

## Novice Writers in Asian Academia: Insights on Writing Issues

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### ABSTRACT

*Many novice researchers are encouraged to write and publish for the benefit of their careers. However, not many researchers have successfully published in the top-tier journals. Previous research on the writing outputs of researchers provided evidence that the organization of writing is among the major weaknesses which hinders this group of researchers. This paper aims to scrutinize the common issues and mistakes related to the writing practice of novice writers based on the research reports. Our investigation took place via content analysis of a database of manuscripts obtained from 23 postgraduate students, and reviewed by two experienced guest editors. The editorial remarks were analyzed and summarized using an analytical framework by Jaroongkhongdach, Todd, Keyuravong and Hall (2012) which observes five different aspects of manuscript quality. The five aspects include: justification, clarity, coherence, appropriateness and awareness. The findings indicated that many writers in this study lack awareness about research writing. The lack of this technical knowledge severely impacts the conceptualization of their written outputs. Consequently, they could not achieve the expected appropriateness in the construction of their writing in terms of justification, clarity and coherence issues of their texts. It is essential to understand the writing issues that are faced by the novice writer, so that suitable strategies could be identified to help these novice writers and potentially others to overcome their obstacles in writing.*

*Keywords: novice researchers; writing; journal publication; academia; lack of awareness*

### INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing trend among Asian scholars to publish in academic journals and this has led to a fivefold increase over the last twenty years (Haustein, Mittermaind, Tunger & Julich 2009). This increase is parallel to the increasing number of higher education institutions in this region (Lee 2004, Wan 2007) and to the increasing use of performance-based measures as a standard indicator of job promotion (Jung 2012, Wang, Tseng, Yen, & Huang 2011). In the world of academia, journal publication plays a major role in performance-based measure since bibliometric system is widely implemented as an index of

university ranking (Chen & Liao 2012, Haustein et al. 2009, Hemmings & Kay 2010). As discussed by Ahuillo, Bar-Ilan, Levene and Orteja (2010) and Chen and Liao (2012), the quantity and quality of journal publications account for more than 50% of the components considered in the bibliographic systems used by several world university rankings, such as Webometrics Ranking of World Universities (WRWU) by Cybermetrics Lab in Spain, Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU) by Shanghai Jiao Tong University of China, and Performance Ranking of Scientific Papers for World Universities (PRSPWU) by Higher Education Evaluation and Accreditation Council of Taiwan.

The greater emphasis on journal publication has created pressure on the academic staff, posing substantial obstacles, especially in the early years of their career (Huang 2010, Cheung 2010). In many cases, these obstacles result in frustration, marginalisation and even attrition of young scholars. In order to address the issues related to publication, this paper aims to identify the common issues and mistakes related to the writing practice of novice Asian researchers via content analysis of their manuscripts. Our investigation is based on the five generic aspects of manuscript quality, proposed in a similar Asian context by Jaroongkhongdach, Todd, Keyuravong and Hall (2012). The ultimate aim of this investigation is to identify potential strategies of improvement, which would be applicable to the novice researchers who participated in our investigation, as well as the other novice researchers who share the similar contexts.

### PUBLISH OR PERISH

It is widely accepted that academicians, undergraduates and postgraduates are urged to perform the duty of 'writing for journal publication' (e.g., Huang 2010, Cheung 2010). Success in journal publication has been seen as gaining a VIP ticket for a better career advancement (Finkelstein 2006, McGaghie 2009, Miller, Taylor & Bedeian 2011), and even leading to increased incomes (Swidler & Goldreyer, 1998). For example, an article in a top finance journal was estimated to value between \$19,493 and \$33,754 in terms of profit returns from salary and job promotion (Swidler & Goldreyer, 1998). No one can now deny the fact that productivity in scholarly publication is becoming the 'gold standard' for measuring academic quality, credential and success in the world of academia (McGaghie 2009). The question that arises is whether academics and the university students are prepared to face this challenge. Lack of success in journal publication may leave a major impact on many aspects, including reduced job satisfaction, pressure from superiors and feelings of incompetence (Glasheen et al. 2011). These negative impacts possibly lead to change of career choice, emotional stress, low professional self-esteem and the worst scenario ever, i.e. the termination of tenure. Thus, the question that emerges is how to make the process of writing for journal publication a better experience for those involved, especially amongst the young members in academia.

