

Students' Ways of Understanding Academic Writing

Suciyati Haji Sulaiman¹

¹Universiti Brunei Darussalam, Bandar Seri Begawan, Brunei Darussalam

Article Info

Keywords:

Phenomenography
Conceptions
Academic Writing
Student learning

ABSTRACT

Universities have placed academic writing skills as valuable skills for university students; some universities have compulsory modules for undergraduates, and some have dedicated writing centers for students to seek assistance in composing academic writing. Without a doubt, writing in English, particularly for those whose first language is not English, is considered a complex and challenging skill to master. In addition, academic writing is even more complex, as an essential element of academic writing is the inclusion of claims and opinions. Therefore, the struggle observed is that students cannot voice their opinions in a formal writing context, which perhaps resulted in the structure of the written piece not being coherent and cohesive as per the standard of academic writing. In order to achieve its aim, this study will use a phenomenographic research approach to investigate the undergraduate's conceptions of academic writing. A phenomenography approach is used in this study because students' experience composing academic writing would be the focus, and the research object would look at the variation in ways of experiencing such phenomena. The study relates to learners from various faculties at the University with a common ground of their English language proficiency that is used to gain entry to the University.

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Corresponding Author:

Suciyati Haji Sulaiman
Language Centre, Universiti Brunei Darussalam
Email: suciyati.sulaiman@ubd.edu.bn

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic writing seems to have its reputation associated with being in a university. Some may see academic writing as a new skill to be learned, and others may have already acquired the writing skills before entering the University. In Brunei, one of its national universities, Universiti Brunei Darussalam, has in place a compulsory breadth module that aims to facilitate undergraduates in acquiring the writing skills in order to produce a fluent and coherent academic writing piece, not only for the undergraduates to cope with in producing written assignments but also to go beyond their assessments, and to produce further and publish research papers.

It is relatively common for educational institutions to provide support in academic writing [1], which varies; where some educational institutions have a dedicated center for

students to approach and seek assistance in their writing skills and some institutions have it as a requirement for its undergraduates to sit in a class to learn academic writing skills as part of their degree program. For example, higher educational institutions in Australia support their students in acquiring adequate literacy competency [1]; this was when Australia received several international students from around the world applying to study at the universities. Thus, for universities to uphold their academic reputation, they must assist students in acquiring competent academic writing skills [2]. In the United Kingdom, academic writing is considered a social practice within the institution [1]. On the other hand, universities in Brunei Darussalam has mandated academic writing within their undergraduate program, making it compulsory for all undergraduates to sit and pass the academic writing module.

The motivation for Study Academic Writing at the University

The National University has imposed two (2) compulsory breadth modules on academic writing that all undergraduate students must sit. The main objective of these compulsory academic writing modules is to prepare and train undergraduates to familiarize the academic genre and to produce an excellent academic paper to ‘survive’ and succeed in their undergraduate program. It can be seen that students have varying skills in writing academically as they have come from different schools prior to entering the University. However, it is assumed that these students entering the University should have similar English proficiency levels as they all have taken a national exam, the GCE Cambridge-Brunei O Levels, where the entry requirement for the University is at least a C6 grade. Though these students entered the University with an average of C6 grade in their English proficiency examination, in reality, students still carry a varying degree of proficiency [3].

Without a doubt, writing in English, particularly for those whose first language is not English, is considered a complex and challenging skill to master [4]. In addition, academic writing is even more complex [4], [5], as essential elements of academic writing are research and the inclusion of claims and opinions. By providing research evidence, the writing becomes reliable and accurate information. Therefore, the struggle observed is that students cannot voice their opinions in a formal writing context. This may be due to the lack of acquired specialized vocabulary that is needed to express own opinion, especially in an academic context [4]. Thus, this perhaps resulted in the structure of the written piece not being coherent and cohesive enough as per the standard of academic writing. Therefore, this suggests a need to examine more closely how these students conceive academic writing to understand further and effectively respond to their needs in producing an excellent academic paper.

This study aims to investigate undergraduate students’ experiences of learning to write an academic paper to identify an approach to teaching that leads to successful mastery of this objective. It is necessary to explore how students understand academic writing and identify what they need to learn to achieve the objective. According to Marton [4], the critical aspect must be discerned to meet the learning objective.

In order to achieve its aim, this paper reports phenomenographic research on the qualitatively different ways students experience academic writing in English at the

University. The study sought to contribute to the growing literature and bring to awareness the critical aspects for the students to achieve the objective of learning to write academically. The study's results provide insights into how students experience academic writing by articulating variations in their understanding of it. This variation is depicted in a hierarchy related to students' conceptions of academic writing.

