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Writing Transition in Postsecondary Education: A Case Study

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Abstract

This study looks at writing transition from the culture of writing in pre-university to the culture of writing in university in the Malaysian context. A multiple case study was conducted among six students. Data was collected through personal interviews, personal narratives, class observations and written texts over a period of one and a half years. The study is based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. The findings indicate that students faced tensions in the writing transition. These tensions and their appropriation of the writing cultures were impacted by their sociocultural historical makeup and point to a need to review current writing practices in postsecondary education.

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1. Introduction

Writing in university is a specialised form of writing which is connected to various disciplines and professions (Prior, 2006). It is an important communicative skill for students' success in university (Baker, 2011). Writing in university is relevant for examinations, reports, research work in the various disciplines and in helping students to learn strategies such as analysing, synthesising, inferencing and others (Bacha, 2002). However, it is a complex activity which does not come naturally to many second language (L2) students as they have to deal with writing skills and the writing culture in their institution.

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The common problem faced in writing in university by L2 students is the writing expectations in universities. These students face problems in dealing with discourse aspects in academic texts and cohesive devices, developing ideas, writing different text-types and writing genres for different disciplines (Bacha, 2002; Ting & Tee, 2008).

In view of this, there is a need to look into the culture of writing of students as early as when they enter pre-university programmes to provide support to enhance their involvement and success as L2 writers in higher educational institutions. L2 student writers in transition from pre-university to higher education can find it difficult to meet the demands of its writing expectations as not all writing skills they have learned are important at university. The researcher perceives that students who have undergone ESL writing courses in pre-university programmes for a year still have problems in writing in university even though these courses are geared to meet the demands of academic writing at the degree level. Students' problems in writing can carry on from the transition period to their final year at university and they graduate with poor communication skills. Research on the language proficiency and competency of final year students in Malaysian universities shows that their writing reflects poor ideas, accuracy and presentation (Siti Hamin et al., 2005; Tg Nor Rizan et al., 2007). However, there is little research on students' writing in the transition period; whether from school or pre-university levels to university (Baker, 2011; Chan & Ain, 2004; Kramer-Dahl, 2004). Thus, this paper attempts to look into L2 students' cultures of writing in the transition period from pre-university to higher education. It examines the challenges in their cultures of writing in the transition and how they make the transition in writing based on sociocultural theory to offer insights into the writing transition.

2. Theoretical framework

Writing is a process that is influenced by students' perspectives, beliefs, practices and values that have been shaped by individual and external factors such as culture, society, school and others (Fitzgerald, 2006; Atkinson, 2003). Thus, sociocultural theory offers a framework to explore students' writing transition as the theory views individual learning, culture and social interaction as closely related. Students bring to learning their own personal histories that is linked to their "values, assumptions, beliefs, rights, duties and obligations" (Donato, 2000, p. 46). The unit of analysis in this theory is the "tool-mediated goal directed action" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) to help people participate in an activity. Sociocultural theory is beneficial for writing instruction as the use of tools whether mental, linguistics or physical can enhance writers' writing performance beyond what the individual can do on his own (Englert, Mariage & Dunsmore, 2006). The student writers are situated in concrete interaction, goal orientated and mediated activity (Prior, 2006; Reed, 2004). The script the student-writer produces is "a product of action (a goal) and a state of activity". The writing activity is viewed as a "cultural activity in the making of both an artefact (a written story) and a version of a self (the writer and author of the tale)" (Reed, 2004, p. 25). Furthermore, writing offers an insight into a writers' conflict with his environment. This refers to the affordances and barriers as posed by his writing context and the means he has access to in order to achieve his goal. Research into writing and sociocultural theory although limited has emphasised the importance of social, cultural and historical contexts of the student writers in writing (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Englert et al., 2006; Nelson & Kim, 2001; Thorne, 2004). This paper hopes to address this gap too along with that in the writing transition.