The learning process of writing for journal publication has proven to be difficult for many young researchers. Many academically recognized journals report high rejection rates, from above 90% in top-tier journals to an average of 60-70% in most journals (Cherkashin, Demidova, Imai, & Krishna 2009, Floyd et al. 2011). Manuscript rejection severely challenges the writing confidence of young researchers (Glasheen et al. 2011). Many studies have been done to investigate the causes of manuscript rejections (e.g., Cherkashin et al. 2009, Alton-lee, 1998, Amodei, Jalongo, Onchwari & Gargiulo 2013). As a whole, language and writing problems emerge as major causes of manuscript rejections as compared to the rigorous issues of research (Cherkashin et al. 2009, Jaroongkhongdach et al. 2012). In other words, many researchers face problems in reporting their research rather than in conducting

their research (Jaroongkhongdach et al. 2012). This problem is apparent amongst novice researchers, especially those in Europe and Asia who also face the pressure of writing in English, i.e. the world's preferred academic language (Cho 2009, Flowerdew, 1999, Jaroongkhongdach et al. 2012, Huang 2011).

### WRITING BARRIERS FACED BY NOVICE RESEARCHERS

The urgency of the current situation calls for the investigation of the writing issues faced by the novice researchers in Asia (Huang 2010, Cheung 2010), and subsequently, to identify ways to help them to break their writing barriers (e.g., Li & Flowerdew 2007, Wigglesworth & Storch 2012). Such an investigation is absolutely crucial, in line with the rapid increase in postgraduate students across the Asian countries (Postiglione 2011). Strategies need to be identified in order to help these students to succeed and excel. At the same time, identification of solutions to overcome the writing issues among the students would also help to raise the academic standard in the Asian region as a whole (Lee 2004, Wan 2007). Ultimately, the effort to identify strategies and solutions to overcome the writing issues would act to promote a better research and research writing culture in the Asian academia. Armed with better research writing skills, postgraduate students would be able to perform writing more independently and be able to communicate their thoughts more effectively. Possibly, better writing skills would lead to reduced attempts at plagiarism which has become a major issue in Asian academia (Liu 2005). As a whole, it would lead to a better and a more rewarding experience for both the students and their research supervisors.

In line with the role of English as a global language, most top-tier journals are published in English. To date, a sizeable proportion of high-indexed journals' executive editorial boards are based in North America (Lyytinen, Baskerville, Livari, & Te'eni 2007). As a result, American English and to a certain extent, British English are the two dominant English varieties expected to be mastered by the writers. English language could be an obstacle for novice writers who are nonnative English users. Most studies actually found that the real problems are in 'academic expressions', which include content organization and development (e.g., Cho 2009, Flowerdew, 1999, Jaroongkhongdach et al. 2012). In a Thai study, Jaroongkhongdach et al. (2012) realized that the major issues in the local writing outputs were related to the conceptualization of research. They identified three aspects, namely justification, awareness and coherence, which are lacking in the literature review and discussion sections, that affected the quality of the writing output. Cho (2009) who investigated journal paper writing in a Korean context, attributed the flaws to problems in meta-linguistic features of writing, namely problems related to paper organization and paragraph development. Burrough-Boenisch (2003) refers to these writing problems as 'textual shortcomings at the level of substance, text and discourse' (p.240), which are the most likely to annoy the reviewers. Such content organization problems need to be identified and resolved, and often most effectively via the peer reviews or local editorial services (Burrough-Boenisch 2003).

