UNDERGRADUATES' WRITING IN DISCUSSION TEXT.

CHAI AI SZE

This project is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Education with Honours (Teaching English as Second Language)

Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human Development
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK
2009
Abstract

This case study examined the ability of undergraduates to handle the discussion text type that required by in the examination of the generic course PBI 1032 Academic Reading and Writing (ARW) in second term in year 2007/08 at University Malaysia Sarawak, with a specific focus on the structure and language features significant to the text-type. A total of 101 sample discussion texts obtained from undergraduates from different programmes and faculties at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. The results showed that the undergraduates only meet the qualities of the discussion text partially. Most of the undergraduates able to construct acceptable statement of issue, leading with Argument with relevant and adequate details and evidences were provided to explain the points. Text analysis of the sample discussion texts using the frameworks of Feez (1998) showed that the Argument Against and Assessment of the discussion text were the most difficult in terms of the text structure. There are two common mistakes that can be detected in the sample texts namely: (1) irrelevant points and (2) relevant content with the targeted issue but many lack the defining characteristics of the text type in its structure and style, particularly in assessment of the discussion text. The analysis of linguistic choices indicated most of the undergraduates were more competent and familiar with the conditional clauses, conjunction and modal verbs in order fulfill the purpose of the text type. There are 42 types of conjunctions that used to link the ideas in the sentences but the undergraduates had showed difficulties in using certain modal verbs to show the necessity in writing.
Abstrak

Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who gave me the possibility to complete this final year project.

I want to thank Dr Ting whose help, stimulating suggestions and encouragement helped me in all the time of research and writing of this thesis.

I also want to thank my parents for their loving support and patience.

I wish to express my warm and sincere thanks to Helen Poh who gave me untiring help during my difficult moments in completing this research.

Especially, I would like to give my special thanks to my husband Ken whose patient love enabled me to complete this work. Without his encouragement and understanding it would have been impossible for me to finish this research.
Table of Contents

Abstract iii
Abstrack iv
Acknowledgement v
Table of Content vi
List of Tables viii

Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION
1.1 The research problem 1
1.2 Aim and objectives of the study 4
1.3 Significance of the study 4
1.4 Operational Definition of Terms 5
1.5 Scope of the Study 6

Chapter 2 LITERATURE REVIEW
2.1 General Writing 7
2.2 Academic Writing 10
2.3 Genre Analysis 17
2.4 Research on academic writing 21
2.5 Summary 24

Chapter 3 METHODOLOGY
3.1 Research design 25
3.2 Texts selected for analysis 26
3.3 Instrument for data collection 27
3.4 Data Analysis 28
3.5 Limitations of the Study 39

Chapter 4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
4.1 Text structure of discussion text 31
4.2 Language features of discussion text 52
4.3 Discussion 64
4.4 Summary 66

Chapter 5 CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
5.1 Overview of the study 71
List of Tables

Table 1  Basis outlines for a discussion essay  
Table 2  Genre in EAP  
Table 3  Statement of issue identified in the 101 sample texts  
Table 4  Argument For identified in the 101 sample texts  
Table 5  Details of Argument For identified in the 101 sample texts  
Table 6  Argument Against identified in the 101 sample texts  
Table 7  Details of Argument Against identified in the 101 sample texts  
Table 8  Assessment identified in the 101 sample texts  
Table 9  Distributions of Conditional clauses in 101 sample texts  
Table 10 Results of the finding on conjunctions  
Table 11 Results of the finding on conjunctions  
Table 12 Checklist for Text Structure  
Table 13 Checklist for Language Features (Modality)  
Table 14 Checklist for Language Features (Conjunctions)  
Table 15 Checklist for Language Features (Conditional clauses)
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

This chapter presented the background of the study on writing discussion and the statement of the problem which interrelated with the objectives of the study. Some significant research questions had highlighted the rationale and the significance of the study. The scope of the study presented the descriptions on the boundaries of what the study covers and does not cover in the study. Finally, this chapter also included the conceptual and operational definitions of terms and the chapter review at the end of this chapter.

1.1 The Research Problem

Undergraduates write to fulfill their academic purposes. They need to write essays, assignments, notes in their tertiary education for their academic audiences (lecturer, professor who are rating their writing) English for academic purpose is one of the branches of English for specific purpose which serves new conventions of style, referencing and layout of these academic writing text types for the undergraduates to fulfill the academic purposes. Under EAP, different academic text types were introduced in relation to its purposes. The undergraduates were exposing to these purposes, text organization and language features by looking at different text types: discussion, explanation, argumentation etc. The academic paper should be able to reflect their knowledge of content by demonstrating appropriate text structure and language features. Most undergraduates are trained in academic writing by engaging themselves in EAP to be effective in writing different genres of writing. They may
have some comprehension of the structure of an academic paper but might not expose thoroughly the pattern of academic paper to be performed. Therefore, Genre-based approach has emerged as a new approach in teaching writing to learners by most English Language teachers to create a structured, integrated and communicative language teaching classroom which lead them in writing more coherent and fluent academic writing paper.

