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## ESL WRITING VARIABILITY: WRITING TASKS, GENDER AND PROFICIENCY LEVEL

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### Abstract

Research focusing on L1 (native speakers of English) writers has shown that students tend to perform differently on different writing tasks. L1 students perform better on narrative and descriptive writing tasks than argumentative. In fact, some scholars have suggested that L1 students lack a schema for argumentative writing, which perhaps contribute to their poor performance on argumentative writing tasks. This tendency seems also applicable to L2 (non-native speakers of English) writers. This paper reports the findings of a study on the impact of narrative and argumentative writing tasks, gender and proficiency level on the quality of Malaysian English as a second language (ESL) learners' writing. The findings of this study are discussed in the light of variability in ESL writing. Their implications for writing assessment practices are also highlighted.

**Keywords:** ESL writing, task variability, gender, proficiency level

### INTRODUCTION

Typically, direct writing assessment is often associated with problems of validity and those related to reliability (Hamp-Lyons, 1987). Research in writing assessment has illustrated that a learner's written performance on a particular type of writing does not necessarily indicate her ability to perform on another type of writing. In a study of various pieces of writing by ESL students, Hudelson (1989), for instance, pointed out that a single sample of text does not indicate a complete picture of a student's writing ability. Other researchers have also suggested that the inclusion of a single task is not a sufficient indicator of one's writing ability (Odell, 1977, 1981; Quellmalz et al., 1982; Carlman, 1986; Read, 1999; Rafik-Galea & Jasvir Kaur, 2005; Nakanishi, 2005)

In assessing writing, therefore, it seems prudent to include a variety of writing tasks in a writing test for producing several samples of student writing as this not only makes the assessment more reliable, but it contributes to the validity of the test by giving a broader basis for making generalisations about the student's writing ability (Read, 1991, p. 87). Odell and Cooper (1980, p. 40), for instance, argued that "we cannot make claims about writing ability until we have examined students' performance on a variety of writing tasks".

The literature on research in writing has shown that findings on empirical investigations on writing task variables both in L1 and L2 have been inconclusive. Some of the task variables that have been identified as empirically affecting L1 writers' performance include rhetorical specification (Brossell, 1983); purpose (Witte et al., 1991); audience (Rubin & Piche, 1979), and mode of discourse (Quellmalz et al., 1982; Freedman & Calfee, 1983; Engelhard Jr. et al., 1992). In L2, the task variables that have been suggested or more solidly proposed as affecting a writer's performance are genre and rhetorical structure (Connor & Kaplan, 1987; Sweedler-Brown, 1993), audience (Johns, 1993; Porter & O'Sullivan, 1994), subject matter (Tedick, 1988; 1990), and formality (Cumming, 1989). There is, at the moment, a clear need for more studies on the effects of task variables on L2 writing.

## **VARIABILITY IN WRITING TASKS**

Several studies on different types of writing in L1 have found that different modes of discourse required by writing stimuli yielded varying levels of length and overall writing quality (Quellmalz et al., 1982; Engelhard, Jr. et al., 1992; Kaplan, 1997; Goh et al., 2002).

Other studies in L1, which have examined the influences of mode of discourse on the quality of student writing include those of Sachse (1984), Freedman and Pringle (1984), Prater (1985), and Kegley (1986). Kegley, for instance, found that subjects' performance varied with the different modes of discourse, that is, narration was regarded as the easiest writing task followed by description, exposition and persuasion.

Similar effects were found across different modes of discourse and purposes (Sasche, 1984). Sasche findings indicate that expressive narratives tend to have higher rating than persuasive writing tasks. Consistent with the findings of Sasche's (1984) and Kegley (1986), Freedman and Pringle (1984) reported that narrative writing tasks tended to be easier than persuasive writing task; 98% of their subjects were noted to be able to

produce 'adequate classical narratives', whilst only 12.5% were regarded 'proficient in argument' (Engelhard, Jr. et al., 1992).

In the context of research examining the influence of mode of discourse with L2 writers, Carrell and Connor (1991) sought to examine the effects of the differences of the persuasive and descriptive modes on reading and writing skills, and investigated how the relative reading and writing performance varied across students' overall second language proficiency level. Focusing on 23 undergraduates and ten graduate students with different native languages, the study revealed that there was no consistent difference between the two modes on their holistic, quantitative measure of writing although some evidence regarding the generally held view that descriptive texts are easier than persuasive texts was found for reading. Nonetheless, Carrell and Connor reported that their qualitative measure showed differences between modes of discourse in writing when considered alone, in that, descriptive essays produced higher qualitative scores than persuasive essays, suggesting that the former is 'easier' than the latter. In addition, Carrell and Connor did not find any significant interaction between mode of discourse and proficiency level in writing. The researchers concluded with a caution on the generalisability of their results because of the relatively small number of the subjects who participated in the study. Clearly, a study that examines the effects of mode of discourse on L2 writing performance and their relation to learner variables such as proficiency level and gender is timely. The present study is an attempt to investigate how L2 learners, or more specifically, the writing quality of ESL learners is influenced by the different modes of discourse, namely narrative and argumentative.

