Investigating Students' Personal Constructs in Writing Research Proposals: A Case Study

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Abstract

Most academic programmes at tertiary level require a thesis or at least a project paper as partial requirement in obtaining a degree. To fulfil this requirement, students are asked to write a thesis from about 12,000 words to 100,000 words depending on the level of the degree pursued and the requirement of each academic institution. Keeping that in mind, this paper is based on a study that investigates students' academic writing constructs at the undergraduate level. These students were doing their BA in English Language Studies at a local institute of higher learning in Malaysia. The paper reports a study to to find out whether students who, after being exposed to the research methodology and academic writing courses use their own construct or the tutors' in their writing. The study applies Personal Construct Theory using a Repertory Grid and interviews with the informants in seeking answers.

Introduction

Under the Bachelor of Arts English Language Studies (BA ELS) programme in UKM, undergraduate students have to undergo a mandatory research methodology course in their third year. This course entitled "Research Methodology" is conducted over two semesters. This course provides students with:

1. an exposure into the basic principles of doing research in areas pertaining to English Language Studies namely: Linguistics, Applied Linguistics and Literature; and

2. an avenue to do an in-depth study into an area of their choice of research whereby they can apply the basic principles in data collection and data analysis.

The first objective is carried out during the first semester where the students undergo a 3-unit course that prepares them to plan for a research project and write out their research proposals. This course provides step-by-step guidance on how to go about writing a proposal, at the end of which each student chooses

an area of interest, plans the research project, writes the proposal and submits it as part of the course requirement. The second objective is fulfilled as a four-unit project paper during the second semester, where students are assigned a supervisor with whom they continue their research study. All undergraduates in the BA ELS programme need to successfully complete the project in order to graduate. In this context therefore, the importance of the research proposal as conceptualisation of the research project should not be underestimated.

According to Philips and Pugh (1987, p. 59) there are four essential elements by which a researcher constructs and conceptualises a study. They are:

1. the background theory, which encompasses a knowledge of the field of study in which the researcher is working;

2. the focal theory, the description of the research and reasons for it;

3. data theory, 'the justification for the relevance and validity of the material' used to support the study; and

4. the contribution, i.e., the evaluation of the importance of the study and of what relevance the study is to the development of the discipline.

Taken from this point of view, to conceptualise and construct a research study, we believe students not only need to have a firm grasp of the above elements but also a knowledge of the discipline. They must also be made aware that in academic writing, there is a specific writing schema that researchers are aware of and use. This includes the knowledge of the language in order to write a coherent proposal and the ability to compartmentalise and organise the text into a logical and coherent whole.

In an effort to design a worthwhile Research Methodology course, we realise that one important factor that needs to be addressed are the expectations of the tutors and what their constructs are versus the students' own constructs and what their expectations are regarding what is involved in the course including those pertaining to proposal writing and carrying out a research project. When the course was designed, it was assumed that students' constructs would match their tutors', and that by the end of the course, each student should be able to function as a researcher with relevant conceptualisations of research projects and research proposals and possessing the relevant writing skills to match. However, the tutors found to their dismay, having read the written proposals, that the students often enter the course with a different set of constructs. In addition, some do not have the appropriate schema in academic writing. The proposals that were submitted varied between good ones to those that contained not only weak conceptualisations of the research study, but also weak logic, poor text organisation and language.

With such a scenario in mind, a study of the students' written research proposals was carried out to answer the following questions:

1. Do students have their own constructs for writing proposals? If so, what are they?

2. What are the tutors' constructs in 'doing' research proposals?

3. What constructs do students use when writing their research proposal - the tutors'; their own, or the one suggested by the University?

Purpose of the study

The objective of this paper is to highlight the findings of the study based on the research questions above. In doing so, students' as well as tutors' constructs are highlighted. The personal constructs studied are not assumptions, predictions or hypothesis made by others, usually top down about what writing research proposals are about or how to write research proposals. These personal constructs are gathered from the repertory grid adapted specifically for the Research Methodology course offered.

