

Exploring Tertiary Level ESL Students' Perspectives of Using Self-Assessment for Academic Writing: A Conceptual Paper

Venosha Ravana^{1*}, Roslizawati Taib², Juliazilah Junit³

¹²³Faculty of Social Science and Humanities,
Tunku Abdul Rahman University of Management and Technology, Jalan Genting Kelang, 53300 Setapak, MALAYSIA

*Corresponding Author Designation

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Abstract: Critical thinking in academic writing allows students to present evidence, arguments and conclusions clearly. It also promotes deeper, creative and reflective insights on various matters using the medium of writing. However, Malaysian tertiary level ESL learners have been found to struggle with writing critically for academic purposes. This conceptual paper presents a reflective learning tool, a weekly self-assessment, that has been theorized to help ESL learners to reflect on their academic writing practices and improve on their weaknesses when it comes to writing critically. The methodology proposed is an exploratory qualitative study using thematic analysis and document analysis on semi-structured interviews and students' written assignments respectively. It is hoped that this paper can provide directions for practitioners looking to incorporate critical thinking via reflective learning practices in ESL classrooms.

Keywords: Academic Writing, Critical Thinking, Self-Assessment, Reflective Learning, Tertiary Learners

1. Introduction

In the case of a 21st century education, critical thinking can be considered as the core of learning because it helps learners to harness reasoning and logical thinking to solve problems and be adaptable. This falls in line with the Malaysian Higher Education 4.0 aspiration to upgrade instructions at Malaysian universities to be more industry-driven focusing on communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Saiboon et al., 2021). Instead of being test-taking robots, learners are now encouraged to be creators, visionary thinkers and responsible citizens (Ministry of Education, 2013).

In the context of ESL learning, critical thinking is an essential skill for students to think clearly and rationally about issues, to reflect and come to a conclusion, either independently or collaboratively (Nisbet

& Shucksmith, 2017). This mental ability aids them to excel in production-based language skills such as speaking and writing. Apart from that, Yacob and Yunus (2019) claim that critical thinking is vital for tertiary learners to understand complex texts, differentiate between reliable and unreliable sources and form well-informed opinions based on careful analysis and evaluation. Interestingly, this skill also helps learners to approach grammar rules, vocabularies and nuances of ESL with a problem-solving mindset (Yu & Wan Mohammad, 2019), where learners can identify patterns and find creative solutions to overcome challenges in production-based tasks.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

This paper focuses on academic writing as a language proficiency skill for tertiary ESL learners. Academic writing is considered as a complex process which is closely linked to facts, investigations, ideas and also arguments (Neumann & McDonough, 2015). Students should be able to utilize various metacognitive strategies in order to express their ideas critically and creatively.

Generally, at the tertiary level, learners engage in essay writing, report writing, research paper and thesis or dissertation (Jackson et al., 2006). In terms of essay writing, learners are more commonly expected to write argumentative, analytical, and discursive essays while other forms may involve a critical outlook on experiments and research (Neumann & McDonough, 2015). In producing academic writing related to research for the purpose of assignments, projects, and papers, Tahira and Haider (2019) assert that critical thinking is particularly crucial for students to identify relevant sources, assess the credibility of information, and synthesize research findings.

Sadly, literature has found Malaysian tertiary learners to lack in critical thinking and analytical skills, especially when it comes to academic writing (Hiew, 2012; Yacob & Yunus, 2019) which may affect their performance in essay writing and research-related endeavors. In general, Asian ESL learners have been found to rely on rote learning without actually reflecting on their thoughts and beliefs during the writing process (Yacob & Yunus, 2019). As a result, not only their English language development gets halted, but they also fail to capitalize academic writing as a golden tool to grow their higher order thinking skills (Tahira & Haider, 2019).

Next, although there is a realization that critical thinking skills and academic writing tasks are inter-related (Rahmat, 2020), there is a significant knowledge-void gap in the literature linking the two in the subject of tertiary ESL learners. It can be deduced that research on this topic is still in its infancy in Malaysia. Therefore, an investigation on this area would help to expand the body of knowledge in ESL teaching-learning practices in Malaysia.

1.2 Aims and Objectives

Reflective learning is a powerful 21st century pedagogical tool popularized in ESL teaching-learning practices from around the world. Diaz and Vasquez (2019) reported that students who constantly wrote on a reflective diary were found to have developed greater reflective and critical thinking capacities in their English writing courses. Nabhan (2016) too has found that journal writing helped to increase ESL students' self-awareness and critical thinking skills which was reflected in their academic writing performances.