2. METHOD

2.1. Phenomenographic Research

Explaining Phenomenography is developed mainly within the discipline of Education [6]. It is a qualitative research approach that describes variations in people's experiences of a phenomenon through their discourse and aims to investigate and present the qualitatively different ways one experiences a phenomenon [7]. Phenomenography is an approach to identifying, formulating, and tackling specific research questions relevant to learning and understanding in an educational setting [8]. In other words, Phenomenography is the study of how people experience, understand or conceive of a phenomenon in the world, where the investigation is not directed at the phenomenon itself but at the variation in people's ways of understanding the phenomenon [9].

The primary outcome of phenomenographic research is the outcome space [10], which comprises a set of related categories describing a specific phenomenon in question. Each category of description denotes a distinctively different way of experiencing or seeing the phenomenon, which is generalizable across different situations where the same phenomenon occurs [10]. The outcome space shows the relationship among the various categories of description consistent with their logical complexity and inclusiveness and describes the variation in the possible ways a phenomenon is experienced [10]. Typically, the phenomenographic categories of description may be analyzed in the form of a nested hierarchy [8], or they may be analyzed as branched relationships [11]. The conceptions represent a researcher's analysis and description of variation in pooled statements of ways of experiencing a phenomenon. It also represents a researcher's attempt to formalize their understanding of participants' experiences of the phenomenon, where each conception represents the critical aspects of one's way of experiencing the phenomenon. Therefore, a set of conceptions should satisfy three criteria by accordance to Marton and Booth [8]; (i) each conception should denote a distinctly different aspect of the experience of the phenomena, (ii) a logical relationship, commonly hierarchical, should exist between each conception, and (iii) the outcome space should meet the minimum number of different conceptions required to describe the critical variation in experience with the population of interest.

2.2. Participants

The study samples relate to different types of learners at the University. Their common ground is their pre-university English language proficiency of achieving at least a C6 grade in the GCE Cambridge- Brunei O Level examination, as this proficiency level is an entry requirement to be admitted to the University. However, these participants would have different understandings and experiences of academic writing from different school

backgrounds. The main focus of academic writing will be in the Social Sciences discipline, as academic writing varies according to discipline. The study participants are undergraduate students registered for the compulsory breadth module on academic writing from that University's Faculty of Social Sciences. These students are selected as they will have the experience of producing academic writing [12]. Thus in this study, a manageable number of twenty (20) participants were selected and interviewed based on open-ended questions, aiming to achieve as many variations of conceptions as possible and to identify critical aspects that will assist in informing what students need to learn. In order to achieve the object of learning.

2.3. Data Collection

In the phenomenographic approach, the one-on-one interview method is the main form of data collection. In this study, the main focus of the interview question would be investigating the participants' current knowledge of academic writing, exploring their experience, and how they show their attitudes [13] towards it. As the interview is conducted, participants' answers prompt further elaboration to discern participants' deep awareness and experience of academic writing. This study conducted a semi-structured interview with a list of questions and possible prompts, which lasted between 35 to 50 minutes. The one-to-one interview was scheduled at the participants' convenient times and conducted with consent individually and privately, where participants could express their thoughts comfortably, following the ethical standards required.

During the interview, the first and foremost question asked was, "what does academic writing mean to you?" and, wherever necessary, follow-up prompts were asked to discern a deeper understanding of participants' awareness and experience of academic writing. Secondly, the questions moved to ask 'how' – "how do you write an academic paper?" This helps reveal the participant's in-depth understanding and experience of academic writing. It also reveals whether the participants have truly understood what academic writing is, with their responses to what they conceive as academic writing and how they can demonstrate their way of writing academically. In order to ensure an accurate account of the interviews and for analysis, the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

