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Noor Hanim Rahmat

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Writing about Writing: An Exploration of Types of Knowledge and Writing Difficulties

Noor Hanim Rahmat

Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Johor Kampus Pasir Gudang

Abstract

Academic writing or expository writing is different in many ways than narrative or descriptive essays. While the latter retells the writers' experience and observations, the former requires writers to think and plan before they can begin writing. This is because writing no longer depends on their memory. They soon discover essay writing is not merely transferring from their oral thoughts to written thoughts. They cannot just retell what they think they already know in their memory. They have to find for valid information (content knowledge), check the validity of the information (problem analysis and set goals) and then write the information in a proper manner (discourse knowledge). They are not only required to knowledge-tell but also knowledge-transform information into their writing task. This study is done to explore the difficulties that writers face when write academic essays. This qualitative study is done to explore the how writers feel about the difficulties they faced in writing expository essays. 20 participants were purposively chosen from students who attended a semester of academic writing course for the first time in the university. 10 of the participants were from the social sciences discipline while 10 of them were from the science and technology discipline. Findings revealed that academic writers faced difficulties in problem analysis & goal setting, content knowledge and also discourse knowledge. Findings of this study adds on to the body of knowledge in understanding why academic writers find their writing task difficult.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Problem Analysis, Goal Setting, Content Knowledge, Discourse Knowledge.

Introduction

For learners entering the world of academic writing from their previous world of creative or even narrative writing, academic writing may seem overwhelming. Academic writing or expository writing is different in many ways than narrative or descriptive essays. While the latter retells the writers' experience and observations, the former requires writers to think and plan before they can begin writing. This is because writing no longer depend on their memory. They soon discover essay writing is not merely transferring from their oral thoughts to written thoughts. They cannot just retell what they think they already know in their memory. They have to find for valid information (content knowledge), check the validity of the information (problem analysis and set goals) and then write the information in a proper manner (discourse knowledge). They are not only required to knowledge-tell but also

knowledge-transform information into their writing task. According to Rahmat (2020), writing depends on critical reading abilities. Academic writing tasks require the writers to compile and analyse their information through reading. The information usually goes through analysis and transformation before they are inserted into the academic writing task. Besides taking care of content for the writing task, writers also need to have discourse knowledge -that is knowledge of the writing skills. However, writers do face difficulties when they write.

However, the academic writing process is not easy even for the skilled writers. Bulqiyah, et.al (2021) reports that academic writers often struggle with the discourse knowledge. In addition to that Phuong (2021) found that academic writers reported difficulties with content knowledge and also problem analysis. The study by Rahmat (2020) suggested that researchers need to have a qualitative data to look into writing behaviour of writers of academic writing in order to investigate what aspects of writing they find difficult. This study is done to explore the difficulties that writers face when write academic essays. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following questions

- How do writers perceive in problem analysis and goal setting as difficulty in writing?
- How do writers perceive content knowledge as a writing difficulty?
- How do writers perceive discourse knowledge as a difficulty in writing?

Literature Review

Writing as a Process

Writing is an activity that involves many processes. Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) presented the knowledge transforming process (figure 1). The writer begins the writing process with a mental representation of the writing assignment/task. Next, the writer goes through problem analysis to see their ability to complete the task. They then proceed to goal setting. In order to complete the writing task, the writer needs (a) content and (b) discourse knowledge. Content knowledge refers to the writer's knowledge that adds ideas, information, etc to the essay. Discourse knowledge refers to the writer's technical knowledge needed to write the essay.

