

International Postgraduates' Perception on Academic Writing: A Lesson on Criticality

Mas Ayu Mumin¹

¹ Centre for Communication, Teaching and Learning, Universiti Teknologi Brunei, Brunei

Correspondence: Mas Ayu Mumin, Centre for Communication, Teaching and Languages, Universiti Teknologi Brunei, Jalan Tungku Link Gadong BE1410, Brunei. E-mail: masayu.mumin@utb.edu.bn

Received: January 25, 2022

Accepted: April 6, 2022

Online Published: April 21, 2022

doi:10.5430/wjel.v12n4p46

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5430/wjel.v12n4p46>

Abstract

Academic writing has always been synonymous in higher education. However, academic writing could be more problematic for international students than native speakers of English (Mumin, 2020). They endure different struggles that ranged from language proficiency to effect on contextual academic transition. This study is part of a longitudinal narrative study involving five international postgraduate students in a UK university. The findings demonstrated unique views of each participant with a concurrence that proficiency does not promise writing competency. This study also unveiled the participants' views on being a Non-Native English Speaker (NNES) in an anglophone country where 'criticality' seemed to be a crucial notion needed to be grasped in order to write according to the university's assessment writing conventions. Additionally, views on international students' writing support were also documented.

Keywords: academic writing, NNES, criticality, narrative study, international students. postgraduates

1. Introduction

Academic writing is often viewed as synonymous to higher education. As students progress from undergraduate to postgraduate, the latter is often perceived as already academically 'able' (Evans, 2013) and the transition often assumed as natural process (West, 2012). However, with the surge of international students coming to study in Anglophone countries such as the UK in the case of this study, it is only natural that these L2 writers would encounter certain challenges adjusting to their new context, whether physical, psychological or environmental (Mumin, 2020). One of such challenges is academic writing that international students often view as novel idea (Kim & La Bianca, 2018). English language often comes to mind when speaking about L2 writers and they understand that English language is important not only as communication tool but as a platform to grasp academic skills (Batalla & De Vera, 2019) according to the conventions of the university.

With the plethora of international students studies that tend to focus on the more negative attributes, indirectly representing international students as deficit (Khozaei Ravari & Tan, 2018; Heng, 2018; Bista, 2019), this study attempts to acquire deep insights into the minds of international postgraduate students via narrative inquiry. The objective of this study is to explore the participants' conceptualization of academic writing and how criticality in writing is perceived. This study is also interested to see how the participants perceive successful academic writers. This study contributes to academic writing research by giving a deep insight regarding the complexity of defining academic writing, the subjective perception of criticality and successful academic writers that are influenced by contextual relevance.

2. Study Context

This study was conducted in a university in the United Kingdom that offers an MSc programme as a requirement prior to joining their PhD programme. The participants in this study came from an MSc cohort of 30 students and 70% of them were international students. The MSc programme require 4 modules to be completed in top of a thesis proposal. The modules were all intended to equip students with research knowledge and skills needed for their PhD journey. Each module has a 60% passing mar and the students were assigned with a module supervisor to guide them with their assignments.

3. Literature Review

Writing is a complex and multifaceted activity and is often more challenging for L2 writers (Raofi, Binandeh & Rahmani, 2017). Writing in the L1 is different from learning about the L1 as writing require knowledge application and certain techniques that would fulfil the genre requirement. Hence, there is a wealth of literature citing what is considered as good or bad academic writing that ranges from linguistic point of view, cognitive point of view as well as sociocultural point of view.

The linguistic point of view understood that it is insufficient to see English proficiency nor competency to signify academic success (Neumann, Padden & McDonough, 2019). However, it cannot be denied that language competency does play a role and forms as a connection to one's academic performance (Martirosyan, Hwang & Wanjohi, 2015). In this view, it is expected that L2's language proficiency and competency to be (slightly) less than that of the native speaker.

Brown & Yule (1983) claimed that academic writing tends to have longer sentences with extensive use of subordinate clauses, making it more complex than other types of writing. Two decades later, Hyland (2002) concurred that academic writing indeed had the tendency to be abstract and formal, and often convoluted in its structure. However, these views were challenged by more recent studies by debating that academic writing complexities were at phrasal and clausal level (Biber & Gray, 2010, 2011, 2016; Biber, Gray & Poonpon, 2011).

In their corpus study, Staples, Egbert, Biber and Gray (2016) suggested that good academic writing as an extension of discourse with grammatical complexity, specifically in embedded noun phrases but not as complex at clause level. They also found that academic writing is often overt in its description of referents but not as explicit in its manifestation of coherence that often require non-expert readers to skillfully conjecture meaning from such texts. Another corpus study by Taguchi, Crawford and Wetzel (2013) also had a similar conclusion that although the highest indicator of writing quality in their L2 college composition study was reference to source text and prominent authors, they also found that presence of noun modification was also a linked factor in writing quality.

