ANALYZING PERCEIVED WRITING DIFFICULTIES THROUGH THE SOCIAL COGNITIVE THEORY

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Abstract

Writing can both be considered as social and cognitive activity. Nevertheless, among the four language skills, writing skill is among the least liked by many ESL students. Students find writing a tedious process. Teachers find writing a difficult skill to teach. Writing skill involves planning, writing, editing, and perhaps re-writing and these skills are not easily taught nor learnt. Psychologists believe that expectations play a very important role in students' success in

learning. Writing teachers would agree that among some of the reasons why students cannot write well is because they find ESL academic writing difficult. This research looks into students' perceived difficulties towards ESL academic writing. 373 students from seven faculties participated in this study. The participants responded to 25 items on 5 Likert-scale (always, very often, sometimes, rarely and never). The questionnaires were analyzed to determine the students' perceived difficulties on ESL academic writing. Mean score, t-test and one way ANOVA were used to report on the findings. Findings revealed students found writing to be difficult for several reasons.

Keywords

ESL, Language Skills, Academic Writing, Writing Skills, Perceived Difficulties

1. Introduction

According to Riswanto (2016), learning to write is not as natural as learning to speak. Some speakers got away with scarce content through their fluent speech. However, the issue in writing is more complex than speaking. It was reported that students with writing difficulties do not only have problem dealing with spelling and forming letters, but also with "generating ideas" for writing and this can lead to negative thoughts of the actual writing. According to Al-Khasawneh (2010), negative thoughts about writing or perceived difficulties can influence the way the writer write his/her ideas? What are some of the perception that learners have when they said ESL academic writing is difficult? The objective of this study is to find out what ESL learners think about essay writing.

1.1 Research Questions

This research is done based on the following questions:

(a) What is the mean for cognitive, environmental and behavioral perspectives across faculties?

(b) Is there any significant difference for cognitive, environmental and behavioral perspectives across faculties?

(c) How are ESL learners influenced by cognitive, environmental and behavioral perspectives?

2. Review of Related Literature

2.1 Writing from Cognitive Perspective

Writers agree that writing is a thinking activity. The writer is constantly engaging in a thinking activity during the process. According to Rahmat (2011), an active write is constantly creating and criticizing as they write. "Creating" refers to the writer's attempt to decide on the best information to be included in the essay. "Criticising" refers to the act of writing, editing and further revision by the writing throughout the writing process.

Writers usually write for different reasons. Classroom writing can be seen as either real or display writing (Brown, 2000). These two categories of writing are actually types of writing in two end of a continuum. Real writing refers to the types of writing that are usually (although not always) assessed. Writers write "real" writing contents because they have contents they need to put in writing. Examples of real writing are journal writing, letter writing, or even advertisement writing, etc. Examples of display writing are essay writing in class, assignment writing, thesis writing and many more.

2.2 Social Cognitive Theory

According to Santrock (2009), Bandura's social cognitive theory emphasizes the symbiotic relationship between behaviour, environment, and person as well as cognitive factors.
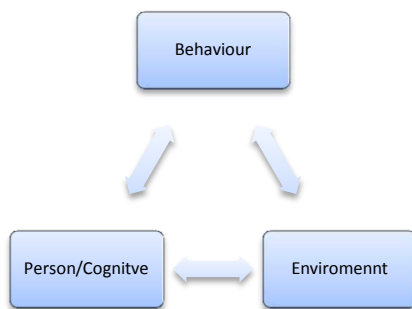
Figure 1: *Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Santrock, 2009,p 248)*

Figure 1 above shows Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory. Cognitive factors include learners' perception on his success or failure towards learning. Learner's behaviour is influenced by his/her environment-a positive environment will create a positive outcome and vice versa. Finally, the behaviour of the learner will result from the existing environment coupled with his/her cognitive perception of the learning process.

