

GENRES APART: SCHOOL AND UNIVERSITY WRITING

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Abstract

This study examined the types of writing emphasised in secondary school and university. The specific aspects studied were the genres that students write best, genres frequently written in school, and genres frequently required in written coursework assignments in university. The data on school writing were obtained from questionnaires distributed to 235 students enrolled in English courses in two Malaysian universities whereas the data on university coursework assignments were obtained through interviews with lecturers in the two universities. The results showed that there is a mismatch between types of writing emphasised in school and university. Students frequently write recount and discussion in school but university coursework frequently requires assignments to be written in the form of research articles and explanations. In view of the different emphases in school and university writing, students entering university have difficulty coping with academic discourse. The findings suggest that it is beneficial to sensitise university students to textual conventions of commonly used academic genres at university to speed up their learning of academic discourse.

Keywords: academic writing, genres, recount, discussion, explanation, research article

Introduction

Students who enter university often cannot handle academic writing well because of the different nature of writing emphasised in secondary school and university (Cullip & Carol, 2002). Compilation of related information from different sources is no longer sufficient as students need to critically evaluate information and cite authoritative sources to make their point. Studies have shown that students cannot get by with general writing skills at university. For example, Horowitz's (1986) analysis of 54 written assignments from 29 courses in a United States university revealed that the common types of writing are "summary of/reaction to a reading, annotated bibliography, report on a specified participatory experience, connection of theory and data, case study, synthesis of multiple sources, and research project"

(p. 449). Based on a study in a South African university, Jackson, Meyer and Parkinson (2006) reported that for science undergraduates there is a mismatch between the most frequently assigned task which is a laboratory report and the most frequently given reading materials which are textbooks and discursive essays. In view of the mismatch, Jackson et al. (2006) suggested that science communication courses need to emphasise research report writing. Business students, on the other hand, have problems communicating in a professional role as business people solving real-world problems, based on Zhu's (2004a) analysis of 95 course documents from undergraduate and graduate business courses in a university in the United States. These studies show that university students need to write a variety of academic genres and they are generally not equipped with the necessary writing skills.

In the Malaysian context, research has shown that university students are better at some academic genres than others. For example, Ting and Tee (2008) found that undergraduates in the Teaching of English as a Second Language programme wrote discussions and arguments better than explanations. The problems with explanations are the absent or unclear statement of purpose, inconsistent use of tenses and lack of reference to develop coherence (Ting & Tee, 2009). The findings are based on analysis of explanations written by biology undergraduates. In comparison, university students are more familiar with discussions. They could even switch from informal language to formal language when participating in discussions on given issues in an online forum when the audience changed from their peers to their lecturer (Ting & Puteh, 2012). These students were able to state the issue under discussion clearly at the beginning and attempt an assessment of viewpoints at the end of the discussion. However, the argument genre is apparently more difficult, particularly for students who are less proficient in English. Ting, Raslie and Jee (2011) analysed Letters to the Editor written by proficient and less proficient students and found that while the latter can learn to use additive and adversative connectors, they were less adept at providing a clear statement of stance in the introduction and a clear restatement of stance in the conclusion compared to the proficient group. These findings suggest that in the Malaysian context, students could have been more familiar with the discussion genre because of more practice in school.

At this point in time, the different nature of the writing at school and university remains a proposition (e.g., Cullip & Carol, 2002). To our knowledge, there have been no studies comparing the types of writing done in school and university in a single study in the setting. At the university level, studies have been carried out on academic writing in different settings (e.g., Horowitz, 1986; Jackson, Meyer, & Parkinson, 2006; Jenkins & Pico, 2006; Zhu, 2004a, 2004b), including Malaysia (Ting & Tee, 2008; Ting & Puteh, 2010). However, studies on school writing in the Malaysian setting have tended to be on error analysis (e.g., Darus & Subramaniam, 2009; Maros, Tan, & Salehuddin, 2007; Talif & Edwin, 1989) rather than on writing skills. Because of the lack of studies comparing writing in school and university, there is no empirical evidence as to whether there is a match or mismatch between types of writing emphasised at the two levels.

