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Rhetorical Analysis Tasks to Develop Audience Awareness in Thesis Writing

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Abstract

A series of online workshops was held to investigate the contributions of rhetorical analysis tasks on ten postgraduate student writers' sense of audience in thesis writing. During the rhetorical analysis tasks, the students' thesis drafts were analyzed by their supervisors before and after participating in the workshops. In addition, the students were interviewed at the end to gain insights of their understanding of audience. The findings suggested that adopting rhetorical analysis tasks may improve learners' sense of audience. The findings also showed that the participants seemed to possess better rhetorical knowledge about appropriate genre, content, stance and style.

1. Introduction

Audience awareness is a skill that postgraduate students need for writing effective theses. It refers to the ability of a writer to answer audience needs and maintain the flow of communication with readers through words (Wong, 2005). Kroll (1984) introduced rhetorical, informational, and social perspective as the three major views of text audience. He explains that while the first two oversimplify the relation between writer, writing, and reader, the social perspective gives a clearer picture of the parties involved in an act of written communication. It is through the social lens, that novice writers understand how to satisfy their readers, what may lead to conflict, and how to anticipate audience reaction. For instance, being able to shape audience understanding and experience through a text causes

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satisfaction in readers, while writing something that makes sense to the writer himself but not necessarily to his readers leads to conflicts. Kroll (1984) concludes that we need to maintain a balanced consideration to audience as an important element of communication.

Developing the skill of audience awareness among student writers necessitates practice (Midgette, Haria, & MacArthur, 2008). Practice is beneficial, because it develops constant awareness of interpersonal function of language while writing (Alamargot, Caporossi, Chesnet, & Ros, 2011; Nystrand, Greene, & Wiemelt, 1993). Interpersonal function of language or interpersonal positioning, according to Holliday (1985) is a macro-function of language, which positions writers in terms of their relationship with the readers of their texts. In order to initiate practice, learners need to be engaged in doing appropriate tasks. Task according to Bygate, Skehan, and Swain (2001: 12) is "a focused, well-defined activity, relatable to learner choice or to learning processes, which requires learners to use language, with emphasis on meaning, to attain an objective".

Tasks in language classrooms have been used for various purposes (cf. Batstone, 2012). Rhetorical analysis is a type of task that facilitates learning through discovery (Parks, 2000; Rainey, 1990). Lee and Swales (2006) introduced students to corpus approach to language with the aim of helping them to take responsibility of their own learning. They found that such opportunities guide the students in advanced language classes to discover the function of language used by a writer other than their writing teachers. They concluded that using corpora in writing classes boosts learners' confidence and empower them to learn independently by checking linguistic issues in corpora and not grammar and reference books. They mentioned that such activities help the learners of academic writing to find disciplinary exemplifications from the texts that have been written for specific contexts and disciplines. Therefore, rhetorical analysis can develop awareness of how and in what ways writers write (Nesi, 2012). In this research, rhetorical analysis tasks were used to lead learners to understand the ways in which good writers engage their audience interest/attention and persuade them to consider their messages and why bad writers fail to do so. The objective of this study was to understand whether rhetorical analysis tasks can foster audience awareness in writing specifically in thesis writing.

2. Literature Review

This study is grounded in analysis of composition and rhetorical models in academic texts from Civil Engineering discipline. As discussed earlier, as graduate students need to learn specialized texts, rhetorical analysis seems suitable to prepare them for this goal. According to Swales (1990), genre includes a communicative situation in which the involved parties try to serve and/or fulfill particular communication purposes. In such a situation the target discourse members understand and recognize the communicative purpose. Based on this explanation, in an academic text the relationship between "what is written" and "the context that it is written for" has a significant role. Researchers, who take this view, usually analyze a large number of texts for a specific genre. In this process they look at different parts of a genre to extract the specific moves and sub-moves of these segments (Swales, ibid). Then, they use their findings to develop the ability for producing genre-specific writing skills among English for Academic Purposes (EAP) learners. Related teaching models generally take a constructionist perspective and offer learners writing guides for specific disciplines (cf. Swales & Feaks, 2004). Through these approaches learners understand that texts are not the same in all disciplines and they need to be equipped with the rhetorical cultures and linguistic codes of disciplines.