3. Method

The six students for this study were from the Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) programme and the American Credit Transfer Programme (ACTP) from a public university in Malaysia. They were between 18-19 years old and had good proficiency in English as a second language. Three in-depth qualitative personal interviews (PI) were conducted to glean information on the participants' cultures of writing in pre-university (two semesters) and university (first semester of first year). The interview questions focused on their writing experience, its impact on them and their writing. Next, three personal narratives (PN) of 2-3 pages each about their writing experiences in the different semesters were written by the students. Besides, the participants' written texts in semesters one and two in pre-university level and university were also collected. Last, six observations of the writing classes (CO), three each in semesters one and two pre-university were carried out for each programme. The collected data was analysed qualitatively and triangulated.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Semester One Pre-university

There were similarities in the type and format of essay writing in the ACTP and pre-TESL programmes. The students started off with paragraph writing followed by the formulaic five paragraph essay writing. They had to appropriate the fundamentals of essay writing: the introduction, the thesis statement, developmental paragraphs, topic sentences, concluding sentences and the conclusion in semester one pre-university. Next, the students similarly appropriated different types of factual essays. The ACTP students focused on cause-effect, comparison-contrast and argumentative essays whereas the pre-TESL students focused on the latter two only.

The students were unhappy with the restrictive formal format of the factual essay and had problems with thesis statements and topic sentences. Ailina found writing thesis statements and topic sentences "big obstacles" as she did not understand what they were nor the objective of having them in her essays which affected her writing marks. Consequently, "I'd get really stressed out and tension..." (PI1). It took her almost a month to finally appropriate and understand these concepts. The main tool that mediated on her learning was her writing lecturer. After asking for clarification, she was very relieved, "That made my writing nightmare less of a nightmare, less scary as for the first time I knew what to write, what my lecturer was looking for" (PN1). Her friends from whom she also asked for help showed her examples and gave her clarification.

The students also objected to the formal writing style and language. Sunitha felt restricted in her writing as she had to use "transitions" and more formal language and be "short and precise when she wrote factual essays (PN1, PI2). She participated by following the stipulated guidelines, "to get consistent marks, higher and higher" (PI1). Tai Chong related that he had to go straight to the point, use more formal language, follow grammatical rules properly and use less active voice (PN1). Thus, he took the effort to refer to writing textbooks to learn the expected writing style.

The tension which occurs in the appropriation of formal writing style and language is noticeably seen in the first semester of pre-university. These were new to the students and Hutchings describes this as gaps between students' real experience and "expectations of institution" (2006, p. 249). The students' experience in secondary school writing was inadequate preparation for the writing tasks in pre-university. They had to learn new types of writing and their conventions in pre-university. Their lack of understanding of such

features and their necessary inclusion in the formal essays led to a dislike of such format. Similarly, Chan and Ain (2004) in their research on ESL students in a writing course in a local university found that the students also did not understand what a thesis statement was and had problems in writing.

The students had to appropriate the level of formality that is suitable for formal essay writing to be successful in writing in semester one pre-university and be part of its writing culture. If not, the students can be penalized. Tai Chong related that if he used his old way, figurative language to describe things, his essay marks were penalised (PN1). Allison and Wu (2001) in their research with students in a Singapore university also found that if students were unconventional in their writing in university, they could be penalised for not trying to work out the norms and conventions required for writing. According to Sommers and Saltz (2004), students' earlier writing experience in secondary school which is familiar to them has a strong pull on them. This happens to the students in this study too who mainly did narrative writing and used "flowery language and being wordy" (Tai Chong, P11) in secondary school although they try to follow the conventions of formal essays through the use of tools to mediate on this process. This is reflective of the sociocultural stand taken in this study, i.e. that writing is tied to various historical and sociocultural factors.

Another factor that can explain the tension in appropriating the formal essay format as well as the language and style of writing in pre-university semester one is the lack of experience with genres as attested by Leki (2001a) as one of the challenges faced by L2 writers. In pre-university, the students have to adjust to different genres such as exposition and argumentation which demand a higher complexity in terms of their structures and features (Hyland, 2002) in comparison to the narrative genre they mainly focused on in secondary school.