The repertory grid used can be seen in Table 1 is modified from Kelly (1955), Riley (1985) and Jamilah (2001). The grid enabled both students and tutors to explore the patterns of the deepest thoughts and feelings about proposal writing and doing research. Furthermore, the grid elicitation interviews which are open-ended not only encouraged students and tutors to explore their feelings and thoughts about proposal writing and doing research; they also verified these personal meanings from first person evidence through their own voices. These are what we call personal constructs. In the end, a bottom-up approach to the Research Methodology course development in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia is the outcome of the study. In doing so, we hope that the following will be gained especially in terms of:

- helping students write better proposals

- helping course tutors a design better research methodology course

Teaching Academic Writing: An Overview

Bjork (2003) suggests the teaching of text types (e.g. comparisons/contrast, cause/ effects) as general, interdisciplinary typologies in the first semester, well before introducing students to the genres of their disciplines. Johns (2003), who completed interviews with faculties from across the discipline, argues that we need to begin in our classrooms with the social constructivist theory that brought us modern conceptions of genre.

Coe (2002) puts it this way: genres embody socially established strategies for achieving purposes in rhetorical situations. They are not just text-types; they imply/invoke/create/ (re) construct situations (and contexts), communities, writers and readers. Thus, understanding the genre they are handling will help students become versatile writers, able to adapt to a wide variety of types of writing tasks they are likely to encounter in their lives. Kruse (2003) supports Coe by saying "… we should remember that academic writing is a complex, self management process in which students must cope with nearly all aspects of research simultaneously" (p. 27).

Realising the fact that academic writing is a genre that is complex, dynamic, and is socially constructed, we need to assist students in their writing of academic papers. Thus, a step-by-step guidance on how to go about writing a research proposal is the approach that we use at the institution. Where research project proposals are concerned, tutors often find many of the proposals poorly written, and often, the research projects proposed, not workable. As a result, many students often have to rewrite their proposals during their second semester when they should be concentrating on the research proper. It is not unusual to have cases where degrees were withheld just because students fail to complete their research projects. It is at this point that an investigation of students' written research project proposals is deemed necessary, as it appears most of the problems discussed above stem from the proposals. This would also provide an impetus to designing a better Research Methodology course.

Having discussed the above, we out-rightly recognise the following first, there are serious disadvantages of not taking into account students' as well as tutors' personal understanding of the discipline and their starting points in understanding the discipline. Secondly, writing a research proposal is not always step-wise. Lastly, there are diversities and similarities of knowledge pertaining to the discipline that tutors as well as students have. The three points given above have been made clear through the lens of Personal Construct Theory (PCT).

Personal Construct Theory and Personal Constructs

The Personal Construct Theory by Kelly (1955) is based on the belief that people interpret and act upon happenings and events in the world according to their previous experience. This technique was used by Kelly to explore his clients' deepest thoughts and feelings through the use of a system of personal perception constructed by the persons or persons themselves. This theory emphasises interaction between individuals and the environment as an experiential cycle in which people develop their personal construct system. Based on this theory, a system of grid called the Repertory Grid is used to frame, and to selectively code, sum up or interpret the results of the conversations.

The term 'repertory' derives from the idea that each individual has his or her own repertoire of personal constructions of experience (Thomas and Harri-Augstein, 1985 p. 21). The grid allows space where personal meaning can be collected. Kelly insisted as observed by Burr and Butt (1992, p.3) that "… if you want to help people to change, you must first understand the construction they are placing on their world, the theories they hold and the questions they are asking". Thus, this theory states that reality is subjected to many alternative constructions and allows individuals to probe the multiple meanings they have of the same phenomenon.

Riley (1986) claims that PCT is a 'total psychology', by which he understands its proponents to mean that it is both a theory of the person and a theory of knowing: it is, then, a *meta- theoretical epistemics*, a theory of the ontogenesis of meaning, in which it studies individuals' apprehension and categorisation of knowledge. The focus of PCT, then, is the individual, his forms of appraisal and his construing of events; the aim of Personal Construct Psychology is the identification, observation and extension of an individual's cognitive categories and operations.

