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A Comparison of ESL Writing Strategies of Undergraduates and Postgraduates

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ABSTRACT

Writing is an essential skill that needs to be mastered by students. They need to adopt some strategies in order to be a good writer, especially in fulfilling their academic requirements. This study attempts to compare the writing strategies used by undergraduate and postgraduate students. A total of 44 students participated in this study. A survey questionnaire adapted from Flower and Hayes (1981) framework was administered to the respondents. Analysis of strategies based on three factors namely task environment, background knowledge and composing process was used. The t-test results showed that there was no significant difference between the mean response of undergraduate and postgraduate students. In task environments, the undergraduate students were found to choose topic that they know while the postgraduate students tend to choose a topic that they like. Both groups tend to use their schemata or background knowledge in order to write. Furthermore, findings from composing process showed that both groups tend to have a proper plan such as a mind map or an outline to write an essay.

Keywords: Writing, strategies, task environment background knowledge, composing process

1.1 INTRODUCTION

Writing is the basis in which all work in university is judged. Because of this, producing good written academic work is necessarily important for undergraduate and postgraduate students. For these students especially those who come from ESL backgrounds, mastering written skills in English can be challenging. The challenges are often associated with learning certain competencies for example, linguistic and cultural competencies, for fulfiling the different purposes and contexts of writing (Vandermensbrugghe, 2004). To overcome such challenges, students may resort to use various writing strategies. Learning about how these strategies help or fail students in their quest to produce well-written tasks, will assist instructors in developing effective writing lessons. Thus, this study attempts to describe and compare the written strategies used by two groups of ESL writers: undergraduate and postgraduate students.

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1.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

A student's writing is affected by the extent of his or her knowledge of writing strategies. Successful writers are capable of using effective writing strategies (Gillespie & Graham, 2010) and transfer these strategies to write academic texts in their content areas. Thus, this research is based on the following question: How do task environment, background knowledge, and composing process differ in the writing strategies of undergraduate and postgraduate students?

2.1 REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

2.1.1 The Composing Process

Writers go through different stages in their composing process before they complete their act of writing. According to Olive (2003), writers need short term and long term memory when they write. They also often make use of their background knowledge as content in their writing. In addition to that, Hayland and Milton (1997) studied how writers compose using a variety of strategies as they write. Sometimes, they focus on the content, and other times their focus is on the content as well as meaning. Castello, Banales and Vega (2010) revealed that students' writing depend on how writing is taught by teachers and reported that writing teachers may either use the cognitive, socio-cultural or even socio-cognitive approach in the writing classroom. In the cognitive approach, the teachers focus on the teaching of thinking processes involved in the writing, such as pre writings skills and revising skills. In the socio-cultural approach, the teachers focus on different genres in writing and how it can be appropriate for authentic reasons. Finally, the socio-cognitive approach combines the use of different writing strategies in authentic writing topics.

2.1.2 The Writing Classroom

Students' success in writing depends on many factors. The writing classroom in particluar needs to be conducive for students to maximize their writing skills. There are five components that make up a writing classroom and they are teacher's role, teaching method, learners' role, learning materials and how materials are used (Noor Hanim, 2011).

Teacher's Role

Firstly, writing teachers need to be non-authoritative, provide support and environment as well as background knowledge to the learners. Researchers like Christensen (2002), Grabe and Kaplan (1996) and Muncie (2000) support the fact that teachers play a very important role in making the writing lessons successful.

Teaching Method

Past research have reported different approaches used in the teaching of writing. Oliver (2005) revealed four approaches to teach writing: pragmatic, rhetorical, cultural and expressive. The pragmatic approach focuses on language used in writing as well as cognitive activities involved in the writing process, while the rhetorical approach centers on the different genres in writing and authenticity in writing content. The cultural approach emphasizes on the meaning rather than the writing process and the expressive approach concentrates on experiential writing. A good method may be a combination of more than one method.

Learners' Role and Responsibilities

Learning can take place under many conditions. The learners can learn from the teacher in the classroom. They can also learn from peer interaction. They can also enjoy the use of media in the writing lessons apart from reading materials. Finally, the learners can also learn from the materials chosen by the teacher in the ESL classroom.