External critique or feedback has proven to be a successful tool of writing revision (Gosden, 1996, Wigglesworth & Storch 2012). Feedback provided by experienced writers or peer reviewers could help to assist novice researchers identify the type of scientific discourse that meets the expectation of the international audience in academia (Gosden, 1996) and the journal reviewers and editors (Burrough-Boenisch 2003). This feedback could either be obtained from professional consultants (Burrough-Boenisch 2003) or writing partners from overseas (Li & Flowerdew 2007). As explained by Wigglesworth and Storch (2012), collaborative writing activities are fruitful because these activities allow the learners to

discuss and deliberate over particular language features which are unclear, until they reach the positive end. Potentially, similar effects could be obtained for the shaping of journal articles amongst novice researchers.

### ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Jaroongkhongdach, Todd, Keyuravong and Hall (2012) constructed a comprehensive framework for the assessment of published journal articles of Thai scholars, which comprises five generic aspects of quality as shown in Table 1. This analytical framework was applied in the present study to assess the quality of the research papers.

TABLE 1. Analytical framework used in this study

Justification:	The reasoning provided for decisions made in research.
Clarity:	The sufficiency of description or explanations.
Coherence:	The logical relationships between sections.
Appropriateness (note: the term ‘appropriacy’ was used in the original study):	The match between two or more potentially related components, such as the match between the research question and method.
Awareness:	The thorough consideration of alternative views or impacts of research decisions.

Source: Jaroongkhongdach et al. (2012)

## METHODOLOGY

### SAMPLE

Data was gathered through a research writing workshop conducted in a research university in Malaysia. Along with a few other major universities in Malaysia, the status of 'research university' has been awarded to this particular university in recognition of its potential in carrying out impactful research with significant knowledge and social implications. Annually, a research writing workshop is conducted by the School of Educational Studies in this university in order to help postgraduate students to convert their theses or work-in-progress into publishable products.

Twenty three current and recently graduated postgraduate students attended this year's event. The sample consisted of one fresh PhD graduate student, four existing PhD students and eighteen recently graduated Master's students. The majority of the students were local mature-age students (age between 20s and 40s) (Table 2). None of the students were native speakers of English. The local students had acquired their English as an academic language since their primary education, the ways of English acquisition varied for the international students. Three international students were exposed to English as a second language in childhood; while two others learnt and gained proficiency in English during their first degrees. The workshop was conducted in English and all participants were able to use English for interactive purposes throughout the workshop.

TABLE 2. Basic demographic data of the participating postgraduate students

Age	20 – 29 years old	N
	30 – 30 years old	7
		13

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Nationality	>40 years old	3
	Malaysian	18
	Philippine	2
	Turkish	1
	Nigerian	1
First language	Iranian	1
	Malay	8
	Chinese (i.e., Mandarin or Hokkien, a local variety of Min language)	4
	Tamil	6
	Other foreign languages	5
	English	0

#### DATA COLLECTION

All participants were requested to bring along to the workshop a draft manuscript representing their work. The participants were instructed to synthesize their theses into the structure of a journal manuscript, and maintain a length of approximately 5,000 words. The manuscripts were prepared either in Malay, i.e. the official language of Malaysia, or English. A checklist was developed by the guest editors in this study, to serve as a guide for the participants to self-review their manuscript before submitting it (see Appendix). The development of this checklist drew on the writing barriers reported by the related literature, as well as other similar checklists published recently (Alton-Lee, 1998, McGaghie 2009, Shidham, Pitman & DeMay 2012).

The manuscripts were assigned to two guest editors with doctoral qualifications to review. The guest editors were postdoctoral fellows in the school, who had written and published widely in high-impact journals. Individual remarks were provided to each participant during a series of 20-minute face-to-face consultation arranged within the workshop. The guest editors used the APA style as the guide when examining the format of writing. At the end of the three-day workshop, the guest editors compiled their general remarks, to be presented to the whole group. The guest editors' remarks were then compiled to be analysed for the purpose of this study.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

In the present study, the summary of the reviewer's comments were encoded according to the five criteria outlined by Jaroongkhongdach et al. (2012), via content analysis for all 23 participants. The analysis aimed to identify the common error types found in each section of the writing produced by the participants so that the error patterns could be better described and matched with suitable remedial strategies. In order to preserve the anonymity of the original works, the keywords in the examples were substituted with other similar forms.