Next, the findings also indicate that tension was seen among the students in semester one pre-university with the requirement of in-depth content in writing. The formal factual essays that students write in pre-university involve obtaining and transforming knowledge and were more complex genres than narrative essay which normally revolves around personal narratives or opinions or telling what is already known (Hinkel, 2004) by a writer. To illustrate, Tai Chong said he had to substantiate his ideas or facts with examples, explain in detail why an aspect is good, and justify his stand or opinions in his essays through reading. For example, if he stated that watching television damages the eyes, he had to explain how, "providing examples of cases of eye damage ... affirm, clarify and strengthen [his] stand" (PN1). "The points must also be logical and not far fetched or else they would be rejected." (P11). The students in this study had to refer to a variety of sources, read them and be selective in selecting information for their essays as well as in transforming information using basic summarising and paraphrasing skills they have learned. Previously, in secondary school, the students "wrote whatever came to mind" (Ailina, P11), "skim on the surface" (Haziman, P11) or "cook up something" (Tai Chong, P11).

In pre-university semester one, they were challenged by the demand for information and the inherent complex tasks of obtaining it from printed and electronic sources to mediate on their contradictions. These tools were mainly the Internet, factual books, reference books, magazines and newspapers besides discussions with friends. This finding concurs with Harklau's (2000) findings that information in writing in high school comes from classroom communication, for example, teacher talk and not from texts as in college writing. As a result, the difference in the types of content and the manner it is obtained cause tension with content in writing among the students.

4.2 Semester Two Pre-university

When the students moved on to semester two pre-university, it entailed the appropriation of some writing conventions that were different from semester one. No doubt, the students had groundings in essay writing in semester one pre-university and this prior experience should be useful, there were still adjustments which caused tension. Both the ACTP and the pre-TEFL writing programmes involved students in doing a research paper of about eight to ten pages long. This involved appropriation of research skills such as note-taking, summarising, quoting, paraphrasing, synthesising, and citing, many of which were new to the students.

Doing the research paper was the main area of adjustment and tension the students faced in writing in semester two pre-university. The students find it difficult to extend on their note taking, summarising and paraphrasing skills besides learning quoting, synthesising and citing skills. For example, Ju Siang cited quoting and citing as the “worst and most cumbersome tasks” in doing the research paper (PN2). He had to “pay extra attention to every dot and every letter to avoid violation of MLA rule and it was tiring” (PN2). In order to appropriate these two research skills, he paid attention when his lecturer taught, tried conscientiously to apply the rules and asked questions. A class observation that was conducted indicated that students were very attentive when they were learning about using citations in their writing (ACTP CO4).

The students also found the writing topics difficult and writing informatively was also a problem. To illustrate, Sunitha had problems in getting and presenting ideas in the research paper. She used various tools: the Internet, newspapers, magazines, academic journals and reference books to source for information. She also asked for advice about paraphrasing, organising, synthesising information and citation from her lecturer and friends to elicit information precisely and avoid plagiarism. She concluded that although “it’s not easy ... it’s not that bad” (PI2). Compared to semester one pre-university writing, these tasks caused tension to the students as they involved more knowledge telling and knowledge transforming which needed “different rhetorical and text-generating skills” (Hinkel, 2004, p. 12).

Another reason that explains why the students in this study have problems in writing research paper, even in their selection of research topic is due to their prior experiences of learning different essay genres in semester one pre-university. The students learned the different essay genres with their specific rhetorical patterns separately. However, in writing a research paper, the students had to learn to integrate diverse rhetorical patterns (Cornwell & McKay, 1998). Furthermore, the students in this study lacked experience in writing a research paper which further added on to the tension in appropriating this form of writing in semester two pre-university. Their previous writing experience was with paragraphs and essays only, but now, they have to advance to writing a research paper.

Content or information for research paper was another area of concern among the students as posed by the findings. Leki (2001a) states that L2 students found it a challenge as to what type of support and how much is needed when utilising information to support their writing as experienced by the students in this study. Cornwell and McKay (1998) found that in writing the research paper, one of the problems is some students do not even analyse the information as they are heavily reliant on their sources. This is seen in the case of Tai Chong who only included sufficient information which he could understand about his research topic when his source of information was too scientific for him to understand entirely.

Moreover, the demand for precise and formal language needed for research writing was also on a higher level than the level of formal language needed for semester one pre-university factual essays. Sunitha had difficulties writing “proper sentences” and “short, factual sentences” for the formal research paper (PI2). She used the dictionary, writing models, and her previous semester argumentative essays as a guide to write. The students were not well prepared for this by their previous writing instructions or experiences. They had only one semester of pre-university writing where they were exposed to formal writing. They lack sufficient

exposure to objectivity in academic writing which is achieved, for example, through the use of passive voice or impersonal forms. They are still more familiar with the features of active voice and first person forms found in personal essays. Similarly, Johns (1997) believes that non-native students are more exposed to story form rather than to precise academic prose (in Hinkel, 2004).

