

EXPLORING THE INTERPLAY OF MODE OF DISCOURSE AND PROFICIENCY LEVEL IN ESL WRITING PERFORMANCE: IMPLICATIONS FOR TESTING

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ABSTRACT

Recent theory in discourse and practice in rhetoric has suggested that writers require different skills and strategies when writing for different purposes, and in using different genres and modes (Kinneavy, 1972; Carrell & Connor, 1991) in writing. The importance of taking into account these various aspectual skills and forms of writing is recognised in teaching (e.g. Scarcella & Oxford, 1992), and in the assessment of writing (e.g. Odell & Cooper, 1980). For instance, Odell and Cooper argue that “we cannot make claims about writing ability until we have examined students’ performance on a variety of writing tasks” (ibid: 40). With this in view, in this study the researchers seek to investigate the modes of narration and argumentation in order to find out whether i) ESL learners perform better in writing narrative than argumentative essays, ii) Level of ESL proficiency has an effect on writing ability according to the modes of discourse used, iii) ESL argumentative writing is syntactically more complex than the narrative as measured by T-units, and iv) ESL writers produce longer essays in the narrative compared to the argumentative mode. The sample for the study was drawn from a population of 384 lower sixth secondary students in 6 secondary schools. The instruments used to obtain data were essays written in the two modes. The tasks were scored holistically using an adapted version of the revised Test of Written English (TWE) six-point scale (1990). They were also analysed for T-units and overall length. A two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) (mode of discourse x proficiency level) was used to analyse the data with the three dependent variables —holistic score, mean T-unit length, and overall length. Wilks’ Lambda was used to obtain the multivariate F values for examining the influences of each independent variable and the relevant interactions. This was followed by three univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) in order to identify which of the three dependent variables seemed to account for significant multivariate F values (Spector, 1977). Results were tested for significance at .05 level.

Introduction: The Testing of ESL Writing

ESL students’ general language performance in large-scale examinations is often used as a basis for making important decisions with regard to acceptance

into universities and/or academic programmes, and their placement into various courses. For instance, in the Malaysian context, the grades in the English Paper in the secondary school leaving certificate, Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) and the MUET (Malaysian University Entrance Test) are used as partial entry requirement into programmes of institutions of higher learning. In both the examinations, a writing component is found. In fact, both the examinations give significance to writing as an important component to reflect language ability.

The design that characterises the writing components in the two tests is illustrative of differing subscriptions to test operationalisation. One obvious difference is the element of choice. Choices may be viewed as in-built mechanisms to encourage examinees to perform optimally which in itself contributes to the establishment of test validity. In the SPM English paper, the essay writing task permits choices where the examinee is free to choose from a range of given topics to display his/her writing ability. The topics may focus on description, narration or argumentation. In the case of the MUET, there is just one essay task and the topic emphasises expository writing with no attention given to narratives such as story telling or pure description of places. The rigidity of a singular task, however, enhances test reliability, usually achieved with a conscious sacrifice of some measure of validity. These decisions are, however, debatable as there are pros and cons that accompany every decision made about test design and test implementation. Against this backdrop of controversy, research must be carried out to add to the pool of resources to help in the making of informed decisions especially when they are crucial to the lives of test takers.

Recent theory in discourse and practice in rhetoric has suggested that writers require different skills and strategies when writing for different purposes, and in using different genres and modes (Kinneavy, 1972; Carrell & Connor, 1991) in writing. The importance of taking into account these various aspectual skills and forms of writing is recognised in teaching (e.g. Scarcella & Oxford, 1992), and in the assessment of writing (e.g. Odell & Cooper, 1980). For instance, Odell and Cooper argue that “we cannot make claims about writing ability until we have examined students’ performance on a variety of writing tasks” (1980: 40).

In commenting on test validity, Lauer and Asher emphasise that:

Some composition theorists maintain that writing ability entails many arts, powers, and skills -inventional arts, audience-adaptive skills, flexibility in writing different types of discourse, and revising skills. In their judgement, therefore, measures of writing would be valid only if they were capable of taking these powers and skills into consideration (1988: 141).