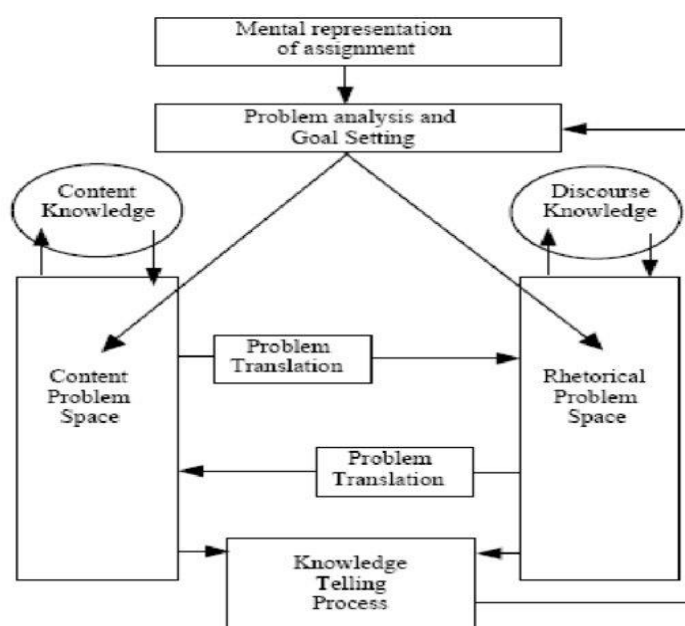


Figure 1- Knowledge Transforming Process (Bereiter and Scardamalia,1987)

Difficulties in Writing

Writing is said to be difficult at many levels. When asked, different categories of people reported different type of difficulties in writing. According to Malagoli,et.al (2021) students who were had language difficulty reported significantly more perceived difficulties than students without language difficulties. The study by Moses and Mohamad (2019) also reported challenges faced by both students and teachers in learning as well as teaching writing skills in elementary schools. They reported difficulties such as lack of vocab, weak grammar, and poor spelling. They also found that students' readiness in the writing task also makes the writing task more difficult. They may lack exposure to reading materials and may also lack motivation in the writing task.

Next, Heaton (1975) listed several difficulties in writing. The first one is language use and it refers to the the ability of the writer to write correct and appropriate sentences. The second difficult writing skill is mechanical skills and they refer to the ability to use correctly those conventions peculiar to the written language, for example punctuation, and spelling. The third difficult skill is the treatment of content and this is the ability to think creatively and develop thoughts, excluding all irrelevant information. Next, is stylistic skills and this refer to the ability to manipulate sentences and paragraphs, and use language effectively . Finally is judgment skills and it is the ability to write in an appropriate manner for a particular purpose with a particular audience in mind, together with an ability to select, organize and order relevant information.

Bryne (1988) categorised the problems that make writing difficult into three categories. The first is Linguistic Difficulty and this refers to the linguistics aspect like grammar, vocabulary, language use and choice of sentence in writing must have fully monitoring. The second difficulty is Physiology Difficulty and it focuses on difficulty in develop written material or content of composition. The third is cognitive difficulty. This refer to the writer's ability (disability) to use their thinking process to make decisions on formal instruction like spelling, punctuation, capitalization and paragraphing.

Are writers facing difficulty because the task is difficult or are they caught in a cycle of self-fulfilling prophecy they set on themselves? According Merton (1948), self-fulfilling prophecy (figure 2) refers to the phenomenon where a person beliefs influences his/her expectations and the expectations influence how others behave towards him/her . It is a prediction that comes true at least in part as a result of a person's beliefs or expectation that made the prediction come true.

