

# Academic Writing At Universities - A Shift Of Balance From Reproduction To Critical Analysis

**Luu Thi Huong, Ph.D.**

Thai Nguyen College of Economics and Finance

**Dinh Thi Huong, Ph.D.**

Ha Noi University of Home Affairs

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## ABSTRACT

*English academic writing is never an easy task for university students. This is true for both native and non-native speakers of English. Many first year students claim that the writing assignments at universities are much different from what they studied at high schools. And that, schools did not prepare them for writing assignments at universities. They may not notice that there is an enormous transition in focus of studying in these levels. This paper attempts to look for some key factors from psychological perspective that might be helpful for first year students dealing with academic writing at universities. Writing is a crucial skill in higher education, so much of academic success is dependent upon the ability to clearly communicate one's ideas through writing. In order to be a good writer, first and foremost, one must be a wise thinker and reader, the so-called critical thinker and critical reader. Another important issue is that one should be tolerance to errors made during the writing practice.*

**Index terms:** Academic writing, psychological perspective, critical thinking, critical reader

## I. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Background of the study

Writing is one of the most difficult tasks for language learners. It is the process of performing communicative task through a system of signs. Unlike speaking which is intended for face-to-face communication, writing, on the other hand, is read by readers who are separated by time and space. Schmandt-Besserat & Erard (2008) [1] refer to writing as graphic marks that represent the units of a specific language, which serve as functions of the language structure. In other words writing is an activity that puts letters, symbols, numbers or words together on paper in order to communicate, express and explain ideas in written text, there is no negotiation of meaning. Heffernan & Lincoln (1986) [2] states, writing is a mean of communication. It can be said that people can exchange information through written forms. The examples of real communication in written forms are public signs, instructions, newspaper, magazines, brochures, and so on. Harmer (2004) [3] notes that;

"Writing is often not time-bound in the way conversation is. When writing, students frequently have more time to think than they do in oral activities. They can go through what they know in their minds, and even consult dictionaries, grammar books or other reference material to help them (P.121)".

Academic writing which is a compulsory subject for both undergraduate and postgraduate students in many educational institutions, to some extent, is more challenging because of its complexity. In order to be a good writer, one should master language knowledge and content knowledge, i.e. grammar, morphology, genres, styles and the knowledge of the world. Murray, R. & S. Moore (2006) [4] state that;

"Becoming a writer is an important journey. It is a journey that leads us to many new discoveries about ourselves, about our ideas, about the world in which we live, and about our professional identities as academics, teachers, researchers and scholars (P.1)".

On the journey, language learners inevitably get shocks and make a lot of mistakes and errors and it is for sure that they could learn tremendously from those mistakes and by overcoming the shocks.

### 1.2. Problem statement

Many first year students at Thai Nguyen University claim that academic writing is the most difficult subject because what they had studied at high schools was quite different from what they are required to do at university. In other words, schools did not prepare them well for writing at universities. However, the fact is that principles of good academic writing are the same whether

you are writing as a high school student or as a postgraduate doctoral student. The difference lies in firstly, the focus of studying. Murrey (2012) [5] states;

Schools tend to focus on training you to produce written work that will earn you good AS/A-level grades. They don't normally prepare you specifically for academic writing at undergraduate level. As a result, certain principles of writing are not covered at all or are covered only superficially, with much important detail often being left out - detail that may be crucial to successful assignment writing at university (p.7)

Secondly, philosophies i.e. the vast bulk of your education at high school consists largely of developing discipline in your approach to study and building up a body of knowledge that will prepare you for the outside world (p.9). Another difference lies in the shifting of balance. At high schools, the main emphasis is on absorbing and applying information appropriately according to context (i.e. the particular question or exercise being attempted), at university far greater emphasis is placed on analysing and thinking critically about that information. In other words, there is less stress placed on the simple reproduction of information (the displaying of), and more on the ability to evaluate or appraise it (p.9).

It is believed that first year students may not catch up with changes in the "atmosphere" at universities rather than academic requirements. This paper attempts to investigate some changes that students need to make in order to write better at universities.