The Role of Learning Materials

The use of materials in the ESL classroom can make the lesson a success or a failure. Traditionally, teachers may use the textbooks prescribed and/or add on materials as the need arises. The use of technology and media has long entered the ESL classroom to make lesson interesting and authentic.

How Materials are Used

Finally, materials can make or break a lesson. Some teachers depend on materials and let the lesson focus only around the materials. Some teachers prepare lessons and use a variety of materials to suit different functions of the lesson activities.

2.2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 1 shows the theoretical framework of the research. This framework is an adaptation of the Flower and Hayes model (1981) of the writing process. However, their definition of terms such as task environment, long term memory and writing process has been changed to pragmatic functions, background knowledge and composing strategies respectively. Hence this framework reveals that the act of writing takes place under three conditions and they are (a) authentic task environment (b) background knowledge and (c) composing process. These three elements are then redefined into questions for the writers to reveal their act of writing.
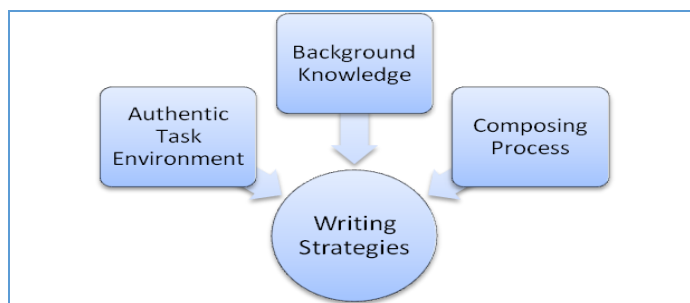
Figure 1 Theoretical framework of the study

2.2.1 Authentic Task Environment

Authentic task environment involves choosing a topic that serves as authentic to the writer. This means the ideas presented need to deal with things sensibly and realistically and close to the real life experiences of the writer. In order to do that, he/she needs to consider, for example the topic (chosen by the writer or given to them), the audience of the essay (the audience determines the way the writer writes), the exigency felt by the writer (what did the writer do if he/she encounters problems about the writing - before and during the process of writing) and also the written text.

2.2.2 Background Knowledge

According to Flower and Hayes (1981), background knowledge is stored in the writer's long-term memory and it involves the topic chosen. The writer needs to recognize the appropriate information and decide on the suitable writing plan to fit the rhetorical situation of the essay so that the contents are relevant to the audience.

2.2.3 Composing Process

Flower and Hayes (1981) believes that the writer used his/her own composing strategies when they are composing. This writing process involves the planning made by the writer before writing, translating ideas into words while writing, and later reviewing, evaluating and revising the essay before presenting it to the audience.

2.3 PAST RESEARCH

2.3.1 Writing Strategies of Undergraduates

Yu, Rea-Dickins, and Kiely (2007) studied on the cognitive processes of undergraduate students' ESL writing. Think-aloud protocols were analyzed to identify the common patterns of their writing

strategies. They then developed a model of cognitive processes and this model consists of three interrelated stages. Their study revealed the effects of different graphic prompts on the cognitive processes of the writers. The writing scores also showed these writers' ability to use appropriate vocabulary, to make comparisons in their descriptions as well as interpret the information given. The research also showed that graph familiarity did not affect the ability of these writers to write. Bowen (2012) revealed that while undergraduate students focus on content addition in their writing, they could get by with some errors in the form of grammar, typos, spelling and even documentation.

2.3.2 Writing Strategies of Postgraduates

Mu (2007) studied on the writing strategies of postgraduate writers and found that a major hindrance to writing is the background and rhetoric of writing. In addition to that, the study by Harwood and Hadley (2004) on postgraduate writers revealed that these writers focus on the acquisition of dominant norms, concentration of the pragmatic aspects of the writing and usage of personal pronouns. They also focus on the specialized lexical and discourse patterns of the writing. Other studies on postgraduate students were done by Torrance, Thomas, and Robinson (1994) and Yasuda (2003), which looked at the writing and revising strategies by the postgraduate writers. Torrance *et al.* (1994) used cluster analysis to identify three distinct groups of students in terms of the strategies used when writing. Their study found that the writers were categorized into "Planners", who planned extensively and then made few revisions, "Revisers", who developed content and structure through extensive revision, and "Mixed Strategy" writers, who planned before starting to write and revise extensively as part of their writing processes. The Planners responded with higher productivity than both the Revisers and Mixed Strategy Writers. Planners and Revisers did not differ significantly in how difficult they found writing to be; Planners found writing less difficult than did the Mixed Strategy Writers. It was concluded from both studies that working from a plan can be an effective writing strategy for some, but that planning is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for writing success.