4.3 First year of Higher Education

In the first year, the writing that the students did was vastly different from their pre-university writing. They wrote mainly to complete the assignments given for their content subjects. The ACTP students had two assignments each for Introduction to Civilisation, Microeconomics, Speech Communication. The TESL students had one assignment for Foundation of Education, two each for Linguistics and Literature and three assignments for Counseling. The adjustments to writing requirements in this culture of writing were: compulsory research for various content based writing assignments, content was prioritised over language, academic language use, more formal writing style and less rigid organisation.

The students experienced tension as they tried to participate in this new activity system of content based writing in first year. One of the contradictions they faced was the compulsory research for their academic writing assignments. Ju Siang clarified that unlike “pre-u experience where I can write whatever I think is right, this is something factual which I need to research ... and online reading, journals, ... libraries, they cannot be taken away from the writing” (PI3). Sunitha said, “I felt a bit overwhelmed because I didn’t know what to do and how to go about it ...” (PI3). Previously, in pre-university, she only had to do research for one subject, writing, but now in higher education, she had to deal with “different subjects ... different reports and assignments” (PI3). Sunitha added, “... it’s not just like writing class, like writing English, stories which is fun but it’s a bit different, different subjects like Economics and Civilisation which is a lot to read before we write” (PI3). Likewise, Haziman pointed out that it was essential to refer to sources in writing in degree year. He took a long time to source for information and was unhappy about the situation. “It’s tough, you’ve a perspective towards something, but you just cannot write it down ... Err, I mean, we’ve to refer to some books, you know” (PI3).

The students tried to appropriate the compulsory research in higher education as their writing assignments had to be substantiated with information. They used tools such as academic journals, reference books, the Internet, textbooks, and others as sources of information to get good grades for their writing assignments. This was challenging to the students as in pre-university, they were dealing with writing as an ESL subject, but in higher education, writing was used for the numerous academic assignments for their various content subjects. This was not an easy transition as the students had to do research for all the three to four subjects they were taking for their course. It was taxing to cope with research to source for information for their writing assignments. These L2 students were not well prepared to meet the high amount of research required in higher education. Clerehan and Walker (2003) in their research found that a significant number of university students are not well prepared for assignment writing in university and one of the many problems faced in writing is in coping with research. Likewise, Bacha (2002) attests that ESL students are confronted with difficulties in writing research paper for different disciplines in university.

Next, tension was felt with the priority given to content over language in writing in higher education. The students found this hard to accept. This was very different from their understanding of the important aspects of writing in pre-university where besides content, language and organisation were also given importance. Now, in the first year, Sunitha stated, “We were required to research and write about facts, analysing and summarising as we went along. Grammatical errors were overlooked as well as other more English evaluations” (PN3). The students faced contradictions in writing as they viewed content to be overemphasised in their course assignments. Haziman voiced his strong dissent over this, “The lecturer

reminds us, ‘I’m not, ahhh, marking your grammar but your content’, so, I’m frustrated with that statement, because, ah, we’re learning English, right?’ (PI3). Despite his disagreement, he still had to take the initiative and responsibility to refer to sources to obtain new ideas and to see a wider picture of an issue. He also pushed himself to be more critical of content and ideas to participate in this new activity system. Tai Chong was equally dismayed that content matters more and that even when “grammar can go wrong, but it’s still acceptable” (PI3). He faced problems in dealing with the content, especially in substantiating facts by inserting opinions or taking a stand. He “cracked his brains” thinking what to write, brainstormed with his friends, asked advice from lecturers, and used others’ writing assignments as examples to appropriate content for writing. He also learned to get in-depth information from a variety of sources: the Internet, reference books, newspapers and magazines and to refine his skills at paraphrasing to avoid plagiarism.

