be said that students found the module useful as it helped them with their writing skills. However, students who gave negative feedback on the module outnumbered those expressing positive opinions. This finding contradicts those of Osman and Abu Bakar (2009), which indicated more positive responses towards the course than negative ones. This may be due to the fact that the sample from the previous study was made up exclusively of medical students, who are basically high achievers whereas the sample in this study were relatively low achievers from the social sciences.

Project Paper

Academic Essay Organisation

For the purpose of this paper, only the introduction and background paragraphs will be highlighted. Students were given an assignment to produce an academic paper related to their field of study (social sciences). As a safeguard against plagiarism and inappropriate content, students were asked to produce several drafts of each essay section (on average, two or three drafts were produced by each student). Mullen (2006) and Silber (2008) determined that one of the best writing practices is to draft, revise, edit, and review. They say that all these techniques will help improve a written text.

Table 5: Structure of an academic essay

Sub-heading	Elaboration	Availability in 1st draft	Availability in final draft
Introductory Paragraph	- stimulate your readers' interest in your topic.	0/20	6/20
	- provide brief information (about one to four sentences) about the topic.	4/20	20/20
	- include a clear thesis statement that explains the focus of your paper.	1/20	20/20
Background Paragraph	- include information that is factual and/or historical, explaining the background of the topic that readers need.	10/20	20/20
	- ask yourself information questions like: Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? Responses to these questions and citations of sources where you found the answers may be included in your background paragraph.	1/20	18/20

Source: Adapted from Tunceren and Cavusgil, 2006, p. 18.

Table 5 supports Mullen (2006) and Silber (2008) view on process writing, i.e., drafting, reviewing and editing. Through this process, the students are able to organise their writing and also are able to know the difference between an introduction and background paragraph. However, bearing in mind that the students are all second language learners, the end product were not without grammar and linguistic mistakes.

This is most probably because the students' foundation in the language is not strong. Looking at the students' semester 2 English Language results, i.e., English for Reading and Writing, no As were recorded for the paper. In addition, the content of the textbook and the course syllabus do not include the teaching and learning of grammar in detail.

In-text citation and end-text citation techniques

An academic paper differs from other genres because of the existence of in-text citation and end-text citation. In the case of in-text citation, the

ability to quote and paraphrase correctly is paramount. If quotations and paraphrases are not done properly according to academic conventions, the validity of the paper will be undermined, and the writer may be open to accusations of plagiarism.

Table 6: Paraphrasing techniques

NO	TECHNIQUES	Availability in 1st draft	Availability in final draft
1	Change a word form from one part of speech to another.	0/20	0/20
2	Use synonyms.	0/20	14/20
3	Change numbers and percentages to different forms.	1/20	1/20
4	Change the word order (e.g., change from active to passive and vice versa, move modifiers to different positions).	3/20	5/20
5	Use different definition structure.	5/20	10/20
6	Use different attribution signals.	2/20	20/20
7	Change the sentence structure, and use different connecting words.	0/20	15/20
8	Do not change key terms or proper nouns.	0/20	3/20

Source: Adapted from Tunceren and Cavusgil, 2006: pp.82–86.

Looking at Table 6, it can be concluded that a majority of the students learned at least some of the techniques described by Tunceren and Cavusgil (2006) in their book *College Writing 4*. However, 14 students took the cautious approach, preferring to quote rather than paraphrase from the first draft onward. This unwillingness to paraphrase undermined the quality of the students’ academic papers because, as Tunceren and Cavusgil (2006:82) have said, “Although you can occasionally use a direct quotation in your writing, one convention of academic writing is to paraphrase more frequently than quoting.”

Besides knowing the proper techniques and formats for quoting and paraphrasing, students also need to know how to cite sources correctly. Tunceren and Cavusgil (2006) use the APA style for citation writing in their book. However, they do point out that while, “The APA (American Psychological Association) style is commonly used by the social sciences

(e.g., economics, psychology, political science) . . . [the] MLA (Modern Language Association) style is often used in humanities courses like literature or history” (p. 10).

CONCLUSION

Looking at the purposes of this research which are to identify the structure of organisation, language use and content of the introduction and background paragraphs of an academic paper produced by social sciences students, and also to identify the social science students’ perception of their problems in writing the introduction and background paragraphs, it can be concluded that the Tunceren and Cavusgil (2006) model used in the UB00402 module has helped the students to understand and also produce better academic essays. However, because of problems at the syntactic level, i.e., arranging the words to form the most comprehensible structure, not many achieved excellent result for this particular module.

This research paper also proves that academic writing is a challenge to both social sciences and also science students (research done by Osman & Abu Bakar [2009] on medical students). The highlighted challenges are paraphrasing, grammar and vocabulary.

For further investigation in the area of academic writing and students’ perception, it is possible if other models of academic writing be studied and compared to the Tunceren and Cavusgil model. A bigger number of samples from more than one tertiary institution should also be used in order to validate the finding.

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