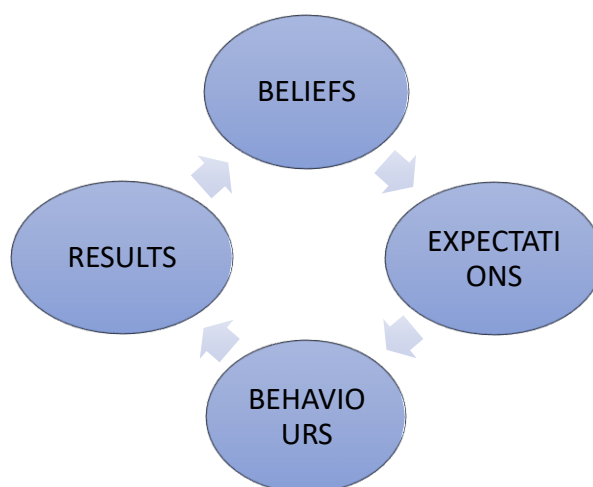


Figure 2- Cycle of Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Nevertheless, there are different types of self-fulfilling prophecies. According to Adler, et.al (2012), there are two types of self-fulfilling prophecies: self-imposed and other-imposed. In a self-imposed prophecy, a person's own expectations are the causal factor for another person's actions. Next, other-imposed self-fulfilling prophecy arises when others' expectations of another individual affect the actions of that individual.

Past Studies

The study by Bulqiyah, et.al (2021) was done to explore perspectives of 21 tertiary students on essay writing difficulties. This explanatory research used both quantitative data (from survey) and qualitative data (from interview). Out of the 21 participants, 6 were interviewed. Findings revealed that their writing difficulties can be categorised into (a) affective problems, cognitive problems, (c) and linguistic problems. Affective problems is derived from students' and lecturers' attitude while learning and teaching writing respectively. Cognitive problems are problems about writing viewpoint, transferring language and the process of writing. Linguistic problems are problems in lexico-grammar, vocabulary, and the structure of essay.

Phuong (2021) carried out a study to explore students' difficulties in learning English writing skills. 50 English majored sophomores at the Tay Do University participated in this study. Questionnaires and interview were used as instruments for the study. Findings revealed seven types of difficulties and they are (1) vocabulary, (2) problems with grammar, (3) problems with prior knowledge, (4) troubles with organizing ideas, (5) problems with allotted time, (6) difficulties with teacher and (7) mother tongue. The most difficult was "allotted time".

The study by Pratiwi (2016) looked at students' difficulties in writing English essays. 79 students in the third semester of University of Bengkulu participated in the study. The data of this research were obtained by using the test scores of a composition test. The test was scored by using ESL Composition Profile. Findings showed that there are several categories of the writing difficulties. The first category of writing difficulty is related to the linguistics difficulty (language use and vocabulary aspects). This was found to be most difficult one compared to the second category; Cognitive Difficulty (organization and mechanics aspects) and also the third category; Physiology Difficulty (content aspect). In summary the groupings are;

- (a) Physiology Aspect (Content)
- (b) Linguistics Aspect (Language use and Vocabulary)
- (c) Cognitive Aspect (Organization and Mechanics)

Conceptual Framework

Figure 3 below shows the conceptual framework of the study. This study is rooted from the Knowledge-Transforming Process by (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987). According to Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987), during writing, the writer needs three main types of knowledge; (a) content knowledge, (b) discourse knowledge, and (c) problem analysis & goal setting. So when writers face difficulties in their writing task and their difficulties can either stem from their inadequacies in content or discourse knowledge while some may have difficulties with problem analysis and goal setting. In the context of this study, content knowledge is indicated

by difficulties with the retrieval of ideas, information or knowledge about the topic. Next, discourse knowledge refers to difficulties in grammar, vocabulary and also writing skills. Finally, problem analysis and goal setting refer to critical thinking skills and also the need for guidance.