Although the aim of these approaches is to use text analysis to develop students' awareness toward conventions and discourses, they have attracted a lot of criticism. This is mostly because of their prescriptive and form-focused nature (Hyland, 2009). Genre-approaches have expanded the concept of context by emphasizing learning in the discipline to develop students' critical awareness, but they fail to consider the relationship that writers should establish with their readers. In other words, writers are supposed to answer their readers' expectations. If student writers are spoon-fed with ready-made writing frameworks, they may not build up the confidence to explore their readers' needs and creatively express themselves to address them. The questions here are: If learners are guided to explore the rhetorical structures of discipline-related texts themselves and teachers do not take the risk of presenting

static and fixed rhetorical forms, does engaging learners to such activities help them to understand readers' positions and expectations? And do identifying particular characteristics of texts help them to develop a sense of audience? To answer such questions we developed genre-based rhetorical analysis tasks for student use and investigated trace of development and/or improvement of audience awareness in consequent drafts.

3. Methodology

The method used to answer the raised questions involved pre and post analysis of the L2 learners' thesis drafts by their thesis supervisors which was reported through reflections, and 10 sets of in-depth interviews with the L2 learners' after a series of online workshops. The learners' drafts were analyzed to investigate changes that students made to their drafts to engage with their readers. The in-depth interviews were used to investigate whether and how the student writers of the study developed and implemented their sense of audience.

We selected our student participants purposefully based on their English proficiency, level of study, and their supervisors' willingness to participate in the study. Ultimately, we selected 10 PhD students in Civil Engineering and invited their supervisors to participate in the study. We focused on one discipline as we wished to maintain homogeneity. The participants were from five leading universities in Malaysia. Five of the supervisors were males and the other five were females. The students were all males. We obtained informed consent from our participants and insured them that their confidentiality is protected by using pseudonyms in our report. All the student participants of the study were international students from the Middle East with IELTS overall band score of 6.5. The students had already submitted the first draft of their PhD theses to their supervisors for feedback.

Discussion sessions held with each supervisor and the recent thesis draft of each student was analyzed. In Malaysia, it is expected that a PhD thesis includes a chapter of introduction, a chapter of literature review, a chapter of research methodology, one or more chapters of findings and discussion, and a conclusion chapter. In 8 out of 10 cases that we analyzed for this research the drafts included a validity chapter, placed before the conclusion chapter. The sessions were audio-recorded and later the supervisors' reflections on the drafts were transcribed. The information from analyzing the drafts was written down on recording sheets during the analyzing process and double-checked with the supervisors. For data analysis, each field note was reviewed thoroughly and each transcript was read carefully. The aim was to identify writers' sense of audience and their awareness of the interpersonal function of language.

After this initial process, the student participants of the study were invited to take part in a series of online workshops on Civil Engineering thesis part-genres. At the beginning, the student writers were sent an email containing i) a well-written thesis and ii) an unsatisfactory thesis as samples. These samples were validated beforehand by three Civil Engineering professors for the purpose of this study. The online workshops held based on mutual agreement on time. The participants were asked to install Skype application software on their computers and add each other and the researchers to build a discussion channel. The participants were asked to familiarize themselves with chapters of the two sample theses sent earlier. In each workshop, initially the researchers provided some information about the function of some part-genres of the chapter under analysis. Then the participants were asked to put themselves in a critical reader place and do some tasks. The tasks required the participants to reflect on the rhetorical moves and functions of part-genres and discuss the expectation of a potential reader when reading a particular section of a thesis. The researchers of the study led the sessions by asking questions related to appropriateness of introductions and thesis statements, discourse moves, citation, cohesion, coherence, paraphrasing, and presentation of research niche and gap of literature (Bitchener and Turner, 2011). For the purpose of this study a total of six workshops were conducted. Each session took between 60 to 90 minutes, depending on the discussions involved. At the end of each workshop, the students were asked to revise the related draft chapters at home. After the last revision they were asked to send their manuscripts to their supervisors.