#### RESULTS

The guest editors provided feedback to the workshop participants according to the major sections generally expected to be presented in a journal manuscript, i.e. title, abstract, introduction, literature review, research questions, methodology, results, discussion, conclusion and references. The guest editors did not note any substantial differences between the manuscripts prepared in English and Malay. The editors gathered all the remarks for the draft manuscripts, and came to a consensus about the writing issues that emerged from the texts. The issues assessed included justification, clarity, coherence, appropriateness and awareness (Jaroongkhongdach et. al 2012). Frequency count was not done, as the analysis

was based on the qualitative remarks made by the editors. The writing issues that were identified in the manuscripts are summarized in Table 3.

TABLE 3. Writing issues identified in the manuscripts of the novice writers

	Justification issues	Clarity Issues	Coherence issues	Appropriateness issues	Awareness Issues
Title		X			
Abstract	X	X	X		X
Introduction	X				X
Literature review	X		X		X
Research questions		X		X	X
Methodology	X	X		X	
Results	X	X	X	X	X
Discussion	X			X	X
Conclusion	X			X	X
References		X			

As the table above demonstrates, different sections of the manuscripts were associated with different dominant patterns of writing issues. Awareness issues dominated the beginning sections of the manuscripts (i.e., title, abstract, introduction, literature review and research questions), followed by justification and clarity issues. Some of the awareness issues observed were related to the lack of awareness about scientific research writing, in addition to research decision problems as put forward by Jaroongkhongdach et al. (2012). On the other hand, appropriateness issues were predominant in the second half of the texts (i.e., research questions, methodology, results, discussion and conclusion), followed again by justification and clarity issues. The writing issues observed in each section were detailed as follows.

#### TITLE

Clarity issues emerged as early as in the writing of the title. The titles selected by the participants did not truly reflect the content matter presented in their articles (*clarity issue*). For instance, a study which examined the effectiveness of a computer-based learning was written as ‘The benefits of a computer-based learning’. Some titles were either too brief or inappropriate (*clarity issue*). For instance, the title ‘Vocabulary acquisition among six years old children’ was very brief as it did not sufficiently describe the scope and variables of that particular research. On the other hand, title such as “Vocabulary knowledge among Form 4 students in Slim River” was also deemed inappropriate, as it is not necessary to provide the specific location of the study (*clarity issue*). In the above cases, the lack of awareness about the rightful way to construct a title affected the clarity of the outcome.

#### ABSTRACT

Four aspects of errors, which are awareness, coherence, justification and clarity issues were obvious in the abstracts. Most of the authors did not follow the regular outline of an abstract. Ideally, the abstract should include an introduction or background, aims and objectives, methods, results, discussion and conclusion, summarizing the entire research concisely (*coherence and clarity issues*). Most manuscripts did not include the background of the study in the abstract (*justification issue*). Instead the writers began the abstracts with “This research aims to..” Ideally they should have said something about the area being investigated rather than the purpose. Overall, the abstracts were poorly structured. There were many instances where the novice writers discussed the findings of the study prior to informing the readers about the design and methods used (*coherence issue*). Many writers also did not highlight the major findings in the abstract and did not clearly state the implications and inferences of the

research in the wake of the current knowledge (*clarity and awareness issues*). Overall, many abstracts suffered from the lack of awareness and coherence as expected in scientific research writing. As a result, justification and clarity issues also became apparent.