2.3 Perception of Difficulties in Writing

Among some of the top reasons why students hate writing are (a) they have insufficient groundwork and this can develop into insecurity and frustration. Secondly, (a) students often feel that essay writing is a subject that has "no answers." This is true because there can be answer keys to essay questions but the actual marking scheme of the essay can only be done by the writing teacher. Next, due to the uncertainty, some learners hate writing because they have a fear of failure. Contrary to popular believe, a piece of good writing need not have high number of vocabulary words nor is time consuming.
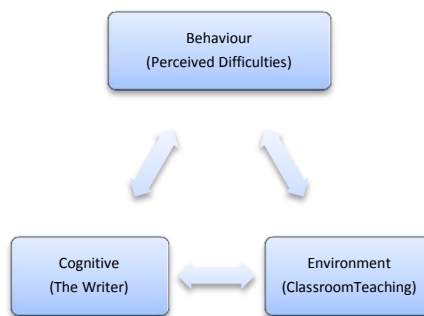
2.4 Theoretical Framework

Figure 2: *Theoretical Framework of the Study*

2.4.1 Behaviour (Perceived Difficulties)

According to Petersen (2015), perceived difficulties can stem from difficulties in perceived difficulties in punctuation, language use and also writing skills. Problems in punctuation include problems in using full-stops, question marks, exclamation marks, comma, colon, semi-colons and many more. Problems in language use include problems in using appropriate type and style of language in writing, use of synonyms/antonyms, use of tense, word order and many more. Finally, problems in writing skills include problems in spelling, summarizing, paraphrasing, using in-text citation, and many more.

2.4.2 Environment (Classroom Teaching)

Often, the learners' like or dislike towards a learning process in the classroom would depend on factors like teachers' language proficiency, and methods of teaching, medium of instruction. According to Solagha (2013),l earners are also affected by teachers lack of interest (or vice versa) towards the subject.

2.4.3   Cognitive (Writer)

During the process of writing, the writer is constantly suing his/her cognitive skills to make decisions. The decisions are related to the writing and they include the choice of the target language, as well as choice of what to write or not write.

2.5   Past Research

A study by Al-Khsawneh (2010) reported that the environment is the reason why students found writing difficult. Students also identified teaching method as one of the contributing factors. Some students also felt that some writing teachers need more training themselves in order to teach writing. Some students noticed the lack of interest on the part of the teacher to teach writing.

A study by Ghabool (2012) was done on 30 ESL students from upper and lower secondary in Malaysia to investigate on the problems that ESL writers face when they compose. The study reported that ESL writers face problems in conventions, punctuations and language use. The result revealed that language use was the most common problem reported by ESL writers

A research was done by Kho, Wong & Chuah (2013) to investigate the writing difficulties faced by 132 students in a higher institution in Sarawak, Malaysia. The findings reported that students had problems with creativity and critical thinking skills when it came to writing. They were also reported to face problems with proofreading and language use besides also facing problem with tenses, vocabulary and also using their L1 to write L2 essays.

Another study by Zakaria, Ibrahim, Rahmat, Noorezam. , Aripin, & Rasdi (2014) was conducted on 497 students from four different engineering faculties (Chemica, Electrical, Civil, and Mechanical) and Business Management to find out if ESL writers differ in their writing strategies. Results revealed that there were no significant differences in the way these different writers use their long term memory, explored their task environment as well as they writing process.

On the other hand, a study by Rahmat, Syed Abdul Rahman & Mohd Yunos (2015) looked into the writing strategies of three undergraduates studying Bachelor of Education (TESL), Bachelor of Education (Physical Education and Health) and Bachelor of Education (Science). The three writers underwent Think Aloud Protocol the findings revealed that the strategies used by writers of different disciplines do differ in some ways. Some interesting findings were (a) good writers took a longer time to write and narrative inquiry revealed that

even the good writers perceived essay writing as difficult; hence, they said they needed more time to begin writing. Another interesting finding was that writers from social science took a longer time to plan compared to their sciences counterpart. The writers from non-sciences were also reported to revise compared to the other writers.

3. Methodology

This study used the survey research design to examine the perceived difficulties faced by ESL academic writers. Data was collected from 373 students randomly selected from seven different faculties namely faculty of engineering, mechanical engineering, applied science, Art and Design, Business Management, Hotel and Management and also PusatAsasi (TESL). The instrument used in this study is a questionnaire with two main sections. In section A, the students responded to information about their demographic profile and section B, learners respond to the reasons they fund writing difficult, and in section C the learners responded to what they perceive as difficult in ESL writing. The participants responded to 25 items on 5Likert-scale (always, very often, sometimes, rarely and never). The questionnaires were analyzed to determine the students' perceived difficulties on ESL academic writing. Mean score, t-test and one way ANOVA were used to report on the findings.

