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Academic Writing for Graduate Students from Taiwan

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Abstract:

This study was to examine the academic writing needs of 76 Taiwanese students who were studying in an English-speaking country, based on these participants' self-reported data about writing difficulties, the importance of grading criteria, and the assistance from ESL composition classes at this university and their coping strategies to accomplish their academic writing. The composing process and analysis and synthesis were more challenging than their English language problems, and grading criteria, quality of development and organization of controlling ideas were more important than written format and second language proficiency. ESL composition classes were more helpful in upgrading their English proficiency than in guiding them how to deal with problems during the composing process and analysis and synthesis of readings for academic writing. Their common coping strategies included clarifying strategies, using current feedback to adjust strategies, and managing competing demands.

Keywords: *Academic writing, ESL writing needs analysis, coping strategies, English for academic purposes*

1. Introduction

Writing competence is one of the most important requirements for graduate students to accomplish their programs. Entering a new discourse community, students need to learn 'the textual conventions, the expectations, the habits of mind, and the methods of thought' (Flower, 1990, pp. 222-223). In order to better communicate, students have to familiarize themselves with certain academic discourse, 'trying on the particular ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing,' (Bartholomae, 1986). For non-native speakers, academic writing is even more complex.

Language proficiency used to be claimed as one of the major factors that influence foreign students' writing ability. Commenting on non-native speakers' writing, faculties note that these writers need improvement in vocabulary and sentence-level grammar (Santos, 1988; Bridgeman & Carlson, 1983). However, more recent research on L2 composing indicates that language proficiency should be separate from L2 writing competence (Raimes, 1985; Edelsky, 1982; Lay, 1982; Yang, 1994), and that global organization is a more serious problem in L2 writing than language proficiency (Mohan & Lo, 1985). Given the increasing number of international students, admitted into the United States, there is an increasing research (Belcher, 1989; Christison & Krahnke, 1986; Currie, 1993; Flower, 1990; Johns, 1991; McCarthy, 1987; Spack, 1988) on L2 writing and on instruction that will initiate 'strangers' (McCarthy, 1987), L2 students, into academic discourse community. Given the increasing number of Taiwanese students who travel abroad to pursue their further education at American graduate schools, there is a need to research into their academic writing.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate how this group of Taiwanese graduate students at an American Midwest research university perceived their academic writing, when learning to meet the writing expectations from L2 audience, mostly.

How do these Taiwanese graduate students perceive their academic writing in terms of

- Writing difficulties;
- The importance of grading criteria, and
- The assistance from the esl composition classes (106-108) at this institution?

3. Results

3.1. Writing Difficulties

Based on the respondents' reports, they perceived more difficulties in composing process and analysis and synthesis than in language proficiency, when doing their academic writing. It was conjectured that since, in their prior English writing experiences, the emphasis used to be put on accuracy of language competence in English, rather than the development and organization of controlling ideas, consequently, these respondents perceived more difficulties in composing process and analysis and synthesis than language proficiency.

According to the results of analyses of variance (ANOVA), length of stay in English-speaking countries, gender, and with or without a B.A. in English had effects on respondents' perceptions about academic writing difficulties. Length of

stay in English-speaking countries had effects on the perceptions about writing difficulties in language proficiency. The longer the respondents stayed in English-speaking countries, the less writing difficulties in language proficiency they perceive. It was conjectured that since there were more opportunities to use English writing in English-speaking countries, compared to those in Taiwan, length of stay would be helpful to the improvement of language proficiency. The results also revealed that the female respondents perceived more difficulties in composing process and analysis and synthesis than the male. Meanwhile, the male perceived slightly more difficulties in language proficiency than the female.

Besides, it was assumed that with a B.A. in English might affect perceptions about writing difficulties. The results, on the contrary, showed that those respondents who did not have a B.A. in English perceived fewer difficulties than those who did in all of the three writing aspects, composing process, analysis and synthesis, and language proficiency. It is conjectured that those who had a B.A. in English might have strict standards in self-evaluating their writing performance, since they might know more about the complexity in English writing.