There are different text types in academic writing to present their ideas, to persuade the readers or to report their research findings. These text types serve different functions and meanings and these writing genres are examined critically by identifying the specific language features and structure found in each genre in order to make the text purposeful and meaningful to the readers.

For example, according to Peters and William (2000), the purpose of discussion text is to allow the participants and the readers to examine an issue from more than one angle. Often quite opposite points of view are expressed about an issue and arguments for these are put forward, compared and evaluated against each other. Under EAP, different academic text types were introduced in relation to its purposes. The undergraduates were exposed to these purposes, text organization and language features by looking at different text types: discussion, explanation, argumentation etc. In this respect, academic writing can be viewed as a mediating domain between adult students’ wider cultural worlds and the final pieces of written work that they hand in for assessment.

There have been a number of publications in recent years which have offered English language teachers advice on how to teach students to write. For example, in a study done by Smith and Sue (1995), a study has focus on the way a classroom teacher has successfully taught her class how to write in discussion text and Henry
and Roseberry (1999) have conducted a study on evaluation on the teaching method and materials in genre-based language instruction to the undergraduates' at the University of Brunei Darussalam in writing academic paper.

These publications do not focus on offering teachers more guidelines and recommendations on how to teach writing by analyze undergraduates writing, but instead details the way a classroom teacher has successfully taught her class how to write in particular genre. A survey conducted recently by the NT child ESL and Literacy research Node found that teachers wanted more than the guidelines usually available in published materials. There was an indication from teachers that they wanted access to more practical in published materials. There was an indication from teachers that they wanted access to more practical teaching resources. It is hoped that documenting a successful example of actual undergraduates writing in discussion text will address need and that other teachers may be able to apply some of the methods in their own classroom.

In this case study, the text analysis examined the ability of undergraduates to handle the discussion text type that required in the examination of the generic course PBI 1032 Academic Reading and Writing (ARW) in second term in year 2007/2008 at University Malaysia Sarawak, with the specific focus on the structure and language features significant to the text type. The study had identify the structure of the writing in relation to the purpose of the discussion text which inclusive of statement of issue, Argument For and Argument Against, details of Argument For and details of Argument Against and assessment or recommendation. Besides, the case study also determined the frequency of use of the three significant language features in the discussion text type which are conditional clauses, conjunctions and modal verbs.
1.2 Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of the study was to investigate undergraduates’ ability in writing discussion text type with the focus on the text structure and significant language features proposed by Feez (1998). According to Feez (1998), discussion text type should comprise of issue, Argument For, details for Argument For, argument against, details for argument against and assessment or recommendation. In this study, there are three significant language features that be focused on namely conditional clauses, modal verbs and conjunctions.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Academic reading and writing is one of the generic course offered by the Centre of Language Study in UNIMAS. The outcome of this analysis will point out the strengths and weakness of undergraduates in writing discussion text.

The result of the study can reveal the strengths and common mistakes done by the undergraduates in terms of text structure and language features in discussion text. Discussion text is one of the common text types that undergraduates need to master to write at university. Besides, the finding of this analysis can be use as the reference for the instructors to identify undergraduates’ weaknesses in writing discussion and therefore focus on them by providing more explanation and guidance. Furthermore, the results of the analysis can direct the course developer to create more exercises and providing extra explanation in relation to the common weaknesses of the undergraduates’ in writing discussion.
1.4 Operational Definition of Terms

**Academic writing**

Academic writing is the writing which constructs academic knowledge in particular subject in contrasting way with results in meaning (Bazerman, 1998). The examples of academic writing are arguments, explanation, discussion etc. In this study, undergraduates’ discussion essays are select from the Academic Reading and Writing Course exam.

**Text type**

A text type is the text which share same purpose and text organization with similar language structure (Feez, 1998). The examples of text type are procedure, description, discussion etc.

**Genre**

Genre is defined as communicative events used by specific discourse communities which focusing on the communicative needs of particular academic groups involves examining what these groups do with the language, such as essays, dissertations and lectures (Hyland, 2006). It is used by community member to achieve a particular purpose, written for a particular audience, and employed in a particular context.