Task Variables in a Writing Test

Central to the development of both testing and research instruments for direct assessment of writing performance is the issue of creating tasks which will be appropriate to the needs of the writers being assessed. In psychometric terms, the task variables included in any writing test are elements that need to be manipulated and controlled in order for test takers to have an opportunity to demonstrate their range of ability optimally. These variables vary from what may look less crucial, such as deciding on the use of pen and paper, typewriter or word processor; time allocation for the tasks, and more importantly, on the wording of topic or the prompt itself (Hamp-Lyons, 1990; Ruth & Murphy, 1988). The issue of what writing tasks are to be included in a test is crucial, since a task will be regarded as useless if it does not provide the basis for making generalisations regarding an individual's writing ability. As Read argues, "...if task type is a significant variable, candidates may be advantaged or disadvantaged..." (1991: 85).

The task variables that have been found empirically to influence L1 writer's performance are topic, purpose, audience, culture-related specifications, linguistic difficulty, level of language in contact, rhetorical specification and mode of discourse. Hamp-Lyons (1990:75) further says, "Audience, purpose and mode of discourse are all response expectations - that is, they ask something of the writer, and are thus interactive between writer and task".

Mode of Discourse

As mode of discourse is a central concern in this study and seen as a fundamental notion in the understanding of writing, it would be useful to explain the concept further.

The term *mode of discourse*, has been used since more than two decades ago. Its use became dominant over *aim of discourse* in the nineteenth century. One of the most commonly cited references to *mode of discourse* is Bain's classification (1867). His classification has been used in writing curricula and testing to this day (Ruth & Murphy, 1988; Harris, 1993). Bain classifies writing into four major modes of discourse; narration, description, argumentation/persuasion and exposition. Each of these different modes has its peculiar organisational pattern, and to a certain extent, defining stylistic characteristics. Categorising writing in this manner is primarily governed by writer's intentions or purpose which may relate to making a point or a report, to relating events and so forth. This classification has influenced language teachers throughout the world and there are constant attempts to provide model essays, which exemplify the structure of each different mode of discourse to aid learning.

For many years, essays, compositions and reports have been the traditional forms of writing taught in schools, and pupils' intellectual abilities have also been tested through these means. Bain's classification has, nonetheless, been criticised as giving "high esteem to types of writing that do not, in fact have any place in society at large" (Harris, 1993: 16).

With respect to assessment of writing, the traditional classification has been criticised as not providing an accurate coverage of different types of writing. Harris voices his concern regarding this issue:

At a time when several countries are developing national curricula or equivalent that are designed to assess the abilities of all pupils against set of criteria (technically called criterion-referenced assessment), it is particularly important that the demands of different types of writing should be understood and that the specific types be described as accurately as possible (1993: 17).

Another influential system for classifying modes of discourse is that proposed by Kinneavy (1972) in his well-known theory of discourse. According to him, *mode* emphasises 'what' is talked about rather than 'why' something is talked about. He explains that providing an answer to the question of 'what' something is about enables the formulation of categories such as "a narrative, a series of classifications, a criticism or evaluation, and a description" (ibid: 36). While maintaining the categories of description and narration, Kinneavy substituted Bain's two other categories, *argument* and *exposition*, with *evaluation* and *classification* respectively.

The term *mode of discourse* in the context of this research refers to a text-type classified according to Bain's traditional rhetoric, and the modes chosen for investigation are narration and the argumentation. These two modes of discourse are further defined as follows:

1. A narrative refers to what is sometimes known as *personal narrative* 'with an expressive and reflective cast not unlike the "familiar" essay' which has the stereotype feature of story-telling or recounting an event (Price & Takala 1988: 136). In this sense, Schmidt (1981) sees it as 'a sub-category of description, and used mainly for the communicative purpose of *experienced-focused transmission of information*'. Some features that highlight this type of narrative are the description of:
 - (a) perceptions,
 - (b) process-activities,
 - (c) completed/past events,
 - (d) real or fictional sources,

- (e) individual and concrete phenomena, and
- (f) experiential approaches.