3.1 METHODOLOGY

3.1.1 Research Design

The investigative approach in this study is a quantitative-based research. Descriptive analyses are used to achieve the objectives of the research. Further, the quantitative method is utilized to quantify certain values in order to provide evidence in support of the findings. The conduct of the research involved the phase of distributing questionnaires to the particular samples selected in this study.

3.1.2 Sample

For this study, the sampling technique used is purposive sampling. A group of postgraduate and undergraduate students representing Master in Business Administration (MBA) and Bachelor of Education (TESL) programs were selected to answer the questions regarding their writing strategies.

3.1.3 Data Collection

This study investigates the writing strategies of university students in particular, how the strategies differ among students from different levels and fields of studies. In order to collect the data, a self-administered survey questionnaire on the respondents' perceptions regarding the way they carry out their writing tasks was adapted from Flower and Hayes (1981) framework. The instrument used in this study is a set of questionnaire that contains four sections; Section A, Section B, Section C and Section D. The demographic profiles of the samples were obtained from Section A, containing two regarded items on the background of the subject. Meanwhile, Section B comprises 12 items on Task Environment and divided into four sub items; Topic, Audience, Exigency and Written Text. Further, Section C contains five items on the Background Knowledge with Topic, Audience and Various Writing Plans as the main focus of investigation. As for Section D, 15 items have been allocated on composing process and divided into five main areas; Planning, Translating, Reviewing, Evaluating and Revising. In sections B, C and D, the repondents were asked to use a three-point Likert scale to respond to several statements relating to, for example, how they choose essay topics, plan the writing task and evaluate their writing. All the items are managed in a table with the three scales; Never, Sometimes and All the time.

In collecting the required data, some procedures have been performed in order to have a trouble-free process. Firstly, the documented questionnaires were distributed to the participants and they were asked to answer the questionnaire after their class. The session takes approximately 30 minutes for all to be completed. All the gathered data are then analyzed using SPSS 20.

3.1.4 Participants

In total, 44 respondents completed and returned the questionnaires. Out of this number, 32 (73%) of the respondents were females and 12 (27%) were males. The respondents were also grouped under the category of 'Level of Study'. From this category, the undergraduates were 61.4% and postgraduates were 38.6%.

3.2 DATA ANALYSIS

3.2.1 Goodness Fit of Data

Data from the questionnaires were tabulated and analyzed using SPSS version 20. To assess the normality of the distribution of the data, a test of normality was carried out. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic returned values of $p=.091$, $p=0.08$ and $p=0.166$, respectively for the three sections (B, C and D). From the results, normality is assumed for all the sections as the p value is greater than 0.05. In other words, the variables of task environment (B), background knowledge (C) and composing process (D) fulfilled the assumption of normality. According to Pallant (2005), the violation of the assumption of normality is commonly found in larger samples. Tests were also done for each section to assess the internal reliability of the items. The Cronbach's Alpha values were .491, .620 and .830 for

each section. Based on this result, background knowledge and composing process were found to have internal consistencies as the coefficient values were greater than the acceptable value of 0.6. The test of internal consistency is summarized in Table 1. The t-test and frequency analysis are then used to describe and compare the collected data and subsequently answer the research question of this study.

Table 1 Cronbach Alpha test

Section	Variable	Coefficient
B	Task environment	0.491
C	Background knowledge	0.620
D	Composing process	0.830

4.1 DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1.1 General Findings

The findings are presented based on the investigation of whether the task environment, background knowledge and composing process differ among students of different level of studies. Although much of the data here were self-reported and filtered through self-perception, the findings that emerged from this study offer insights into the ways students write. The results of the independent-samples t-test are summarized and presented in Table 2.

