THE USAGE OF INTERDISCURSIVITY IN STUDENTS' DISCUSSION WHEN WRITING A MEMORANDUM

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Abstract

Writing is the basis on which every formal real-life task depends upon where writers interact with the authentic communicative community. As such memorandum writing is an area in which students get engaged in a wide range of writing tasks demanding not only corrective facts, but also corrective language even outside the classroom. This study focuses on the use of interdiscursivity through students' group discussion when writing a memorandum. Qualitative method was used in this study where respondents are observed while engaged in group discussion and the discussion was transcribed to find out the problems faced by students when writing a memorandum. In addition, the transcriptions also revealed how interdiscursivity can be used as strategy for effective memorandum writing. The study revealed five major problems faced by students and the role interdiscursivity in enhancing effective memorandum writing strategies. The findings of this study can aid academicians especially when devising instructional plans and materials for teaching writing skills. This study is limited only to memorandum writing and it is suggested further studies to be done on other forms of writing tasks.

1.0 Introduction

Most of the conventional models of language education have become distinguish insufficient to meet the challenges of the current interdisciplinary demands and practices of the academy and the professions in the world (Bhatia, 2011). Several students who enrol in institutions of higher learning enter with no prior familiarity in writing, regardless of whether they are native or non-native speakers of English (Macbeth, 2006). Students with writing problems may have difficulties in one or more aspects of writing skill such as proper use of grammar, conventions, punctuation, capitalisation, spelling, and some of the basic and initiating aspects of writing, which is also an objectionable piece of work for both teachers and learners in ESL classes (Ghabool & Kashef, 2012). They further confirms that lack of English language proficiency is the main cause of difficulties that Malaysian ESL learners have in their writing tasks, as all these are requirements in writing a memorandum. Criticisms from employers that fresh graduates in Malaysia are generally academically prescient but they are lack in soft skills acquisition such as communication and analytical skills (Shakir, 2009). In the context of ESL, students rarely give importance on how to write and comprehend memorandum effectively.

Tertiary students may have some difficulties in using appropriate vocabulary and words to explain their writing tasks in sentences (Halim, Ahsan & Munir, 2011).Memorandum writing is an area in which students get engaged in a wide range of writing tasks demanding not only corrective facts, but also corrective language. In other words, the student has to express what he or she is supposed to know of the social culture information within the language which that knowledge is maintained and shown. Shafie & Nayan (2010), stated six difficulties faced by beginner level writers which are, they are unable to work together with partners, they have poor language proficiency, they have limited time to discuss, poor research skills, lack of ideas and they face stress during collaborative writing.

Since researcher has been lecturing in a higher learning institution for more than four years, he or she has been observing that students are not familiar when they are introduced to the context and content of memorandum writing. Students are not able to comprehend textual features of some of the professional genres, and they are still naive of the discursive realities of the professional world (Bhatia, 2008). In this study, the researcher has focused attention on students' literacy in memorandum writing of the academic discourse. Literacy in the ESL writing of memorandum discourse is fundamental to students' academic survival, as it is important for assessing students' academic progress. As students' of ESL, writing memorandum have often been central to the discussions on this subject, the researcher considered it vital to focus attention on the kind of interaction practices students engage in their ESL writing process and the possible explanations for these interactions. This is expected to provide insights on the model that could be effective in the second language academic writing. As such, when students are taught how to write a memorandum they may come up with a discursive outcome. Therefore, it is vital to examine the problems faced by these students when given a memorandum task. Furthermore, the researcher is keen in finding out whether the use of interdiscursivity through student-student interaction in group discussion will be able to assist students when writing a memorandum.

2.0 The objectives of this study are:

I. To investigate the problems faced by students when writing a memorandum.

II. To study how the use of interdiscursivity can assist when writing memorandum.

2.1 The research questions that underpinned this study are:

1. What are the problems faced by the students when writing memorandum?

2. How can the use of interdiscursivity through student-student interaction in group discussion assist students when writing memorandum?

3.0 Methodology

The research method used in this study which is the documentation analysis of transcriptions of the students' discussion. Thus it was a qualitative analysis method used to find out the problems faced by students when writing memorandums. Besides that the same method was used to study in-depth on how interdiscursivity could assist students when writing a memorandum through student-student interaction. The purpose of using this method is to answer the two research questions as stated in this study. The population of the research was 24 students from a college under the School of Arts & Science in the district of Kampar, Perak, Malaysia. The sampling method used in this study is based on convenience sampling method. The research instrument that was used in this study the transcription of the recording from the students' discussion. The data from the transcriptions were analysed using the interpretive approach.