The description is said to have an emotional impact on readers (Schmidt, 1981: 136).

2. Argumentative writing is considered a part of persuasion. Following the International Educational Assessment (IEA) study, the argumentative mode of discourse is defined as that which intends to present and argue for a particular perspective with the intention of persuading somebody to change his/her mind, point of view or feelings. (Gorman et al., 1988; Carrell & Connor, 1991).

The narrative has been compared to the argumentative mode in studies of L1 writers and the findings suggest that narrative writing is easier than argumentative writing (Crowhurst, 1987; Reed et al., 1985; Engelhard, Jr. et al., 1992). Researchers claim that students tend to produce writing of better quality on narration when compared to argumentation. What then are the characteristics of narrative writing that are seen to be easier for writers to elicit?

Narrative writing can be defined as a kind of writing which creates a word picture. Narration tells about events as they occur (over time). Similarly, Brooks and Warren (1952: 237) describe narration as “a kind of discourse concerned with action, with life in motion”, and it provides answers to questions such as “What happened?”, “When did it happen?”, and so forth. Examples of narration are fiction, short stories, anecdotes, novels or ‘narration’ itself.

Narration can take different forms, for example, ‘narration that merely reports’ and ‘narration that makes a point’ (Lannon, 1986:181). The former is characterised as being strictly referential in its goal; its purpose is to simply give an account of what happened. In other words, narration of this type seeks to provide bare facts, for example, newspaper reports or courtroom testimonies. In this type of narration, the writer does not imbue his/her feelings or impressions into the writing, but simply follows a strictly chronological order to keep the readers’ attention on the unfolding events.

Contrary to this is the ‘narration that makes a point’ which emphasises both ‘referential’ and ‘expressive’ goals. In this type of narration, the writers’ task is to filter the events through his own feelings and make some definite points, whether at the beginning or at the end of the story.

The above description of narration seems to illustrate that narrative writing is rather straightforward and not difficult in terms of idea development. No complex discussions are required of the writer as the goal of a narrative is to merely provide

an account of an event or be more expressive about the event that needs to be conveyed.

To enhance one's skills in narration, cohesion devices such as the use of pronominals, demonstratives and temporal conjunctives (e.g. then, soon, later, next day) are typically resorted to. Perera (1984) argues that such time markers are mastered early. Children are said to learn to use narrative forms successfully and fairly early, and narrative is learned in the course of daily communication. This points to the relative ease of writing narratives.

In contrast to narration, argumentative writing is seen as a difficult task for both L1 and L2 learners. Research that examined argumentative writing has identified several characteristic problems. One of the main problems, for instance, is inadequate content. Another common feature of argumentative writing is that it is generally found to be shorter than the narrative and its shorter length is attributed to the ideas being less developed (Freedman & Pringle, 1981; Crowhurst, 1980; 1987). Several researchers have also noted that learners often fail to provide adequate support for their points of view, and the content tends not to be original (Gorman et al., 1988). Other problems identified are poor organisation due to lack of knowledge of argumentative structure (White, 1989) and failure to use connectors typical of argument (Crowhurst, 1987; Gorman et al., 1988).

Aside from the above problems, research has also uncovered other reasons why students are weak in argumentative writing. Some researchers have suggested that competence in writing arguments is slow to develop (Crowhurst, 1983; 1987), others have pointed out that it is more cognitively demanding than some other modes of writing, such as narratives. Moreover, students are also said to lack a schema for writing persuasion (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1982).

To add to its complexity, argument is seen as a mode of discourse that aims to make the reader or listener think or act as the arguer desires (Brooks & Warren, 1952). In other words, the goal of the writer when writing an argument is to persuade readers to agree with what he/she has written. In short, the primary goals of argumentative writing are:

1. to make readers accept one's position on an issue,
2. to motivate readers toward a definite action,
3. to change the reader's behaviour.

(adapted from Lannon, 1986: 252).