Hence, this paper aims to conceptualize a technique to improve tertiary learners' academic writing skills by incorporating a reflective learning practice, which is a weekly self-assessment for ESL academic writing. It is hoped that with this new technique, students can understand their language learning process better and make sense of their self-assessed strengths and weaknesses as shown in the studies of Casazza and Gioppo (2020) and Nabhan (2016). Secondly, self-assessment could also act as regular and meaningful feedback for their written works (Clarkson et al., 2018).

In realizing the aforementioned aims and objectives, this paper presents the methodology and expected outcomes of a study which aims to utilize weekly self-assessments to enhance tertiary level ESL students' academic writing performance with critical thinking skills.

2. Methodology

This study will follow a qualitative research design to explore the experiences and perceptions of Malaysian tertiary ESL students regarding weekly self-assessment and its impact on their critical thinking in academic writing. A qualitative research design in this context, helps the researchers to develop rich and detailed insights based on emergent findings. This can be useful to establish context and also contribute to the development of new theories or the refinement of existing ones (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) related to critical thinking in academic writing. The proposed weekly self-assessment template is presented in the Appendix.

Next, the purposive sampling method is to be used to select a diverse group of Malaysian tertiary ESL students who are actively engaged in academic writing courses. To allow for a sample size that allows rich and in-depth data collection, this study will only aim for 10 to 15 participants recruited based on inclusion criteria of (I) willingness to participate, (II) availability for participation, (III) currently enrolled in a tertiary institution in Malaysia, (IV) from a diverse discipline, and (V) familiar with academic writing.

Data for this exploratory qualitative study is to be collected using semi-structured interviews. This method ensures that this study takes a participant-centered approach to compare and contrast different perspectives, experiences, and strategies related to reflective learning, critical thinking tendencies and academic writing proficiency. Individual semi-structured interviews will be conducted with participants using a protocol developed based on the critical thinking theory. The interviews will focus on their experiences with weekly self-assessment, their perceptions of its impact on their critical thinking skills, and their overall academic writing development. It is to be noted that since this protocol is developed from literature, it has to be validated by research experts and language experts to fulfill the aspects of content validity and reliability. For analysis, this study will follow the conventions of thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify patterns and contextualize findings. Table 1 presents the semi-structured interview protocol developed for the current study.

Table 1: Semi-structured interview protocol

Domain	Item	Question
1. Demographic Information	1	Can you please tell me about your academic background and your experiences with ESL writing courses?
2. Reflective Learning and Self-Assessment	2	How familiar are you with the concept of reflective learning?
	3	What do you know about self-assessment?
	4	Have you been involved in any form of self-assessment as part of your ESL writing courses?
	5	Can you describe your experiences with weekly self-assessment in your ESL writing course? (Possible probing question - How did it work?)
3. Critical Thinking and Academic Writing	6	In your opinion, is critical thinking important for academic writing? (Possible probing question - why/why not?)
	7	If yes - Can you provide an example of a time when you applied critical thinking skills to improve your academic writing?

	8	Can you share any specific instances, where engaging in self-assessment helped you think more critically about your writing?
4. Impact of Self-Assessment on Critical Thinking	9	Have you noticed any changes in the way you analyze and evaluate information while working on your assignments due to the self-assessment process?
5. Integration of Reflection and Analysis in Writing	10	Can you describe how self-assessment has contributed to your ability to write essays and research reports in a more critical and analytical manner?
6. Barriers and Benefits	11	On the other hand, what benefits have you experienced from the regular practice of self-assessment in relation to your academic writing?
7. Recommendations and Insights	12	Based on your experiences, do you think teachers need to include self-assessments in writing exercises? <i>(Possible probing question – why/why not?)</i>

Furthermore, some samples of participants’ academic writing outputs such as essays and reports can be collected to take a look at how reflective learning might have manifested in their written work. The content, structure, and argumentation in their writing can act as concrete evidence to identify instances where the participants have incorporated self-assessment insights, critical thinking, and reflective elements. This would also triangulate and validate the participants’ experiences that they have shared during the interviews. For analysis, content analysis methods inspired by the studies of Hou and Wu (2011) and Ibáñez and Delgado-Kloos (2018) will be followed as the aforementioned researchers have also utilized content analysis in a similar context as the current study.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the thematic analysis and content analysis findings, this study will engage subject experts for member checking. They may help to review the analysis to ensure accuracy and avoid biases of reporting (Busetto et al., 2020). This study also acknowledges the small sample size as a potential limitation.