The repertory grid technique can be accompanied by the grid elicitation interview or 'conversation' to allow individuals freedom to express themselves i.e., revelation through their own voices, their own model of knowledge and the nature of their model. Investigating students' and tutors' personal constructs on academic writing, specifically their personal constructs with regard to proposal writing and doing research allow us to see the alternative meanings they give to a construct thus helping us understand how they construe the elements for writing research proposals.

Previous Research using PCT

Riley (1986) uses PCT with learners in order to help them improve their reading ability and efficiency and also investigate the reasons for learning a foreign language or their needs in that language. Olson (1980) uses the grid to understand how teachers construed their work in relation to curriculum innovation. In his work he showed that the fate of curriculum change depended on the sense teachers made of it and that this, in turn, was dependent on how they construed their role in the classroom. Kevill and Shaw (1980) use Repertory Grid to make teachers more aware of their communication interactions with the students. As well as serving as a basis for self reflection, the grid also promoted genuine dialogue and understanding between staff and teachers and students and acted as an effective stimulus for individual change.

Later, Kevill, Shaw and Goodacre (1982) looked for teachers' thinking following in-service courses. The teachers were required to construe their teaching situation at the beginning and at the end of their courses. They were then provided with

detailed feedback of the analysis of the changes in their grids which enabled them to gain an understanding of the way events had altered their perspectives of their everyday work and lives.

This technique was also tried out with a group of teachers at a South West English Language Teaching Association (SWELTA) meeting in 1993 at the University College of St Mark and St John, Plymouth (Jamilah, 2001). Jamilah (2001) used this technique again in her research to understand students' response to methodological innovation.

In the present research, the grid was used to elicit students' constructs on their understanding of the writing of research proposals. Students were asked to fill in the grid and to verbalise their constructs. Constructs were also elicited from the tutors of the course. The students and the tutors' constructs were later compared to see whether the students had their own constructs or that they followed the tutors' without really understanding.

Research Design

This research follows an interpretive paradigm as the analysis would involve interpreting human behaviour via the repertory grid technique. Our work aimed to explore students' as well as tutors' mental constructions -understandings, beliefs, attitudes, opinions and so on - that may lead them to the understanding of what research proposals are, as well as, what is involved in writing research proposals. It involved our keeping records of students' and tutors' accounting for their decision to write the way they do and through analysing these records, to understand why they did so. The students' as well as tutors' work would undoubtedly be laden with their own construction of knowledge, as well as their knowledge of the language, their assumptions, and perceptions, thus making the research process complex and subjective in nature.

Participants and Selection criteria

The participants of the research were third year undergraduates and two tutors involved in tutoring the research methodology course. There were altogether 79 students with different levels of English language proficiency, different economic backgrounds, different school cultures, and different work cultures. From a population of 79, we divided them into 3 groups - the high, medial and low performers, to allow for representativeness within each range, and also for tutor variability (each tutor teaches a minimum of 20 students). The marks allocated for the writing of research proposal is 50% of the course. Based on that, we selected 11 students for each range. We also selected subjects from different ethnic groups. Because of the small size of the population, gender was not taken into account.

For the purpose of this paper, because of the exhaustive and extensiveness of data, we have decided to discuss two students from the 2 ends in their level of performances, viz., the high and the low. We also discuss findings from two tutors who taught the course. There is a need for us to study both students and the tutors involved because we are interested in the personal constructs of both groups of participants, what constructs students used and the effect on their written discourse by comparison with the tutors' constructs.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

We used a personal construct grid which is based on Personal Construct Theory by Kelly (1955) to explore students' and tutors' deepest thoughts and feelings through the use of a system of personal perception constructed by the individual/s themselves. The technique of eliciting what is from "within" an individual, i.e., feelings, opinions, personal motivations, attitudes and so on with regard to proposal writing and doing research is framed by a system of grid called Repertory Grid.

The term 'repertory' derives from the idea that each individual has his or her own repertoire of personal constructions of experience (Thomas and Harri-Augstein, 1985, p. 21). The grid allows space where personal meanings can be collected and through the grid elicitation interviews, these may be further explored and conversed about. Thus, individuals are given the freedom to contribute their own personal meaning in terms that they feel best to express their own undistorted thoughts and feelings.