4. Discussion of Findings

This section will report the findings based on the three research questions.

4.1   Research Question 1:

(a)   What is the mean for <u>cognitive, environmental</u> and <u>behavioral perspec</u>tives across faculties?

Table 1: *Mean Score statistic for <u>cognitive and environmental</u> perspectives by faculty*

	n	Mean	SD
Electrical Engineering	20	28.88	2.48
Mechanical Engineering	109	29.48	3.16
Applied Science	47	27.51	4.01
Art and design	16	30.41	3.63
TESL	113	30.47	3.91
Business management	40	29.69	3.30
Hotel and tourism management	28	27.85	3.08
Total	373	29.44	3.64

A one-way ANOVA between groups was performed to explore whether there is different in cognitive and environmental perspectives of students from different faculty. Students compared by seven different faculties namely Electrical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Applied Science, Art and Design, TESL, Business Management and Hotel and Tourism Management. The mean statistic score by students faculty composition presented in Table 1

Table 2: *Mean score statistic for behavioral perspectives by faculty*

	n	**Mean**	**SD**
Electrical Engineering	20	84.68	7.40
Mechanical Engineering	109	85.26	13.18
Applied Science	47	79.22	11.80
Art and design	16	83.63	21.50
TESL	113	94.64	13.33
Business management	40	85.95	16.01
Hotel and tourism management	28	78.08	16.08
Total	373	86.78	14.88

Table 2 above reports the mean score for all the seven faculties. The highest mean was ASASI (TESL) at 94.64. This can be explained by the research by Rahmat, et.al. (2015) where writers from non-sciences perceived writing as difficult compared to their sciences course mates.

4.2   Research Question 2:

(b)   Is there any significant difference for cognitive, environmental and behavioral perspectives across faculties?

Table 3: *One Way ANOVA on cognitive and environmental perspectives by Faculty*

Source	Sum of square	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	391.13	6	65.19	5.27	0.000
Within groups	4527.253	366	12.37		

The one way ANOVA result in Table 3 indicates that there was a statistically significant difference at the $p < .05$ level in the mean for cognitive and environmental perspectives of the seven faculty , $F_{(6,366)} = 5.27$, $p = 0.000$. The effect size calculated using eta squared, was 0.08. This indicates that there is a medium difference in mean cognitive and environmental perspectives between groups.

Table 4: *One Way ANOVA on behavioral perspectives by Faculty*

Source	Sum of square	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	12315.67	6	2052.61	10.728	0.000
Within groups	70028.20	366	191.334		

The one way ANOVA result in Table 4 indicates that there was a statistically significant difference at the $p < .05$ level in the behavioral perspectives for the seven faculty , $F (6,366) = 10.728$, $p =0.000$. The effect size calculated using eta squared, was 0.15. This indicates that there is a large difference in mean behavioral perspectives between groups. This finding is in accordance with the findings by Rahmat, et.al (2015) who found that writers from different faculties do use different strategies when they wrote.

Table 5: *Mean for Different values for Pairwise Comparison of Cognitive and Environmental Perspectives*

	Electrical Engineering	Mechanical Engineering	Applied Science	Art and Design	TESL	Business management	Hotel and tourism management
Electrical Engineering	0.00	0.61	1.37	1.53	1.59	0.82	1.03
Mechanical Engineering		0.00	1.97	0.93	0.99	0.21	1.64
Applied Science			0.00	2.89	2.96	2.18	0.33
Art and Design				0.00	0.06	0.72	2.56
TESL					0.00	0.78	2.63
Business Management						0.00	1.85
Hotel and Tourism Management							0.00

A Post-Hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD test was performed to determine the mean difference between the pairs. The mean score for students from Electrical Engineering faculty

(M=28.89$;$ SD=2.48), Mechanical Engineering faculty (M=29.48$;$ SD=3.15), Applied Science faculty (M=27.51$;$ SD=4.01), Art and Design faculty (M=30.41$;$ SD=3.63), TESL faculty (M=30.47$;$ SD=3.91), Business Management faculty (M=29.69$;$ SD=3.30) and Hotel and Tourism Management faculty (M=27.85$;$ SD=3.08). The result as shown in Table 5 indicated that there is no significantly different on the cognitive and environment perspectives for the seven faculties.