## **GENDER**

In writing assessment, students' writing performance has been claimed to vary with gender (Green & Green, 1999; Pajares & Valiente, 2001). Brosell (1986, p. 175), for example, states that "elements of culture, gender, ethnicity, and so forth ... all bear upon the way different people respond to a writing task". Generally speaking, it is part of the common wisdom of the classroom that female students tend to write better than male (Kirby et al., 1988). The educational commonplace that writing is an area of achievement for females was confirmed by Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) in their review of empirical research. In addition, the National Assessment of Educational Progress reported consistently superior writing performance of girls over boys across age levels and writing tasks (Applebee et al., 1990). Welch and Doolittle (1999) highlighted gender differences in performance on the American Collegiate Assessment of Academic Proficiency (CAAP)

tests, specifically, on the essay-based writing test (also favouring females). The above findings provide evidence in gender differences in writing, favouring superior performance amongst the female students.

The results of a study on the influences of mode of discourse, experiential demand and gender (Engelhard, Jr. et al.,1992) also seem to suggest that gender is a significant predictor of writing quality. Although females were found to produce more highly rated essays than males, the main differences in writing between males and females appeared to be related to the mode of discourse. The pattern of differences between females and males were consistent across mode, in that narrative essays tended to have larger gender differences followed by descriptive and expository.

On a different note, Flynn (1988) explored the link between women's ways of seeking and assimilating information about the world (epistemologies) and women's writing. Flynn argued that women's predominant styles of problem solving and argument might differ from men's due to gender typical patterns of socialisation and development. In the light of this, Flynn suggested that personal narrative form, for instance, may be a vehicle especially well suited for female typical modes of understanding and influencing the world, whereas the argumentative essay, in contrast, represents a male-typical mode of confronting positions (Lamb, 1991).

This valuable information suggests that there could possibly be interaction between gender and the different types of writing task; that is, females or males may be better at certain types of writing task than others. In this respect, Rubin and Greene emphasised that "if gender differences in writing do exist, it is likely that they are suppressed in some genres and accentuated in others" (1992, p. 15). In the light of this, a study on the effects of different types of writing task should include gender as a possible variable so as to show whether certain types of writing indeed favour a particular gender thus bearing an important implication in writing assessment. While other studies have indirectly analysed results of writing performance according to the various facets of the test takers, this study actually included gender as a variable under investigation – that is, whether gender is a significant predictor of writing and whether it shows variability amongst the different types of writing task.

## **PROFICIENCY LEVEL**

Besides gender, proficiency level is another variable included in discussions of ESL learners' performance. Generally, it is expected that advanced ESL learners would perform better on a given language test – be it in any of the four language skills in terms of overall performance. This is

because advanced ESL learners are expected to be competent in the language, thus they are able to demonstrate better performance. A survey of the literature review indicates that there seems to be a lack of studies focusing on this issue.

Studies which investigated the effects of proficiency level on the different types of writing task include those of Cumming (1989) and Carrell and Connor (1991). Whilst the former focused on the effects of proficiency level on the composing behaviours of ESL learners on different types of writing task, namely, argument, summary and letter writing tasks, the latter examined the effects of ESL learners' proficiency level on students' written performance on narrative and argumentative (persuasive) writing tasks as part of a study on relationship between reading and writing descriptive and persuasive texts.

In relation to the former, Cumming (1989) found that students with greater ESL proficiency tended to receive substantially higher ratings on all three aspects of their writing, namely, discourse organisation, content and language use. Similarly, Carrell and Connor (1991) did not detect any additional variability in the interaction of modes of discourse and proficiency level. In other words, ESL learners with higher or lower language proficiency did not perform significantly better on either the persuasive or the descriptive texts although there seems to be evidence in ESL learners' performance on reading. ESL students with higher language proficiency performed significantly better on persuasive texts than those with lower language proficiency. In contrast, those with higher language proficiency did not score significantly better on descriptive texts than those with lower language proficiency. This led them to conclude that "higher language proficiency may aid question-answering for presumably more difficult persuasive texts but does not significantly affect the question answering for presumably easier descriptive ones" (Carrell & Connor, 1991, p. 322). Given the above findings, it cannot be concluded whether or not proficiency level is a significant predictor of ESL writing on different types of writing task. A study including proficiency level involving a large number of subjects is certainly warranted. The current study will, therefore, contribute to our understanding of variability in written language, and will thus have implications beyond such understanding for the teaching and testing of writing ability.

