“They don’t see what I see in my head”: helping ESL students at University Brunei Darussalam (UBD) to navigate the murky waters of academic writing

Sharifah Nurul Huda Alkaff, Universiti Brunei Darussalam

Abstract: Horowitz (1986) states that academic writing is the type of writing most ESL/EFL students are required to do in English speaking universities and it is also most likely the type of writing that they are exposed to in their home countries. However, there seems to be much variability in how acceptable standards of academic writing are perceived by individuals within and among different academic communities and language and cultural backgrounds. At the University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD), English is the main medium of instruction. The majority of courses at UBD are taught in English by L1 English-speaking and L2 English-speaking lecturers who hail from all corners of the globe. Thus, UBD students have to constantly grapple with perceptions of acceptable academic writing among lecturers from not just different academic communities but also from different socio-cultural and language backgrounds. This paper thus attempts to identify and explore possible steps and strategies which will allow consensual understandings concerning academic writing to emerge in order to minimise the problem.

Introduction

The last two decades have witnessed a steady growth in research on academic writing. In one of the first studies on student writing tasks, Horowitz (1986) states that academic writing is the type of writing most ESL/EFL students are required to do in English speaking universities and it is also most likely the type of writing that they are exposed to in their home countries. The vast majority of ESL writers view proficiency in academic writing as their main goal in ESL writing development. ‘Academic’ writing as referred to by researchers in academic discourse is invariably the various forms of the essay. Woodward-Kron and van der Wal (1997) in their university wide survey of lecturers’ perceptions of student literacy found that the text types most students are required to write are discussion and
analytical essays. Although Swales (1990) states that a particular discourse community uses one or more genre of writing, the literature on academic discourse in the Arts indicates that the essay is the preferred genre for academic writing (Connor and Johns, 1989; Swales, 1984; Hückin, 1987; Halliday and Martin, 1993; Baxerman, 1988). Hinkel (2002), for example, uses the term ‘text’, that is, L2 students’ text specifically, interchangeably with the word ‘essay’. A more recent article by Leki (2003) suggests that essay writing is not a prominent feature of the first two years of most undergraduates’ tasks but nonetheless, she does not dismiss the importance of essay writing for upper tertiary students.

In my paper, I will first briefly describe the set-up of the Universiti Brunei Darussalam (UBD) where my study is based and the contexts in which learning and teaching takes place at this institution. I will then look at and discuss how students and lecturers from three faculties within UBD perceive a ‘good’ student essay. Finally, I will attempt to identify and explore possible steps and strategies which will allow consensus concerning academic writing to emerge in order to minimise problems faced by students because of variations in perceptions of ‘good’ academic writing among lecturers. With regards to the notion of ‘good’ writing in this paper, it should be emphasised here that the adjective ‘good’ in a phrase such as ‘good academic essay’ is not meant to imply that there is some abstract standard of excellence but rather writing that is mutually agreed by both lecturers and students as fulfilling the criteria of formal academic prose.

UBD was established in 1985, one year after the country’s independence from Britain. It is currently the only university in Brunei Darussalam. There are three mediums of instruction: English, Malay and Arabic, but the majority of courses offered at UBD are taught in English. English-medium courses at UBD are taught by native-English speaking (NS) and non-native English speaking (NNS) lecturers. The latter form the majority of the academics in English-medium courses and they comprise Bruneian lecturers and others from at least a dozen other countries. Thus, UBD students have to constantly grapple with perceptions of acceptable academic writing among lecturers from not just different academic communities but also from different socio-cultural and language backgrounds. This realisation was one of the factors that motivated me to investigate perceptions of ‘good’ academic writing among students and lecturers at UBD. Johns (1993) believes that this area of research (i.e. readers’ expectations) has been “least explored in the literature” (p.75) and that it is especially important for English as a second language (ESL) students to acquire knowledge of their readers’ expectations.

Methodology
The data that I will present in this paper were part of a larger volume of data collected for my PhD dissertation that primarily investigated the processes and beliefs that shape lecturers’ and students’ perceptions of ‘good’ ESL academic writing in non-scientific discourse. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were employed at different points in the study in an embedded or nested type of mixed-method integrated research design (Caracelli et al. 1997). The qualitative phase progressed through three stages. The first stage was an exploratory exercise, including examining examples of student essays and conducting preliminary interviews with lecturers and students. The second stage was a pilot study of interview schedules utilising interview questions developed from the findings of the first stage. The third and final stage of data collection was the main qualitative study which comprised applying the refined interview schedules to a sample of lecturers and students. All three stages yielded a total of 80 interview data: 50 from students and 30 from lecturers from three faculties at UBD. The three stages of qualitative data collection led to the development of a conceptual framework that encompassed 3 super-ordinate categories, 9 categories and 17 sub-categories of the constructs of academic writing (refer to Figure 1).