## INTRODUCTION

Similar to the abstracts, the lack of awareness about the structure of research writing also affected the introductory sections. Another major flaw of this section was related to justification issues. Many manuscripts did not provide a sufficient overview of the existing knowledge base and its gaps (*justification and awareness issues*). The lack of awareness was also reflected in instances where the writers included irrelevant information in the introduction and background (*justification and awareness issues*). For example, a study which investigated “The relation of Facebook usage and vocabulary acquisition” explained the history of the Facebook instead of discussing how Facebook could be useful for vocabulary acquisition, based on the existing body of knowledge (*justification issue*). It was obvious from this section that the lack of awareness about scientific writing had led to the lack of justification and justification faults in writing.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review section resembles the issues observed in the introductory section. Many manuscripts failed to declare what is and what is not within the scope of the respective studies. Similarly, the awareness about the suitable type of content to be included in this section was lacking in many cases. The major flaws noted in this section are summarised in Table 4.

TABLE 4. Major flaws noted in the Literature Review section

(1)	Interesting facts that were not directly related to the topic of research were included in the writing ( <i>justification issue</i> ). Example: <i>A study about the relationship of Facebook with vocabulary acquisition compared literature on social networking such as Twitter, Blogger and Facebook, which was not directly related to the research topic.</i>
(2)	The relevant literature in the field was not sufficiently covered ( <i>awareness issue</i> ). Example: <i>The same study on Facebook included only a small number of studies that mentioned about the relation of social networking with language acquisition in the Malaysian context, but did not include studies that were done in other parts of the world.</i>
(3)	Up-to-date literature was not included ( <i>awareness issue</i> ). Example: <i>The latest literature included in some manuscripts had been published in the 1990s.</i>
(4)	Non-primary academic sources was cited ( <i>justification and awareness issues</i> ) Example: <i>Wikipedia, blogs or non-peer-reviewed articles.</i>
(5)	Theoretical framework was absent ( <i>justification and awareness issues</i> ). Example: <i>The writer of a study on the effects of computer-based learning on classroom teaching and learning did not provide and elaborate on the theoretical perspectives related to classroom learning behaviors.</i>
(6)	The literature review was not properly conceptualized and organized ( <i>coherence issue</i> ). Example: <i>The same study on the effects of computer-based learning reported elements of computer-based learning, but did not reported literature on the relationships between computer-based learning and learning behaviors in a classroom setting.</i>
(7)	A tendency to report claims made in the existing literature without critically interrogating and examining the whole body of the related literature ( <i>justification issue</i> ). Example: <i>An author reviewed six articles in the areas of leadership by reporting the findings of each article separately, but he/she was unable to synthesize the findings of the articles. In other words, the author was reporting the findings of each study rather than critically reviewed the literature.</i>

As a whole, the failure to synthesize the existing literature properly led to a confusion about what has been accomplished and what still needs to be achieved in the area of the

study. This also led to inability to identify the research gap that could be investigated in the research; and subsequent failure to add new perspectives onto the research topic.

Hence, consistent with our earlier findings, the lack of research awareness was prominent in this section. Subsequently, justification and coherence issues were also obvious. The weaknesses observed in the introduction and literature review sections severely affected the conceptualization of the whole writing. These issues led to the unavoidable appropriateness, justification and clarity issues present in the subsequent sections.

#### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Ideally, research questions should be derived from research objectives after reviewing the literature. Due to the flaws observed in the literature review (e.g., irrelevant or insufficient literature review, lack of theoretical framework, inability to identify research gap etc.), many research questions were not appropriately and clearly formed. Many writers did not clearly articulate the research questions and objectives of their studies. For instance, in the case of a study which aimed to examine the effects of computer-based learning in the classroom, the writer put forward the objective as “To examine the performance of the experimental group and the control group by looking at the pretest and posttest language scores”. This kind of research question or objective is poorly formulated. The content was overloaded with secondary information which severely affected the appropriateness and clarity of the output (*clarity, appropriateness and awareness issues*). Such writing reflects the lack of awareness on the part of the writer. In another example of a case study, the research question formulated was “Is language intervention effective for language delay children?” A research question like this was problematic as this research question could not be answered using a single case study approach (*clarity, appropriateness and awareness issues*). Additionally, many authors also stated both research questions and research objectives in this section, when indeed, the use of either one is adequate.