In a cognitive point of view, writing is seen as a "rhetorical act" that writers needed to "solve and respond" to by writing (Flower & Hayes, 1980, p.369). A good writer is expected balance the rhetorical demands and audience while achieving their writing goals. This theory also highlighted the importance of good writers' ability to express good ideas not only in breadth but also in depth, or in other words, it needs to be detailed and specifically target the rhetorical aim (ibid.). In addition, according to the cognitivists' perspectives, the writing challenge is not only in terms of writing strategies but also about managing the text itself thus categorizing the writing act into three main elements namely, the task environment, writer's long-term memory and writing processes that include Planning, Translating and Reviewing.

Furthermore, students in higher education are often expected to demonstrate 'knowledge-transforming' writing (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1987). This means that practicing writing alone is not enough and writing should be an automatic activity that doesn't require thinking about every detail. By doing so, there would be more cognitive capacity for rhetorical issues and not just simply linking ideas together. In this way, ideas trigger the next (knowledge teller) thus the writer can elicit a writing purpose and construct text, becoming a knowledge transformer.

This notion was further emphasized by Kellogg (2008, p.3) where he claimed that a "knowledge transformer" is an adult writer's trait but professional writers possess "knowledge-crafting skills". However, to evolve from writing what one knows (knowledge teller), to writing for own benefit (knowledge transformer) to writing for reader's benefit (knowledge crafter) could take at least two decades (See Figure 1). Kellogg (2008) also accentuated the importance of memory retention and ability to structure more complex sentences using less frequent words as a characteristic of a better writer.

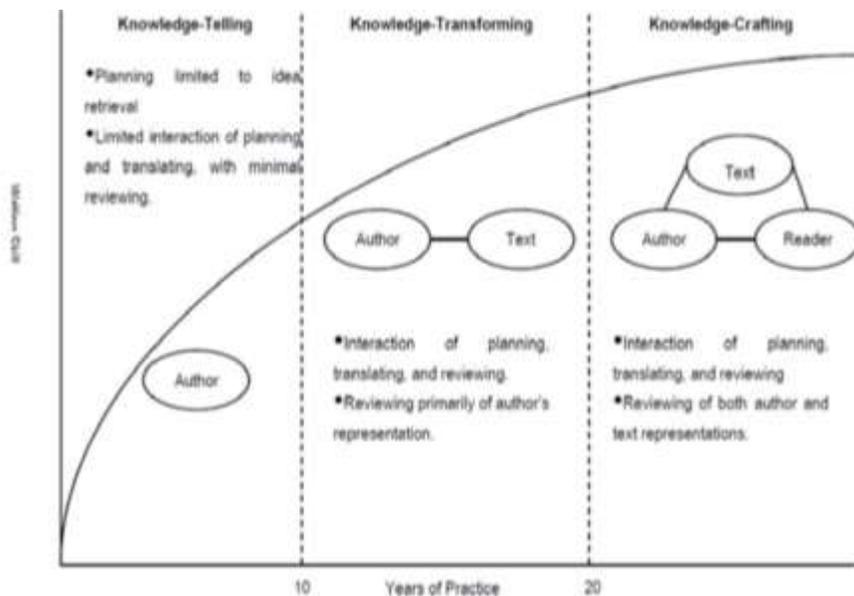


Figure 1. Macro-stages in cognitive development of writing skills (Kellogg, 2008)

In a sociocultural point of view, academic writing, what’s more ‘good academic writing’ has an “abstract and situated nature” (French, 2019, p.5) that made its definition difficult to construct. It is not only dependent on context but also varies according to purpose and academic level (Ivanic & Lea, 2006; Ahmed & Myhill, 2016; Turner, 2018).

In a study by Ahmed and Myhill (2016) in Egypt, they concluded that students’ L2 writing was crucially impacted by sociocultural context. Based on their study of fourteen English majors and seven L2 writing teachers via convenience sampling, they found the participants to be limited in their freedom of expression as certain particular topics were forbidden. They conjectured that this was due to the Egyptian university’s educational context that was exam-oriented, practiced spoon-feeding, and competitive learning. Hence the L2 writers were accustomed to rote learning and conventional writing topics and not encouraged to go outside their comfort zones. This shows how different academic writing is seen in an Egyptian university as compared to what we perhaps, assume it to be.

Academic writing ought to be seen as a form of a student’s professional identity in higher education (French, 2019) that is assigned as a determining factor for a students’ belonging into the academic community in higher education. French (2019, p.1) maintained the “symbolic significance” of academic writing in higher education but is yet an elusive idea that should not be simplified to a definition and practice due to its situated nature. Hence French (2014) exhibited a problematized version of academic writing as opposed to the traditional and simplified version (Table 1). French (2014) claimed academic writing an ideological activity that is subjective in nature that is categorized as a social practice that is context-dependent, creative, developmental and fluid in nature. Hence, this is why the conceptualization of academic writing should not be confined to a universal definition because “meaning and purpose are socially constructed through negotiations of past and present members” (Street, 1984), supporting Kellogg’s view that academic writing could change or evolve according to changes in academic level context.