## II. A REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

### 2.1. Academic writing at universities

Many students believe that a good knowledge of grammar, punctuation or sentence structure are enough to do well on academic writing at universities. However, They are not everything. Academic writing requires more than that. Academic writing is what scholars do to communicate with other scholars in their field of study, their *disciplines*. Academic writing is what you have to learn so that you can participate in the different disciplinary conversations that take place in your courses. You have to learn to *think* like an academic, *read* like an academic, *do research* like an academic, and *write* like an academic - even if you have no plans to continue your education and become a scholar yourself (Greene, S. 2015. p1) [6].

#### 2.1.1. Critical thinking and academic writing

Back to Murrey's discussions [3], at schools, students are trained to reproduce things rather than critical analysis of a given issue (p.9). At universities, however, the ability of synthesis and evaluation are more important and encouraged. For university students, critical thinking is the first and foremost requirement to be successful academic writing. This means that they are required to show evidence of critical thinking in their academic essays in the form an argument, and by demonstrating related skills such as evaluation and analysis. However, students are either unaware of the importance of argumentation in writing or lack understanding of what is meant by the concept of argument, evaluation and analysis (Jones, 2005; Wingate, 2011) [7] [8]. Critical thinking operates in the background of arguments, encouraging the thinker to pay attention to the social, ideological, epistemological, and historical forces that operate, often invisibly, all around us. In relationship to this conversation, critical thinking and writing operate in a specific kind of relationship. While it may sound strange, critical thinking functions not to answer a question, but to answer to the way you are asking a question (Vallis, 2010. p.24) [9]. In the context of undergraduate students, critical thinking is defined in terms of abilities or skills such as selection, evaluation, analysis, reflection, questioning, inference and judgement (Tapper, 2004) [10]. Tsui (2002) [11] concludes that critical thinking is the students' abilities to "identify issues and assumptions, recognise important relationships, make correct inferences, evaluate evidence or authority, and deduce conclusions" (p.743). When critical thinking is applied to writing these abilities are expressed through the process of argumentation, producing an argument i.e. the essay, the dissertation. Argument can be defined as a connected series of related ideas "intended to establish a position and implying response to another (or more than one) position"

#### 2.1.2. Becoming a critical reader

People hardly ever speak without listening. We need to take in something so that we can produce something. Similarly, writing needs reading to occur. Reading is a two-way street. Readers are presented with a writer's ideas, but they also bring their own ideas to what they read (Kirsznner, 2011. p. 13) [12]. However, reading as an academic is far different from reading a magazine or a novel. When you read an academic writing for the first time you may be perplexed by the vocabulary and sentence structure of many of the academic essays you read. Scholars use specialized language to capture the complexity of an issue or to introduce specific ideas from their discipline. Every discipline has its own vocabulary. You probably can think of words and phrases that are not used every day but that are necessary, nevertheless, to express certain ideas precisely [4] (p.1). The experienced readers need "some disciplines" of the reading passage or the background knowledge of the reading.

Another important issue in reading is that readers should master some basic reading strategies such as previewing which include the author, the title, the place of publication. All these clues will give you something that help you understand the text. Skimming to find the thesis is another important strategies. Read the first paragraph of an essay carefully because it may announce the

author's thesis, and it may give you some sense of how the argument for that thesis will be conducted. When you have grasped the main points of the reading run your eye over the rest, looking for key expressions that indicate the author's conclusions or other specific information.

Reading critically other people's work is the best way for you to prepare for your own writing. The benefits include (1) the writing styles and conventions employed by authors, (2) the gap of researching for your investigation to fill in and (3) you will develop a mature academic style of writing that is both fair and discerning in its accounts of others' work, and that maximizes the opportunity for others to take seriously what you have to say.

### 2.1.3. Academic writing - what a novice writer should know

The first year university students can be seen as novice academic writer. What they need to develop is the *discourse competence*. Canale & Swain (1980) [13] defined discourse competence as an ability to make larger patterns of stretches of discourse into meaningful wholes. Later interpretation of discourse competence implies that discourse competence is also concerned with language use in social context, and in particular with interaction and dialogue between speakers. In terms of academic writing, discourse competence refers to the ability to integrate a wide range of different types of knowledge in order to create extended written discourse that is both linguistically accurate and socially appropriate.