## THE STUDY

The primary purpose of the study is to examine the effects of different writing task, namely, mode of discourse, learner variable and gender on the quality of writing produced by Malaysian English as Second Language (ESL) learners at Lower Sixth secondary level. Specifically, the study seeks to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of mode of discourse on the quality of ESL student writing?
2. How does the relative quality of writing in the different modes vary across gender?
3. How does the relative quality of writing in the different modes vary across proficiency levels?

## Method

The study undertaken employed a randomised design with a factorial treatment structure. In this design, each writing task was randomly allocated to each subject classified by the learner variables. The experiment conducted was a static group (between-subject) design.

The subjects of the study comprised 384 Lower-Sixth secondary students from six secondary schools. The students' average age was 17.5 years old. The breakdown of the subjects are as follows: male advanced (88), male intermediate (88), female advanced (120), and female intermediate (88).

The instruments used to obtain data were essays written in the two modes. Both the narrative and argumentative modes entailed two tasks in order to increase test reliability. The writing tasks were controlled for other task variables such as topic, prompt and purpose.

The tasks were scored holistically using an adapted version of the revised Test of Written English (TWE) six-point scale (1990). They were also analysed for T-units (an indication of syntactic maturity) and overall length (number of words).

The adapted TWE holistic scoring guide comprises six levels or bands. Each band is accompanied by syntactic and rhetorical criteria which target at 'how well the task/question is addressed', organisation and development, appropriateness of details, language use, word choice, syntactic variety, and grammar use of the conventions of English. Overall length of the essay refers to the total number of words found in a writing text. Length was seen as a variable that could be affected by task types, specifically, different modes of discourse, gender and proficiency level.

Two raters were trained in the use of the holistic scoring scales prior to the actual investigation. Upon training, the inter-rater reliability coefficients obtained were .93 and .94, for holistic scoring of the two types of writing tasks. The word count of the text of the writing scripts was done manually by the researchers and one of the raters who participated in the study.

Initially, a three-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) (mode of discourse x gender x proficiency) was used to analyse the data with the two dependent variables—holistic score and overall length. Wilks Lambda was used to obtain the multivariate F values for examining the influences of each independent variable and the relevant interactions.

This was followed by univariate analyses of variance (ANOVA) for detailed analyses of any main effects and interactions between the independent variables. Results were tested for significance at .05 level.

## Results and Discussion

Considering the factorial design of the study, an examination of any significant interactions between the independent variables revealed by the statistical analyses is necessary before any strong claim on the significant main effects can be made. The main effects of the independent variables, wherever applicable, were interpreted in light of any interactions which have relatively larger F values than those of the significant main effects.

The results of the univariate analyses of variance on holistic score indicate that mode of discourse had significant effects on holistic score, with F value for mode of discourse,  $F(1, 368) = 39.27, p < 0.0001$ . In addition, both proficiency level and Gender were also found to have significant effects on holistic score;  $F(1, 358) = 512.47, p < 0.0001$  and  $F(1, 368) = 10.56, p < 0.0013$ , respectively. However, a highly significant two-way interaction between proficiency level and gender,  $F(1, 368) = 40.71, p < 0.0001$  was also revealed by ANOVA. Thus, the main effects for proficiency level and gender were interpreted in light of the two-way interaction between proficiency level and gender because of its relatively large F-value (40.71).

Table 1: Means by Task Type as Measured by Holistic Score

Task Type	Means (max. Score = 6)
Narrative	3.51
Argumentative	2.98

As shown in Table 1, the overall means of holistic score for the narrative and argumentative writing tasks are 3.51 and 2.98, respectively.

Regardless of gender and proficiency level, there seems to be an overall tendency for students to perform better on narrative writing tasks than argumentative, confirming the findings reported in previous studies with L1 writers (Sachse, 1984; Kegley, 1986; Engelhard Jr. *et al.*, 1992), and with L2 writers (Carrell & Connor, 1991). The qualitatively superior writing on narrative writing tasks suggests that narrative writing is easier than argumentative.