In the modified grid, elements selected are those that revolve around the culture of writing a research proposal. Eight elements were identified based on tutors' and students' input which are deemed necessary areas and issues in writing research proposals and doing research (see numbers 1-8, below which correspond to the elements in Table 1). Seven of these are taken from the topic areas in the syllabus designed for the Research Methodology course offered to the BA ELS programme. The elements are as follows: Creating a research niche (1), Objectives and research questions (2), Theoretical framework and literature review (3), Choosing research methodology (4), Analysis of data (5), Reporting the findings (6), Using appropriate language (7) and Tutor/supervisor feedback (8).

The grid was made available to the students and tutors, and the grid elicitation interviews were conducted. The students and tutors were instructed to randomly combine any 3 elements in the grid, based on random combinations of elements. Then, the students and tutors voiced out their mental understanding with regards to starting and writing a research proposal. In this study, the modified version of Kelly's grid (1955) and Riley (1985) as well as the grid elicitation interviews ensured that it is participant friendly in terms of data elicitation. The grid elicitation interviews allow us to examine the thoughts behind the actions of students and tutors, which were used for analysing their actions in terms of subjective categories.

As the contents of the interviews 'conversations' are based on the constructs that they themselves construe, the elicitations are designed to leave students and tutors free to express themselves fully in their own way. In this way, they are allowed to express personal meanings in the most natural way, not diluting their meanings through terms set by us, the researchers or others interested in them. The interviews/'conversations' were audio tape -recorded and transcribed. Finally, students' actual research proposals were analysed taking into account their personal constructs and their written product. Tutors' feedback about the strengths and weaknesses of their students' proposals were also recorded and transcribed.

Table 1: Repertory Grid (*Modified from Kelly (1955), Riley (1985) and Jamilah (2001)*.

DIFFERENCES   SIMILARITIES

Element Construct	1 Creating Research niche	2 Objectives & Research Questions	3 Theoretical Framework & Lit Review	4 Choice of Research Methodology	5 Data Analysis	6 Report Findings	7 Language	8 Tutor/Supervisor feedback	Element Construct

Analysis of data

Raw data was collected using the repertory grid and the grid elicitation interviews/ conversations from both students and tutors. They were then cluster analysed to reveal "what goes on with what" in participants' thinking. This way of analysis is only one of a variety of different grid assembly and interpretation techniques (see Riley, 1985 and Thomas and Harri-Augstein, 1985 for further techniques and grid assembly). However, the principle underlying all these interpretation techniques and different grid assembly is that they provide the participants (students and tutors) with a sort of 'psychic mirror' which are objective correlates of their cognitive categories in the area studied. The students' research project proposals were also analysed using content analysis based on the eight elements stated on the grid (see Table 1).

Verification of the data is constructed through a triangulation process of methods sourcing for the same phenomenon. The grid elicitation interview/conversations transcripts and students' research proposals were subjected to content analysis and further interviews were also conducted for verification purposes. Based on Lincoln and Guba (1986), if the evidence can survive this process, then the researcher can be sure that there is validity and therefore, there is also reliability. This argument can be summarised as follows: the imperfections of one method are cancelled out by the strength of another (Lincoln and Guba, 1986).

Students' and tutors' constructs of writing research proposal

Based on research questions 1 and 2 of our study, we have found that students, as well as tutors do have constructs of their own for writing research proposals and doing research. For the purpose of this paper, we will highlight the three most important constructs as voiced out by the tutors and students themselves. The details of the constructs are summarised in Table 2 for creating research niche/ starting point of research (RN), Table 3 looks at the theoretical framework (TF) and Table 4 looks at methodological framework (MF). In each of the tables; tutors' constructs are placed in one column next to the students' constructs (S4 - low performer and S10 - high level of performer). The third colum provides a comparison with the 2 constructs with the students' written proposals.