Purpose of study

This study examined the types of writing emphasised in secondary school and university. The specific objectives of the study were to: (1) identify the genres that students write best; (2) determine the genres frequently written in school; and (3) determine the genres frequently required in written coursework assignments in university.

Method of study

The participants of the study were 235 students from two public non-research intensive universities in Malaysia (128 from Uni 1 and 113 from Uni 2). Uni 1 is located in Sarawak whereas Uni 2 is located in Pulau Pinang. The participants had their earlier education in secondary schools all over Malaysia. At the time of the study, the students aged 20 to 25 were registered in generic English courses. The majority of the students in the study can be considered as having lower proficiency in English. For students from Uni 1 who had sat for MUET, only 26% out of 128 students scored Band 4 (n=28) and Band 5 (n=5) while the majority had Band 3. Those with Band 3 use the language with noticeable inaccuracies, in contrast to students with Band 4 who have a satisfactory command of the language and occasional inaccuracies in the use of the language (Malaysian Examinations Council, 2006). For Uni 2 diploma students who had not sat for MUET at the time of the study, 45% of the 113 students scored A in their SPM English and 55% scored B and below.

Two data collection techniques were used in this study to find out whether there is a match between types of writing frequently done in school and university. The data on school writing were obtained by means of students' self-reports in a questionnaire whereas the data on university writing were acquired from analysis of written coursework assignment questions given by lecturers.

A questionnaire was formulated to obtain participants' reports of types of writing frequently done in school. Six types of writing were listed in the questionnaire with examples so that it was clear to participants what the technical terms meant:

1. Stories
2. Discussion (e.g., Advantages and Disadvantages of ...)
3. Argument (e.g., Animal abusers should be jailed)
4. Explanation of a process (e.g., Lab experiment steps)
5. Classification (e.g., types of forest)
6. Review of books and movies

The first five types of writing were based on classification of academic genres by Derewianka (1991) and Feez (1998) (see Appendix 1). However, the term "stories" was used instead of "recounts" to minimise use of jargon and the term "classification" was used instead of "information report" (Derewianka, 1991) to

avoid confusion with general factual reports. Review was included in the list because Horowitz (1986) had identified as summary of/reaction to a reading as one of the common types of writing required in university written assignments.

In the questionnaire, participants were first asked to identify the type of writing they did the best. Then, students were asked to report the frequency with which they wrote these six types of texts in English lessons (at least once a week, once in two weeks, once in a month, once in a semester, once in a year, and never). Besides the genres, the questionnaire also elicited demographic information such as gender, faculty and English proficiency scores. In the analysis of the questionnaire responses, frequencies for each of the responses were computed.

To obtain data on university writing, lecturers were interviewed to find out the written assignments given as coursework assessment. In both universities, two lecturers in each faculty were interviewed. The lecturers were asked to name two courses they were teaching during the academic year and to provide an assignment question each. Altogether, 32 lecturers were interviewed, giving rise to 64 coursework assignments (30 from Uni 1 and 34 from Uni 2). The number of assignment questions from the two universities was not the same because of the different number of faculties in the two universities.

The assignment questions were subsequently categorised into recount, discussion, argument, explanation, classification and review. Explanations of lab procedures and protocols were classified as explanation because they involve a systematic sequencing of events. For example, "write a report on application of using PIC 1684A general board" (Microcontroller course). The frequencies were computed for comparison to find out whether there is a match between writing frequently done by students in school and the types of writing required for coursework assignments.

Results and Discussion

Genres that students write best

The results showed that the participants were the most familiar with discussion and recount. Although there were 235 participants, the total responses added up to 241 because some students felt that they were equally good in two types of writing. Out of 241 responses, 39.83% and 37.76% identified discussion and recounts as the two types of writing that they did best respectively (Table 1). In comparison, very few participants reported that they wrote argument, explanation, classification and reviews well. The next part of the results will show that more participants were able to write discussion and recount well because of frequent practice in school.