Table 1. Conceptualization of academic writing (French, 2014)

Traditional Conceptualization of academic writing	Problematized conceptualization of academic writing
Autonomous	Ideological
Objective	Subjective
Technicist skill set	Social Practice
Universal	Situated
Functional	Creative
Performative	Developmental
Fixed	Fluid

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The purpose of this study is to explore international postgraduate students’ perception of academic writing. Which also encapsulates their idea of criticality and being a successful academic writer. To achieve these research aims, the

study require access into the participants' past history that would help shape their current perception and meaning, hence narrative inquiry fitted the purpose of this study. As Connelly and Clandinin (2006, p.479) described, narrative inquiry as "the study of experience as a story" that suits the purpose of this study that does not see the participants' perception of academic writing to happen overnight but rather, over a period of time and exposure. I say this because the participants possess multiple identities such as identifying themselves not just as MSc students but also NNES learners and members of academia.

Due to its subjective nature of 'truth' within the narrative aspects, this study falls under the interpretive paradigm whereby the essence of meaning produced by the participants are "situated" to their context (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p.291) related to the essence of SCT. Within this paradigm this study sees the participants to construct meanings and to function through their interpreted and perceived meanings (Hammersley, 2013). Moreover, interpretivism holds the idea of subjectivity, identifies with multi-realities and embrace that meanings are socially constructed (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), putting this study under the ontological purview of idealism and epistemology of constructivism.

4.2 Participants

The sample of this study is of convenience sampling whereby it was on voluntary basis. I recruited the five participants through a pitch talk held during their orientation week prior to officially starting their MSc programme. Of the five, four were female and one male participant. With an age range of 24 to 35 years old. The participants were all international students studying MSc as part of their requirement pursuing their PhD programme. Hence, all of them has actually possessed a Master's degree and were actually teachers back in their countries.

4.3 Data Collection Methods

There were two methods of data collection used namely: semi-structured interviews and blog throughout the entire study. The semi-structured interviews were conducted once before they started the MSc programme and once after all assignments has been submitted and all feedback has been received as sort of a cumulative summary interview. In between, these two timeframes, the participants were interviewed twice for each module: once after they have received their assignment (where blog elements were also discussed) and once again after receiving their marks and feedback. Each interview was tailored for each participant hence, the topic covered might slightly be different from one participant to the other as the interview session also aims to clarify what was written in their blogs and build up on past interviews.

The blogs on the other hand, act as a personal academic journal using Microsoft One Note platform where participants were asked to blog at least thrice per module which accumulates to twelve blog posts. They three times that they blogged were: once upon receiving the assignment, once after submitting their assignments and lastly upon receiving their marks and feedback. In their blogs, the participants were expected to write about their thoughts and feeling about the assignment which could include their process thought as well as their feelings regarding their marks and tutor's feedback.

Both methods were necessary in order to form a more comprehensive picture of the study as well as a way to triangulate data. This means, every blog post can be clarified during interview sessions and with each phase, we continuous development can be observed where the final interview data can be used to 're-check' early data obtained during the initial interview.

The data obtained were thematically analyzed using NVivo software in order to find recurring themes, not only among participants, but also within the participants themselves. This way, I would be able to link themes that had a profound effect on the participants' mean-making construction.

5. Findings

The following table is the demographic information and marks obtained by the participants that could be relevant to the findings and discussion chapter. 'M1', 'M2', 'M3' and 'M4' denotes the module in sequence.

Table 2. Demographic information and marks of participants

Participant	Gender	Age	M1 marks	M2 marks	M3 marks	M4 marks
Yaseen	Female	28-35	65	68	68	68
Maria	Female	30	60	58*	62	58*
Lulu	Female	29	57	61	70	78
Elio	Male	24	67	66	72	72
Shaima	Female	35	65	62	66	66

The participants’ perception on academic writing was not a simple question that they could answer at any given time. Instead, their perception developed over time citing the word “criticality” repeatedly throughout the course of the study, demonstrating it as a significant element in academic writing. For coherence purposes, this findings chapter will commence with the participants’ perceived writing challenges prior to and throughout their tenure as Masters students as these influences how they see academic writing. It will then be followed by their perception the notion of criticality in academic writing before moving onto the participants’ perception of a successful academic writer. The last section in this chapter is related to the participants’ perception of cultural difference as this is quite an important element in showcasing their cultural identity as an academic writer and a learner.

5.1 Academic Writing Challenges

Table 4 below shows the participants’ writing challenges. The challenges noted in the ‘Initial Interview’ were challenges they expected prior to joining to the MSc programme. The rest of the challenges were in accordance with each module interview in Phase 3 and Phase 4. In these interviews, the participants were all asked regarding their writing challenges and difficulties as I believe it is important to show their academic writing concerns preceding their MSc course and how the challenges developed throughout the programme.