#### METHODOLOGY

The critical aspects of the methodology section are the justification, clarity and appropriateness of the methodological descriptions. These aspects were found to be lacking in the manuscripts reviewed. Many authors did not provide sufficient descriptions of the research design, sampling methods and selection criterion of the research participants or subjects, and methods of subject allocations in experimental studies (*clarity issue*). For instance, a study on the relationship of Facebook and vocabulary acquisition, did not justify why a total of 200 Form four students were recruited. It was unclear why the number of participants was set as 200, and why the upper secondary students were selected (*justification issue*). Moreover, the study also did not mention why the demographic profile of the respondents (e.g. ethnicity, socio-economic status, frequency of using Facebook) were collected, and how these could be useful for the data analysis (*justification issue*). In addition to this, the choice of research design was not properly justified (*justification and appropriateness issues*). For example, a study on the effectiveness of computer-based learning did not clarify why quasi experimental design was used, but not the simple experimental design. Additionally, various methods, instruments, apparatus and procedures were not described in detail. For instance, a questionnaire was developed to evaluate students’ motivational level as to examine its’ relationship with science learning. A total of 20 questions were listed, but no information were provided on how the questionnaire was constructed (*clarity nad justification issues*). In addition to that, the validity of the questionnaire was not provided (*justification issue*); and the proper description of the analysis

methods were not presented clearly, either (*clarity issue*). Overall, the inability to justify the methods chosen had led to doubt whether the study could be reproduced or duplicated.

## RESULTS

In addition to the justification, clarity and appropriateness issues present in the methodology section, issues related to the coherence of the data presentation with the research questions and the methodology used also surfaced in the results section. A major flaw was that many results presented were not related to the research questions (*coherence and appropriateness issues*). The findings did not reflect the research questions. For instance, a study which aimed to investigate the relation of Facebook usage and vocabulary acquisition did not report on the relationship. On the other hand, the findings reported on the satisfaction of the Facebook usage. Furthermore, many authors included opinions and inferences when reporting their results (*clarity and appropriateness issue*). For instance, a case study which examined the effectiveness of a language intervention program claimed that the intervention program was effective for all the school-aged children. The claim resulting from a case study was deemed to be overgeneralised. There should be more evidence to support such claim. Finally, there were many instances of raw statistical tables without appropriate interpretation (*clarity and justification issues*). For instance, Pearson Correlation was done to examine the relationship of motivational level with science learning. The author presented the raw data in table form which was extracted directly from SPSS output, and did not interpret to what extent the correlation was significant. Again, the observed findings in this section indicated that the authors lack awareness of the proper way of presenting their research data (*clarity and awareness issues*). Ideally, the correlation should be reported with the degrees of freedom in parentheses with the significance level. For example, the two variables were strongly correlated,  $r(55) = .49, p < .01$ .

## DISCUSSION

Awareness, justification and appropriateness issues were also traceable in the discussion section. Generally these writers were unable to critically discuss their findings and as such the discussion was shallow and not substantiated with evidence (*justification issue*). For instance, a study which reported on the effectiveness of a language intervention program could not explain why the program was found to be effective by providing evidence. In other word, the author could not debate the findings by providing useful information on the reasons for obtaining or not obtaining a particular finding. Some authors attempted to compare the findings of their studies with other related studies in the field. However, they did not ensure the like-to-like basis, i.e., a comparison that was done on two items on the same nature, in regards to methodology, which ultimately affected the validity of the claims made (*awareness and appropriateness issues*). For instance, the findings of a longitudinal study were compared with the cross-sectional studies without highlighting the possible discrepancies between the studies. Furthermore, some authors did not state the implications of their findings (*awareness and justification issues*). For instance, a study which investigated the effectiveness of a language intervention program failed to indicate how the findings of the study could be applied. This creates doubts as to what extent their study is useful. Apart from this, many authors did not clearly state the limitations of their studies (*awareness and justification issues*)