Table 2: Creating research niche/starting point of research (RN)

Constructs: Tutor A	Constructs: S 4	Student's research proposal
Research is process oriented.	Research should be done in stages:	The learner knows that research niche is important. However, she has difficulties in creating and describing research niche. And she also has difficulties in describing the statement of problem. Her background of the study is not linked to the research niche and her research questions are merely repetition of the objectives. That's why her objectives & research questions are isolated – no niche to hold on.
Doing research is very much a process in the sense that you start at the starting point and after that you come up with the objective, research question, and from there you find the appropriate research niche and together with reading of and knowledge of the area you will be able to conceptualise the whole thing.	Objective, choosing research methodology and reporting findings	
	The idea of writing a research is constructed stepwise.	
	Objective and research questions are based on research niche. Once you do the research niche and it will decide objective and objective will decide research questions	
Every step counts in the sense that everything is interrelated.	Objective, research questions and research methodology is related to creating a niche and theoretical f/work and lit review.	
Starting point will direct you to your theoretical framework and CF		
If you don't have a starting point you cannot conceptualise	The niche will help the students to anticipate the research methodology and how to analyse the data	

Constructs: Tutor B	Constructs: S 10	Student Research Proposal
At the beginning of the research, students need to have some ideas. It's very important, they don't need to know in depth but must have some knowledge to discuss with supervisor	Research niche is based on personal opinion of researcher & supervisor. Creating a niche rated high because it is based on previous research. That is how you figure out the problem. Niche contributes to the objective of the study. Finding is based on research niche. Finding contributes to research niche. What we want to find out is based on research niche. Reporting the findings is related to research niche and objective. Research niche is based on personal opinion. Feedback is based on research done by previous researcher and also the goals and the niche of the research. Niche & objective are related. Objective of the study is related to research niche. *Creating niche & research question not partly related to theoretical framework. Analysing data is based on data not from niche. Findings related to niche because it is based niche & objective. Findings can partly contribute to find out in the niche & objective. Opinion is related to research niche. Objective of research is based research niche (not 100%). *Need to refer to previous lit. then you know the problem. Process to carry out the study includes the step & material.	S10 has reconstructed and retranslated her tutor's construct. she is quite an independent student. Research niche is clearly stated

Table 3: Theoretical Framework (TF)

Constructs: Tutor A	Constructs: S 4	Student Research Proposal
Theoretical framework is important at the starting point; you have to look at other people's TF in which you think you want to position yourself. TF goes hand in hand with MF because it ... decide to analyse the data, have to have knowledge of the area, otherwise your whole research falls apart.	Theoretical framework and lit review also help in choosing the correct or proper research methodology. The theory used is helpful in deciding the research methodology and the proper analysis of data. Theoretical framework is important because the theories you use for data analysis and reporting reflects the overall result of the research	Literature review & theoretical D'work– repeating the tutor's construct. However, no mention of TF and the literature review only covers 1.5 pages and is very skimpy. The student did not discuss previous studies. Her literature review is totally wrong. Literature review is related to research question – not shown in the research proposal. Literature review to research question – tutor's construct and st. repeated it but unable to manifest the construct in writing. The niche helps to choose appropriate research method and collection of data – she has the correct construct but was not able to manifest it in the written product. Repeating tutor's construct.
Constructs: Tutor B	**Constructs: Student 10**	**Student Research Proposal**
All students should have knowledge of theory. Students are always confused with TF and CF. You need the theory in order to determine the product. Theory is not connected to the MF, theory is related to the product. Theory will not develop at the starting point but will come later after readings and lit. review. Theory will determine the concept. The theory that you refer to could determine and direct to the method used; the theory used will also help in the choice of method. TF should be introduced earlier by content subject tutors.	Theoretical framework based on previous research or either what we get from the data. Findings and f'back is not totally related to theoretical f/ work and research methodology. Confirm – theoretical D'work & lit review is based on previous research.	Theoretical framework is also clearly presented. Student has shown that she has put a lot of effort in reading past research work in the area. Her literature review is well argued and presented.