4.0 Findings and Discussions

RQ1. What are the problems faced by the students when writing memorandum?

4.1.1 Not able to comprehend the role of a memorandum

Students were not able to comprehend the basic function a memorandum. During the discussion they had, they mentioned that they have not come across a memorandum before and they think it is similar to writing a letter of enquiry. This was evidenced by:

Student A: "Before we proceed further, I want to know that I do not understand what the main function of a memorandum is? I have not come across with a memorandum before."

Student B: "Is memorandum similar to letter of enquiry? Because I have never written a memorandum before."

From the results above, it can be determined that students were not able to understand the purpose of writing a memorandum. It is important that students to know the purpose when they are exposed to a new topic or lesson that they have never encountered before. As there is a rise of confusion among students, they may get confused with the functions of memorandum as a communication tool with other communication tool such as letters. This supports the finding of Macbeth (2006), who stated that students face problems in familiarising themselves, in the changes of learning writing during the transition period between secondary and tertiary level education. Therefore, there is need that before they go through the period of this transition, students should be exposed to the various forms of writings.

4.1.2 Students Were Not Able to Understand the Format of a Memorandum

Students found it difficult to memorise the format involved in writing a memorandum. The reason was they were not able to distinguish the format involved when writing a memorandum with a letter. This was evidenced by:

Student C: "How come we do not need to write the receivers address? We do that in writing letters rite?"

Student D: "Which comes first the sender or the receiver? It is very confusing as all the four things come in sequence, the sender, the date, the subject and the receiver."

The format involved when a writing a memorandum is vital, because it is a significant function when a reader determines to continue reading a memorandum. The reason for this is each of the formats will address directly to general readers or to a specific reader. It is also important for students to know that there are certain parts of formats such as from formal letters which are not required when writing a memorandum as it is used for formal internal communication within an organisation unlike a letter which is used as an external formal communication tool. This supports the findings of Nik, Hamzah& Rafidee (2010) that students are unable to recognise the conventions involved when writing a task. Besides that, they (2010) also mentioned that students do not get themselves familiarise to the components required in specific written tasks.

4.1.3 Unable to organise the content

Students were not able to distinguish the organisation of the content when writing a memorandum. They were not able to identify what is to be written for the purpose, background information and future action to be taken by the readers. This was evidenced by:

Student E: "In the purpose do we write how the readers can contact us? I am not sure where to write this part."

Student F: "What do we have to write in the background information? The details of organising the event or how can the readers participate in the event? How many paragraphs can we write?"

It is a necessity for students to know how to organise a writing task. This will enable readers to understand clearly the message of what the writer is trying to convey. The content of a memorandum should be organised well as it is done in a short and simple way to allow readers to understand the purpose it was written quickly which supports the findings of Tatum (2013). He indicated that a memorandum is a common form of communication within an office environment that serves as a quick note to convey message from various departments within an organisation. The content of a memorandum is also vital to be analysed because it requires the readers to take future actions or giving feedbacks and a failure to do this may lead to communication breakdown. Besides that, this is also an important skill required by students in the future during employment stage. This supports the suggestion by Shakir (2009), that students generally are lack in soft skills acquisition such as communication and analytical skills.

4.1.4 Wrong vocabularies used by students when writing memorandum

Students used wrong selections of vocabularies when writing a memorandum. They are unable to identify the proper vocabularies because they were not exposed to such vocabularies due to language proficiency problem. This was evidenced by:

Student G: "I did not know the meaning of the word you are telling. Will the readers understand that word? I am having problem to spell it."

Student H: "Is there such word as ballroom? I thought it is known as hall."

Language proficiency can be considered as a daily problem faced by students. Without using the proper vocabulary in writing a memorandum, students may choose the option of just writing the words they are exposed to without taking consideration of the lexical meanings of these words. Readers may fail to understand these words and may lead them to taking the wrong actions required by the memorandum they have read. Besides that, students may write the wrong facts in a memorandum, resulting from the wrong use of vocabularies because it will fail to give a sentence its proper structure. This will give negative impression on readers of the writer. This supports the findings of Ghabool & Kashef (2012) and Halim, Ahsan & Munir (2011) that students normally face difficulties using the correct language forms when engaging themselves in writing tasks. Words used in writing task are usually linked to students' exposure of the social culture information, and it is important for these students to maintain this knowledge by knowing more vocabularies to expand their language skills.

4.1.5 Unable to Develop Critical and Practical Ideas for the Content of a Memorandum

Students were unable to develop ideas for the content of a memorandum. They come up with ideas that are not logically for the content of a memorandum. This was evidenced by:

Student I: "I think we can choose to have this event on Christmas Day? The fund raising event will allow everyone to dress up in Christmas clothes to come and do donation."