Table 3. Participants' writing challenges throughout their MSc programme

Participant	Initial Interview	M1	M2	M3	M4
Yaseen	Criticality and Pessimism	Writing Process, where to start	Unsupportive Tutor	NIL	Writing process: Not knowing where to start, pessimism
Maria	Writing in UK university convention	Writing in UK university convention, Understanding task, reading	Understanding assignment tasks, Meeting word count	Writing competence, Writing Structure	Subjectivity, Hedging
Lulu	American Slang, Register	NIL	NIL	Demonstration of Criticality	Feeling satisfied with end product
Elio	Writing Introduction	Writing process, Editing, APA references	Unsupportive Tutor	Demonstration of criticality	Feeling satisfied with end product, clarity of ideas
Shaima	Register, Rhetoric, Grammar	Topic Coverage, Criticality	Clarity of Ideas	Demonstration of criticality	Writing process: Not knowing where to start

In the initial interview, Lulu’s writing concerns were related to her propensity to use American slangs having been educated in the USA for her earlier Master degree as well as her concern for her vocabulary choices that needed to sound more “academic”. This rang true when both her marker’s feedback in DCR and SM both contained reference to her American slang and did not realize that it would affect her marks greatly that she recorded no writing difficulties in her DCR and SM interview. She only realized its effect and mentioned it in her IM interview.

Yaseen’s initial challenges included her self-proclaimed pessimist outlook and often externalize blame to anything or anyone other than herself. In her module interviews, Yaseen cited ‘not knowing where to start’ twice throughout her MSc sojourn and faulted upon the fact that she was never taught academic writing formally. In SM, she blamed her “uncooperative” tutor and in IM, Yaseen declined to comment because she insinuated to feel defeated and demotivated due to no progression in her marks. Holistically, Yaseen’s challenges seem to remain constant.

Elio on the other hand identified ‘writing introduction’ as his major writing hurdle in his initial interview. His writing challenges transposed in DCR citing continuous editing which is relational to his NEE writing challenge. I say it is similar because Elio said that he would continuously edit his work until he feels satisfied with the final outcome. Before submitting it to his tutor. In IM, and just like Lulu, Elio seemed to have started to realize significance of criticality that was much sought after by his tutors. Like Yaseen, Elio who was often cheerful in our interview meetings also mentioned his difficult relationship with his SM tutor but optimistically saw it as a “learning experience”. Throughout Elio’s data on writing challenges, it appeared that Elio transmuted from ‘petty’ challenges of writing an introduction to a more consequential challenges that could make or break his writing such as criticality and clarity.

Maria's writing challenges of adjusting to the UK university's writing conventions remained constant throughout her MSc programme. They are considered similar because her responses throughout the programme were based on the written feedback acquired from her tutors that dictated her to adhere to their academic writing structure, to remain within the word count and even requested that she try 'hedging' in her writing. Her limited competence in the English language contributed to her difficulties and Maria also acknowledged her struggles could be rooted in her ontological view of the world as black and white as she was a science student. This meant she found it hard to argue from a more nuanced position because the MSc course was iterative and fluid in nature and not static.

Shaima was a student taking MA at the university before pursuing her MSc. Her initial challenge was based on her difficulties during her MA but as MSc started, she noticed that her challenges were no longer related to minute detail such as grammar, but more towards the presentation of criticality, clarity and depth of her topic. Perhaps, in the case of Shaima (and Maria) linguistic-related problems had ceased to exist as she had employed university approved proof-readers for all four assignments to help mitigate her grammatical concerns as well as language structure.

In summary, certain challenges, such as in Lulu and Elio, seemed to develop with time. Lulu and Elio seemed to clearly understand that clarity and criticality goes hand in hand. In the case of Yaseen, her writing challenges remained the same, as she had yet to overcome her own pessimistic nature. For Maria and Shaima, they managed to remove linguistic hurdles by employing proof readers so they could concentrate more on other writing difficulties.

5.2 The Lesson on Criticality

Criticality has always been perceived as the essence of academic writing with this MSc cohort as it was mentioned by the participants in almost each interview. The participants were introduced to the notion of criticality since the beginning of their MSc sojourn. For Yaseen, Elio and Maria, it was their first time to encounter with such concept, although all the participants indicated in their interviews that most of their MSc cohort (majority NNES) struggled with the idea. While it seemed feasible enough when tutors talk about it, it was a much more arduous task to execute and demonstrate it in writing for the participants.

The table above presents a summary of the participants' perception and understanding of the term 'criticality' and what it implied in order to demonstrate it. From the table, it can be observed their subjective take on how they perceive criticality in academic writing. The one thing they concur was its importance of being manifested in their academic writing. Based on their marks, Lulu and Elio made more progress over the year than other participants and they linked criticality to the semantics of their writing instead of the syntactical aspects. This indicates that criticality was not an easy concept for students to grasp and likely require practice in order for it to be developed hence understood.