3. Expected Results and Findings

While the actual findings will depend on the data collected and the depth of analysis, this section presents some projected findings which may act as a good starting point and a motivational factor to pursue this study. Figure 1 visualizes the potential findings.

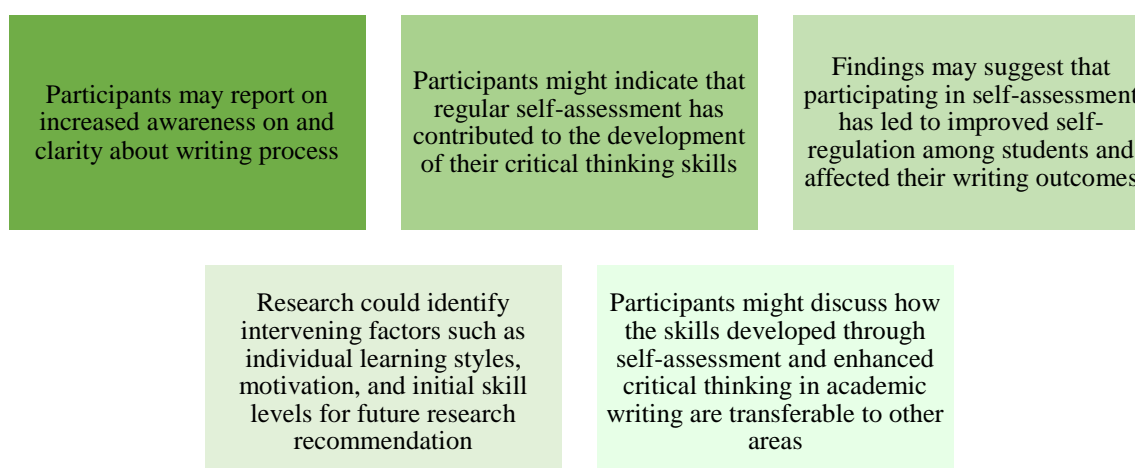


Figure 1: Expected results and findings of the current study

It is emphasized that these expected findings are hypothetical and serve as potential directions for the current research. The actual findings will emerge from the data collected and the depth of analysis conducted during this explorative study.

4. Conclusion

This conceptual paper has conceptualized a qualitative explorative study which may aid in exploring how self-assessments as part of reflective learning practices can support tertiary level ESL learners to incorporate critical thinking in academic writing. This comes as a response to the reported lack of critical thinking elements in written works of Malaysian ESL learners.

In the context of ESL teaching and learning at Malaysian universities, if found successful, this study would be able to encourage more instructors to incorporate reflective learning activities for academic writing courses and other language proficiency courses. Students would be able to experience ESL learning in an updated pedagogy that not only improves their writing skills, but also allows them to be excellent critical thinkers. Self-assessment is also a vital life skill to be developed among Malaysian youths. With more longitudinal data coming out of future studies on this area, a course focusing on critical thinking and reflective teaching-learning can be set up in Malaysian universities.

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Appendix

This section presents the proposed template of weekly self-assessment for the participants of the current study.

Table 2: Template for weekly self-assessment

1. What is your essay/report about? Describe it briefly.
2. Do you feel confident about your topic choice? (Yes/No)
3. Is your main point (thesis statement) clear in your writing? (Yes/No)
4. Did you use any internet or book resources related to your topic? (Yes/No)
5. Did you explain your ideas clearly? (Yes/No)
6. Did you have strong reasons for your points? (Yes/No)
7. Did your writing move smoothly from one idea to the next? (Yes/No)
8. Do you find your writing easy to understand? (Yes/No)
9. Can someone else read your writing and understand it? (Yes/No)
10. Did you look at different sides of your topic? (Yes/No)
11. Did you explain why your ideas are important? (Yes/No)
12. Did you fix mistakes in your writing? (Yes/No)
13. How did you feel about using self-assessment for your writing? (Happy/Neutral/Unhappy)
14. What did you learn from this self-assessment? (Write a sentence or two)
15. What will you try to do better in your next writing assignment? (Write a sentence)

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