Table 6: *Mean for Different values for Pairwise Comparison for behavioral perspectives*

	Electrical Engineering	Mechanical Engineering	Applied Science	Art and Design	TESL	Business management	Hotel and tourism management
Electrical Engineering	0.00	0.58	5.46	1.05	9.96	1.27	6.60
Mechanical Engineering		0.00	6.04	1.63	9.38	0.69	7.18
Applied Science			0.00	4.41	15.42	6.73	1.14
Art and Design				0.00	11.01	2.31	5.55
TESL					0.00	8.69	16.56
Business Management						0.00	7.87
Hotel and Tourism Management							0.00

A Post-Hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD test was performed to determine the mean difference between the pairs. The result from Table 6 indicated that only mean score for Asasi TESL faculty (M=94.64$;$ SD=13.33) was significantly different from the others six faculties Electrical Engineering faculty (M=84.68$;$ SD=7.40), Mechanical Engineering faculty (M=85.26$;$ SD=13.18), Applied Science faculty (M=79.22$;$ SD=11.80), Art and Design faculty (M=83.63$;$ SD=21.50), Business Management faculty (M=85.95$;$ SD=16.01) and Hotel and Tourism Management faculty (M=78.08$;$ SD=16.08). The result as shown in Table 3 indicated that there is a significant difference on the behavioral perspectives for TESL faculty. This finding can be explained by the fact that comparatively, TESL students would be better at ESL essay writing

because and findings by Rahmat, et.al (2015)did show that better writers took a longer time to begin and perceived writing and a difficult task.

4.3 Research Question 3:

(c) How are ESL learners influenced by <u>cognitive, environmental</u> and <u>behavioral</u> perspectives?
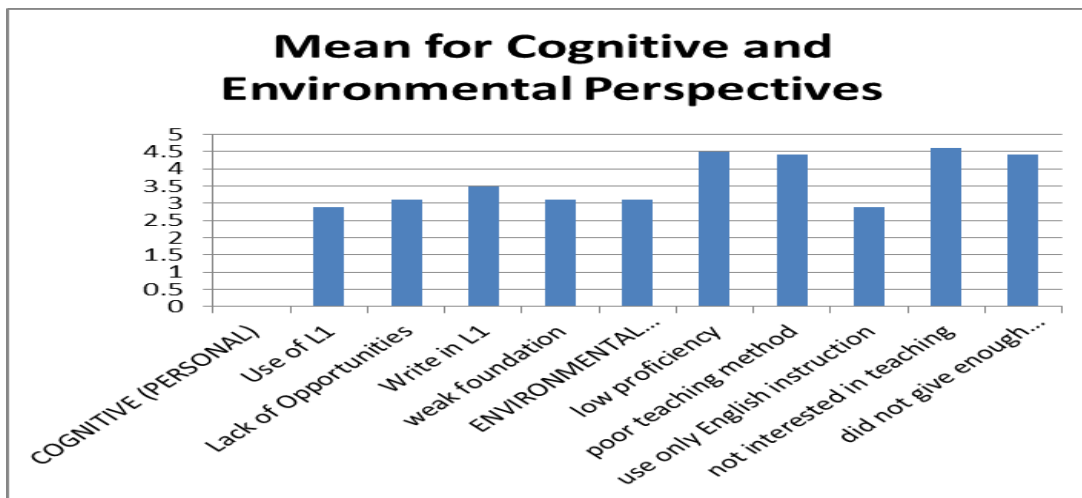