Early on the MSc programme Lulu stated that criticality is about "*how you link ideas*" and writing content that matters to the readers. Lulu has always had a certain air of confidence when talking about criticality, believing that she was "*trained enough*" when she was doing her MA in the United States and seemed more phlegmatic when discussing the topic compared to other participants:

Lulu: It's about...I think it's there throughout the paper. It is what you choose to include and exclude in the paper. It's not about listing things, it's about figuring out the areas where you can oppose ideas with each other...you list things and you critic them at the same time...if you simply understood what criticality is about...evaluating something and what and how you can evaluate something and then you realize that criticality is there.

Lulu added a new element towards the end of study that criticality could also be in form of sources. Lulu said that criticality should not only be present in the form of writing itself but also in term of the sources or references to be cited in the paper. She believed that the use of different sources would show "*connectedness*" and referred back to her NEE assignments where she cited six different authors for a small section and said this was demonstrating criticality "*by showing that you actually read something.*"

Sharing Lulu's focus on criticality to be perceived in terms of semantics was Elio. Elio described himself as a "*descriptive*" writer and was struggling to grasp the concept of criticality. His conception of criticality did not "*critically developed*" until halfway into the programme and credited his tutor for helping him realize that criticality means to stop writing superficially and he started paying attention to detail, "*questioning everything that is questionable*" and not take everything at face value. This showed that Elio was enforcing the importance of the meaning of criticality as not only a matter of what was written but how the text was constructed in order to make criticality become more visible. He also asserted the importance of inserting one's voice in your writing to show your firm stance on the matter in question.

Yaseen had an interesting take on criticality. Yaseen conveyed her uncertainty of the meaning of the word multiple times throughout the study and said for her, criticality was simply criticizing something but did not see it as an act of judgment or connections of ideas. She also expressed her trouble of understanding the logic of having to “criticize” published articles by someone like her who had not even reached such academic level:

Yaseen: What do you mean criticality? Should I criticize what they want..someone else’s writing? That’s something that I cannot really do because they have got this you know, they got the degrees and research published and I come in and say something? It doesn’t make sense to me and then what kind of knowledge do I have to criticize someone else’s work? I have to reach this level so I can you know, say I think you didn’t do it right, it’s better this way, you know? I don’t know. I don’t even know what criticality is.

Yaseen also presumed that the reason why she and her cohort struggled with the idea of criticality was because majority of them (NNES) came from from an academic background where they “tend to be descriptive” and was not exposed to critical writing as much as the local students. Towards the end of the study, she merely commented “presence of voice” an to show a firm position as what criticality entailed. Yaseen’s obvious frustration with the concept and difficulties in defining criticality should be weighed against the fact that she consistently achieved marks in the highs of 60s which would indicate a degree of criticality in her writing, although she still did not know how or where in her writing this has been achieved.

Shaima seemed to concur with Yaseen’s view, citing her cultural roots where she was conditioned to “obey and be silent” could be why she struggled with the idea of criticality. She realized her lack thinking critically and said that although tutors kept on talking about it, they failed to show her how to execute it. Shaima commented that she only understood it fully at end of her MSc tenure when her NEE tutor briefly explained to her about it. Initially, she would play with the linguistic aspect to show criticality but after meeting her NEE tutor she now understood that it was more than linguistics but rather justification of ideas and not just merely reporting them. However, she said this would still not be possible without English language competency because failing to understand the linguistic aspects could result failing to write critically, or in other words, without a good command of English “it would be hard to transfer critical thinking from my head onto paper”.

Shaima’s understanding of criticality certainly developed over the year but consistently pertains more to syntactical nature of writing. This notion is relatable to Maria’s perception of criticality in academic writing. As Maria came into MSc with limited English language proficiency, it was no surprise that Maria grappled with the idea of criticality.

5.3 Perception as a Successful Academic Writer

As mentioned earlier, all the participants had no formal academic writing background nor training. They were only exposed to such genre during their first Masters degree. During the initial interview, the participants gave superficial answers to what they perceive as successful academic writers. Apart from being able to write in a “sophisticated”, “organized” manner that uses reputable citations, their remarks were limited to language registers such as formality and vocabulary, writing organization, sentence structure as well as grammatical attributes such as punctuation. Perhaps, this was indeed due to their limited exposure to academic writing.

However, towards the end of the study, their conceptualization on successful writers shifted, became more complex and was better articulated. Their answers were multifaceted, drawing in many factors they believe were relevant in formulation their perception of a successful academic writer. Lulu, for example, instead of initially talking about what a successful academic writer entailed, started to focus on how a successful writer should be and should have. She believed that a successful writer, particularly for an NNES like her, are required to be skilled readers. She also acknowledged the importance of tutor’s feedback in order to understand the academic writing conventions and proofreaders, to help them with the linguistic aspects. To achieve the status of a successful writer, Lulu added writing practice to be of the utmost significance.