Student J: "We can have this event at night, so everyone can party. People will enjoy the fund raising event and will donate more. Besides that, we can do this event in Genting Highlands."

Students were given a task to write a memorandum on organising an event for fund raising. Based on the findings, it can be seen that one of the difficult task is to get these students to write logical ideas in the content of the memorandum. It is vital to enhance critical thinking among students in order for them to realise that the knowledge imparted to them at the present learning stage will be used practically by them in working environment. This is the mechanics in writing where development of paragraphs in the content is looked into to show the quality and writing abilities a writer has. This supports the findings of Nik, Hamzah& Rafidee (2010), in which one of the problems faced by students when doing a writing task is the mechanics of writing, whereby students are unable to work by themselves to develop logical coherent content in paragraphs without guidance.

4.2 R.Q2 How can the use of interdiscursivity through student-student interaction in group discussion assist students when writing memorandum?

From the document analysis, it was found that the students mentioned nine outcomes how interdiscursivity could assist them through student-student interaction assist students when writing memorandum. Each of the student had discursive interpretation of the task given to them, they were confused of the task requirement during the discussion process, they went through negotiations and linguistic adaption during their discussion, they learnt to modify ideas to fit that the requirement of the given task, they have gained learning conscious, they were more focused on completing the task and not on language used for the task, they had the idea of using the Internet to complete the task given, and they have developed heterogeneous communication in the discussion.

4.2.1. Discursive Interpretation of the Task

Each of the students has their own discursive view after reading the task given. They mentioned their view of the task given to them. This was evidenced by:

Student A: "From my point of view, we should decide on choosing which society to be represented before we think of the fund raising. I think by doing this, we can decide what kind of activity we can plan for the fund raising."

Student B: "After I have read the question, I think let's look into what activity we come up for the fund raising then think of a society. It does not matter of taking any society to conduct this activity."

Each student came up with their own idea of completing the task given to them. They shared with each other their own point of view and discussed among themselves how to blend in each other's' idea to suit the requirement of the task. It is very important to analyse each student's ideas critically as this will help students not to be out of the topic of the task which has been given to them. This will also help teachers to easily identify and correct the discursive views given by students by giving immediate feedback to them. This supports the findings of Bakhtin (1981;1986) in which he argues that utterances in a language are always dialogised and this changed based on how a reader interprets what they read and thereafter describe what they have understand through verbal discussion.

4.2.2 Confusion of Task Requirement Through The Discussion Process

Students got confused with spoken genre when they interact with other group members. One member may not lead the other members to the right direction of the task requirement. This was evidenced by:

Student C: "I think we can plan fund raising as secondary event, let us focus on other event that will be benefit for the Society to organise".

Student D: "We should have two different dates for the event so that we can gain more money. We write the memorandum to mention we want do this event and tell the participants to register then later we will inform them about the particulars if it is confirmed."

It is important for students to interpret what they read in a right direction which meets the requirement the task given to them. The act of misleading by one group member may cause the whole group to produce an out of topic memorandum which does not answer the task given to them. Each member should play responsibility to ensure that every group member get the proper gist of understanding of the task given to them. This supports the finding of Bakhtin (1986), which relationship of genre involved in the mixing in way that confused clear distinction and may perhaps mislead the action of the doer of a task. As this is a 'primary genre' as mentioned by Bakhtin (1981), which means that oral dialogue corresponds as distinguisher to the listener of how the speaker presents the definition of genre discussed. Furthermore he (1981) also mentioned that speakers may also distinguish a definition when they speak of what they have read from any text genre and will use to present an idea in their own understanding and this known as 'secondary genre'. This also supports the findings of Wu (2011) where in specific case it is the joint of discourses or styles that makes sense in the formation of interdiscursive relations.

4.2.3 Negotiation and Linguistic Adaption

Students negotiated with each other for the points to be written in a memorandum. The students bring up their own ideas and try to negotiate with group members to include them in the memorandum. This was evidenced by:

Student E: " I think we should have an event like Canteen Day, and have other special events like lucky draw, clown performance and many more for this fund raising, what do you think of my idea?"

Student F: "I think the event should be organised on a weekend or public holiday which will be easier for everyone to attend as I think this event should open to all public."