**Text structure**

Text structure refers to the semantic and syntactic organizational arrangements used to present written information. For example, arguments in a sequence are constructed
in a chain, while arguments in a well-constructed compare-contrast text are linked back and forth from one object of comparison to the other.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study covered the analysis on the written genre which is University Malaysia Sarawak undergraduates’ writing in discussion text type. The language features and the structure of the 101 sample discussion texts were analysed systematically in order to trace out undergraduates’ common problems in writing discussion text. The study does not focus on the application of the finding in terms of teaching writing in second language. The background of the study has been explained along with the objectives of the study. The significance of the text analysis in this study has presented to find out the mistakes of UNIMAS undergraduates in writing this text type in academic context. The conceptual terms and operational terms have been explained in terms of their relations to this study by referring to the various sources. Lastly, the boundaries of the study has been described in the last section in this chapter in order to acknowledge what will the study covers and does not cover in the study.

The next chapter covered the literature review of established studies related with the case study. The review discussed the general writing and writing for specific purposes which latter focused on different text types in the academic writing.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presented the general writing and the English for specific purposes. Division of English for specific purposes and different academic text types were explained in this chapter. The genre analysis presented the context of language use and the genre in EAP also be explained further.

2.1 General writing

The capability to excel in writing is not a skill acquired in nature; writing is a complex sociocognitive process involving the construction of recorded messages on paper or on some other material, and, more recently, on a computer screen. Swales and Feak (2004) noted that the skills needed to write range from making the appropriate graphic marks, through utilizing the resources of the chosen language, to anticipating the reactions of the intended readers. 3The first skill area involves acquiring a writing system, which may be alphabetic (as in European languages) or nonalphabetic (as in many Asian languages). The second skill area requires selecting the appropriate grammar and vocabulary to form acceptable sentences and then arranging them in paragraphs. Third, writing involves thinking about the purpose of the text to be composed and about its possible effects on the intended readership. One important aspect of this last feature is the choice of a suitable style. Therefore, because of these characteristics, writing is not an innate natural ability like speaking but has to be acquired through years of training or schooling it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional setting or other environments (Myles, 2002).
According to Myles (2002), most of the learners acquire skills of writing from the language teachers through conscious effort and intensive practice in composing, constructing, and analyzing ideas by take into account both social and language competency. Writing is a challenging activity especially for learners of a second / foreign language and yet it is a skill that they have to master in order to excel in content courses especially at the college or university level and exchange ideas with native speakers or foreigners, and specially when they need to show competence in the English language (Santos, 1994).

Recently, the need for writing spans the full gamut of academic courses. Undergraduates are expected to graduate with (a) the skills to write critically about, and respond analytically to, literature and issues of the day and (b) the ability to compose standard business documents – letters, reports, and proposals (Fogiel, 2000). The ground of the needs is due to the more and more professional, trade, and other careers call for strong writing skills (Fogiel, 2000). People in most professions have to present themselves to customers or clients in writing. For instance, scientist must continually read as well as write articles about their research and must write up the results of their experiments. In addition, executives or other professionals must often write memos, reports, proposals, and letters. All these demands and requirements have fostered the expansion of one particular aspect of language teaching, namely, the teaching of Academic and Professional English.
2.1.1 English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

Mackay and Mountford (1978) defined ESP as the teaching of English for a "clearly utilitarian purpose" (p. 2). The purpose they refer to is defined by the needs of the learners, which could be academic, occupational, or scientific. Learners’ needs is one of the absolute characteristic proposed by Dudley-Evans (1997). Besides, Mackay and Mountford also defined ESP and the special language that takes place in specific settings by certain participants. They stated that those participants are usually adults. They focused on adults because adults are usually highly conscious of the reasons to attain English proficiency in a determined field of specialization, and because adults make real use of special language in the special settings they work. They also argued that there is a close relationship among special settings and adults and the role, usually auxiliary, that English plays in those particular settings for those particular people.

Division of ESP

Most researchers speak about two or three major divisions of ESP. Robinson (1991) described two great distinctions: English for Occupational Purposes (EOP), and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) with English for Science and Technology (EST) cutting across the two of them. English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is the teaching of English with the specific aim of helping learners to study, conduct research or teach in that language (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001). With the focus on the language
items, EAP needs to prepare learners to read textbooks, listen to lectures, write essays, and do library research.

2.2 Academic Writing

Academic writing is for ESL students studying in colleges and universities where courses are taught in English. Those students who are not native speakers of English often find the written demands of their courses very challenging. In addition to learning academic English they need to adopt new conventions of style, referencing and layout. Students usually have to complete a variety of writing tasks during their studies, ranging from short IELTS essays to lengthy dissertations. This writing may be done either under exam pressure or as coursework. In addition, the type of writing they are asked to do depends on the subject they are studying: future lawyers will be given quite different tasks from potential pharmacists.