It would seem that a writer of an argumentative text has a rather difficult task to accomplish. Such is the task of a writer of an argument that, in producing an effective argument, the writer is required to bring together multiple strategies and

resources, and to incorporate features specific to argumentative writing. These vary from convincingly supporting the claim and appealing to the readers' reason/emotions, to maintaining a clear and unmistakable line of thought (Lannon, 1986). In addition, the writer needs to reason inductively or deductively to give logic to his/her argument as he seeks to convince and appeal to the reader. "The absence of any appeal or its inept use ... (in fact) can destroy a text's persuasiveness" (Connor & Lauer, 1988: 155).

In the L2 writing context, Carrell and Connor (1991) investigated the reading-writing relationship between texts written for different modes or purposes, namely, persuasive and descriptive modes and reading skills. This oft-cited study also questioned whether reading and writing performance vary across students' second language proficiency level.

The subjects involved in the study were twenty-three undergraduates and ten graduate students at Purdue University with Chinese, Spanish, Hindi/Urdu, Malay or Indonesian, Korean, German, Serbo-Croatian, Greek, Italian, Hebrew, Vietnamese, and Japanese as their native languages.

Each subject in the study was required to write on topics that were tasked according to the different modes under investigation. The study revealed that the scores obtained did not show any significant relationship between writing and reading performance in the two modes of discourse, although some evidence in support of the generally held view that descriptive texts are easier than persuasive texts was found for reading. Nonetheless, Carrell and Connor reported that their qualitative measure showed differences between modes of discourse in writing when considered on its own, in that, descriptive essays produced higher qualitative scores than persuasive essays, suggesting that the former is 'easier' than the latter for the students.

No significant interaction between mode of discourse and proficiency level in writing was found in the investigation. However, complex interactions of mode and language proficiency were found in reading. Subjects with higher language proficiency were reported to perform significantly better on persuasive texts than those with lower language proficiency; but those with higher language proficiency did not perform significantly better on descriptive texts compared to those with a lower proficiency level. The researchers nevertheless, cautioned on the generalisability of their results as the number of subjects who participated in the study was relatively small. Clearly, more studies that examine the effects of mode of discourse on L2 writing performance are warranted.

The Study

Research hypotheses were formulated to drive this investigation. They are:

1. ESL learners will perform better in writing narrative than the argumentative essays
2. Level of ESL proficiency will have an effect on writing ability according to the modes of discourse used.
3. ESL argumentative writing is syntactically more complex than the narrative as measured by T-units.
4. ESL writers will produce longer essays on the narrative compared to the argumentative essay

Several assumptions constrained the study. The most important was that subjects participating in the study were assumed to have given their best effort in the completion of the allocated writing tasks. Therefore, the subjects' completed written texts are assumed to accurately reflect their writing ability. Subjects' placement into the *proficiency levels*, namely *advanced* and *intermediate* was also deemed to be accurate. The low level was not investigated as the learners were unable to produce much writing as revealed in a pilot study undertaken prior to the actual administration of the instrument.

Methodology

The sample was drawn from a population of 384 lower sixth secondary students in 6 secondary schools in the state of Selangor in Malaysia. The students' average age was 17.5 years old. The students' proficiency levels were determined by the students' results on the SPM English examination (a standardised examination for form five leavers). Those with distinctions were categorised as advanced while those with credits 3 and 4 were benchmarked as intermediate.

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

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

The adapted TWE holistic scoring guide comprises six levels or bands. Each band is accompanied by syntactic and rhetorical criteria which target at 'how well the task/question is addressed', organisation and development, appropriateness of details, language use, word choice, syntactic variety, and grammatical accuracy and

use of the conventions of English. The mean T-unit length, an index of syntactic maturity originally used by Hunt (1970), was selected as a measure of syntactic complexity. Hunt defined a T-unit as “a single main clause...plus whatever other subordinate clauses or non-clauses are attached to, or embedded within, that one main clause”.

Overall length of the essay refers to the total number of words found in a written text. Length was seen as a variable that could be affected by mode of discourse and level of proficiency.

Two raters were trained in the use of the holistic scoring scales and T-unit analysis prior to the actual investigation. Upon training, the inter-rater reliability coefficients were .93 and .94, for holistic scoring of the two types of writing tasks and T-unit analysis was found to have .92, and .98 indices for the two modes of discourse. These results gave confidence to the use of the methods involved.