Table 4: Methodological Framework (MF)

Constructs: Tutor A	Constructs: S 4	Student Research Proposal
MF is not important at the starting point. You only think of it after you have made a decision of what you want to do, then only you decide on methodology. This also depend on what you're researching on It's only when at lit review that your methodology is important because lit review would sum up what methodology you're going to use and what findings. **MF is important when you're designing your method it's either based on precedence or something new You need to have knowledge of the area and then knowledge of methodologies, once you have that you can decide what you want to choose, mix even combine a few methods. They have to read studies done in the area and kinds of findings	Once you know the research niche then you can proceed to choose the research methodology Research methodology helps to get finding because from the method you analyse the data and then the result. From here you will be able to arrive at the findings of the research Theoretical framework and lit review also help in choosing the correct or proper research methodology	
Constructs: Tutor B	**Constructs: S10**	**Student Research Proposal**
Methodological knowledge not at the beginning. However students should already have some ideas. Methodological framework is important only when you have your research question. Research question determine your MF Method is important to determine the product. It's important to know the method to determine the end product even though the expectation may be different There is a link between method, concept and theory.	Data is some of the materials. When analyzing data we have to base on the data & methodology is based on how to get the data and we have to plan & find a suitable methodology. *Methodology is not based on concept & concern but on research niche & objective. *Analysing data – based on concept that has been argued by previous researcher. *Reporting the findings also based on concept and concern by previous researcher and what we get from data.	Methodological framework is also clearly stated. Her choice of research methodology is based on previous researchers' methods of data collection. Her data analysis is also based on procedures done by previous researchers

	*Choice of research methodology based on how research is done by previous researcher.	
	*Research methodology is still based on personal opinion – what is suitable in order to carry out the research.	
	*Choice of research methodology depends on what you think is suitable to carry the research.	
	*Every rule is highly based on the concept suggested by previous researcher.	
	*Previous research may help in giving ideas to form research questions.	
	*In choosing research methodology and analysing data objective is not important.	

Pertaining to students' personal constructs, most of the students tend to mirror the construct of the tutors where the features/conventions of writing research proposals are concerned, which means that these features or conventions were taught in the course they have undergone. However, there are cases where students have the constructs but are unable to unpack or translate them into actual written discourse, i.e., in the writing of the research proposals (RP). An example is S4; her constructs matched that of the tutor's. In analysing S4's research proposal, it was found that she has the constructs of the stages in writing a RP correct. According to her tutor, these were taught during lectures and reinforced in tutorials. This was shown in the written RP in terms of headings that the student used. However, when analysing the actual contents of these stages, important important findings were revealed.

Based on the analysis of the grid and the grid elicitation interview transcripts, S4 knows that research niche is important and this coincides with her tutor's construct. However, she has difficulties in creating a niche. Based on the analysis of her RP, she was not able to describe the research niche. Her 'background of study' was not linked to the research niche. She was unable to articulate the statement of problem. Because of this, her research questions (RQ) were merely repetition of the objectives. She was unable to articulate the RQs for her study. Her objectives and RQs were also not related to the research niche as was revealed in her personal construct. As a result, her objectives and RQs were isolated with

no niche to hold on to. In the interview, the tutor who taught S4 assumed that S4 was equipped with the necessary skills in academic writing. This reflects one of the major problems in the programme – the tutor's perception is that the student is supposed to have learnt the skills in a previous course offered during the first year of the programme. The above clearly shows that S4 has problems in transferring what she knows in her 'mind' to be able to put into practice these knowledge into writing the research proposal.

S10, on the other hand, was able to form her own constructs derived most of the time from her own reconstruction of Tutor A and tutor B's personal constructs; up to a certain extent. This is evident in her constructs on research niche, theoretical framework and methodological framework revealed in the grid elicitation interview transcript. To a certain extent, she derives her constructs from tutor A and at times, from tutor B. This is clearly illustrated in Table 2, where her constructs on research niche shows the importance of having a niche in starting a research. She has also extended Tutor B's construct further to the objectives, analysis, findings, and in reporting findings.

In Table 3, S10's construct on theoretical framework is in agreement with that of tutor B's, i.e., theoretical framework and literature review are based on readings of previous research. However, S10 has also developed her own constructs based on her own translation/interpretations of the constructs of her tutors. In particular, those in Table 4 (see Constructs: Tutor A and Constructs: S10 especially those marked with asterisks *) with regard to her constructs on research methodology. She has also translated the importance of previous research to her constructs on data analysis and reporting the findings.