The results of this study suggest that different writing tasks can be associated with the assessed quality of ESL students' writing as measured by holistic score elicited under restricted time. As indicated earlier, the narrative writing task appears to elicit better writing quality than the argumentative writing task. This finding lends support to previous research on mode of discourse with L1 writers (Engelhard Jr. *et al.*, 1992) and with L2 writers (Carrell & Connor, 1990). Like L1 writers, L2 writers also produced writing, which was of better overall quality for narrative writing tasks. When responding to the argumentative writing task, however, the overall quality of writing seems to be rated lower. This finding also supports previous research on the relative difficulties of varying modes of discourse with L1 writers (Sachse, 1984; Kegley, 1986; Zainuddin, 2006) and L2 writers (Pollit & Hutchinson, 1987) that argumentative topics are more difficult to write on than topics calling for other modes of discourse. In relation to this, some studies on L1 writers have suggested that difficulties in writing argument may be associated with reasons which range from lack of experience and instruction in the reading and writing of persuasion (White, 1989) to cognitive difficulty and the lack of schema for written persuasion (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982). This expected finding can also perhaps be explained by the lack of emphasis on argumentative writing in the teaching of writing to the Malaysian lower secondary students. The dominant paradigm in the teaching of writing especially during the first four years of secondary level appears to focus on narrative and descriptive modes of discourse. The argumentative mode is included in the syllabus only at the form five level. Further qualitative analyses of linguistic features elicited in the writing responses may perhaps provide insights into how these writing tasks differ, which however is beyond the scope of this study.

For overall length, ANOVA revealed that there were significant main effects on the independent task types,  $F(1, 368) = 47.18, p < 0.0001$ ; proficiency level,  $F(1, 368) = 129.72, p < 0.0001$  and gender,  $F(1, 368) = 5.11, p < 0.0244$ . A highly significant two-way interaction between task types and proficiency level,  $F(1, 368) = 19.95, p < 0.0001$  was also revealed by ANOVA. Thus, the interpretation of the main effect of task types will be discussed in light of the interaction.



Table 2: Means by Task Types and Proficiency Level as measured by Overall Length

Proficiency	Task types		Mean
	<u>Narrative</u> Level	<u>Argumentative</u> Mean	
Advanced	468.52	368.71	368.71
Intermediate	321.78	302.88	302.88

As shown in Table 2, a similar pattern of performance on the different modes of discourse can be seen for both the advanced and intermediate subjects. Regardless of mode of discourse, genre and gender, there was an overall tendency for students at the advanced proficiency level to produce more words than those who were at the intermediate level. At both advanced and intermediate proficiency levels, the subjects' overall mean number of words are higher on narrative writing task (468.52, 321.78) than argumentative writing task (368.71, 302.88) although the difference between narrative and argumentative writing tasks seems somewhat larger at the advanced level. This is consistent with the means obtained for the significant main effects of mode of discourse (narrative=395.26; argumentative=334.72), in that, overall, longer essays were elicited for narrative than argumentative writing tasks.

This finding suggests that ESL subjects demonstrated greater fluency with the language when responding in writing to narrative writing tasks. In contrast, ESL subjects' fluency tended to decrease when producing the argumentative writing task, a finding that contradicts Reid's study (1990) with ESL writers on topic type. It may be posited here that since narrative writing tasks have been regarded as easier, it seems likely that the subjects were able to write longer responses. On the other hand, since argumentative writing tasks have been regarded as difficult, it may be the case that students were having difficulty in responding to the task, hence, not able to produce longer written responses.

Table 3: Means by Proficiency Level and Gender as measured by Holistic Score

Gender	Proficiency Level	Mean
Male	Advanced	4.32
Male	Intermediate	1.87
Female	Advanced	4.10
Female	Intermediate	2.71

A somewhat different picture can be observed for gender. Although the main effect of gender revealed that overall, females tended to receive higher rating than the males, irrespective of the writing tasks (mean = 3.41 and 3.1, respectively), the interpretation of the interaction between proficiency level and gender revealed an inconsistent pattern. As shown in table 3, female students obtained higher mean rating than that of the male only when they were in the intermediate group. Thus, it would seem misleading to claim that there was an overall gender variability as measured by holistic score, in that females performed better than males. This finding does not support the results from previous reports on L1 writers performance on writing tests (Applebee *et al.*, 1990) and on L1 study of different types of writing task, indicating that overall, females achieved more highly rated writing than males (Engelhard Jr. *et al.*, 1990). It is rather puzzling to find that the male students tended to perform better at the advanced level and the females, better at the intermediate level. It may be posited that at the advanced proficiency level, there was, possibly, more variability in the female writing proficiency.