## CONCLUSION

In the concluding section, many writers failed to conclude the results obtained, instead they repeated every detail of their findings. For instance, in the manuscript that reported the relationship of Facebook and vocabulary acquisition, the author did not conclude the findings by indicating how the findings are useful and what the impact of the study to the Facebook users. Instead, the authors revisited the findings as reported in the result section. Hence, it was unclear what were the implications of the study (*justification issue*). There are also many instances when the writers provided recommendations that go beyond the limits of the study conducted, protruding the tendency to over-generalize the findings. For instance, a study which found that computer-based learning was effective in a classroom setting, concluded by indicating that computer-based learning was also effective for self-learning (*awareness, justification and appropriateness issues*). Therefore, similar to the discussion section, issues related to awareness, justification and appropriateness were obvious in the conclusions.

## REFERENCES

In many manuscripts, references were not properly written. For instance, the author names were not properly structured and abbreviated (*clarity issue*). The inconsistencies of citing certain Asian names were particularly obvious. There was a tendency for some authors to cite the full names [e.g., Ang Beng Ca (2013), Abdul Balak (2013)]; while some others mixed up the first names and the family names [e.g., Ang (2013) or Ca (2013), Abdul (2013) or Balak (2013)]. Such inconsistencies could be due to the lacking of the relevant guidelines in the field of academic. Another issue noted was related to the consistency of reference styles. Even though the authors were asked to use the APA styles, some of them mixed up several styles such as APA, MLA and Chicago in one reference list. Additionally, one minor problem was that some authors actually included the titles of literature in their writing, e.g., “In the study of Robert (2009) which entitled The Computer-Based Learning...”, instead of listing them in the references. As a whole, the prominent issue in this section is related to the clarity of writing and formatting.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, editorial remarks on the writing output of a group of novice writers were compiled and analysed in order to identify the common writing issues. Using the framework introduced by Jaroongkhongdach et al. (2012), our findings showed that different types of issues are prominent in different sections of manuscript writing. The findings from the current study also show that these issues are interrelated. As a whole, most participants proved to suffer from the lack of awareness about research and research writing, and what influenced the conceptualizations of their papers. Consequently, they could not achieve the expected appropriateness in the construction of their papers, which then manifested as justification, clarity and coherence issues associated to their writing. Awareness issues were prominent throughout the different sections of their writing, especially in the beginning part. The lack of awareness brought along some residual effects on the remaining of their writing, which manifested as appropriateness, justification, clarity and coherence issues. The findings in this paper echoed Juroongkhongdach's (2012) findings that the major issues associated to the writing outputs of novice researchers were related to the conceptualization of the research or, more specifically to the context of the current study, the conceptualization of the research

writing. Similar findings were also reported in Cho (2009). On the other hand, even though writing in English namely, the poor grammar, long sentences and inadequate punctuation of their manuscripts, was an issue for many of the participants, language errors were considered to be minor, as the manuscripts contained major construction flaws, as mentioned above. These construction flaws were apparent across both the English and Malay manuscripts produced.

In line with the perspective put forward by Hong Kong researchers in Flowerdew's (1999) study, the writing issues were not related to the lack of intellectual creativity. On the contrary, it was due to the lack of 'awareness', as defined by Jaroongkhongdach et al. (2012). The reason for this was that the majority of the participants were middle-age adults and many of them were also teachers in primary and secondary schools. Given the fact that these adults were pursuing postgraduate studies at the expense of their busy professional and family lives, their learning attitudes and intellectual qualities were indisputable. Therefore, the errors they portrayed in their academic writing could be related to their lack of knowledge about the standards of a journal manuscript, even though they had produced research theses before they attended the workshop. However, Jaroongkhongdach et al (2012) gave less emphasis to the aspect of 'awareness' as it was placed at the same problematic level as 'justification' and 'coherence'. On the basis of our findings we suggest that 'the lack of awareness' is the primary issue associated to the reduced quality in the research written outputs. As a consequence of this issue, justification, clarity, coherence and appropriateness issues become apparent.