Pertaining to tutors' personal constructs, the analysis of the grid and the grid elicitation interview transcripts show that tutor's constructs reveal much about their practices. There are differences between Tutor A's and Tutor B's constructs in relation to proposal writing and doing research. Differences in their beliefs are then transferred to their practices. Tutor A, being the coordinator of the Research Methodology course, has formalised constructs she deems important in writing a research proposal based on her own orientation in doing research. Basically, most of the constructs of the coordinator were used by all the course tutors as the elements for teaching the course in order to standardise knowledge imparted to students.

However, in tutoring the students each tutor has in many ways based these constructs on their own interpretation of the formalised constructs, thus there are similarities and differences in Tutor A's and B's constructs. Both agree that research niche is important (see Tutor A's and B's constructs, Table 2). They also agree that methodological framework is not important at the beginning of

the research. Tutor A sees literature review in tandem with the formation of methodological framework. Tutor B sees only after the research questions are constructed the methodological framework as important.

Whose constructs do students use – theirs or their tutors'?

In writing research proposals, most of the time students base their constructs on the formalised ones introduced by the tutors in the course. Having formalised constructs helped in the standardisation of project proposal assessment, as well as helped in creating some control over the interpretation of what a research study means. For instance, the constructs of Tutor B differs from Tutor A, but are seen as part and parcel of the many variations in the approach to writing a research proposal. Students tend to stick to tutors' constructs as they are mostly afraid to go beyond what is taught. The genre approach though helpful, could also restrict students' understanding and inhibit their curiosity to explore further ways of writing in the particular genre.

Clearly, it can be seen that S4, a low level performer thinks that she has to adhere to the stated constructs even though she could not comprehend some of them, thus she is unable to translate that into her own writing. She could only, most of the time follow/regurgitate the constructs of her tutors. S10, a high level performer, also based her writings on the formalised constructs; however, she extended her comprehension of the constructs based on her tutors' constructs and managed to reconstruct her own in her research proposal (see Tables 2, 3, and 4).

Conclusion

Conventions or genre based academic writing may or may not help students in writing their research proposals. There are advantages and disadvantages to the use of genre-based writing frameworks. Genre-based writing has in many ways confined students to working in set ways even if they cannot comprehend the conventions given by the tutors. The students tend to work on a framework that is not within their initial constructs in academic writing. This top down approach may restrict students such as S4 who does not have the initial constructs but have to adhere to the given framework, and S10 who has built constructs of her own and who can go beyond the given framework but dares not because she was afraid to break formalised conventions in writing a research proposal.

Having said that, based on the findings, we are proposing a learner-oriented, bottom-up approach to academic writing that will help not only weak but also good students produce better academic writing, as an alternative approach to writing research proposal i.e., a construct-based approach to proposal writing. In

this approach, course developers and tutors work within the parameters of what students know of the subject matter, as well as what they can do and not what the tutors and course developers think the students should know and should do. The framework for proposal writing should be culled from a sum of the knowledge that students have constructed from participating in the course.

Further, summing up the students' constructs through their perceptions, feelings and beliefs, of what is involved in research and proposal writing, could help course designers and/or tutors better understand students' own construction of their understanding. This would also help students to write better and more effective research proposals. Problems in conceptualising research and writing a research proposal experienced by the students could be identified much earlier in the course, perhaps before the course starts and rectified at the onset, rather than at the end of the semester during the final assessment of the product (Jamilah, Bahiyah, Lee and Siti Hamin, 2004).

In assessing students' research proposals, it was found that a few variables have to be addressed. First, there has to be the appropriate culture of academic writing practices. This has to be inculcated in the students before they are asked to embark on a course in research methodology. The students have to be exposed to the form, structure and register suitable for academic writing. Issues in writing, like ethics and plagiarisms have to be raised and discussed as these have bearings on the environment that surrounds doing a research. These, even though not specifically related to writing a research proposal, are, however the basis on which a research is based, and therefore, form the scaffolding upon which researches are conceptualised and built upon. A research proposal is then written within these environments. They are, after all, the design upon which words are written to describe the process and procedures of data collection and analysis. Hence, assessment of students' written proposals has to be based not only on the language, which expresses the content, but also the areas and issues pertinent the process of designing and formulating a research.

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