Linguistic accuracy refers to grammatical knowledge that govern one's writing which includes sentence structures, articles, punctuation, verb forms, verb tense, subject - verb agreement etc. The notion of social appropriateness refers to a more abstract idea which consists of writing genres, disciplines and registers. Eggins & Martin (1997) stated 'different genres are different ways of using language to achieve different culturally established tasks, and texts of different genres are texts which are achieving different purposes in the culture' (p. 236) [14]. In describing the relationship between register and genre, Eggins (1994) says 'genre and register are at two different levels of abstraction. Genre, or context of culture, can be seen as more abstract, more general - we can recognize a particular genre even if we are not sure exactly what the situational context is'. (p. 32) [15].

## 2.3. Errors and academic writing

### 2.3.1. Errors versus mistakes

It is important to make a clear distinction between the two confused terms an error and a mistake. Errors are considered to be systematic, governed by rule, and appear because a learner's knowledge of the rules of the target language is incomplete. Thus, they are indicative of the learner's linguistic system at a given stage of language learning. They are likely to occur repeatedly and not recognized by the learner. Thus, only the teacher or researcher can locate them (Gass & Selinker, 1993) [16]. For instance, a Vietnamese language learner may write "I do not know where does he come from". The auxiliary verb "does" he inserted is correct when he makes a question "where does he come from?" However, his interlanguage of indirect question is wrong and he does not notice of this type of error and does it repeatedly. In contrast to errors, mistakes are random deviations, unrelated to any system, and instead representing the same types of performance mistakes that might occur in the speech or writing of native speakers, such as slips of the tongue or pen, false starts, lack of subject-verb agreement in a long complicated sentence, and the like.

### 2.3.2. Errors in second language acquisition

It is agreed that errors made by second or foreign language learner is nothing serious. In fact, making errors is an evidence of the learning process. Corder (1967) [17] argued that what we term as "error" in L2 learners is actually a natural developmental stage, analogous to what children exhibit in acquiring a L1. Because nearly all children pass eventually through these stages to adult competence in the L1 without intervention, by extension, L2 errors should not be seen as problematic either. Willian (1981) [18] even asserted that errors are primarily in the eye of the beholder and especially in the minds of writing teachers wielding red pens - in other words, we notice errors in student writing because we are looking for them, not because they are truly bothersome. In other contexts, we might not even spot them at all. It comes to a conclusion that errors in academic writing is inevitable, especially for first year students who can be seen as novice writer. As teachers of academic writing, one should try to explain the errors in a way that can motivate the learning process.

## III. CONCLUSIONS

Academic writing in English is accounted as a complex process for English as a foreign language learners, especially for first year university students. There is a period of transfer from high schools where the focus of learning is on reproduction to critical analysis writing at research institutions. What tutors or instructors should do include setting them into a new "learning atmosphere" and giving them motivated feedbacks to errors that are inevitable in the journey that leads them to many new discoveries about themselves: Academic writing.

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## AUTHORS

**Dr. Luu Thi Huong** is currently a lecturer of English at Thai Nguyen College of Economics and Finance. She earned her bachelor degree in English Language Teaching at Thai Nguyen University and the degree of Master of English at the Laguna University, The Philippines. She holds the degree of Ph,D in English Language and Literature at Batangas State University, The Philipines. Her interests include Language Teaching strategies, Phonetics and Phonology and Intercultural studies.  
**Email: luuhuong2611.ckt@gmail.com**

**Dr. Dinh Thi Huong** is currently a lecturer of English at Ha Noi University of Home Affairs. She earned her bachelor degree in English Language Teaching at Thai Nguyen University and the degree of Master of English majoring in TESOL at the Laguna University, The Philippines. She holds the degree of Ph,D in English Language and Literature at Batangas State University, The Philipines. Her interests include Translation Studies, Language Teaching for Children and Lexicology  
**Email: dinhhuong.lilac@gmail.com**