This conceptual framework was used as the basis for the construction of a questionnaire to confirm the findings of the first phase of the study. The collection of qualitative and quantitative data was intended to corroborate or establish convergence of the results of the study. Based on the definitions of the categories and sub-categories in the conceptual framework, definitions that could be displayed within a relatively short paragraph were identified. Conversely, those descriptions that could not be reasonably exemplified within a short paragraph were deemed unsuitable for testing in the questionnaire. The final version of the questionnaire was administered to 213 students from three faculties.

Findings
A key finding of the study is that not only are there significant differences between lecturers’ and students’ perceptions of exactly what constitutes ‘good’ academic writing, but there are also differences among lecturers both within the disciplines and amongst lecturers within the same discipline as to the characteristics which define acceptable academic writing.
Dealing firstly with the wider issue of the differences in lecturers’ and students’ perceptions concerning acceptable academic writing, the data clearly indicate that there is clear mismatch between the perceptions of lecturers and students towards what is regarded as ‘good’ ESL academic writing. There are differences in views between both sets of respondents as to the importance of several constructs in ESL writing and these constructs cut across all the three superordinate categories. There is certainly cause for concern as it suggests that a considerable number of students do not gauge accurately what is perceived by their lecturers as important in ESL academic writing.

For example, less than 20% of students agreed that a good command of the construct Morphology and Syntax (grammar) need to be present in an essay as opposed to more than 90% of lecturers who believed that a successful essay needs to show a good control of morpho-syntactic forms. Although many lecturers say that they are sometimes willing to adjust their expectations because of the students’ perceived poor language skills, they, nonetheless, believe that a good control of morpho-syntactic forms is an important criterion in a successful essay.

The data also reveal that there are differing levels of agreement among the lecturers regarding the constructs concerning perceptions of ‘good’ ESL academic writing. Although some constructs recorded relatively high levels of agreement among the respondents interviewed, others showed much less agreement among the subjects as to its importance in the execution of a successful essay. The data also reveals that even within the same discipline, perceptions of appropriate discourse conventions and successful writing vary. For example:

1. For the construct, Critical Analysis and/or Engagement in an Argument/Interlocution, one ESL lecturer states that she doesn’t mind students adopting a “sitting on the fence” position when writing argumentative essays while another ESL lecturer firmly believes that it would be “very difficult” for her to grade such an essay as she believes that students need to take a stance or adopt a position in their argumentative essays.

2. Under the sub-category of Register, differences exist among two ESL lecturers on the acceptability of more informal register in students’ essays. One ESL lecturer insists that it is “very important” for students to “write in an academic style” only, while another ESL lecturer believes that a less informal register is acceptable because of his beliefs that language is constantly “changing” and evolving and that what was appropriate in academic contexts in the past may not be important or relevant in present times.

Academic writing can, therefore, be viewed as a highly complex process which is influenced by what Samraj (2002) describes as “layers of context” (p.165). Thus, the concept of good writing is seen as context bound and what is good writing for one lecturer may not be as successful for all circumstances. This was also clearly reflected in the data where it was found to be an almost impossible task to obtain straight answers as to the importance of each of the constructs of academic writing in a successful essay. This led to the development of what was labelled as ‘Anomalous Areas’ that refers to data of the “Yes, it is important but...” kind. For example, the vast majority of lecturers say they regard a comprehensive coverage of issues discussed within an essay as very important but some of these lecturers also feel that it is less important for first and second year students to demonstrate this in an essay. Similarly, the construct Personal Perspective shows a high level of agreement among lecturers as to its importance in acceptable academic writing but at the same time, many lecturers also believe that it less essential to display much personal insight in expository and descriptive essays.

To add to the complexity of the situation, the overall data from lecturers also indicate a perceived sense of unfulfilled expectations of acceptable academic writing. Lecturers believe that they have to make adjustments to their perceptions or definitions of ‘good’ ESL academic writing in almost all of the categories of acceptable academic writing. Thus, lecturers may agree that certain constructs or categories may be very important in the planning and execution of successful essay but more often than not, when assessing students’ essays, many lecturers claim that they constantly have to adjust their expectations accordingly. For example, some lecturers believe that Bruneian student writers find issues such as presenting personal perspectives or critically analysing facts in their academic essays particularly problematic as their educational experiences, which are steeped in the Malay Islamic Monarchy (MIB) ideology, with its emphasis on social and communal values over individual ones, are by nature, at odds with the notions of critical enquiry in western academic rhetoric. Another perceived area of compromise is a good command of language which is very important according to most lecturers. However, they feel that many students are not able to fulfill this criterion due to what they perceive as students’ generally poor language skills. Thus, lecturers believe that their criteria or expectations of good writing are more
often than not tempered and mitigated by the students' language and cognitive ability and the obstacles posed by their particular socio and cultural influences.