2.2.1 The purpose of academic writing

Cotterall and Cohen (2003) noted that the purpose of academic writing program is to provide problem solving for the second language learner to adjust to cultural differences, acquire academic proficiency in the target language, and familiarize themselves with the types of texts and tasks associated with academic study in the education context. Students' writing is at the centre of teaching and learning in higher education, fulfilling a range of purposes according to the various contexts in which it occurs. According to Cotterall and Cohen (2003), the first purpose of academic writing is for assessment purpose. Students may be require to produce essays, written examinations or laboratory reports whose main purpose is to demonstrate their mastery of disciplinary course content. In assessing such writing,
lecturers focus on the content and the form of the writing that is the language used, the text structure, the construction of argument, grammar and punctuation.

The second purpose of academic writing is to promote learning. According to Coffin (2003), academic writing also promotes learning, which can help students grapple with disciplinary knowledge as well as develop more general abilities to reason and critique (Hilgers, Hussey & Stitt-Bergh, 1999).

The third purpose of academic writing is to help learners to enter particular disciplinary communities, whose communication norms are the primary means by which academics transmit and evaluate ideas. As they progress through the university, students are often expected to produce texts that increasingly approximate the norms and conventions of their chosen disciplines, with this expectation peaking at the level of postgraduate study (Coffin, 2003)

Academic writing programme set out to give learners the experience of completing an authentic, extended, writing task of the type encountered at university. It also aimed to show learners how to use an essay structure to interrogate information and ideas while conducting research and writing descriptions, explanations, discussions, and opinions.

2.2.2 Academic Writing Text Types

There are several text types in academic writing, namely: description, narration, process, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, argumentation and discussion. According to Coffin (2003) the generalisation towards these text types enables the students to identify the response to the function that a text performs, which is not always reflected in the descriptive term applied to it, for instance, prompt such as ‘discuss’, ‘critically evaluate’, ‘compare and contrast’ etc.
2.2.2.1 Description

Most good descriptive writing appeals to the reader’s senses. (Skwire, 1996) He noted that a good description essay should have a thesis and cannot include every piece of information on the subject in a descriptive theme. According to Skwire (1996), the uses of lively and specific details have to be connected with the thesis by presents them in a logical sequence. In the description text, the introduction of the paper should include the thesis statement and follow by the body which supports the thesis and is organized according to the principle of time, space, or logic and finally a conclusion, which restate the thesis and gives a sense of finality to the paper. Skwire (1996) noted that ‘time’ and ‘space’ are the two key points to create a coherent paper. Creme and Lea (2008), also proposed that description usually needs to be followed by or linked to explanation. For instance, a writer should present the storm from the first hesitant flakes, through the massive downfall, to the Christmas-card quietness at the end of the storm. In terms of space, a good descriptive writing should beginning with the object farthest from the observer and working to the closer object. However, the principle of organization is not rigid; the important consideration is that some clear principle is needed to give structure to the paper. Example of university academic Writing of the description type are description on a diagram, with labeled parts, as in biology.

2.2.2.2 Narration

A narrative is a story (Skwire, 1996). To narrate means “to tell, to give an account of.” The examples of narration are novel, short story and biography. A
narrative paper tells a story, usually of a personal experience, that makes a point or support a thesis. The purpose of a narrative paper is to recreate an experience in such a way that the reader can imaginatively participate in it. According to Skwire (1996), the subject in narrative paper is limited in order to tell the story completely and engage the readers successfully. The language use in narrative paper is natural and sound conversational.

Narratives contains mainly action verbs [materials processes], but also many verbs which refer to what the human participants said, or felt, or thought [verbal and mental processes]. According to Derewianka (1990), there is normally past tense in narratives and many linking words to do with time. However, as dialogued often included, the tense may change to the present or future. According to Feez (1998), narratives highlight a complication in the sequence of events. Examples of narratives are writing a report of a car accident, writing literature text etc. In writing a report of a car accident, past tense and linking to do with time are used to engage the readers. The possible words that may be used in car accident report are crashed, cried, asked, called etc to show the past events during the accident and some linking word such as at first, then, finally etc to show the sequence of events happened in the car accident.