Self-evaluation of writing performance had linear relationships with composing process, analysis and synthesis and language proficiency. The results indicate that the higher the levels of writing performance respondents self-reported, the fewer difficulties about academic writing in composing process, analysis and synthesis, and language proficiency. TOEFL scores were used to predict ESL students' English proficiency, and TWE scores were used to examine ESL students' writing ability in English. TOEFL scores had linear relationships with the perceptions about writing difficulties in composing process and language proficiency. It was conjectured that the higher the TOEFL scores, the fewer difficulties in composing process and language proficiency were perceived by the respondents. TWE scores did not have a linear relationship with the perceptions about writing difficulties in composing process, but in language proficiency. Besides, with or without a B.A. in English had linear correlations with the perceptions about writing difficulties in analysis and synthesis and language proficiency. It was a surprise to notice that those who did not have a B.A. perceived less difficulties in these two writing aspects than those who had a B.A. in English. Furthermore, length of stay in English speaking countries had a significant correlation with the perceptions about writing difficulties in analyses and syntheses. It was conjectured that since analysis and synthesis were popularly required in academic studies, the longer the stay in English-speaking countries, the more experiences respondents might have in this special academic writing aspect.

3.1.1. Grading Criteria

Based on the results of the respondents' perceptions about the importance of grading criteria, statistically, quality of development and organization of controlling ideas was ranked the most important grading aspect, followed by written format. Language proficiency was ranked the third among these three grading aspects. Furthermore, none of the 11 variables had significant effects on respondents' perceptions about the importance of grading criteria.

3.1.2. Assistance from ESL Composition Classes

Based on the results of the perceptions about the assistance from ESL composition classes (106-108), respondents assumed that they had obtained more help in language proficiency than in composing process and analysis and synthesis. In the analyses of variance (ANOVA), only length of stay in English-speaking countries and average grades on papers, excluding those of ESL composition classes, had effects on the perceptions about assistance from ESL composition classes. Those who had lived in English-speaking countries within the range of a year perceived more assistance obtained from ESL composition classes than those who had lived longer in English-speaking countries. It was conjectured that the respondents still had fresh impressions about what they had learned from the ESL composition classes, since they had just taken these classes. In addition, as for those whose stay in English-speaking countries was longer and had higher average grade on papers might be more confident about their writing ability in academic writing than those new students. Consequently, it would not be easy for them to tell how much assistance they had acquired from the ESL composition classes.

In addition, those whose average grade on papers was a 'B' or a 'B+' perceived more assistance obtained from ESL composition classes than those who had an 'A' or an 'A-' as their average grade. In fact, 85.7% reported themselves as good writers, and 100% of those as excellent writers had an 'A' or an 'A-' as their average grade on papers. Furthermore, according to the results of the correlation between self-evaluation of academic writing performance and perceptions about writing difficulties, the higher levels respondents self-reported their writing performance, the less academic writing difficulties they perceived. As a result, it was conjectured that those who received an 'A' or an 'A-' had obtained academic writing expertise than those who had a 'B' or a 'B-' as their average grade before attending ESL composition classes.

3.2. Coping Strategies

How often does this group of Taiwanese graduate students use the coping strategies, adopted from the findings of Leki's case study (1995), to accomplish their academic writing tasks?

Based on the respondents' report on the perceptions about choices of coping strategies, clarifying strategy, using current feedback to adjust strategies, and managing competing demands were more frequently used than relying on past writing experiences, taking advantage of first language or culture, and looking for models. According to the results of analyses of variance (ANOVA), only length of stay in English-speaking countries and TWE scores had effects on the perceptions about choices of coping strategies. In terms of length of stay in English-speaking countries, generally, clarifying strategy, relying on past writing experiences, and looking for models were commonly used by those who had lived in English-speaking countries within the range of a year than those who had lived longer. It was conjectured that because new students had limited experiences in academic writing, clarifying strategy and looking for models could help

them to realized what the writing requirements were. Besides, since most students start anew, to some certain extent, when starting graduate programs, one of the resources that the new students could find is from their past writing experiences in order to accomplish their academic writing. However, using current feedback to adjust strategies and managing competing demands were popularly used by the respondents. It was conjectured that different courses and instructors might result in different writing requirements, so as a consequence the respondents need to use feedback, especially instructors', to adjust coping strategies. In addition, there might be some more different problems for foreign students to deal with from those of the students who are not away from their country, when attending graduate schools in a foreign country. That's why managing competing demands was commonly used by this group of respondents. TWE scores indicate ESL students' writing ability. It was conjectured that the higher the TWE scores, the more frequently the respondents relied on their past writing experiences.