After this step, each student was interviewed for 20 to 30 minutes. The interviews with the students were based on two sets of questions. The first set of questions asked the student writers to describe their general experiences of revising their drafts after doing the given tasks. The second set of questions asked about their perception of their audience awareness while they were revising their drafts. Data analysis on the data gained from this stage involved extracting the function of tasks, their usefulness, and possible development of sense of audience.

Finally, the researchers arranged appointments with each supervisor to meet them personally again and investigate the supervisors' perception of the revised version of the participants' drafts. Just like the first set of discussion meetings, sessions were audio-recorded to elicit supervisors' reflections from the transcripts. The findings from the analyses were jotted down immediately on recording sheets and checked with the supervisors at the end of the meeting. The data from this stage were compared to the data gained from the initial meetings.

4. Findings

The findings of this study have been organized into two sections. The first section reports the student writers' reflections on the two sample theses, their own awareness of audience while writing, and the efficacy of the tasks. The second section reports the pre and post analysis on the students' draft theses in the forms of reflections of the supervisors on their supervisees' audience awareness with supporting evidences from the students' texts.

4.1. Student writers' reflections on sample theses and responses to the interviews

The findings from the interview sessions show that the students had noticed a great difference between the chapter introductions of the two sample theses. Particularly, they observed that the thesis statement and topic sentences in most cases were completely different. The adjectives that the interviewees used to describe the good sample were: "clear", "holistic", and "well-written", while the adjectives that they used to describe the bad sample were "disconnected", "unfocused", "weak" and "ineffective". Most of the interviewees claimed that a good thesis statement inform the readers the central focus of the following paragraphs, they draw readers in, motivate them to follow the discussion in the following paragraphs, and help the readers to determine the aim of the writer. On the contrary, Jason, one of the student writers, mentioned that:

> *"In the second sample* [the bad sample]*, I, as a reader, was quite lost when starting a new chapter or section. I found myself searching the lines to find a central focus of what I was reading. Sometimes it was boring and annoying, because I wasn't able to figure out why I need to read all these sentences."*

The second frequent issue that the participants of the study pointed to was the connection between the sentences in one paragraph, the connection between the paragraphs, and the connection between the sections. The responses to interviews reported that the students agreed that the obvious strong trait of the good sample was presenting information in clear, well-structured, and connected sentences in each paragraph. Moreover, the paragraphs were linked relevantly in such a way that readers could easily follow the discussions. However, the bad sample included unrelated arguments. The conjunction words in the beginning of the paragraphs were not used appropriately. In addition, there were many ambiguous sentences that confused the participants as readers of the texts.

Attribution and citation were the other mentioned issue. All of the interviewees mentioned that there were occasions while reading the bad sample that they asked themselves why the writer did not cite anybody after some statements and cited many after obvious statements. They stated that some claims needed citation to assure the reader that the statements and the basis of the arguments were strong and supported. Comparing this issue in the two samples, Nick said:

> *"The writer of the first sample* [the good sample] *mentioned much previous research after important claims, and less after the statements with general ideas. He or She clearly showed her/his own conclusions, inferences, and point of view by using the phrases like 'the researcher', 'this or current study'. However, the writer of the other sample cited studies excessively in some places, and no citation at all in other places, which was awkward. By awkward I mean,* [pause] *ok* [pause]*. I mean, the statement was there but I wasn't able to understand how it is*

true. In some places, there were arguments and criticism, but I wasn't able to figure out who made that criticism. There were no clues there."