Among the students, the same phenomenon manifests itself in some students acknowledging that they feel that they can recognise their lecturers’ criteria of acceptable academic writing and in several cases, share the same views towards these constructs of writing. However, they feel that they are unable to fulfil these expectations due to precisely the same reasons offered by the lecturers, that is, poor language and cognitive skills and social and cultural constraints in meeting these definitions of good writing. For example, two students stated that although they feel that their lecturers generally require them to show some kind of personal insight in their essays, they feel that they are unable to do so because they believe that they are “basically quite shy” and “kind of passive”. Another example is when a student seems able to quite clearly express what she feels is needed in order to produce a coherent paragraph but laments that “when someone else reads it, they don’t see what I see in my head” because she is unable to successfully articulate her thoughts in writing due to inadequate writing skills.

Another finding to emerge from this study that lends credence to the argument that academic writing is indeed a highly complex process is that there is a contradiction in the responses of the respondents towards acceptable academic writing. For example, the vast majority of lecturers say they regard a comprehensive coverage of issues discussed within the essay as important. However, at the same time as many as 30% of the lecturers interviewed during the main stage of qualitative data collection do not feel that it is essential for students to show evidence of wide reading in the subject matter. Another example concerns the views expressed by a few ESL lecturers. These lecturers seemed to indicate that a good comprehension of the topic is essential in producing a successful essay but as the interview progresses, they also believed that as language teachers, the quality of the language aspects of the essay would affect their judgment of the essay more than the content as they are “not qualified” to comment on the content.

The conclusions drawn from this study thus clearly reveal that UBD students have to navigate what appears to be an extremely complex situation involving the heterogeneous nature of perceptions of acceptable academic writing among lecturers at UBD. This situation needs to be addressed urgently because while some students show awareness of what is required by lecturers in different disciplines and cultural and language backgrounds, many others face considerable difficulties and uncertainty in trying to gauge as best as they can what is perceived as acceptable writing among their different lecturers. The varying expectations of acceptable academic writing among lecturers from across disciplines is best exemplified in the data where one student claimed that her content-course lecturers “blame” her ESL lecturers for emphasising report writing using bullet points in EAP classes rather than essays with prose which according to this student was what was required by her content-course lecturers. The differences in expectations of acceptable academic writing among different lecturers can result in the students being the victims of circumstances, as is the case with this particular student, who received poor marks for her essays from her content-course lecturers. However, as the findings of the study show, even if content-course and ESL lecturers can agree on a particular writing task that can best serve students’ academic writing needs in their respective disciplines, perceptions of what is ‘good’ academic writing may vary.

Possible Strategies
The findings as summarised above would inevitably lead to questions of how can be done to bridge the quite considerable gap in perceptions of acceptable academic writing among students and lecturers from different academic communities and socio-cultural backgrounds. How does one help one’s students navigate through this potential minefield of varying perceptions and contradictions in assessment of good writing?

The most obvious measure would be to encourage lecturers to ask students their perceptions of good writing and provide students their definitions of their criteria of good writing. Discussions can perhaps also centre on increasing awareness of norms and conventions in western and non-western academic ‘discourse’. As ESL students often have limited experience in anticipating expectations of English-speaking audiences, it is perhaps, very important to communicate those expectations to them.

Another thing we can impart to our students is that perceptions of appropriate discourse conventions vary even within the same discipline, depending on specific contexts and roles students are expected to assume. As reiterated by a number of researchers (Casanave, 1995; Zhu, 2004; Samraj, 2002) disciplinary communities are “not monolithic” and they contain local contextual dimensions or elements which influence students’ writing and lecturers’ perceptions. So perhaps, encouraging our students to conduct their own explorations of the discourse that they hope to gain
control of can be one way of discovering what these contextual dimensions are.