## CONCLUSION

The writing issues of novice scholars observed in this paper reflected that the writers not only lack awareness about research considerations as reported by Jaroongkhongdach et al. (2012), they also lack of awareness about the standard and requirement of scientific writing. The lack of awareness resulted in appropriateness, justification, clarity and coherence issues in their writing. Novice researchers from different parts of the world are likely to face the same problems. Thus, it is crucial to equip the novice researchers with the knowledge of academic or scientific writing skills. This can be done through formal training in undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Other ways to help the novice researchers to produce a good quality academic writing include the use of a checklist, collaborative writing with experienced writers, integrating writing activities in mentoring process, and engaging in scholastic reviewing pools and networks.

Awareness about research and research writing can be considered as a first step to acquire the writing skills necessary for successful journal publication. A junior researcher who develops these skills will then be able to focus on other issues. Given these findings, it seems foremost important to provide novice researchers with forehand information about the standard requirements of scientific writing. This could be done either via a checklist as outlined in the Appendix, or to make scientific writing a formal training in undergraduate and postgraduate programs, facilitated by experienced writing instructors (Zhu 2004). On the other hand, peer reviewing (Burrough-Boenisch 2003, Gosden, 1996, Misak, Marusic, & Marusic 2005) and collaborative writing (Li & Flowerdew 2007, Wigglesworth & Storch 2012) could be implemented to reinforce the knowledge they have acquired. Furthermore, research supervisors need to be more proactive in indentifying problems related to writing as early as possible, so that their supervisees still have time to seek for remedial helps and find ways for self-improvement. Another strong implication obtained from this study is the relevance and urgency to provide information about writing techniques of scientific papers to

novice researchers. It was apparent from the findings that many participants did not know about the ‘formula’ of writing a scientific paper, despite their postgraduate trainings. To date, training in scientific writing has yet to be made compulsory in most of the undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Despite the fact that some institutions offer courses on research methodology, academic writing itself is yet to become a core component of teaching. Accordingly, Cheung (2010) advocates for writing activities to be integrated into a mentoring process for novice researchers. On the other hand, a greater emphasis should be taken on the autonomy and integrity of novice writers throughout their induction, as argued by Huang (2010). Consequently, it seems plausible to improve the quality of scientific writing, especially in the ESL contexts, had the related issues been identified and addressed - which would have a far-reaching impact on the academic output of young researchers in the ESL and EFL contexts.

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## APPENDIX: THE CHECKLIST USED DURING THE WORKSHOP

### CHECKLIST FOR PREPARING AN ARTICLE

Please check (/) whether you have included the followings in your article:

#### Title

- State the title informatively and succinctly

#### Abstract

- Include introduction and background
- State aims and objectives
- Discuss methods
- Explain results
- Include conclusions

#### Introduction/Background

- State why your study is necessary
- Identify the research problem

#### Literature Review

- Justify criteria for inclusion and exclusion from review
- Distinguish what has been done in the field from what needs to be done
- Articulate important variables and phenomena relevant to the topic
- Synthesize and gain a new perspective on the literature

#### Purpose and Research Question

- State the purpose of the study clearly

- Define the research questions appropriately and connect to the research issues
- Identify constructs and variables

#### Methods

- State the type of study
- Answer the research questions using appropriate research design
- Explain the participants of the study adequately
- Discuss the procedures and data collection
- Explain the analysis used

#### Results

- Generate results that answer the research questions
- Select graphs and tables appropriate to best communicate your data

#### Discussion

- Analyze your findings and put them into a broader scientific context
- Discuss in the light of previous studies
- State the implications of results
- State the limitation of the study

#### Conclusion

- Summarize your study

#### References

- Present references according to the journal's style
- Include all sources cited in the text, table and figures
- Use up to date references

#### Writing Mechanism

- Perform spell check
- Check whether sentences are grammatical
- Check if the language are consistent in all areas
- Ensure no plagiarism