In their previous cultures of writing in pre-university, the students were doing writing as an ESL subject. In contrast, in university, writing in English was for assignments for their course subjects; thus, consideration was given more to content, i.e. course based knowledge than language by their subject lecturers. This is because when students are writing for their discipline in first year, they need to “engage actively with material, examine ideas in-depth, integrate and critically evaluate what they read and state their understanding clearly” (McCune, 2004, p 257). The students found it hard to adjust to this new situation as their previous experience indicated a different focus by their ESL writing teachers who gave consideration to both content and language in their essays. Besides, these students, like many non-native students are exposed to “traditional product-centered instruction” (Hyland, 2003) which emphasises grammatical correctness and accuracy (Gonzales-Villegas, 2007; Chan & Ain, 2004; Hyland, 2003; Leki, 2001a, 2001b). Thus, these students gave importance to grammar and language in writing which was in conflict with their lecturers’ focus on content in higher education. According to Malia (2006), ESL students need to realise that in university writing, focusing too much on language and grammar which are surface level concerns instead of on global-level concerns or skills in writing such as focusing on the issue and giving support can impede their writing.

Furthermore, there was tension in adjusting to appropriate academic language use and more formal writing style which are discussed in tandem. The language and writing style used in writing the academic assignments in first year were formal and academic. The students in the first year found it too academic or technical in that many terms were related to specific content subjects. For example, in the sample of the economics assignment for first year, terms such as federal reserve, inflation, Taylor’s Rule, recession and others that were specific to economics were seen. Tai Chong took time to adjust to such “economics terms and jargons” (PN3). He was disciplined and persevered in learning these terms from his textbooks. Nadiana also cited examples of new words such as “self disclosure” and “cohesion” she had to learn in Counseling and needed time to adjust to them (PI3). She took high responsibility for her own learning by referring to the dictionary and giving quality time for writing. Sunitha noted, “We had to be a little careful in our word choices. This made the writing assignments more strenuous because we had to look for specific technical terms in that particular subjects to say it ...” (PN3). Her self-reliance, industriousness and commitment to success came to the fore as she put in more work and effort in writing to mediate on the situation.

In line with the academic language use, the students also indicated tension with the writing style in first year which was also more formal from pre-university writing. Haziman had to teach himself to “present straight to the point” instead of what he did in pre-university writing, i.e. presenting his point in a roundabout way “from A to B and C and then I go backwards to A or B or C” (PI3). It was difficult for him to choose “crucial” words to write concisely but he managed with his self-reliance and industriousness. Ju Siang said he was very academic, formal and “straightforward” in his writing. He had to “avoid fancy words, use rigid sentences and work straight to the point without much “stories” lying around to make the writing look more beautiful” (PN3). He was committed, disciplined and responsible to follow the expected writing style. He also

used some of the writing techniques he had learned or refined in semester two pre-university writing to write in the first year.

First year students have to realise that their writing is bound to their specific academic disciplines and they have to use discipline specific language and academic voice in their writing assignments although the experience is new them (Hutchings, 2006; Prior, 2006; McCune, 2004; Lea & Street, 2000). Research have indicated that L2 students face difficulty with discipline discourse in academic texts in writing in university (Malia, 2006; Bacha, 2002). As in the case of the students in this study, this was not an easy appropriation to them and it caused tension. In line with this, no doubt the students had been dealing with more formal writing from semester one to semester two in pre-university, the writing style in first year was still viewed as highly formal due to the content based writing that entailed the use of discipline related vocabulary and precise language. Leki (2007) stresses on the irrelevancy of ESL and composition courses to students' academic language and literacy as they continue on in higher education. At this point, the findings of this research also raise the question as to how much the tension with the priority of content over language discussed earlier is linked to the tension with academic discourse in writing. There is the argument that students' difficulties with academic discourse in writing can be disguised and be manifested as "surface difficulties with grammar" (McCune, 2004, p. 277). With regard to the findings of this research, the students' voices clearly indicate that their struggles to appropriate the academic discourse and genres necessary for writing in higher education go beyond the requirements of language proficiency. This clearly reflects the phenomena described by McCune (2004).