Developing a culture of continuous and frequent dialogue between students and lecturers from within and across disciplines can also be a good way to help students have a better understanding of the complexities of perceptions of acceptable academic writing because as pointed out by Walvoord and McCarthy as cited in Leki (1995), even a non-evaluative term like thesis statement can sometimes be understood differently in different disciplines across the curriculum. If lecturers have different definitions of the same terms, it would appear that students, particularly ESL students, would be more susceptible to this apparent confusion. Students may ‘hear’ what their lecturers deem as important but their understanding of such terms may not be identical. Thus, in order to make sense of this confusion, we can start by keeping the channels of communication open between all participants in the academic writing process.

This brings me to my final point. When thinking about what can be done to help our students gain a better understanding of their lecturers’ varying perceptions of ‘good’ academic writing, what struck me most is how content-course lecturers are largely overlooked in academic writing instruction. There is some information in the literature as to what English L1 content-course lecturers regard as important in academic writing but very little is available regarding the perceptions of non-L1 content course lecturers, even though they form an increasingly large part of the academic population at many universities. And when it comes to the literature on classroom feedback, there is virtually no information available on the types and nature of appropriate and effective feedback from content course lecturers, either English L1 or non-English L1. This is strange considering that researchers on student-teacher feedback acknowledge that “students gain a clearer understanding of audience (readers’) needs by receiving feedback on what they have done well and on what remains unclear” (Hyland, 2003) and that “teachers should provide feedback on all aspects of student texts, including content, rhetorical structure, grammar and mechanics” (Fathman and Walley, 1990). If this is the case, then perhaps we can ask ourselves – who is in a better position to provide feedback on the content of, say, a geography essay that a geography lecturer?

Another thing that struck me when collecting data for this study was the realisation that among the content-course lecturers, many were articulating their criteria of good writing for the first time in their academic careers.

Several content-course lecturers mentioned that they had not really thought about their criteria of good academic writing before they were approached by the researcher. Their years of teaching experience may mean that these lecturers can recognise ‘good’ writing when they see it but have had fewer opportunities to think about and articulate their criteria of good writing. Thus, if lecturers themselves have not had the occasion to think about and articulate their criteria of ‘good’ writing, then, it can be argued that discussing with their students what they want to see in an academic essay will not be a particularly easy task for these lecturers. Ann Johns, a leading scholar in second language writing, has a similar observation when she states that “....genre theorists have discovered, not surprisingly is that genre knowledge among experts in a discipline or profession is tacit, that even many who are full members of a discourse community and use a genre successfully cannot discuss the schematic/social knowledge they have that enables them to recognise, situate, understand and produce a text in a genre” (2000: 209).

Yet another observation that was gleaned during the process of data gathering for my study was that many content-course lecturers seemed to be of the view that teaching students to write successfully is somehow the responsibility of the EAP language teacher alone. Some even gave their opinions on how the EAP courses that students have to take during the first two years of tertiary studies have failed to improve their academic writing skills. Few ventured to share any insights on how they can help students to function in their particular disciplinary community. Wei Zhu (2004: 14) in his study on several aspects of academic writing, reports that even among the content-course lecturers who advocate a ‘layered model’ or division of labour view of teaching academic writing, that is, a process of academic writing instruction jointly undertaken by language/writing and content course instructors, most perceived their roles in helping students develop academic writing skills “mainly as the provider of opportunities for writing” rather than teaching specific disciplinary thought and communication processes.

Successful academic writing can thus be seen as a highly complex process and that investigating lecturers and students views on academic writing represent efforts to understand one aspect of the complexity. Through continued research, it is perhaps possible to gain a better understanding of academic writing, which should enable lecturers to better prepare ESL students for their writing tasks for both language and content-courses.
Figure 1: Showing schematic view of the conceptual framework that hinges on the relationship between the Ontological, the Methodological and the Epistemological Superordinate Categorisation.

ONTLOGICAL

- Focus
  > Addressing the Question
- PersonalVoice
  > Personal Perspective
  > Critical Analysis and/or Engagement
    in an Argument/Interpretation

EPSTEMOLOGICAL

- Content
  > Comprehensiveness of Coverage
  > Familiarity with and/or Comprehension of the Topic
- Evidence of Reading
  > Evidence of Wide Reading in Subject Matter
  > Reproduction of Facts
  > Plagiarism
  > Evidence of Cognitive Skills
  > Evidence of Ability to Synthesize

METHODOLOGICAL

- Structure
  > Appropriate Organisation of Topics and Ideas
  > Style of Writing
  > Register
  > ‘Good’ Style
  > Referencing Conventions
- Language
  > Morphology and Syntax (Grammar)
  > Vocabulary
  > Aesthetics
  > Handwriting
  > Overall Presentation

References