Table 1
Types of writing that students do best

	Uni 1	Uni 2	Total	Percentage
Discussion	58	38	96	39.83
Recount	29	62	91	37.76
Argument	12	6	18	7.47
Explanation	13	2	15	6.22
Classification	9	5	14	5.81
Review	7	0	7	2.90
Total	128	113	241*	99.99

*The total does not tally with number of participants (235) because some students selected more than one option

Genres frequently written in school

Based on the participants' self-reports, they had the most practice writing discussion in school. Table 2 shows that 57 participants wrote discussion essays at least once a week and 65 reported that they wrote discussion essays once in two weeks. The second highest frequency is for recounts, with 49 reporting that they wrote recounts at least once a week and 59 reporting that they wrote recounts once in two weeks. The frequencies for the other genres lagged behind.

Table 2
Frequency of types of writing done in school

	At least once a week	Once in 2 weeks	Once in a month	Once in a semester	Once a year	Never	Total *
Discussion	57	65	66	31	8	7	234
Recount	49	59	47	30	24	21	230
Argument	28	49	75	39	15	18	224
Explanation	33	50	66	40	27	18	234
Classification	20	47	71	30	26	41	235
Review	30	34	67	34	25	44	234

* Some missing responses resulting in totals less than 235

Based on these results, it can be concluded that the participants would have less problems with written assignments which require reporting of events and discussion of issues since they had more exposure to these two types of writing in school. A common type of discussion essay that students are asked to write is the advantages-disadvantages essay and a popular type of recount is imaginative recounts (e.g., one day in the life of ...) and personal recounts (e.g., what I did during

the holidays) rather than factual recounts (see Derewianka, 1991 for details of classification).

In this study, the three types of writing which the participants did not have much practice writing are review, classification and explanation. Table 2 shows that the largest number of participants reported that they had never written any review or classification (44 and 41 respectively) compared to other types of writing. The number of participants who reported that they wrote review and classification once a year is also among the highest compared to other types of writing (25 and 26 respectively). The infrequent writing of review and classification is reinforced by the results showing that very few participants had practice writing these once a week or once in two weeks.

Besides review and classification, the participants were also seldom asked to explain processes or how and why phenomena happen. Although only 18 participants reported that they had never written explanations during their secondary school years, a total of 67 stated that they had either written explanations once a year or once a semester (equivalent to two times a year). Only 33 participants stated that they had written explanations once a week. This number is low compared to 57 who reported that they wrote discussions once a week. To sum up, the types of writing frequently done in secondary school are discussion and recount, while the least done are review, classification and explanation. The argument genre falls in between.

Genres frequently required in written assignments in university

In this section, the results on the frequently required genres in university writing are presented, and concomitantly compared with the results on school writing to determine whether there is a match or mismatch between the types of writing that are required at the two levels of education.

Past research which has specifically highlighted academic disciplines studied by the university students (e.g., Jackson et al., 2006 – science; Zhu, 2004a – business) indicate that the type of writing science and arts students are required to produce may differ according to the disciplines. In view of this, the written coursework assignments in this study were broadly categorised into arts and science. The total of 64 coursework assignments is too small to allow further subdivision. For examples of assignment questions from the science and arts degrees, see Appendix 2.

Table 3
Frequency of genres required in university assignments

Genre	Arts	Science	Total	Percentage
Research article	11	6	17	26.56
Explanation	5	12	17	26.56
Classification	5	4	9	14.06
General essay	2	6	8	12.50
Recount	3	2	5	7.81
Promotional materials	3	1	4	6.25
Discussion	3	1	4	6.25
Total	32	32	64	99.99*

*Total percentage does not add up to 100 due to rounding-off

The analysis revealed that the types of writing required in written coursework assignments are more varied than school writing. The genres which emerged from the analysis, and which were not explored in the questionnaire on school writing, are research article and promotional materials (e.g., posters, flyers). In fact, research article and explanation are the two most frequently types of writing required in written coursework assignments at the two universities (Table 3).

Examples of assignment questions in the research article genre are as follows:

- Report the findings of a site investigation (Project Management course)
- Write a business plan (Marketing Strategy course)

Business plans are put in the category of research articles because they resemble research proposals. To complete this type of assignments, students need to read and cite related research in order to provide a background for their investigation. At the same time, the students also need to align their research projects with current societal needs which serve as an impetus for their study. The results show that more of the research article assignments were from the arts rather than from the sciences (11 versus 6), mainly because the economics and business lecturers were inclined to ask their students to conduct mini research projects and write business plans. The business plan is, in fact, one of the real-world tasks that business executives need to produce, and it is one of the popular types of assignments from Zhu's (2004a) analysis of assignments given in undergraduate and graduate business courses in a large university in the United States. The finding on the high frequency of research articles among the written coursework assignments concurs with Horowitz's (1986) finding as reporting of research project is one of the seven main university writing tasks. Jackson et al. (2006) also advocate the use of research articles as models for teaching academic writing.