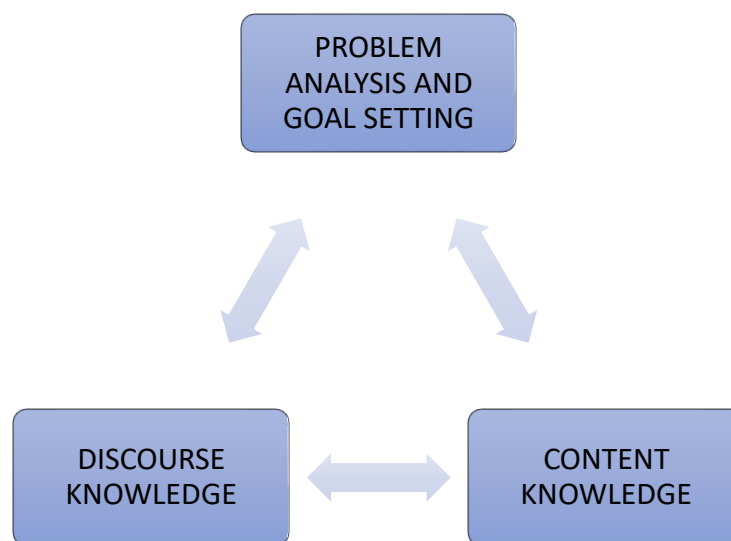


Figure 3- Conceptual Framework of the Study- Writing Difficulty and Types of Knowledge

Methodology

This qualitative study is done to explore the how writers feel about the difficulties they faced in writing expository essays. 20 participants were purposively chosen from students who attended a semester of academic writing course for the first time in the university. 10 of the participants were from the social sciences discipline while 10 of them were from the science and technology discipline. The students were first taught expository essay and then asked to write an expository essay entitled “Why is it difficult to write expository essays?”. Qualitative data is analysed qualitatively using content analysis. It was done on the students’ essays. The content was coded based on recurring patterns in the essay. The instrument used is adapted from Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) and is presented in table 1 below.

Table 1

Category and Indicators in the Instrument

SECTION	KEY MOVEMENT / MAIN CATEGORY	INDICATORS	CODING
A	CONTENT KNOWLEDGE	Knowledge, ideas,	CK
B	DISCOURSE KNOWLEDGE	Language, grammar, vocabulary, writing skill	DK
C	PROBLEM ANALYSIS AND GOAL SETTING	Thinking, need guidance	PA&GS

Findings

Introduction

20 essays entitled “Why are writing expository essays difficult?” were analysed. The essays were written by students from the social sciences as well as science & technology discipline. The essays were analysed and coded were given in accordance to table 1. Findings were

presented based on (a) content knowledge, (b) discourse knowledge and (c) problem analysis and goal setting.

Findings for Problem Analysis and Goal Setting

This section presents data to answer research question 3- How do writers perceive in problem analysis and goal setting as difficulty in writing? In writing, the ability to analyse the problems as they occur is coupled with the ability to solve those problems and to set goals to improve on the writing. Participants from both disciplines indicated problem analysis as poor “time management”. Writers sometimes do not plan their writing time well so much so that they end up not having enough time to complete their writing task. Next, participants from both social science and science & technology reported that writing requires “critical thinking” skill or even “high level of thinking” which is often difficult to display. The writers therefore needed the ability to “think at multiple levels”. Participants from the social sciences said that writing becomes difficult because writers “lack confidence”. They added that these writers needed “guidance” for their writing task.

Findings for Content Knowledge

This section presents data to answer research question 1- How do writers perceive content knowledge as a writing difficulty? In the context of this study, content knowledge can be indicated by the use of the words such as “ideas”, “topic”, “ideas” “knowledge”, or even “material”.

Knowledge of Topic

Students from both the social sciences and science & technology discipline were reported to find content knowledge a difficulty when writing expository essays. To begin with students from the science and technology discipline reported one main difficulty is that they were not interested in the topic. They were reported to say “not interested in topic”. The participants from both social science and science & technology discipline also mentioned that they “do not know the topic” and they lacked “knowledge of the topic”. They also said they needed “interesting topics” as they had “insufficient knowledge” of the given topic.

Ideas

Only one participant from the science & technology discipline reported that writing is difficult because writers “lack ideas”. Three participants from the social science discipline reported similar difficulty such as “lack of ideas”, and “lack of new ideas”. Some even mentioned that they needed “new ideas”, or “fresh new ideas” or even “struggle with new ideas” or even they even could not “generate new ideas”.