2.2.2.3 Process

The process paper describes a series of actions, changes, or functions that bring about and end or result (Skwire, 1996). The example of process paper is the ‘how-to” paper, a step-by-step set of instructions on how to complete a particular task such as how to do yoga, how to cook rice etc. Skwire (1996) noted that the steps in the process have to group in their chronological order, under logical headings. The
completeness and accuracy of explanation on the steps are important to produce a
good process paper. Derewianka (1990) noted that in the process text type, there are
linking words to do with time, for instance, first, then, when, lastly etc. the frequent
uses of action verbs in this text type to describe the actions eg put, twist, hold, take etc.
Besides, detailed factual description of participants such as shape, size, colour,
amount etc. Examples of the process text in university writing are writing lab report,
time linking words are used to show the steps in the experiment and the action verbs
are used to describe the procedure and action in each step in the experiment. Besides,
the factual descriptions such as shape and colour are also important to describe the
result of the test.

2.2.2.4 Comparison and contrast

A comparison shows the similarities between two or more things; a contrast
shows the difference between two or more things; a comparison-contrast shows both
similarities and differences (Skwire, 1996). A good comparison and contrast paper
follow an established pattern of organization: subject by subject, point by point, or a
combination of the two (Skwire, 1996).

2.2.2.5 Cause and effect

The purpose of this text type is to give an account of how something works or reasons
for some phenomenon. (Derewianka, 1990) this text type usually involved generalized
non-human participants, such as the wind, glaciers, computer etc. Derewianka (1996).
There are two basic types of Explanation namely:
A) explaining how, e.g.
- Mechanical explanation (How does a pump work?)
- Technological explanation (How does a computer work?)
- System explanation (How does a company work?)
- Natural explanation (How are mountains formed?)

B) Explaining why, e.g.
- Why so some things float and others sink?
- Why is the ozone layer thinning?
- Why do we have different seasons?
- Why does iron go rusty?
- Why do livings need food?

Cause and effect text type often start with statement about the phenomenon in question and followed by a sequenced explanation of how/why something occurs. The example of the cause and effect essay is “cause of air pollution”. The undergraduates need to explain why the air pollution happened by using sequenced explanations.

2.2.2.6 Argumentation

The purpose of arguments text is to take position on some issue and justify it. Argument texts belong to a genre group called “Exploration”. Derewianka (1990) noted that the beginning of an argument usually consist of a statement of position (thesis statement) and justify with argument supported with evidence (e.g. statistics, quotes). The conclusion of the text usually is summing up the position by reaffirming the general issues under discussion and possibly calling for action. The example of argumentation text is “Can new medicines and vaccines be safely developed without animal testing?” In this text type, the undergraduates need to choose a stance and evident with relevant and valid explanation in order to convince and persuade the readers.
Discussion is commonly used in essays which require the writer to discuss both sides of a case and then form some opinion based on the preceding arguments (Feez, 1998). According to Bailey (2006), longer essays often require students to assess the information and ideas they have collected in a discussion section before the conclusion. Some of the example of discussion vocabulary are: benefit and drawback, advantage and disadvantage, a positive aspect and a negative features etc which used to show positive and negative side on the issue.

There are two basis outlines for a discussion essay.

Table 1. Basis outlines for a discussion essay.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essay title: School uniforms-a step forward or a step back?-discuss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outline A</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a) Advantage: reduce social inequality/encouraging group identity/avoid choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b) Disadvantages: loss of individuality/ expense/ unfashionable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c) Discussion: overall, benefits more valuable in most cases</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Academic Writing: A handbook for International Students (2006))

According to Feez (1998) the significant language features for discussion text type are:

- Conjunction, e.g. causal, comparative, conditional
- Reference signaling and retrieving information
2.3 Genre Analysis

Genre-based approaches, where teaching and learning focuses on the understanding and production of selected genres of texts in both spoken and written, have become increasingly influential in the field of English language teaching (ELT) (Derewianka, 2003) and identified as one of the major trends in the new millennium (Rodgers, 2001). For example, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and English for Academic Purpose (EAP), both of which have now been around for a while, are early examples of genre-based approaches, arising from pioneering work in genre analysis by Swales (1981, 1990) and others.

One way of characterizing genres is in terms of the ways broad social purposes are systematically linked with context through lexical and grammatical features (Christie & Martin, 1997). Researchers working within Halliday’s (1994) Systemic Functional Linguists (SFL) model define genres by internal linguistic criteria, grouping texts which have similar formal features. Spoken and written genres are seen as narratives, recounts, arguments and expositions, and each genre is composed of a series of stages which contribute to the overall purpose of the genre. On the other hand, Swales defines genre as “a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes. These purposes are recognized by the expert members of the parent discourse community, and thereby constitute the rationale for the genre.