Students were able to choose proper vocabulary through negotiation among group members. This allowed members to think the rationale way of writing the content of a memorandum and leading them to write it in a more creative way. This supports the findings of Wu (2011), where interdiscursivity can also act as product of dynamic negotiation which indicates the process of making linguistic choice. Here the doer of a task will use negotiation to voice out his or her opinion to allow rationale thinking among listeners to accept views and ideas directed to them. According to Vershueren (1987; 1999), language is adaptable from our daily use of language

as a part of process in learning, whereby the interdiscursivity function can be found in a pragmatic effects and it contributes to speakers to convey the message they want to convey to listeners by strengthening the ideas and opinion delivered and leading to a successful communication to take place.

4.2.4 Modification of Ideas

Students modified the earlier ideas they conveyed as the discussion went on. They tend to look back what they have written down earlier in the memorandum and change to relate to new points written in the content of the memorandum. This was evidenced by:

Student G: "I think we should look back at the number of programmes involved in this fund raising event. From my point of view, it should not have too many programmes."

Student H: "We should see whether these programmes can be conducted in this venue, otherwise we need to reconsider of different idea for this memorandum."

Students often looked back at the content of a memorandum that they have written to check whether there is a coherency in the points written and do the points in the content matches with one and another. This allows students to understand the changes needed in ensuring a memorandum can be used as a successful communication tool to avoid confusions among readers. This process is known as hybridization which was mentioned by Bakhtin (1981; 1986), changes do take place in task when there is an on-going discussion and this all depends from the speakers utterance by noticing there is a need of changes to be done and will notify the listeners to identify the changes. Marchenkova (2005) mentioned that people do reinterpret of what they have uttered or heard earlier into giving it a meaningful definition in order to achieve a successful communication.

4.2.5 Conscious of Learning

Students were able to relate the discussion with their own social context. The discussion done for the content of memorandum writing by these students was based on their personal experience. This was evidenced by:

Student I: "Let's have this fund raising by having recycling campaign. When I was in my secondary school, we did a fund raising activity by doing recycling campaign and we gained a lot of money by selling old newspapers, aluminium cans and other recycling products."

Student J: "I think we should have something like a Family Day and invite all the parents of the students to come and participate in this event. I have seen many this kind of activities work well."

Students often relate their participation in a discussion by relating the topic with their social context, simple example is from their personal experience. Kubli (2005) mentioned that consciousness of learning are based on exchanging of ideas among students and every words used in such discussion are based on students personal social context exposure limit. Such exchange of knowledge is considered as interdiscursivity as Kubli (2005) stated that Bakhtin theory can be matched with the mentioned process. According to Lin (2005), this way also encourages students participate independently and they will be able to manage a learning process on their own without the aid of a teacher.

4.2.6 Focused on Task and not Language

Students where more focused on completing the given memorandum task. They least did giving importance towards the language used. This was evidenced by:

Student K: "I think we have spelled a few words wrongly in this memo, but let's look at it later, we think on how to complete it first."

Student L: "I don't think it is necessary to see what words important to be used in this memorandum task, we focus on finishing otherwise we will not have enough of time."

Students were least focus on producing a memorandum that follows grammatical rules accordingly. They are more focused on completing the task in spontaneous manner. This supports the findings of Mathews & Jacquet (2013) that students are able to convey their ideas anonymously focus on the content of a writing task, and they are able to develop communication ability even though they have lack of grammatical precision

Conclusion

The purpose of this research is to determine the use of interdiscursivity through student student interaction when writing a memorandum among tertiary level students.

Most of the time, students do not understand what they are writing, when writing a memorandum because they do not know the structures and conventions involved in memorandum writing. Improving memorandum writing is a big challenge for both teachers and students. Many teachers may feel that there are many challenges in implementing effective memorandum writing based on the mentioned studies done in chapter one. As for students, there are various strategies for them to learn, that they do not know when to apply the appropriate strategy. Thus, their motivation to write and their discursive ideas are limited. It is the researcher's opinion that efforts should be directed toward implementing of interdiscursivity through student student interaction when writing a memorandum among tertiary level students.

Future researches on using interdiscursivity as a strategy for writing skills should not only focus on the end result of this group discussion. The emphasis should be on the process of learning as students would be able to use the social and learning skills, acquired through interdiscursivity, in their everyday life.

As such, it can be surmised that it is vital for researchers to continue their efforts toward promoting interdiscursivity as an alternative learning strategy and the potential of it as an instructional intervention be maximized.

Brief biography of the author

Daljeet has a number of years teaching experience in Tunku Abdul Rahman University College. He is appointed by Tunku Abdul Rahman University College as an English Lecturer. He has obtained Bachelor of Education (TESL) from University of Wales and he obtained a Master of Education (TESL) from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. Currently, he is a PhD (TESL) candidate with Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris. His fields of research interests are metacognitive in teaching and learning of English Language and paraphrasing skills.

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