Lack of Knowledge

Several participants from the social science discipline, reported that their writing difficulty arose for their “lack of knowledge”. In addition to that the participants from science & technology reported they “lacked ideas and knowledge” and also “lacked of factual knowledge”.

Materials/ Current Issues

One participant from the social science discipline reported that one difficulty is writing material that is “irrelevant”. In addition to that participant from the science and technology discipline reported that they lacked “knowledge on current issues”.

Findings for Discourse Knowledge

This section presents data to answer research question 2- How do writers perceive discourse knowledge as a difficulty in writing? In the context of this study, discourse knowledge is identified by issues with language, vocabulary and also technical writing skills.

Language

Language is known to make or break a piece of essay. Good language skills help writers convey the message in the writing effectively. Weak language skills; on the other hand, often impedes understanding and stops message from being conveyed the way it was planned by the writer. Participants from the social sciences discipline mentioned “language proficiency” as one difficulty. This lack of language proficiency can snowball to not being able to “focus on clarity on ideas”. According to participants from both disciplines, proficiency skills also include “weak sentence structure” and “lack of structure skills”. Specifically for the social sciences discipline, they reported difficulties by the writers to “focus on the clarity of ideas”. They also reported that writers “lacked elaboration skills” or they may have “inconsistency of ideas” as well as not able to “convey their thoughts”. They felt that writers need to be “proficient in grammar and spelling”.

Vocabulary

Writers who have good vocabulary skills are able to use a variety of words in their writing. Participants from the social sciences discipline reported that good writers “need to use clear, concise language. They added that having the knowledge on “technical words” can attract readers’ attention. Participants from the science & technology discipline described that writers face difficulties because they “do not read much” and that lead to their “low vocabulary skills which can lead to them having weak t “structure of words”.

Writing Skills

Writers with good writing skills can develop eloquence in their work. This quality helps them communicate better with the readers. Participants from both disciplines claim that one main difficulty is that writers “struggle with writing skills”. They felt that when it comes to expository essays, writers “lack writing technique”. This includes “paragraphing skills”, failing to “elaborate ideas”, and lack of “organization skills”. In addition to that, participants from the social science discipline, writers lacked “the technique to doing mind-maps”, or even “proper format to organize essays”.

Conclusion

Summary of Findings and Discussion

Problem Analysis and Goal Setting

Problem analysis and goal setting should be done at the initial stage of the academic writing process. Participants from both disciplines indicated they found difficulties in “time management”. They also reported they needed more “critical thinking” skills or even “high level of thinking”. They said they needed the ability to “think at multiple levels”. Participants

from the social sciences said that writing becomes difficult because writers “lack confidence”. One interesting discovery is that lacking confidence and motivation in academic writing puts the writers in the cycle of self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948). Writers begins by not having much interest/confidence in the writing task. This lack of confidence is mirrored in the way they approach the task. They have low expectations of their writing ability. Their behaviour depicts their attitude towards the academic essay writing task and their result would display what they believe of themselves on their writing ability (figure 2) .

Participants also added that these writers needed “guidance” for their writing task. Bryne (1988) mentioned cognitive difficulty as one main difficulty that writers face in academic writing. This is the thinking process that can be seen as a difficult part if writers analyse well before they even begin planning the writing process. Pratiwi(2016) added in her study that cognitive aspect of writing involves also being critical in the organization and the mechanics aspects of the write-up.

Content Knowledge

In the context of this study, having content knowledge refer to the writers’ ability to improve the ideas presented. Writers portray this ability by elaborating the topic, the issues, the knowledge in the writing task. In general, writers felt they needed to be given interesting topics so that they will be motivated to write. Next, writers work if they lacked ideas to expand their writing. According to Phuong (2021), one main difficulty is the problems with ideas. When writers lacked ideas, they lack the ability to elaborate what they need to convey. This is supported by Pratiwi (2016) who labeled difficulty in content as physiology difficulty.