Shaima on the other hand retained her notion on the importance of grammatical clarity and also added the significance of assignment task comprehension. Similar to Lulu, Shaima realized that multiple revisions were required prior to each submission, she highlighted the importance of tutor’s and proofreader’s feedback. She also believed that a successful writer needs to be courageous, having the audacity to stand their ground and were willing to re-write. Like Lulu, she also believed that writing practice would help an amateur academic writer to become a successful academic writer although she believed it would be tricky as academic writing conventions would depend on academic writing level, content and genre.

Elio received high merits and distinctions in his assignments yet hardly saw himself as a successful academic writer. Rather, Elio perceived acquiring writing models of the same genre to be an asset for a successful writer. He believed

that by 'hearing' the writer's voice, one can mimic or mirror the model's writing. With persistence and practice, he believed it would help develop and academic writer into a successful one where then these writers would cultivate their own writing style due to the growing confidence.

Yaseen felt my open-ended question on what constitutes a successful academic writer to be a difficult question and requested that it be asked last. When she finally answered, she swayed from her initial idea of writing sophistication to biological and sociological factors. She believed that having innate abilities and attitudes such as resilience and being self-aware to be the key of becoming a successful writer. For those without such innate attributes, she believed that writing practice and acquiring the correct techniques could also help. However, she did not believe in the idea of a 'successful' writer because for her, no writing piece is perfect and there is always room for improvement.

Maria was the least communicatively competent of them all. Throughout the study, Maria mentioned that her English language competence was not only her communicative, but also academic barrier that hinder her from becoming a successful academic writer nor acquire friends. Her language ability, according to Maria also impede her ability to think critically as part of acquiring the English language also relate to one's ability to comprehend nature of an assignment content and ability to "manipulate" academic vocabulary, using them in the right context and this require practice and experience.

In summary, each participants gave an array of responses when asked what elements does a successful writers possess. Their answers varied from language competencies and importance of feedback to innate ability. However, perhaps the most common personal trait that most of the participants shared was the importance of writing practice in order to develop one's writing skills.

5.4 Cultural Differences (NNES)

Perhaps this study would be deemed incomplete without demonstrating how the differences of academic (or non-academic) culture could influence a learner's academic writing. *Very often throughout the study, the participants would use phrases such as "In my country..." or "In my culture..."* which signifies the importance of culture in building their perception and meaning towards academic writing as well as trying to find a positive common ground between their previous experiences and their experience studying in the UK. Elio for example, saw the vast physical and human academic infrastructure in the UK university helped him to become a better learner. He was able to mingle with like-minded people that could help develop him into a better academic because being studious was regarded as a feminine trait back in his country. This somehow impede his learning autonomy due to his cultural expectations of how men should behave.

Shaima also acknowledged her cultural background to affect how she perceived academic writing and criticality. She disclosed that her culture and the ability of being critical was related to power relations where people of status and power would consider "*criticality is considered to be a criticism (sic)*". Throughout her education in her home country, students were only to absorb information and never question the authoritative figure. Her experiences in the USA and the UK slowly helped her gain more confidence to be critical in many personal aspects such as thinking, but was not necessarily able to demonstrate this in her academic writing yet. She still struggled adapting to the UK university's learning environment and felt resistance to question her tutors face to face. Lulu and Yaseen shared similar upbringings although they were both from a different (but still Middle Eastern) country where to obey is synonymous with a sign of respect and to question or criticize meant to disobey.

The data above showed the importance of culture in shaping the participants' perception of the academic writing and learning culture at the UK university. International students like them cannot simply embrace and become experts in academic writing nor understand the notion of criticality overnight without loosening their cultural grasp which is also perceived as part of their national or cultural identity. Hence, this could also be considered as an innate struggle that cannot be explicitly seen by anyone who has not been through a similar journey.

6. Discussion

To answer how participants conceptualize academic writing, it can be surmised from the data that there is a complex answer involved. There is no clear-cut answer as participants tend to blend their answers in form of writing challenges, identified criticality as an important element in academic writing and offered their idea on successful academic writers, unable to separate the action from the doer. One thing that is clear from their data however, was the development of complexity in their perception of each element. From the above section, the participants initially had responses riddled with answers referring to grammatical attributes. Perhaps, this is not a surprise as L2 writers define themselves through language (Almenia & Alharbi, 2020). However, as they immerse themselves into the program overtime, most of their conceptualization developed into a more multifaceted answers attributing to writing styles as

well as importance of content. Additionally, all the participants also acknowledged the significance of criticality as part of an academic writer's identity, although not all of them are fully acquainted with the idea yet.