Figure 3: *Frequency for Cognitive and Environmental Perspectives*

Figure 3 above shows the frequency for mean of cognitive and environment perspectives. For, cognitive perspectives, the highest mean is "write in L1(mean 3.5). For environment perspectives, the highest is "teacher shows lack of interest" (mean-4.6) and also "teacher has low proficiency" (mean 4.4).
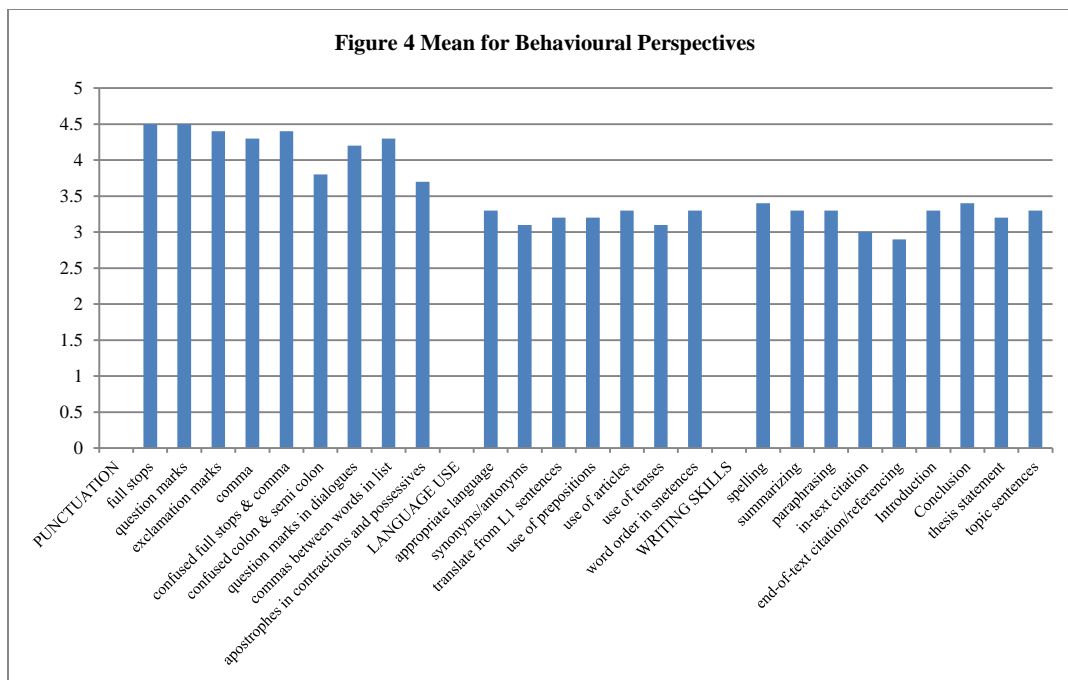
Figure 4: *Frequency for Behavioral Perspectives*

Figure 4 shows the bar chart for mean of behavioral perspectives. When it comes to writing skills, the students found writing introduction (mean-3.3) and conclusion (mean-3.4) as their obstacle. What is interesting is that the students perceived punctuation in the introduction and conclusion as a major obstacle for their ESL writing. Similarly, the study by Ghabool (2012) also found that writers considered punctuation as one of their obstacles in ESL writing.

5. Conclusion

5.1   Summary of Findings

As a whole, this research has revealed that writers from the non-sciences (specifically TESL students) behaved in accordance with previous findings. They perceived writing as difficult and focus their time and attention when it came to essay writing. However, this is not to say the students from non-sciences were not good writers, rather they saw writing as a means to completing their assignments and not as something they needed to give attention to. They were more concerned with the content of the writing and put less emphasis on the ESL academic writing skills. Brown (2000)[10] differentiates between "composing" and "writing". The process of writing is considered and a means to present content. The composing process, however, is seen as a "thinking" process and the writer would be seen to spend as much attention to the content as

well as the composing strategy, and the composing strategy is more prevalent among non-sciences writers.

5.2   Pedagogical Implications and Suggestion for future Research

This study revealed that different writers from different disciplines focus on different aspects of the composing process. What is the pedagogical implication of this research? Traditional writing teachers design their writing activities as if they were extensions of grammar lessons. Doing so may lead two negative repercussions. Firstly, the learners who had good grammar skills may be disappointed when they struggle with writing skills because the two skills are not entirely related. On the other end of the continuum, learners who already are have low self-esteem because of their low proficiency in grammar can be left demotivated to practice writing skills. Alhammad (2017) also reported that language learners with anxiety over learning the language may perceive the language skills as more difficult than it actually is. Writing teachers need to be exposed to many different approaches of teaching ESL learners see writing as a skill to be learnt regardless of their language proficiency.

5.3 Scope of Future Research

It is suggested that future research looked into what more aspects of perceived writing difficulties faced by ESL writers. In addition to that, it is also interesting to explore the writing difficulties and writing behavior through a qualitative study. Data from Think Aloud Protocol can help researchers explore the cognitive aspects of writing behavior and difficulties.

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