Discourse Knowledge

This study showed that writers perceive their academic writing difficulty is rooted from discourse knowledge such as language, vocabulary or even their writing skills. Participants reported that language proficiency is a difficulty. This lack of language proficiency can snowball to not being able to “focus on clarity on ideas”. They also lack proficiency skills also include “weak sentence structure” and “lack of structure skills”. Writers were also found to report that they “lacked elaboration skills” or they may have “inconsistency of ideas” as well as not able to “convey their thoughts”. They felt that writers need to be “proficient in grammar and spelling”. Next, participants also reported that they lacked vocabulary skills. They added that having the knowledge on “technical words” can attract readers’ attention. They described that the they face difficulties because they “do not read much” and that lead to their “low vocabulary skills which can lead to them having weak “structure of words”. Finally, participants from both disciplines reported that one main difficulty is that writers “struggle with writing skills”. They felt that when it comes to expository essays, writers “lack writing technique”. This includes “paragraphing skills”, failing to “elaborate ideas”, and lack of “organization skills”. The study by Phuong (2020) also found that academic writers had trouble organizing ideas. Similarly, Pratiwi (2016) also reported that academic writers faced linguistic difficulties in the form of language use and vocabulary.

Pedagogical Implications & Suggestions for Future Research

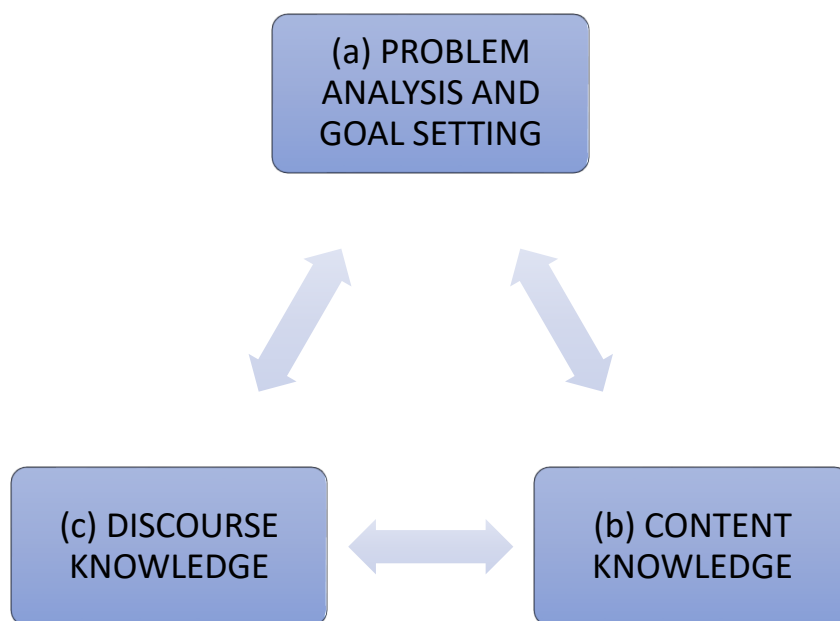


Figure 3- Conceptual Framework of the study-

The “problem analysis and goal setting” stage is seen as the “anchor” of the academic writing process. Writers begin with (a) problem-analysis and sets goals to make decisions on (b) what they want to include in the essay (content knowledge). Nevertheless, this decision (c) will influence how (discourse knowledge) the writer writes the essay. That is why suddenly adding an idea when the writer is done or even adding a paragraph to a main idea because the previous paragraph has become too long sometimes end with the discourse knowledge being compromised. That is why writing teachers could instill in the academic writers planning should take up the most time. If the planning is comprehensive, writers would have a smooth writing process conveying content knowledge using relevant discourse knowledge.

Writing teachers should spend more time teaching planning skills to academic writers; especially the beginning academic writers. Writing instructors could teach a variety of skills to plan essays such as brain-storming, mind-mapping, and making detailed outlines before the actual essay write-up. Future researchers could look explore more writing behaviour either through qualitative or quantitative research.

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