Another interesting observation was the participants' opinion on successful academic writers. Their initial perception prior to joining the MSc programme was a drastic change as they fulfill their academic identity in the university, seeing academic writing as an extension of their professional identity (French, 2019). The participants alluded that one should grasp the understanding and be able to establish criticality in one's writing which the participants believed would help with their writing challenges and is part of the quality for a successful academic writer. The participants also saw a successful writer as not only merely someone with impeccable grammar knowledge but problematized this notion with many subjective skills. Apart from Maria, their conceptualization of academic writing showed some similarity to French's (2014) perception of academic writing where the difference of cultural and possibly academic context help influences the participants' perception of academic writing to become more complex as they negotiate meaning subject to past experience and present influences (Street, 1984). Perhaps, this was what Kellogg (2008) meant regarding cognitive development of writing from knowledge-teller to knowledge transformer and finally to knowledge crafter. As this paper did not aim to measure their writing cognitive development, it is very hard to gauge this because some participants such as Lulu and Elio seemed to grasp academic writing and the university's academic writing conventions quicker than the rest.

English language competence was also discussed to a certain degree by all participants but mostly, it was emphasized by Maria who spoke little English and only started learning it a year or two prior to joining the MSc programme. Maria's L2 writing challenges was not only linguistic but seemed psychological as well (Tang, 2012) because she believed that she could not write without the presence of a proof reader. As Maria's language ability was still developing, it is understood that it is "unrealistic" to expect critical thinking to be exhibited in her writing yet (Loo, 2020). Maria struggled throughout her MSc sojourn, either acquiring failing grades or the bare minimum demonstrating that language proficiency to be a factor in academic success as it influences academic writing skills (Neumann, Padden & McDonough (2019). Furthermore, Maria also failed to utilize English language as a way to express herself or as a tool for negotiation (Catabay, 2019) resulting her not being able to secure any form of relationship with her peers.

Overall, data not only shows that perception of academic writing was an amalgamation of different point of views (linguistic, process and sociocultural) but it was also showing an interesting cognitive development in their conceptualization of academic writing. Much of the participants' perception were derived from their previous experiences but developed further as they immersed themselves into the MSc programme and university's academic culture. This indicates as Wang (2018) had discussed that more exposure on the academic culture experienced in the UK, the participants' previous cultural and educational background started to become less instrumental in their perception. Although a students' culture and academic background help with one's adjustment into the UK system, these influences become less central as new learning approaches and strategies were exposed to the students (Wang, 2018). Hence, this shows the presence of SCT where they adapt and change their point of view as they engage and adjust themselves into the university's academic writing conventions, verifying writing as a context-related activity. Of course, this was not experienced by all the participants, particularly Maria, who was reluctant to let go of her linguistic view of academic writing.

7. Conclusions

This study exhibit that perception of academic writing is socially constructed and dependent on the context. Each participant in this study encountered a unique academic journey and academic writing development and were all influenced by sociocultural aspects that they experienced prior to and during their MSc sojourn. It showed their conceptualization of academic writing that started with a more abstract description to become more concrete as they progress through their studies.

The participants in this study came from countries that pushes grammar knowledge as equivalent to academic writing ability. Due to this, it is no surprise when most of the participants struggled in the earlier stages of their MSc programme. Perhaps, it would then be wise for international students, prior to coming to anglophone countries to study to be exposed to academic literacy. The focus should be balanced between grammar knowledge and practice for criticality that should really start at undergraduate level as academic writing takes time to develop. On the other hand, perhaps the host country should also look into giving adequate support towards international students as international students number studying in the UK is increasing every year yet expectations still tend to be to "study the UK way" (Peters, 2005, p.5). unless ample support is given, academic writing problem will continue to exist.