Table 2 T-test

Section	F	Sig	t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
B	.747	.392	.130	42	.897
C	2.283	.138	.136	42	.892
D	1.279	.265	.234	42	.816

The results of the t-test showed insignificant values ($p>0.05$) across the three sections (p=.897, p=.892, p=.816) indicating that there was no significant difference between the mean responses of undergraduate and postgraduate students. As such, we can assume that the students from these two levels of studies are most likely had the same views or methods in the way they write.

In the next analysis, the frequencies and percentages were tabulated to reveal the trend in the writing strategies of the undergraduate and postgraduate students. This type of analysis would further refine and compare the writing strategies adopted by the undergraduate as well as the postgraduate students.

4.1.2 Task Environment

Figure 2 depicts the results on Task Environment for undergraduate and postgraduate level. It is found out that 82.4% respondents of undergraduate level prefer to choose topic that they know to write an essay. It can be concluded that they write by using their own schemata on the selected topic. This finding is in accordance with the research by Olive (2003); he stated that students often make use of their background knowledge as content in their writing. Two statements share the same percentages (64.7%) which are, 'I try to choose topic that I like' and 'I try to choose topics that are easily found in the library/internet'. It can be inferred that sometimes they write essay if they have interest on the topics or if they could get the references from internet or library.

In contrast to undergraduate students, post graduate students prefer to choose a topic that they like as compared to a topic they know. In addition, it can also be seen from the figure that postgraduate students would find out more if they do not know about the topics of writing (85.2%). Therefore, only 14.8% students would change to a simple topic if they do not know about it. It can be inferred that their education level influences the process of choosing a topic for essay writing.
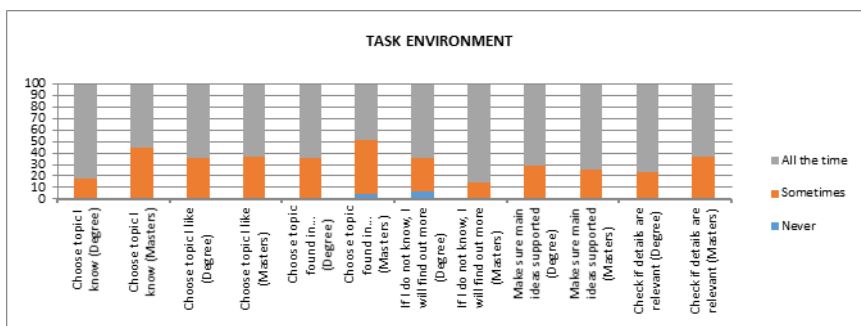

Figure 2 Task environment

4.1.3 Background Knowledge

Figure 3 depicts the Background Knowledge used by undergraduate and postgraduate students in their writing composition. The results indicate that two statements share the highest percentage (76.5%) for undergraduate students. The statements are, 'Recall if I know' and 'Feels happy about topics I know'. It can be assumed that they would activate their prior knowledge on topic that they know at ease to do writing composition.

Similarly, the statement 'Feels happy about topics I know' is the highest frequency (76.5%) chosen by the postgraduate students. This result is in accordance with undergraduate students whereby they feel happy if they know about the topics of essay that they are going to write. Therefore, the background knowledge on topics is important in order to do writing composition. Thus, the results support the statement stated by Olive (2003) that writers need short-term and long-term memory when they write.
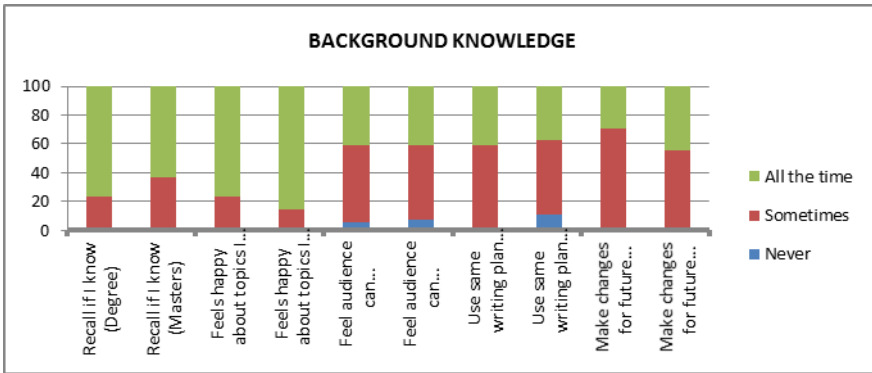
Figure 3 Background knowledge

4.1.4 Composing Process

The findings on the composing process for undergraduate and postgraduate students are revealed in Figure 4. For undergraduate students, only 5.9% of them answered 'never' for four statements. The statements are, 'Look again at content', 'Look again at sentence', 'Look again at mechanics' and 'Before I submit I read'. In contrast, the majority of students would check their essay once they are done. Two other statements share the same percentages (64.7%) which are, 'Use mind maps to plan' and 'Have an outline'. Therefore, the students need to have a proper planning in order to write an essay.