Besides research articles, explanation is another genre frequently required in university writing. Examples of coursework assignment questions requiring an explanation of how or why certain phenomenon occurs are:

- Explain how glands function (Basic Medical Science course)
- Describe the effects of pollutants produced in the industry and suggest preventive and control measures for these pollutants (Environmental Pollution and Monitoring course).

In this study, 12 out of 17 assignment questions requiring explanations of processes were given by science lecturers. Due to the nature of the science discipline which involves study of natural phenomena (e.g., diseases, pathways, problem solving), explanations are more relevant to the sciences than to the arts. Having said that, arts students may explain social phenomena such as how crowd behaviour works, so the same style of sequential explanations is needed. Unsworth (1999) stated that at a higher level, subjects such as history involve causal explanations. However, based on the results of this study, explanation seems to be a feature of science writing rather than the arts. In this light, university students in the science discipline may have some difficulty producing coherent sequenced explanation because explanation is among the less practised types of writing in school (Table 2). In addition, not many students report confidence in writing explanations well (Table 1). Hence, explanation is one of the academic genres which ought to be given more attention in academic writing courses in the university so that students are aware of the organisational structure and language features of a good piece of explanation. The awareness raising is necessary in view of findings on the difficulties that Malaysian students have with explanations (e.g., Ting & Tee, 2008, 2009). Elsewhere, Klein and Rose (2010) have highlighted the little practice that students have writing explanations although they may be given brief explanations to read in science and social studies. Instruction in writing of explanations would bring benefits because Drury and Jones (2010), and Mort and Drury (2012) have successfully used the online learning platform, WRISE (“Write Reports in Science and Engineering”), to teach laboratory and field trip reports.

The genres that are the least required in university writing tasks are recount, promotional materials and discussion (see Table 3). Of these, discussion and recount are the two most frequently practised types of writing in school (Table 2) and yet the skills learnt are not in demand at university level. The results show a mismatch in types of writing required at school and university levels. The findings are not meant to suggest that school students should be taught types of writing frequently required at university but to point out that when students enter university, they need to expand their repertoire of writing abilities to include more academic genres such as research articles which most have not encountered in school. To help students handle academic discourse, the findings suggest that academic writing courses should consider using research articles as reading texts to familiarise university students with this academic genre. Since the impact of the academic writing course is often limited, a concerted effort by discipline lecturers to introduce research articles in their course is needed to increase students’ exposure to the

research article genre before they are required to produce written coursework assignments in this genre.

The skill to write classification is less required than the skill to write research articles and explanations but it is not as negligible as the skill to write recount, promotional materials and discussion – as far as the results of this study go. Out of 64 assignment questions analysed, 9 (or 14.06%) involved classification of phenomena. The number of the classification-type assignments from the arts and science courses are balanced (five and four respectively). Although zoology and botany students are expected to describe taxonomies of animals and plants, classification is not confined to the sciences as shown by the examples of coursework assignments given by arts lecturers in this study:

- Describe string instruments (Introduction to Music)
- Describe the music composition from middle age to 20th century (Music Appreciation course)
- Distinguish among human resource executives, generalists and specialists (Human Resource Management)

Classification-type questions may require students to describe characteristics of one class (e.g., signs of food spoilage, description of string instruments) or one category which encompasses sub-categories (e.g., types of workplace conflict, differences between human resource executives, generalists and specialists). Since classification is not common in school writing (Table 2), this is a genre that students who enter university need to learn. A study by Ting and Law (2008) revealed that classification-type essays written by university students often show characteristics of other genres such as personal response resembling recounts. These essays often lack a clear identification of the category described but instead the introduction presents general information on the topic.