2.4. Data Analysis

The analysis aims to search for variation and categorize the participants' conceptions of academic writing. Using the phenomenographic approach to analyze data involves an ongoing and iterative process [8] of exploring the data to gather and organize the varying conceptions attained through the interviews. The data analysis can only be done once all participants are interviewed and the transcripts are analyzed. Thus, the transcripts were read and reread extensively [13] to develop initial ideas regarding students' understanding of academic writing. The first reading serves as gathering and understanding initial ideas. The second reading highlighted the initial ideas based on similarities and differences. The third reading follows this to accumulate the initial ideas

together to discern the main categories of description, focusing on similarities, differences, and central meaning of the initial ideas. Finally, establishing relationships among categories that followed a hierarchical relationship.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Outcome analysis of students' understanding of academic writing identified four qualitatively different ways. These differences range from limiting to expansive ways, where some students seemed unable to describe different academic writing characteristics on how they understood it. This may mean that students see academic writing as only a component in their learning environment at the University, or in other words, a written piece to fulfill their learning requirements. On the other hand, those students who could describe their understanding more expansively seemed to understand the characteristics and purpose of academic writing. This means that these students understood academic writing beyond the structures and format of writing. Categories of descriptions and excerpts of interview transcripts are presented below.

3.1. Category A: Academic Writing as a university requirement

In this conception, students' understanding of academic writing was limited where. They only understood it as part of university assessments and a "must do" to achieve grades and pass a module for them to graduate.

S1: ... so the first thought that comes to my mind when someone says academic writing is more of like reports or essays anything to do with like the work given by the lecturer...

S3: I think so from the lecturers that I watch um it's just telling me how to write proper essays uni levels

S4: Academic writing is like an essay that is academically and how do I say it, it's like the way we write the essay is academically acceptable like the structure the way we use the words ... it's a university level like a better an improved rating.

3.2. Category B: Academic Writing as formal writing

In this conception, the understanding of academic writing was limited to the perception that academic writing is formal writing, where students mainly mentioned that they should not use contractions and "big" words and not common daily spoken words in their writing.

S11: ... for example through texting so it's informal so I would say like some words that are not really academically acceptable like that so when er maybe I'll just say I can't like c-a-n-t, so that's not like an academic thing, you cannot write the short form right.

S12: formal as in using proper language something that is polite and respectful... proper as in a specific way and a specific sets of words to use rather than using for example, everyday language, for example you say enter, instead of saying coming in ... stuff like that

S16: *for me it's more formal and more it doesn't talk about unnecessary thing it's just straight to the point... I would say formal as in more mature writing.*

S18: *... my understanding is academic writing is basically the proper method of writing which incorporates um formal language as opposed to informal language in writing ... in terms of expressing and having somewhat of an extensive vocabulary.*

3.3. Category C: Academic writing that requires specific structure and references

In this conception, students' understanding of academic writing is limited to the structure that an academic paper should possess and that it has a specific structure that students must adhere to for it to be deemed academic and accepted by their lecturers at the University. Furthermore, most students have included references and structure when mentioning what they understood about academic writing. Hence in this category, not only is there a specific structure that students must follow in order to produce an academic paper, but they should also include citations from other sources in their writing.

S2: *... it's very different from how I not only me but usually people write say for example to friends and family and I think academic writing also requires solid evidence, statistics, facts and referencing ...*

S5: *I would say the difference between non-academic and academic writing would be in non-academic writing there is no referencing and in academic writing, there is referencing ...*

S7: *... an essay they have like the introduction the body and so like for me academic writing it's for me to be able to do that sometimes like we don't know how to start so by learning that I actually know what to put like that thesis statement and all that referencing*

S8: *first I think of the format ... and then intro and then the content and then maybe opinion and then conclusion... during poly [pre-university] ... we also do referencing ... but honestly I still confuse how to do referencing*

S10: *to me it's important to have a structure just so I know what I'm going to write about also it helps me to understand the question ... and because of my sources are where am I supporting points so I feel like without those I don't think I would be able to get the grade that I got*

S14: *you'd have to be more specific you have to like write the names of the authors you have to write the dates and then like usually you can't just give a paper just fill out your ideas you have to have a reference list, so to me I think the difference between like a normal writing and then versus academic writing.*

S15: *It's a way of writing a default way of writing for higher education institutions like the format is very very different compared to when you learned in high school like it's very formal and it has to be in a specific way, the structure has to be specific, it's usually I just think that's the format is specific but it's different for different sources... I mean academic writing also has to have references, we didn't learn that in high school, we didn't have references...*

S17: ... I think are important like the choice of words and also structure, choice of words the main points the content is very important as well and also referencing ... other studies what we can get from other studies as our reference that's important ...

S19: ... trying to like make a draft introduction ... plan my paragraphs ... then I try to remember like the format or the structure ... and then there is thesis statement ... thesis statement has to link to the first sentences ... and then I also have to think of like references like what references makes sense ... I try to make the reference try to relate to the topic ...