Initially, a two-way multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) (mode of discourse x proficiency level) was used to analyse the data with the three dependent variables —holistic score, mean T-unit length, and overall length. Wilks' Lambda was used to obtain the multivariate F values for examining the influences of each independent variable and the relevant interactions

This was followed by three univariate analyses of variance (ANOVAs) in order to identify which of the three dependent variables seemed to account for significant multivariate F values (Spector, 1977). Results were tested for significance at the .05 level.

Findings and Discussion

Holistic Scores

Taking into account the factorial design employed in this study, an examination of any significant interactions between the independent variables (mode of discourse, proficiency level) is necessary before any strong claim on the significant main effects can be made. The main effects of the independent variables must, therefore, not be interpreted independently, but also in terms of interaction effects wherever applicable.

The results of the univariate analyses of variance revealed that both mode of discourse and proficiency level had significant effects on holistic score, with F value for mode of discourse, $F(1, 368) = 39.27, p < 0.0001$ and $F(1, 358) = 512.47, p < 0.0001$, for proficiency level. However, no significant interaction between mode of discourse and proficiency level was revealed by the analysis. Therefore the discussion of the results will focus mainly on the main effects.

Table 1: Means by mode of discourse as measured by holistic score

Mode of Discourse	Means (max. Score = 6)
Narrative	3.51
Argumentative	2.98

The overall means of holistic scores for the narrative and argumentative writing tasks are 3.51, and 2.98 respectively (Table 1). Overall, there seems to be a tendency for students, regardless of proficiency level to perform better on narrative writing tasks than argumentative. The findings confirmed data from other studies with L1 writers (Kegley, 1986; Engelhard Jr. et al., 1992), and with L2 writers (Carrell & Connor, 1990, 1991; Pollit & Hutchinson, 1987).

In support of the scores obtained, verbal comments provided by the raters regarding subjects' performance on the argumentative writing task indicated that the main problems in the writing responses vary from content inadequacy, failure to support their points of view and unelaborated reasons, lack of originality in writing, and poor organisation. Similar characteristic problems in writing argumentatively have been identified by researchers in studies with L1 writers (Crowhurst, 1980, 1986, 1987; Hidi & Hilyard, 1981; Freedman & Pringle, 1981; Gorman et al., 1988; White, 1989).

Further, within the context of the Malaysian school curriculum, it is not surprising that the narrative writing task elicited better writing quality than the argumentative (in terms of holistic scores). An examination of the school syllabus as specified in the Malaysian Secondary School English Curriculum (KBSM, 1990) for Forms one to five revealed that the dominant paradigm in the teaching of writing, especially during the first four years of secondary level appears to focus on narrative and descriptive modes of discourse. The argumentative mode is only included in the syllabus at the form five level. This leads to the contention that prior experience would have a bearing on performance. The ESL students do not have adequate training in argumentative writing given the curricular bias.

As shown by the means in Table 2, there seems to be a general tendency for subjects at the advanced level to perform better than subjects at the intermediate level. This finding is supported by the relatively high F-value (512.47) revealed by ANOVA for the main effect of proficiency level. Indeed, it would have been puzzling if the advanced subjects did not outperform those with a lower proficiency level. This finding seems to suggest that the writing samples of advanced ESL subjects are clearly distinguishable from those of the intermediate proficiency level. However, if more details are desired to account for the difference between the

writing samples of the subjects at the two proficiency levels, it may be necessary to analyse the writing samples using other criteria besides the holistic score.

Table 2: Means by proficiency level as measured by holistic score

Proficiency Level	Means
Advanced	4.21
Intermediate	2.29

The non-significant interaction between mode of discourse and proficiency level suggests that there is no variability in writing performance in the different modes of discourse across proficiency levels. This means that the mode of discourse, narrative and argumentative writing, as a variable, provide no advantage to performance and neither is performance according to mode influenced by the ESL learners' proficiency level. In other words, students' ability to write in either of the mode is not affected by their level of proficiency.