Postgraduate students find themselves using ideas from their memory in the composing process (74.1%). Flower and Hayes (1981) believes that the writer used his/her own strategies when they are composing. 59.3% students state that they always use mind map to plan and 63% of students have an outline before they write an essay. The result shows that both undergraduate and post graduate students would plan their essay writing. It can be concluded that planning is useful in writing an essay as students would have a guideline to produce a piece of writing.
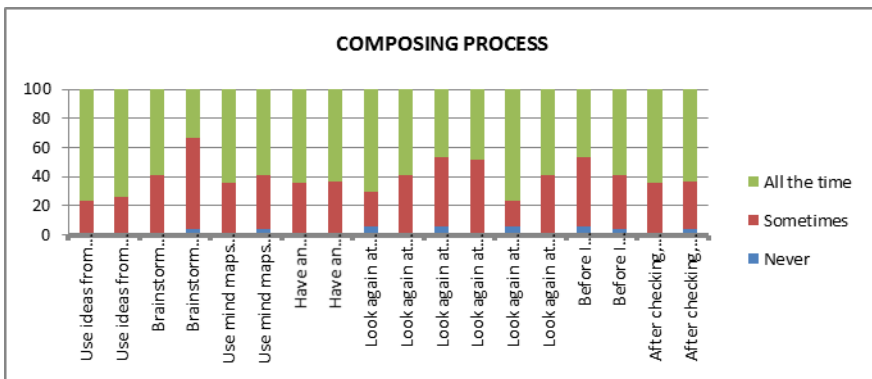

Figure 4 Composing process

5.1 CONCLUSION

5.1.1 Summary of Findings

Task Environment

Although as a whole, both undergraduate and postgraduate students indicated they used all the strategies in the Task Environment, some strategies are used more frequently than others by different groups of writers. For instance, undergraduate students indicated they chose topics that they knew. This is also true in the research by Bowen (2012) who found that undergraduate writers seemed to focus on content addition. This is in line with the finding of this research, which revealed that undergraduate writers were keen to check whether the details of the paragraphs were relevant.

In addition to that, this research also revealed that postgraduate writers would proceed to find out more about their topic as they write. This finding is in accordance with the research by Bowen (2012) who discovered that postgraduate writers aimed to add new ideas to the existing body of knowledge. This also explains why postgraduate writers were also keen on making sure their main ideas were supported.

Background Knowledge

The summary for background knowledge revealed that both groups of writers use this strategy when they wrote. Both undergraduate and postgraduate writers would use their background knowledge to recall relevant information about the topic. This finding is in accordance with the report by Olive (2003) who said that writers made use of their background knowledge as content in their writing. That is why both types of writers preferred topics that they knew about and had background knowledge of.

Composing Process

Again the summary of findings revealed both types of writers used all the strategies in the composing process. However, some strategies are applied more times than others. For example, both types of writers used ideas from their background knowledge. They used mind maps and outlines for their essays. The undergraduate writers were reported to review their content and this is in accordance with the research by Bowen (2012) who said undergraduate writers were more concerned with content addition compared to the postgraduate writers. The undergraduate writers were also reported to review the mechanics of their writing.

5.1.2 Pedagogical Implications

The teaching of academic writing among undergraduates needs to focus less on content generating; instead more emphasis needs to be given on how to improve existing content and how to add on to new knowledge. Postgraduate writers should focus on the expectations of the audience while they write.

5.1.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could focus on the use of think aloud protocols to uncover more about the writing strategies of both undergraduate and postgraduate students. In addition to that, it would be worthwhile to look into the different composing and revising processes of these two groups of writers and to see how these processes affect the end product of their writing.

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