3.4. Category D: Academic writing as a way to communicate one's ideas

In this conception, students understand that academic writing is beyond the format and structure of writing, where it is a platform for one to express and discuss their ideas on a familiar topic. It has also been understood that expressing their ideas requires critical thinking and logical reasoning.

S6: ... academic writing basically has the writer and the reader right the two people involved, it's like talking with each other but you're not physically there so for me the writer would provide information but it has to be understandable for the reader ...

S9: ... I also think that an academic writing does not defined by the higher vocabulary words but more to the content and how it is conveyed to the readers.

S13: I think it's to widen our knowledge and help us see views from other people's perspectives.

S20: ... it's how do you say, it's not just her voice or his voice or their voice, it's also your voice so it's not just other people's opinions that matter, it's also yours so you don't really argue argue to the point where you ignore other people but you also input everyone and you know put it in a beautiful sentence.

3.5. Discussion

This research identified students' conceptions of academic writing within the context of the University in Brunei, establishing four qualitatively different ways in which was categorized as academic writing as a university requirement, academic writing as formal writing, academic writing that requires specific structures and references and finally, academic writing as a way to communicate one's ideas. From this study, the most robust understanding of academic writing is seen as a way to communicate one's ideas, whereby it not only includes the other three conceptions but is also seen as beyond the structure, format of writing, and course more than just a requirement of a university. It is the most potent understanding because students in conception D acknowledge that academic writing is formal writing where specific structure and format must be adhered to, but most importantly, the writer's ideas are conveyed effectively to the reader. Furthermore, the structure and format were seen to aid readers in understanding their writing, where the structure was seen to guide the readers to understand better the ideas written, and the formal language used was to avoid any biases or being opinionated.

The conceptions were arranged in lower to higher-order hierarchies in understanding academic writing. The most common conception of these first-year undergraduate students was that academic writing requires specific structure and references. Nonetheless, the lowest order of understanding is the conception where students understand academic writing as only a requirement at the University. In this conception, students merely see academic writing as only part of a requirement to complete their assignments and consequently pass the module in order for them to graduate. The next order of understanding is academic writing as formal writing. Students believe that using formal vocabulary or higher-order words differentiates academic writing papers from “normal” essays or writing in which students compared to their previous school years’ composition writing. Students in this category emphasize that formal writing means using “bombastic” words that they would not commonly use in daily conversations with family and friends. The next order, and previously mentioned, was the common conception of students in this study, whereby students understand academic writing as one with specific structures and citations in the written paper. Students were well informed that in writing an academic paper, there are specific structures that they have to adhere to and that they should include citations from other sources for their writing to be credible. Lastly, it was found that the highest order of understanding encompasses all orders of thinking in each category and that students have understood that the purpose of writing is to convey a message and share ideas and thoughts with readers without condescending to other people’s ideas. In addition, students in this category have also understood that the structure and format of writing play an essential role in communicating their ideas to their readers efficiently and effectively. Thus, this conception of understanding stands as a higher order as it comprises all four categories in this study.

This study seeks to understand undergraduate students’ conceptions of academic writing at the University to assist and create meaningful module design, as well as for the students to build on their capabilities in producing an excellent academic paper. Understanding how students conceive and perceive academic writing is essential by looking into their prior knowledge and writing behaviors [14]. Furthermore, in an academic context such as a university, it is known that writing acts as both learning content and a platform for other learning matters [15]. This was understood by all the students, whom they acknowledged that they need academic writing in all their modules at the University; however, their behavior towards producing an academic paper then differs according to their previous school background where some students are familiar with writing and have produced several written works before, and yet some students were not able to understand a far extent of academic writing.

In this study, students of category A had difficulty expressing their understanding of academic writing, apart from informing that academic writing was a requirement for their assignments and that they must successfully pass it to graduate. However, they seem to acknowledge that academic writing requires complex words and sentence structure, which is true that it consists of more complex sentences [16]. On the other hand, students of category B were able to extend their understanding further than category A, whereby they acknowledge and understand that academic writing requires a more sophisticated

writing style, using the term “formal” to conveniently cover the term of words that may seem to be advanced and perhaps unfamiliar. Students of these categories have understood that academic writing requires a somewhat advanced English language proficiency in terms of grammatical choice and features and lexical range and features [17]. This can be seen that in this category, the students are aware that their English language proficiency plays an essential role in ensuring that they can compose an excellent academic written paper, or what they deem is acceptable at a university setting, as they have made comparisons with their previous written work, that they called ‘compositions’ in their previous school.