4T-unit Analysis

The ANOVA analysis of T-units revealed a highly significant main effect on mode of discourse, $F(1, 368) = 42.87$, $p < 0.0001$ but non-significant main effect on proficiency level.

Table 3: Means by the different modes of discourse as measured by t-unit analysis

Mode of Discourse	Means
Narrative	14.00
Argumentative	12.66

As seen in Table 3, all subjects tended to produce longer mean T-units on the argumentative writing when compared to the narrative. The findings suggest that there was a tendency for ESL students to produce more complex syntactic structures on the argumentative writing task, confirming results reported in previous studies with L1 writers where similar patterns were observed (Perron, 1979; Crowhurst & Piche, 1979; Kegley, 1986). This could support Crowhurst and Piche's contention that, "perhaps high syntactic complexity in argument is a function of the essential nature of argument" (1979: 107). The results appear to confirm that argumentative writing places greater demands on writers to make use of their syntactic resources, a point highlighted in the findings of previous L1 studies.

This finding is noteworthy. It confirms findings in L1 which expressed that 1) differences in syntactic complexity may be associated with different modes of discourse, and 2) narrative is generally less syntactically complex than argument (Crowhurst, 1983).

The scores on syntactic complexity is, however, not statistically significant on levels of proficiency. This suggests that advanced ESL learners do not necessarily write more complex sentences than those at intermediate level. A correlation analysis using Pearson-Product Moment correlation procedure between mean T-unit length and holistic scores did not reveal any significant relationship between the two dependent variables, thus suggesting no positive relationship between them. In other words, writing that comprises more complex structures do not necessarily translate into better writing as measured by the holistic scoring.

Overall Length

The ANOVA analysis of the number of words according to mode and proficiency level revealed that there were significant main effects on both mode of discourse and proficiency level. Mode of discourse had a highly significant effect on overall length, $F(1, 368) = 47.18, p < 0.0001$ and proficiency level, $F(1, 368) = 129.72, p < 0.0001$. In addition, a highly significant two-way interaction between mode of discourse and proficiency level, $F(1, 368) = 19.95, p < 0.0001$ was also revealed by ANOVA. Since the F value for this interaction is small, it is thus meaningful to focus mainly on the two main effects which have much larger F-values.

Table 4: Means for modes of discourse as measured by overall length

Mode of Discourse	Means
Narrative	395.25
Argumentative	334.72

Table 5: Means for proficiency levels as measured by overall length

Proficiency Level	Means
Advanced	417.64
Intermediate	312.33

As shown in Table 4, ESL students tended to write more when given a narrative task compared to that of an argumentative one. There was also an overall tendency for students at the advanced proficiency level to produce more words than those who were at the intermediate level (Table 5).

To examine the relationship between the holistic scores and the overall length of the elicited writing tasks, a correlational statistical analysis was run using Pearson Product Moment Correlation. The analysis revealed a significant correlation ($r = .42, p=0.001$) between the two variables. This positive correlation seems to suggest that the longer the essay, the higher will be the scores attained by the subjects. Length is thus perhaps also an indication of general fluency. Given this assumption, this finding illustrates that ESL subjects demonstrated greater fluency when responding to narrative writing tasks. In contrast, ESL subjects' fluency tended to be affected when seen against the argumentative writing, a finding that contradicts Reid's study (1990) with ESL writers on topic type.

It may be posited here that since narrative writing tasks are easier, the subjects were thus able to write longer responses, which may in turn have led to better performance. On the other hand, since argumentative writing tasks are difficult, students then may have difficulties in responding to the task, and hence, are not able to produce longer written responses. Finally, the shorter written responses may not have been sufficient to result in a better piece of writing that entails the use of the many resources in producing an effective persuasion, for example, presenting a claim, supporting that claim with relevant and appropriate data, and so on (Ferris, 1994).

Implications for Testing of Writing

The findings provide some evidence for the need to reexamine issues of reliability and validity in test practice of manipulating variables in the design of assessment tasks to evaluate ESL writing performance.