References

- Ahmed, A., & Myhill, D. (2016). The impact of the socio-cultural context on L2 English writing of Egyptian university students. *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction*, 100(11) 117-129. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.LCSI.2016.07.004>
- Almenia, M. M., & Alharbi, M. A. (2020) Voice in L2 Academic Writing: Critical Insights from previous Literature Review. *The Asian ESP Journal*, 16(6.2), 16-182
- Batalla, A. V., & Vera, P. V. (2019). Difficulties in English writing skills of sophomore college students. *Asian EFL Journal*, 21(2.5), 232
- Biber, D., & Gray, B. (2010). Challenging stereotypes about academic writing: Complexity, elaboration, explicitness. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 9(1), 2-20. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2010.01.001>
- Biber, D., & Gray, B. (2011). Grammatical changes in the noun phrase: the influence of written language use. *English Language and Linguistics*, 15(2), 223-250. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1360674311000025>
- Biber, D., & Gray, B. (2016). *Grammatical complexity in academic English: Linguistic changes in writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511920776>
- Biber, D., Gray, B., & Poonpon, K. (2011) Should we use the characteristics of conversation to measure grammatical complexity in L2 writing development? *TESOL Quarterly*, 45(1), 5-35. <https://doi.org/10.5054/tq.2011.244483>
- Bista, K. (2019). Exploring the field: Understanding the international student experience. In K. Bista (Ed.), *Global perspective on international student experiences in higher education* (pp.1-16). New York, NY: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315113456>
- Brown, G., & Yule, G (1983). *Discourse Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Catabay, M. Q. (2019) Error Analysis of second Language Writing of Second Language Learners. *Asian EFL Journal*, 2(2.4), 64-79
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, D. J. (2006). Narrative Inquiry. In Cooper, A. & Bikowski, D. (2007). Writing at the graduate level: What tasks do professors actually require? *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 6(3), 206-221.
- Evans, C. (2013) Making sense of assessment feedback in Higher Education. *Review of Educational Research*, 83(1), 70-120. <https://doi.org/10.3102%2F0034654312474350>
- Flower, L., & Hayes, J. R. (1980). The cognition of discovery: Defining a rhetorical problem. *College Composition and Communication*, 31(1), 21-32.
- French, A. (2014). *Through a glass darkly: A post-qualitative case study into lecturers' perception of academic writing practices in higher education*. [Unpublished Doctoral Thesis]. Birmingham City University.
- French, A. (2019). Academic writing as identity-work in higher education: forming a 'professional writing in higher education habitus'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(8), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2019.1572735>
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105-117). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hammersley, M. (2013). *What's wrong with Ethnography?* London: Routledge.
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: principles in practice* (3rd Ed.). USA: Routledge
- Heng, T. T. (2018). Different is not deficient: Contradicting stereotypes of Chinese international students in US higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 43(1), 22-36. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2016.1152466>
- Hyland, K. (2002) Authority and invisibility: Authorial identity in academic writing. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 34(8), 1091-112.
- Ivanic, R., & Lea, M. (2006). New contexts, new challenges: the teaching of writing in UK Higher Education. In: L. Ganobscik-Williams (Ed.), *Teaching academic writing in UK higher education: theories, practices and models. Universities into the 21st century*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kellogg, R.T. (2008). Training Writing skills: A cognitive developmental perspective. *Journal of Writing Research*, 1(1), 1-26
- Khozaei, R. Z., & Tan, K. E. (2019). A qualitative investigation of strategies and experiences of non-native students

- writing master's theses. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 11(2), 310-324.
- Kim, E. Y. J., & LaBianca, A. S. (2018). Ethics in Academic writing help for international students in higher education: Perception of faculty and students. *Journal of Academic Ethics*, 16(1), 39-59. Retrieved from <https://philpapers.org/go.pl?id=KIMEIA-4&proxyId=&u=https%3A%2F%2Fdx.doi.org%2F10.1007%2Fs10805-017-9299-5>
- Loo, D. B. (2020). Integrating critical thinking in online language tasks: Considerations for an academic writing class. *International Journal of TESOL Studies*, 2(2), 52-61. <https://doi.org/10.46451/ijts.2020.09.05>
- Martirosyan, N. M., Hwang, E., & Wanjohi, R. (2015). Impact of English proficiency on academic performance of international students. *Journal of International Students*, 5(1), 60-71. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v5i1.443>
- Mumin, M. A. (2020). *A narrative study of international postgraduate students' conceptualization of academic writing through assessment feedback in a UK university* [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. University of Exeter.
- Neumann, H., Padden, N., & McDonough, K. (2019). Beyond English language proficiency scores: understanding the academic performance of international undergraduate students during the first year of study. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 38(2), 324-338. Retrieved from <https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1080/07294360.2018.1522621>
- Peters, H. (2005). Higher education as a global project: how international students and the lecturers who teach them perceive themselves in one UK university. In *35th annual SCRUTEA Conference*. University of Sussex, England.
- Raofi, S., Binandeh, M., & Rahmani, S. (2017). An Investigation into Writing Strategies and Writing Proficiency of University Students. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 8(1), 191-198. <http://dx.doi.org/10.17507/jltr.0801.24>
- Scardamalia, M., & Bereiter, C. (1987). Knowledge telling and knowledge transforming in written composition. *Advances in Applied Psycholinguistics*, 2, 142-175
- Staples, S., Egbert, J., Biber, D., & Gray, B. (2016). Academic Writing Development at the university level: Phrasal and clausal complexity across level of study, discipline, and genre. *Written Communication*, 33(2), 149-183. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F0741088316631527>
- Street, B. (1984). *Literacy in theory and Practice*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Taguchi, N., Crawford, W., & Wetzel, D. Z. (2013). What linguistic features are indicative of writing quality? A case of argumentative essays in a college composition program. *TESOL Quarterly*, 47(2), 420-430.
- Tang, R. (2012). *Academic writing in a second or foreign language: issues and challenges facing ESL/EFL academic writers in higher education contexts*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Turner, J. (2018). *On writtenness: the cultural politics of academic writing*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Wang, I. K. H. (2018). Long-term Chinese students' transitional experiences in UK Higher Education: A particular Focus on their academic adjustment. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 30(1), 12-25.
- West, A. (2012) Formative evaluation of the transition to postgraduate study for counselling and psychology training: Students' perception of training and academic writing. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 12(2), 128-135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733145.2011.604425>

Copyrights

Copyright for this article is retained by the author(s), with first publication rights granted to the journal.

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).