3.3. *The Dependence between Average Grades on Papers and the 11 Variables*

The 11 variables include (1) the number of drafts, (2) self-evaluation of writing performance, (3) past interest in English writing, (4) gender, (5) length of stay in English speaking countries, (6) the degree, Master or Ph.D. to be pursued, (7) TOEFL scores, (8) TWE scores, (9) current G.P.A. at this university., (10) credit units taken during the autumn quarter of 1996, and (11) with or without a B.A. in English?

Based on the chi-square results, only self-evaluation of writing performance, length of stay in English-speaking countries, the degree, Master or Ph.D., to be pursued, and current G.P.A. at this university had significant dependence with average grades on papers, excluding those of ESL composition classes. The higher the levels of writing performance self-reported by the respondents, the higher the average grade on papers they received. There was a higher percentage of the respondents whose stay in English-speaking countries was longer received an 'A' or an 'A-' as their average grade on papers than that of those who had shorter stay. Besides, Ph.D. respondents received higher average grade on papers than the Master ones. It was conjectured that the higher grade of Ph.D. respondents might be attributed to the fact that they had more experiences in academic writing and more background knowledge in their major fields. Furthermore, the higher the G.P.A. at this educational institute, the higher the average grades on paper.

4. General Discussions

4.1. *Writing Difficulties*

Getting the better of words in writing is commonly a very hard struggle, and the struggle will be even greater when it is not in our native language (Widdowson, 1983, quoted in Leki, 1992, p.3). That is, due to the limited cognitive resources, second language writers need to struggle harder during the composing process. Writing in a second language uses 'cognitive capacity' that would be used for other tasks when writing in the native language (Jones & Tetroe, 1987). Based on the respondents' reports on the perceptions about writing difficulties, composing process and analysis and synthesis were slightly more difficult than language proficiency in their academic writing. The results indicate that this group of respondents might need more help in composing process and analysis and synthesis than in second language proficiency. In Leki and Carson's (1994) study, their respondents assumed that they may need more language skills, such as grammar and vocabulary and task management, outlines, word choice, paraphrases, summaries, analyses, use of library and so forth. Zamel (1983) claimed that her students need skills in putting ideas together, similar to the skills of analysis and synthesis in the present study.

Based on the results of an analysis of variance (ANOVA), length of stay in English-speaking countries, gender and with or without a B.A. in English had effects on respondents' perceptions about academic writing difficulties. Length of stay in English-speaking countries had effects on perceptions about writing difficulties in language proficiency. The respondents felt that the longer they stayed in English-speaking countries, the less writing difficulties they perceived in language proficiency. Besides, it is interesting to note that the female respondents perceived more writing difficulties in composing process and analysis and synthesis than the male. Meanwhile, the male perceived more writing difficulties in language proficiency than the female did. Besides, from the ANOVA results, those who did not have a B.A. in English perceived fewer difficulties in each question group than those who had a B.A. in English. There is a higher percentage of respondents among those who had a B.A. in English had higher TOEFL scores, TWE scores and more years of English study in Taiwan comparatively than those who did not have a B.A. in English. Writing ability in L1 might have strong influence on L2 writing ability. A possible transfer in writing strategies can shift from the strong language to the weaker one when composing in a foreign language (Yang, 1994). Due to the limitations of this survey, we do not know respondents' L1 writing ability is like, which might have strongly influenced respondents' writing ability in English as a foreign language. However, the results of the correlations between any of the question groups of the perceptions about writing difficulties and self-evaluation of writing performance, show linear relationships. Their self-reports suggested that unskilled writers, including poor, weak and average writers, perceived higher levels of difficulties in academic writing than skilled writers, good and excellent writers in each of these three writing aspects.

4.2. *Grading Criteria*

From the respondents' reports about the importance of grading criteria, quality of development and organization of controlling ideas was much more important than written format and language proficiency. The findings above are substantiated by some previous research on the importance of organization in academic writing (Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Horowitz, 1986; Mohan & Lo, 1985).

4.3. Assistance from ESL Composition Classes

In terms of the respondents' perceptions about the assistance from ESL composition classes, they assumed that they had obtained more help in language proficiency than in composing process and analysis and synthesis. According to the results of the analyses of variance (ANOVA), length of stay in English-speaking countries and average grades on papers, excluding those of ESL composition classes, had effects on respondents' perceptions about the assistance from ESL composition classes. Those who had only lived in English-speaking countries within the range of a year perceived more assistance obtained from ESL composition classes than those who had stayed longer. Perhaps, those who stayed shorter were still able to remember where they had started, they academic writing in English when attending ESL composition classes. As for those who had lived longer than a year, they might have got used to the requirements of academic writing in English and are also more confident about their writing performance. Furthermore, those who received a 'B' or a 'B+' as average grades on papers, excluding those of ESL composition classes reported that they had obtained more assistance from ESL composition classes than those who had higher average grades on papers. It was conjectured that those who had a 'B' or a 'B+' as average grades on papers might have more limited writing ability before they attending graduate schools than those who received an 'A-' or an 'A' as average grades on papers. In this kind of circumstances, these respondents who had lower average grades might have learned more about writing than those who had already had some certain foundation in academic writing.