Tedick (1988), investigating topic familiarity, provides some grounds for questioning the assumption that any single writing task can be regarded as an adequate measure of writing competence. A single writing task measures only one of the various types of functional skills. Different skills are claimed to be associated with different writing tasks (Ruth & Murphy, 1988), thus different writing tasks should not be utilised to compare students' performance and writing skills.

As discussed earlier, the findings of this study illustrate that ESL students' writing performance vary significantly with the different modes of discourse. This implies that there seems to be a need for test designers to include various modes of discourse in any ESL writing assessment in order to elicit several samples of writing from each student. These samples will more accurately represent the writer's underlying writing proficiency thus, enhancing validity, "...by giving a broader basis for making generalisations about a student's writing ability" (Read, 1991: 87).

It is also crucial that different modes are carefully selected for any yearly examinations, since students may be advantaged or disadvantaged if the different modes are alternated in public examinations from one year to another. Thus, students attempting a writing task in one year may perform significantly better or worse than those in another year, depending on which modes were included in the exam. Such practice points to the need for careful selection procedures of task type in order to ensure that writing tasks included are parallel in difficulty and thus reflect fair assessments of students' writing ability.

The ultimate objective of any writing assessment must surely be to provide a valid and reliable measure of a person's writing ability. Holistic scoring may not reveal a detailed profile of the various aspects of students' writing and may have globally reduced students' scores because of its approach. This also raises the issue of whether there is a need to use different evaluation procedures to make judgements on different types of writing. Whether a different evaluation procedure would lead a rater to make different judgements on the quality of students' writing and whether different scoring systems are needed for different modes of discourse remain to be answered.

The findings also show variability in modes in terms of overall length, i.e. ESL learners tend to write longer essays on narrative than argumentative tasks. Coupled with the evidence provided by the correlational analysis, i.e. there was a proportional increase between holistic scores and overall length, test designers may need to reconsider the *required minimum* number of words for argumentative writing tasks. A longer piece of writing for argumentative tasks may perhaps fulfil the requirement of adequate content and perhaps result in better writing quality. Thus, narrative writing may require fewer words for the piece of writing to be adequately explored while an argumentative piece may necessarily require more words before the same quality in writing can be attained.

As regards syntactic complexity, similar to the findings of studies in L1, the current study provides further evidence that greater syntactic maturity is typical of argumentative writing. This, as pointed out earlier however, does not translate to better writing quality. There was also no evidence to show that advanced students produced more complex syntactic structures than intermediate students. However, length appears to be a significant determinant of writing quality. Classroom tests could emphasise these two qualities to have positive backwash on instruction and learning. Another way to encourage better test performance in argumentative tasks is perhaps the inclusion of more specific task guidelines in the rubrics so as to assist students in understanding task requirement, which is more complex than in the narrative. .

Concluding Remarks

Bearing in mind the limitations of the study and the complex nature of writing, quantified data about the variables examined will not be able to provide us with all the answers to the question of variability in writing performance. Clearly, there is a need for more research to be conducted to explore variability in different types of writing tasks. For one, other studies could include more modes of discourse for comparison.

Quantitative data such as holistic scores, mean T-unit length and overall length found in this study revealed certain variability in ESL students' writing performance in the context of mode of discourse and proficiency level. However, these results did not reveal detailed qualitative linguistic differences for the writing elicited by the different modes of discourse and proficiency levels. A study employing in-depth analyses using other linguistic measures would provide insights into the nature of these differences, and is thus warranted. In addition, studies using think-aloud protocols might enhance our knowledge regarding the different strategies that students use in responding to the different types of writing tasks.

Writing remains a skill that is often seen as very important as it has been regarded to be a reliable indicator of language use. It has been often said that a person can be a fluent speaker but this does not mean he is a fluent writer. If there are doubts about a person's language ability, a writing test is often resorted to for confirmation of his language ability. However, the writing skill is always regarded as the most difficult language skill to learn. Given its status and complexity, it stands to reason that studies into this area will continue to shed light onto how best the construct can be understood, taught and tested to give a fair chance for language learners to exhibit their true ability and be reliably reported on.

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