Regarding the research gap and research niche the participants declared that different sections of the good sample together were leading the reader to understand the gap of knowledge in such a way that the reader was convinced that the gap was significant enough to be filled. Two of the participants used the phrase "pieces of a puzzle" to describe the sections of introduction and literature review chapters that make gap and niche of the study. Quite the contrary, the interviewees described the sections of the bad sample as "space fillers", which were not connected or informative. The majority of the interviewees mentioned that they could not make sense of the relationship between the arguments and the discussions and the research gap or niche presented. David said that:

"To me a research is like a maze that the researcher or the person who has written the report takes my hand [reader's hand] *and guides me through the tunnels to find the treasure. This treasure is research gap which is worth spending time to be bridged."*

When the student participants of the study were asked about their perception of their ability to consider their readers while writing, all of them believed that writing a smooth, easy-to-follow, and convincing thesis is daunting. The majority of them acknowledged that they were aware of their audience, but they felt lack of confidence and ability to put what they wanted to say in words. Ted in this regard said that:

"I felt frightened when I was revising my thesis draft after the workshops I attended. That was because the text was lengthy, there was a lot of information and I wasn't sure how to make the ideas connected. How to control my readers' understanding or how to make them understand what I was trying to say. Frankly, there were times that I wanted to throw my draft away and start writing up the whole thing again. But honestly I didn't have that much time. This current manuscript took 9 months to be written. I needed these workshops way too earlier than this."

The questions that asked about the efficacy of the tasks gained the most interesting answers. This is because the student writers get to "play the role of examiners or supervisors". All of the interviewees mentioned the fact that they had done such activities before in workshops and academic writing classes, but they never used them as self-study techniques. For Jeff, such tasks were ambiguous before and he could not figure out what exactly he was looking for and what he was supposed to learn. Dave said that: "It was valuable to be informed about what to look at and what to do with the findings and later on use the findings to revise my manuscripts". The interviewees evaluated the tasks as interesting and interactive. They enjoyed discovering and sharing their opinions. Being critical readers, or in one of the interviewees words "playing the role of a supervisor or examiner" was pleasant for them. In this regards Tony said:

"I like learning through discovery, that's why I decided to be an engineer researcher. I enjoyed the workshop activities because they made me compare, think, and find. They made me put myself in the position of a reader who reads a thesis in his/her course, but it is not necessarily related to his/her area of interest. I found it hard to be motivated to read and understand a thesis which is not written properly. And not only it is boring, it is confusing and causes a lot of misunderstanding."

4.2. Supervisors' reflection (pre and post analysis on student drafts)

This section reports the reflections of the supervisors on primary drafts and also the revised version of the manuscripts. The information is organized based on the reflections received in the first meetings with the supervisors, followed by their related reflection on the revised drafts.

Our findings of the initial meetings with the supervisors held before the workshops showed that the students' major problem in thesis writing was related to understanding the readers' expectation of different part-genres. In this regards seven out of the 10 supervisors we had discussion with said that the major difficulty of postgraduate students

in writing their reports relates to misunderstanding what the different sections of a thesis required of them. Dr Hisham in this regards said:

"I believe when it comes to writing up the thesis, a student must ask himself what should I write and how should I write it. But, most of the time when I read my supervisees' drafts, I can imagine that they were worried about filling the spaces. Most of the time the texts are written hastily without clear focus."

Dr Ahmed mentioned that:

"Students' [initial] *drafts are usually boring. Most of the information written in different sections especially, introduction, discussion and conclusion are repetitive. Typically I can find ample sentences that started like this: this research tries to do blah blah blah. If I search this sentence in a full-text thesis, I could find it in every section.* […] *students are not aware of what they need to tell their readers or what their potential readers require to gain from each section."*

In terms of cohesion and coherence, the supervisors evaluated the chapters of the manuscripts differently. Overall, the most coherent and cohesive chapters were methodology and finding chapters and the least coherent and cohesive chapters were introduction and literature review chapters. Particularly, supervisors used adjectives like "up-to-the-point" and "well-described" for methodology and finding chapters, and "redundant", "convoluted", "unfocused", "disconnected", "confusing" for introduction and literature review chapters. Supervisors believed that whenever students write reports of "what to do" and "how to do" they actually write properly, but when they are writing "why to do" they face difficulty. Specifically, Dr Zaeem said:

"I found that postgraduates' major problem is relating their own texts to other writers' texts. I'm saying this because I get confused when I'm reading students' background of the study, literature review, and discussion chapters. These are the chapters that require the new researcher to show changes over time, and similarities and differences at any specific time. Therefore, the researcher has to connect prior research and studies to find rationale and support for new research niche, gap, and finding. This requires the writer to make particular linguistic choices while writing to inform and convince the readers. Otherwise, they leave their readers confused."