4.4. What Academic Writing Difficulties Did This Group of Respondents Perceive?

Pianko (1979) indicates that what characterizes 'poor' writers in addition to the low quality of products they produce are their underdeveloped composing processes. Cumming's (1989) findings are related to those of Pianko's, claiming that writing expertise is related to composing strategies, not language proficiency, which is an additive factor enhancing the overall quality of writing produced (p.81). Cumming's participants who lacked writing expertise did not know how to regulate their thinking productively or appropriately (p.120-121). However, Freedman, Pringle, and Yalden (1983, p 10) point out that constraints of writing without full proficiency in a second language may impose psychological limitations on people's abilities to conceptualize their intended meaning and its organizations as discourse. Cumming (1989) reported that attaining greater second-language proficiency does not appear to entail qualitative changes in the thinking processes or decision-making behaviors used for composing. However, he also claims that language learners may require sufficient levels of second-language proficiency to be able to sustain the self-regulated behavior that writing performance in a second language required (p.126).

In addition, the importance of organization is a special feature of academic writing (Cumming, 1989; Horowitz, 1986; Mohan & Lo, 1985). The majority of the respondents perceived organization, which was part of question group 1, quality of development and organization of controlling ideas, of the perceptions about the importance of grading criteria, was a very important grading aspect. They also reported that they had more difficulties in analyses and syntheses which demand organization competence a great deal. According to Mohan and Lo's (1985) research findings, competence in the organization of written discourse develops late and appropriate instruction has in impact on this competence. The findings of this study are substantiated by some previous research on the nature of organization competence. The responses in the open-ended sections by the respondents are consistent with the findings about the possible reasons to have trouble in organization: (a) inadequate English for expressing ideas (Mohan & Lo, 1985; Raimés, 1987), (b) unfamiliarity with a topic may cause students not able to write a well-organized essay in any language (Mohan & Lo, 1985), (c) unfamiliarity with the conventions of expository writing in the native language (Bartholomae, 1986, Johns, 1984, Mohan & Lo, 1985; Raimés, 1987), and (d) teachers' stronger values in the expression of grammatical accuracy than that in organization (Mohan & Lo, 1985).

4.5. Writing Instruction for This Group of Respondents

There are some suggestions arise from the present study. First of all, English writing teachers might need to help their students learn to use some certain composing strategies in order to reflect and evaluate their writing effectively, when composing, especially in generating and organizing ideas (Cumming, 1989; Raimés, 1987). Besides, not all students should be treated as learners who need much language instruction to improve their writing. Nevertheless, attention to linguistic accuracy might be beneficial when it is used in 'controlled situations' (Fraids Rubin & Elite Olshtain, 1986), especially in the early stages of the language learning process. On the other hand, it is less helpful to advanced learners to focus exclusively on linguistic accuracy, since their production of linguistic accuracy should be automatic. However, advanced second language learners might need more practice in writing (Reid, 1993). Furthermore, ESL students need to familiarize the particular ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing (Bartholomae, 1986) that define the discourse of their specific academic discourse community.

4.6. Coping Strategies

From the respondents' responses about choices of coping strategies that were adopted from Leki's (1995) findings to accomplish their academic writing of graduate schools, clarifying strategy, using current feedback to adjust strategies, and managing competing demands were more frequently used than relying on past writing experiences, taking advantage of first language and culture, and looking for models. It was conjectured that there were 51.3% (60/74) respondents who had lived in English-speaking countries more than 1 year. That is, they might be rather familiar with the academic writing requirements of their own disciplines. As a result, they do not need to count on past writing experiences and looking for models.

Besides, based on the results of an analysis of variance (ANOVA) of the effects of length of stay in English-speaking countries on respondents' perceptions about choices of coping strategies, beside relying on past writing experiences and looking for models, clarifying strategy was commonly used by those who only lived in English-speaking countries within the range of a year. This effect gave some support to the assumption above that relying on past writing experiences and looking for models might be more frequently used by new students than the old ones.