This brings the discussion to the results on the eight assignment questions which were classified as general essays because they do not reflect one particular genre. Most of the general essays require students to present facts on different aspects of a given phenomenon. However, general essays only constituted 12.5% of 64 written coursework assignments analysed in this study. The majority of the assignment questions required the university students to demonstrate writing in one genre or another. General essays have a tripartite organisation (i.e., introduction-body-conclusion) (Cahill, 2003; Gautreau et al., 1986; Liu, 2005) but genres have typical textual structure and language features to suit communicative purpose. While the ability to write general essays may be adequate at school level, academic discourse at university requires knowledge of textual conventions. To speed up students' acculturation into the academic discourse, explicit teaching of the genres is needed and many studies have shown the benefits of genre-based instruction (e.g., Flowerdew, 2000; Marshall, 1991; Osman, 2004).

Conclusion

The study showed that the types of writing required in school and university differ. The main types of writing done in school are recount and discussion but research

articles and explanations are emphasised in university coursework assignments. The study has found empirical evidence on the mismatch between types of writing emphasised in school and university which may explain why students entering university have difficulty coping with academic discourse. As these types of writing differ in the textual organisation and language features because of different communicative purposes, it is beneficial to sensitise students to the textual conventions of commonly used academic genres at university to speed up their learning of academic discourse. Admittedly, the findings are based on student reports of types of writing frequently practised in school and the lecturer reports of coursework assignment questions are a sampling of written coursework assignment questions given by lecturers in Malaysian universities. Regardless of this, the study has established a mismatch in types of writing required at these two educational levels for further investigation. Further studies involving analysis of actual writing done by secondary students in a school year in various schools would lead to a better understanding of how to bridge the gap between school and university writing in the teaching of academic writing at university level.

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Appendix 1: Characteristics of selected text-types

Genre	Purpose	Generic Structure	Language features
Argument	To argue for or against an issue	Thesis ^ arguments ^ reinforcement of thesis	Language showing writer's position Reference
Discussion	To weigh up two or more sides of an issue	Issue ^ Arguments for and against ^ Assessment/ recommendation	Causal and comparative conjunctions Modality Conditional clauses
Explanation	To explain why or how a phenomenon happens	Phenomenon ^ sequenced explanations	Generalised participants Cause-and-effect relationships Present tense Action verbs
Information Report [Classification]	To classify and describe the phenomena objectively	Identification of topic ^ information	Generalised participants Present tense Language for defining, classifying, comparing
Recount	To tell what happened	Orientation ^ Series of events ^ Personal comment	Specific participants Simple past tense Action verbs Linking items to do with time Use of first person pronoun for personal recount and third person pronouns for factual recount Passive voice may be used in factual recounts
Instructions	To tell someone how to do or make something	Goal ^ Materials ^ Method	Generalised participants Imperatives ("you" is not mentioned) Linking words to do with time Mainly action verbs Simple present tense Detailed, factual description Detailed information on how (adverbs), where, when

Sources:

Derewianka (1991), pp. 10-46.

Feez (1998), pp. 86-101.

Appendix 2: Written coursework assignments categorised by genre

Academic genre	Course	Examples of assignments
Research article	Project management	Report the findings of a site investigation.
	Marketing Strategy	Write a business plan.
Explanation	Basic medical science	Explain how glands function.
	Environmental pollution and monitoring	Describe the effects of pollutants produced in the industry and suggest preventive and control measures for these pollutants.
Classification	Hematology	Describe the characteristics of myeloblast, promyelocyte and myelocyte.
	Music Appreciation	Describe the music composition from middle age to 20 th century.
General essay	Bioinformatics	Describe the background, features and simulation of an online tool database.
	Environmental Health	Make a summary of any article about environmental health issues from magazine, newspapers or journals.
Recount	Construction Technology	Report on a site visit to any construction site and include recommendations of new technology
	Introduction to Social Science	Break a norm in attire. Talk to people and observe people's behaviour. Report how people feel.
Promotional	Social Pharmacy & Public Health	Develop a health promotion campaign in a community pharmacy in an urban area.
	Fundamentals of marketing	Take any product brand and create an advertisement to make the customers aware of the brand. Explain the rationale of the advertisement.
Discussion	Psychology	Use the personality theory to discuss innate and learned behaviour.
	Pediatric nursing	Discuss issues of parental smoking and child abuse.