Last, the students had to adjust to less rigid organisation in their first year writing. They were taught the formulaic five-paragraph essay writing in pre-university, in addition to organisation such as introduction with thesis statement, paragraphs with topic sentences and conclusion. However, they could exercise their judgment and knowledge in organising their academic assignments in first year. They still used introduction, body and conclusion; however, only Ju Siang and Tai Chong still consistently included thesis statement in the introduction. As for the paragraphs in the content, topic sentences were either implied or omitted. There was less "rigidity" in the organisation. At the same time, there was also division of content under headings and sub headings for the longer assignments. Ju Siang informed that when there was a subtopic, he wrote a short introduction to connect to the content which he then expanded and concluded. In this conclusion, he introduced the next subtopic. He was actually using transition paragraphs between one subtopic to another without realising it. He viewed this as "little boxes in a big box" and he found this writing format very useful (PI3).

The students' ability to discern and be flexible in organisation partially stems from their relief of escaping from the rigid organisation in their earlier writing in pre-university. This can also be linked to the main focus given to content in their first year writing assignments, resulting in the perception among the students that since organisation is not prioritised, they can afford to be more flexible with it. This finding supports past research findings. Reichelt (2003) argues that the formal structure of writing from introduction with thesis to developmental paragraphs and conclusion is not necessary for all disciplines in college writing. She questions the value of giving students such writing assignments based on research evidence that content is prioritised over form in college writing. Gillespie (2005) also concludes that formulaic writing is not of great value in preparing students for higher education writing. In addition, Cornwell and McKay (1998) believe that there is not necessarily a clear formulaic pattern in organisation in research writing in university. There can be more than one paragraph in the introduction and topic sentences are not necessary when a transition paragraph leads on to what are the following paragraphs.

5. Conclusion

The study demonstrates that students face various challenges in the writing transition from pre-university to university. It involves the students in appropriating new writing in different cultures of writing to achieve their goal, namely to do well in writing and in their courses. The students have to appropriate writing concepts such as thesis statement, topic sentences and others, and new essay genres in semester one pre-university. Their poor understanding of these concepts makes the adjustments difficult. Next, there is a need to appropriate research skills and research writing in semester two pre-university. These adjustments in pre-university cause tension in writing and result in the use of mediation through tools such as teachers, personal beliefs and characteristics, and peers to achieve their zone of proximal development and appropriation to participate in a new writing culture. The struggles that they face in writing continued in their first year of university where they faced problems with content, academic language and organization. Again, they resorted to mediation to meet the challenges.

The pedagogical implications arising from this study are related to the following areas: assumptions about students and their writing in a sociocultural context and pedagogical intervention.

From a sociocultural theory viewpoint, this study indicates that students conflicts in ESL writing are historically and socioculturally embedded. Teachers need to give attention to these conflicts and rethink about their approaches and ways of teaching, curricula, and how they deal with their students. Nelson and Kim state that teachers should “analyse activity systems in which (students are) embedded in, contradictions inherent within activities and between them” (2001, p. 57). In addition, teachers need to understand that writing which takes place among students is complex, interwoven with various activities and involves mediation of tools (Prior, 2006) and a struggle for participation in the ongoing writing community. An insight into how learning and development, in this case, writing among L2 students can be advanced according to Lantolf is by making changes to “artifacts and social relations under which individuals operate” (2001, p. 157). Artifacts that can be changed are for example, texts, genres, discourses and others. This also highlights the the need to re-examine the content of writing courses at pre-university level for their relevancy to higher education writing.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that students constantly switch between different writing requirements from one writing context to another which results in tension. Teachers need to be aware of the understanding or the lack of it which students carry with them into a new writing culture and how they respond in the writing class to help them. Hutchings (2006) believes that with this awareness, teachers can be more confident and utilise appropriate resources to help their L2 students. The struggles that students face indicate that they are not ready to meet the writing demands in postsecondary education. Teachers need to recognise that these students still need help in postsecondary writing. They should devise strategies to provide scaffolding to help students understand the demands of writing and the changes in the different cultures of writing in order to help them participate better in these cultures and go beyond their Zone of Proximal Development. Teacher student interaction should also be encouraged in class as “joint involvement with adults in situated activity” can improve performance levels in writing (Englert et al, 2006, p. 210).

To conclude, this study advances understanding of students’ challenges in the transition from the culture of writing in pre-university to university from a sociocultural stance, enabling ways to promote their writing adjustments and their success in writing in postsecondary education.

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