Meanwhile, in category C, the students emphasized the importance of writing structures and their format to be the main features of academic writing, and most students in this category mentioned that references or citations to other authors or sources are also important in differentiating a piece of writing, whether it is or not academic. The most common finding among students in this category was the mention that academic writing must have citations for it to be deemed an academic paper, and this distinct feature was well understood by the students [17], [18]. This has shown two different understandings amongst those students in both the categories of B and C, whereby in one, students understood that English language proficiency plays a significant role in producing an excellent academic paper. In contrast, the other category understands that certain features serve the purpose of communicating their ideas in an academic paper. Finally, in category D, the students hold a more robust understanding of academic writing where they have to acknowledge and understand that an academic paper is a means of communicating their ideas towards a topic, and for them to be able to do so effectively, they emphasize the importance of the English language proficiency, as well as adhering to the correct format and structure of an acceptable academic paper.

Academic writing is complex [1], [4], [5]; nonetheless, it is emphasized that academic writing should be seen as a social practice [15], [17]. Although all students have a good idea and understanding of academic writing, which they all mentioned and acknowledged encompasses the aspects of composing academic writing, there are still gaps in their understanding, except for one category. Academic writing indeed consists of not only the structures, format, and inclusion of citations; it also requires a level of English proficiency, of which all aspects must be brought together to compose and produce academic writing, and the driving factor would be the ability of the student to communicate their thoughts and ideas on a topic to a suitable or targeted audience. This driving factor would then depend on their prior knowledge of a specific topic. If students are unfamiliar with a topic, they may be unable to express their thoughts and ideas [19]. These first-year students may not be aware of specific topics or are limited to topics within their disciplines. Therefore they may have only been informed that structures, format, and citing other sources are essential aspects of academic writing, which are the basics of and that differentiates academic writing from other writings. It is believed that once university students are actively involved in building knowledge within their disciplines [20], they will be able to create knowledge rather than reproduce it [21]. For a student to be able to communicate their ideas about a topic, it requires them to have a complete understanding

of what they are explaining, informing, or even arguing, and to support and complement this communication, the students should also be proficient in a language to be able to express their intended thoughts effectively and accurately. In addition to language proficiency, the structure and format of academic writing must also be adhered to for the writing to be accepted within an academic or expert community [22].

Teaching academic writing has been vastly researched, and educators are constantly finding effective ways to teach students, especially university students, as it has been understood that academic writing is required at universities. In addition, lecturers have specific aspects of academic writing that they expect from their students, such as their language use, structures, and format, as well as to the point of prescribing the number of citations they expect a student to include in their piece of writing assignment. Another expectation from lecturers is that the students can display engagement with the course materials in their writing [22], where students seem to struggle due to inadequate knowledge of a subject matter. However, it is still uncertain in terms of what is inadequate to the students, either due to a lack of understanding of the subject or the lack of English language proficiency, which causes students to be unable to express their thoughts and opinions of the subject matter effectively. On the other hand, ineffectively being able to express thoughts and opinions may be due to students' cultural background [20], where it is unfamiliar for students from a specific cultural background to argue an opinion or firmly state their opinion of a subject matter. All these factors seem to have a role in deterring students' understanding of academic writing as a way of communicating their ideas. Therefore, students must know that academic writing does not depend solely on linguistic features [17]. It requires the students to comprehend the academic genres and practice, including how to communicate an argument or an opinion to their readers effectively.

4. CONCLUSION

This study provides a point of entry to writing conceptions held by university students in Brunei, where the University mandates academic writing courses for all undergraduate students. The findings may be relevant to a broader community, especially the University itself, where educators should understand that students are from various educational backgrounds and have different understandings of academic writing. Students' conceptions influence their approaches to engaging and producing [17] a written task. Therefore, educators must be aware of the students' experience when they attempt to produce academic writing and to find the gap and reasons why students are not producing an acceptable standard piece of academic writing.

This study implies that academic writing courses should not only dictate the required features of academic writing, but it is essential to instill in students the importance of building knowledge [19] within their discipline or context for their assignment [21], as the practice of academic writing is more towards the capabilities of one to communicate their ideas and thoughts in a disciplined and concise manner to their readers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My gratitude goes to the participants of this study, thanking them for their time in their busy study timetable. Thank you to my supervisors for guiding me in this study, my colleagues for being willing to assist and listen to the sharing sessions of my preliminary findings, and for their feedback. Thank you to my University for permitting me to conduct this study on campus.

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