Furthermore, TWE (Test of Written English) scores had effects on respondents' perceptions about choices of coping strategies. The higher the TWE scores, the more frequently relying on past writing experiences was used by this group of respondents. Since TWE scores were used to evaluate ESL students' writing ability, those respondents who had higher TWE scores might be more possibly advanced in terms of writing ability. That is, they might not need to start as beginners, so they could count on what they had learned in the past. However, attention should be paid to that there were only 58.1% (43/74) of the respondents who had reported their TWE scores.

4.7. Dependence between Average Grades on Papers and the 11 Variables

According to the chi-square results, only length of stay in English-speaking countries, the degree, Master or Ph.D., to be pursued, and current G.P.A. at the O.S.U. had significant dependence with average grades on papers. Those whose stay in English-speaking countries was longer tended to receive an 'A-' or an 'A' as their average grades on papers, excluding those of the ESL composition classes. In addition, there were more Ph.D. respondents received an 'A-' or an 'A' as their average grades on papers than the Master respondents. It was conjectured that Ph.D. respondents should be more advanced in their academic disciplines than the Master ones, in terms of background knowledge and writing requirements in their academic disciplines. Furthermore, since academic writing is highly evaluated in the graduate schools of most departments, consequently average grades on papers should have a rather direct impact on students' current G.P.A. This might explain why respondents' current G.P.A. at this university had significant dependence with average grades on papers, excluding those of ESL composition classes.

5. Conclusions

The respondents of this study reported that they perceived more writing difficulties in composing process and analysis and synthesis than in language proficiency. Besides, the longer the respondents had stayed in English-speaking countries, the less writing difficulties they perceived in language proficiency. The female respondents perceived more writing difficulties in composing process and analysis and synthesis than the male, but the male perceived more writing difficulties in language proficiency than the female. Those who did not have a B.A. in English perceived less writing difficulties in composing process, analysis and synthesis, and language proficiency than those who had a B.A. in English.

In terms of the respondent's self-reports, quality of development and organization of controlling ideas was ranked the most important grading criteria, followed by written format and language proficiency, which was ranked third. According to the self-reports of the respondents' perceptions about the assistance from ESL composition classes, they perceived more assistance from ESL composition classes in language proficiency than in composing process and analysis and synthesis. Those who had only stayed in English-speaking countries within the range of a year perceived more assistance from ESL composition classes than those who had lived longer. Furthermore, those who received a 'B' or a 'B+' as average grades on papers, excluding those of ESL composition classes, perceived more assistance from ESL composition classes than those who had an 'A-' or an 'A' as average grades on papers. Possible reasons for having trouble in organization, emerged from the responses to open-ended questions at the end of each section:

- Inadequate English for expressing ideas (Mohan & Lo, 1985; Raimes, 1987),
- Unfamiliarity with a topic may cause students not able to write a well-organized essay in any language (Mohan & Lo, 1985),
- Unfamiliarity with the conventions of expository writing in native language (Bartholomare, 1986; Johns, 1986; Mohan & Lo, 1985; Raimes, 1987),
- And teachers' stronger values in the expression of grammatical accuracy than that in organization (Mohan & Lo, 1985, p.521).

The suggestions about instruction that arise from the present study are as following:

- English writing teachers might need to help students learn to use some certain composing strategies in order to reflect and evaluate their own writing, when composing.
- Not all students should be treated as learners who need much language instruction to improve their writing.
- When the instruction of linguistic usage is arranged in controlled situations, it is beneficial beginners in the early stages of the language learning, not for advanced language learners.
- ESL students also need to familiarize the particular discourse conventions in their academic discourse community for a L2 audience.

Based on respondents' self-reports about choices of the coping strategies, adopted from Leki's (1995) findings, clarifying strategy, using current feedback to adjust strategies, and managing competing demands were commonly used. Those who had only lived in English-speaking countries within the range of a year frequently used relying on past writing experiences, looking for models, and clarifying strategy.

Length of stay in English-speaking countries, the degree, Master or Ph.D., to be pursued, and current G.P.A. at

the O.S.U. had significant dependence with average grades on papers, excluding those of ESL composition classes. The longer the respondents had stayed in English-speaking countries, the higher average grades on papers they received. Besides, more percentage of Ph.D. respondents received an 'A-' or an 'A' than Master respondents. Furthermore, the higher the average grades on papers, excluding those of ESL composition classes, the higher current G.P.A. the respondents maintained.

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