

Case Study on Persuasiveness of Argument Texts Written by Proficient and Less Proficient Malaysian Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – Research has shown that university students, particularly non-native speakers of English, encounter difficulties with various academic text-types and often lack the ability to organise the information in a structure considered effective by the discourse community or to use the significant language features of the text-type effectively to achieve the intended purpose. The study examined the persuasiveness of argument texts written by proficient and less-proficient undergraduates in a Malaysian university. The aspects examined were the organisational structure of the text and the language features significant for fulfilling the persuasive purpose of the text.

Method – Forty argument texts were analysed: 22 written by undergraduates who were more proficient in English, and 18 by less-proficient undergraduates. The analysis focused on the organisation of the content of the argument text as well as selected language features, namely, connectors, modal verbs and passive voice.

Findings – The results showed that the proficient undergraduates used the structure considered effective for argument texts but the writing of the less-proficient group was characterised by unclear or absence of statement of stance and restatement of stance. To achieve the persuasive purpose of the text, the proficient undergraduates made use of connectors, modal verbs and passive voice more than the less-proficient group. However, the connectors ‘because’, ‘so’ and ‘besides’ were often used in a manner similar to spoken language,

and there was an overdependence on the modal verbs ‘can’ and ‘will’. The lack of conditionals and nominalisations was obvious for both groups, suggesting that these are more difficult language features to master and greater pedagogical attention is needed.

Significance– The paper explores differentiated focus in the teaching of academic writing at university level for students with high and low proficiency in English.

Keywords: Argument texts, English proficiency, academic writing, university

INTRODUCTION

Undergraduates beginning their university studies have to adjust to a higher level of academic reading and writing. The transition from reading textbooks and writing compositions to “understand[ing] complex academic discourse, especially academic research articles and books, as well as course lectures” is difficult for many undergraduates (Biber, 2006, p. 1). The difficulty lies in the subject matter and the academic language. University students need to engage with the meanings of specialised disciplines:

Reading can no longer serve as largely a process of decoding and memorisation and writing becomes much more than copying or imitating. Students are now required to construct new knowledge from and in text and critique this knowledge. (Cullip & Carol, 2002)

To demonstrate knowledge of the subject matter, undergraduates are expected to refer to numerous sources of information, compare and critique the information. It is no longer personal opinions which count. According to Grabe and Kaplan (1996):

... advanced academic contexts seldom place great store in personal knowledge and impressionistic interpretations. Instead advanced academic contexts require information from other sources, and a main goal of advanced complex writing activities is the analysis, synthesis, and interpretation of information from a variety of sources. (p. 344)