The second set of meetings with the supervisors resulted in gaining significant findings related to the efficacy of the tasks. Generally, all supervisors observed and reported improvements particularly in introduction chapter. They said that in the background section students did better in showing the improvements and findings over time. In discussion chapter they found that students added more points of similarities and differences between their own findings and previous researchers. Moreover, they mentioned attribution and citation reduced significantly in literature review chapter and in most section students had added relevant studies and explained the relation of the discussed studies with their own study. According to Dr Rahim: "This helped me [a potential reader] to understand why a study is chosen to be discussed".

The supervisors also reported that in the revised drafts the use of connectors significantly improved the flow of writing. Particularly, they mentioned obvious increase in using contrast connectors (e.g. however, nevertheless, while), and result connectors (e.g. therefore, hence, consequently, accordingly, subsequently) in the revised drafts of the students, which shows students' content awareness. The supervisors also pointed out more usage of attitude maker words (e.g. interestingly, surprisingly) in discussion chapter and aims of the study section in chapter one. These words, as explained by supervisors, present the voice and attitude of writers towards issues, phenomena, and gaps of knowledge that may trigger the curiosity of the readers. Moreover, the supervisors said that the usages of phrases such as, "the researcher admitted that", "the researcher suggested that", 'this study" showed readers' voice and stance and that they took the responsibility of their statements, claims, and findings.

Regarding the content of part-genres, the supervisors mentioned the same problems with slight improvements in background, aims of the study, discussion, and contribution sections. They predicted that improvements in the discussions in literature review chapter contributed to these sections particularly by reducing the repeated and redundant sentences and fulfilling the function of those sections.

5. Discussion

An initial step toward helping postgraduate students in academic writing in disciplines is understanding student writers' needs. Student writers need to develop awareness that writing is a social practice. To develop this awareness, writing should be perceived as a written monologue, which audience expect it to be interesting, logical, coherent, and convincing. We found that facilitating students' critical and analytical text reviews improves their audience awareness skills. In this regards, rhetorical analysis tasks grounded in disciplinary context are specifically helpful for student writers of academic and disciplinary English. The findings of this study support the suggestion of Thrush (1993) that raising awareness, supplying suitable resources, and providing opportunities for practice facilitate quality writings. This study also confirms Paré (2000) and Wingberg, Geest, Lehman, and Nduna (2010) proposition that teaching technical writing must be in the context.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate the extent to which rhetorical analysis tasks develop audience awareness in graduate students' writing. The effectiveness of the tasks was determined by comparing their drafts before and after doing the tasks. The analysis of students' drafts by their supervisors revealed improvement in audience awareness. As mentioned by student participants of the study, the tasks were not completely new to them and they had done similar tasks before in academic writing courses and workshops they previously attended. Nevertheless, students evaluate the tasks as effective, because these tasks helped them direct their attention to their readers. We found learners may not get the rationales behind doing tasks or forget some aspects of academic writing after a while. Therefore, reinforcing and engaging novice writers in ongoing writing activities under guidance may benefit them. Moreover, we suggest that the tasks that focus on analyzing specific sections of sample theses may grow their understanding of the requirements of each section of a thesis. Profound understanding of the function and requirements of different sections of a thesis help students to maintain cohesive and coherent texts.

Despite these benefits, this study was not without limitations. Firstly, we used a case study design in order to investigate the efficacy of the tasks and using qualitative study means focusing on a few individuals that restricts the generalizability of the findings. Moreover, the study was done in a short timeframe, so the results of the study could not show the long-term effects of the tasks on participants' audience awareness. Interested researchers are encouraged to run longitudinal research to get better understandings of the effects of rhetorical analysis tasks on student writers' writing skills. Ultimately, in spite of the mentioned limitations, we concluded that rhetorical tasks can develop audience awareness among learners.

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