Table 4: Means for Gender as Measured by Overall Length

Gender	Mean
Male	354.28
Female	375.69

As can be seen in Table 4, after controlling for task types, there was an overall tendency for females to produce longer written responses than males, disconfirming studies with L1 writers, which reported no differences between males and females in average composition length (Rubin and Greene, 1992).

Table 5: Means for Proficiency Level as Measured by Holistic Score

Gender	Mean
Advanced	4.21
Intermediate	2.29

The overall means of the main effects for proficiency level in Table 5 illustrate that, irrespective of gender and mode of discourse, as expected, there is a general tendency for ESL subjects at the advanced level (mean = 4.21) to outperform those at the intermediate level (mean = 2.29), as measured by holistic score. This finding seems to suggest that the writing samples of advanced ESL subjects are clearly distinguishable from the samples of those at the intermediate proficiency level. This finding is not surprising considering the relatively high F-value (512.47) revealed by ANOVA for the main effect of proficiency level.

Table 6: Means for Proficiency Level as Measured by Overall Length

Gender	Mean
Advanced	417.64
Intermediate	312.33

As illustrated in Table 6, similarly, as expected, ESL subjects at advanced proficiency level (mean = 417.64) in this study also appear to produce longer written responses than those at intermediate proficiency level (mean = 312.33), irrespective of task types, confirming results of previous studies with ESL writers that overall length tends to increase proportionally with L2 proficiency levels (Reid, 1986; Tedick, 1988). This suggests that at the advanced level, subjects were able to demonstrate greater fluency with the language, indicating linguistic competence that enabled them to demonstrate this fluency. In contrast, at the intermediate level, subjects may not have been linguistically competent enough to write longer responses, irrespective of the mode of discourse.

Recapitulating the research questions formulated in the study, the results of the study pertaining to the specific questions can be summarised as follows. Firstly, the study reveals that ESL student writing varies significantly with the different modes of discourse as measured by holistic score and overall length, a finding which lends support to findings of previous studies in L1. It, therefore, seems reasonable to claim that interlanguage variability according to mode of discourse appears to be a universal phenomenon, in particular with regard to the difference in writing performance between narrative and argumentative writing tasks.

Secondly, the study does not reveal gender variability across different modes of discourse. In other words, the study does not provide any evidence for task type variability across gender. This study also does not seem to support the general view that females excel in writing and the results of the survey on L1 writers, which consistently reported superior writing performance of girls over boys across writing tasks (Applebee et al.,

1990; Welch, & Doolittle, 1999). At least in the context of this study, the male ESL learners seem to be as good as the females in writing. This seems to suggest that writing test constructors do not need to worry about which type of writing task would be an advantage to students of different gender.

Thirdly, the results of this study suggest that proficiency level is a significant predictor of writing quality as measured by holistic score and overall length. The advanced subjects demonstrated superior overall quality of writing to, and wrote longer texts than those at intermediate level, confirming previous research (Tedick, 1988), which suggests that more advanced student should outperform less advanced students in writing. This finding illustrates that the advanced subjects' competence in English was reflected in their ability to outperform the intermediate students in terms of overall quality of writing and fluency on the different types of writing tasks.

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study clearly illustrate that ESL students' writing performance varied significantly with the different modes of discourse. Thus, students taking the writing test in one year may perform significantly better or worse than those in another year, depending on which mode were included in the writing test. It is, thus, imperative that these different modes or formality be included in a writing test or examination since students may be advantaged or disadvantaged if the different modes were alternated from one year to another. This, therefore, emphasises the need for careful selection procedures in order to fairly assess students' writing ability. In addition, this may enhance its reliability, which is a fundamental issue in testing.

Although the present study has dealt with a limited number of comparisons of the different types of writing task, more importantly, the findings of this study provide further evidence for the need to examine the question of reliability and validity in the practice of various ESL writing assessments. This is an issue that has been brought into question previously by other researchers with ESL writers (for example, Tedick, 1988 on topic familiarity). The current testing procedures of many testing agencies seem to alternate one task with another yearly for practical reasons as practised by TWE. The evidence borne out by this study provides some ground for questioning the assumption that any single writing task can be regarded as an adequate measure of writing competence. A single writing task measures only one of the various types of functional skills. Different skills are claimed to be associated with different writing tasks (Ruth & Murphy, 1988), thus different writing tasks should not be utilised to compare students' performance writing skills. Issues raised above are of major

relevance for any ESL writing assessment, especially when important decisions have to be made on the basis of such assessment.

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