

Developing an understanding of the sources of graduate students' perceptions of academic writing

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ABSTRACT

An increasing number of Saudi students in American universities has generated a need to explore the Saudi students' perceptions of academic writing and the sources of such perceptions. Further research can enable writing researchers and instructors to help Saudi students to be better writers in American contexts. This study, therefore, explored the sources of 12 Saudi graduate students' perceptions of academic writing. The findings collected from 12 semi-structured interviews revealed the sources of the participants' perceptions of academic writing. These sources are the perceived effects of the participants' professors, the perceived effects of their fields of study/occupations, the perceived effects of their peers, and the perceived effects of the Saudi culture. The findings suggest the creation of opportunities for writing practices which can help identify the origins of difficulties in academic writing, and then help students overcome those difficulties and change the negative perceptions students have about academic writing. The findings also show that those sources are interrelated. A more in-depth study of student perceptions and their sources is needed because we need a broader picture of how such sources might interact with each other.

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INTRODUCTION

Many international students enroll annually at American, Canadian, British, and Australian universities, and the number of those students is increasing (Institute of International Education, 2014). Because they are enrolled in universities where English is the medium of instruction, those students are required to write in English. Writing in English is difficult for many non-native speakers of English because they need to learn the language as well as the academic conventions (Suherdi et al., 2020). In other words, international students often struggle while attempting to conform to the English academic writing conventions (Juliaty, 2019).

Since writing is a complex activity that requires paying attention to different areas, such as vocabulary, sentences, grammar, paragraphs, ideas, academic conventions, and expectations of audience

(Nam & Seong, 2020), the academic writing ability of international students has been under investigation in order to have it improved. As international students often tend to bring with them the rhetorical and academic strategies related to their cultures which are different from those followed in the countries they want to pursue their studies in (Connor, 2002), some of these students have been noted as having perceptions of academic writing that do not conform to those of their instructors and professors (Fishman & McCarthy, 2001). Since the students' perceptions of academic writing skills is one of the factors that affect their academic writing skills (Pajares & Valiante, 2006), it is important to explore the sources of such perceptions so that writing researchers and instructors can help students to be successful academically.

Despite the fact that some studies in the

literature have pointed out that Saudi students encounter difficulties with academic writing (e.g., Fageeh, 2003), and the number of Saudi students in the United States reached more than 60.000 in 2019 (Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia, 2019), not much research has been conducted on Saudi students. Shaw (2009) points out:

Research has been conducted to understand the challenges and needs of international students in general (with Asian students as the central focus). However, little research has been undertaken to understand the Saudi Arabian experience. In addition, studies exist that determine how to support international students (again predominantly Asian students), yet there is little that focuses on Saudi Arabian students. A sizeable sub-group of international students, Saudi students are under-represented in investigations of international students. (p. 4)

As a result, a comprehensive understanding of the sources that could be influencing the perceptions of graduate students and, in this case, Saudi students on academic writing would be important because it will reveal the reasons for their understanding of academic writing. As a result, the findings can help academic writing instructors give their students the type of assistance and courses the students need to improve their academic writing skills.

Only a limited number of studies have touched on the sources of graduate students' perceptions of writing skills. Those studies referred to different sources, namely: The effects of the courses the students enroll in, the effects of teachers and professors, the effects of the students' culture, and the effects of the students' English proficiency.

The effects of courses the students enroll in on their perceptions

Some researchers explored the effects of the courses the students enroll in on shaping their perceptions. In a study conducted by Gambell (1991), several undergraduate students believed that their "university discouraged writing" (p. 429). Those students referred to the writing courses they are required to enroll in to support their claims. They indicated that the unrealistic writing demands in those writing courses made them perceive writing as difficult. One of the unrealistic writing demands, according to those students, was that they are required to finish writing six essays in only three hours during their final exam.

The effects of teachers and professors on the students' perceptions

Other researchers have noticed the effects of teachers on their students in terms of shaping their perceptions. Cai (2013), for example, points out that the Chinese graduate students he interviewed perceived the Introduction and the References sections in a thesis as not difficult. The reason

behind this perception, according to the interviewees in Cai's study (2013), is that their teachers and professors dedicated many lessons in their writing courses to teach them how to cite references correctly. Kubota (2001) perceives academic writing skills as easy because when she was studying in primary education, her teacher asked her to write diaries. With the time passing by, Kubota says that "the volume, complexity, and sophistication of [her] writing increased." (2001, p. 99).

Different from Cai (2013), Gambell (1991) claims that one of the factors that make students perceive writing as difficult is the "inconsistent and ambiguous standards among professors" (p. 429). He says that some of those professors did not clarify to their students what they (professors) expect from their students in the students' papers. He also noticed that the professors did not show their students how their papers would be graded. These two reasons, according to Gambell (1991), made the students perceive writing as a difficult task.

Finally, Li (2007) found that professors and teachers play a major role in shaping the students' perceptions of writing in particular and in education in general. In Li's study, the students did not search for different sources to improve their academic skills (for example, reading books, talking with a classmate), but were relying on the teacher as the only source to teach them the academic writing conventions.

The effects of the students' culture on their perceptions of academic writing

The students in the study conducted by Carson and Nelson (1996) perceived their peers' comments on their writing as not effective enough to improve their essays. Such perceptions, according to Carson and Nelson (1996), can be attributed to the students' culture (the Chinese culture) in which group harmony is valued more than criticism. As a result, the students did not try to find or to correct errors and did not provide much feedback to their peers on their writing. Being asked to perform various writing activities (for example, report writing, editing, and copying from textbooks) during primary education, made Kubota (2001) perceive academic writing skills as not difficult.

The effects of students' English proficiency on their perceptions of academic writing

Sometimes, the students' level of English proficiency could be a possible reason for perceiving writing in English as difficult by those students. Some of the students in Lee and Tajino's study (2008) referred to their low level of English proficiency as the reason for having difficulties with academic writing. This source, according to Graham (2006), was an internal factor in that it required much effort from the teachers because it is difficult for the students to overcome this difficulty.

Ferreira and Santoso (2008) suggested that the writing performance of the students in their study was affected by their perceptions. Therefore, it is important to explore the sources of the students' perceptions of academic writing because that could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the perceptions of the international students of academic writing with respect to their educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

Exploring the sources of the Saudi graduate students' perceptions of academic writing from different disciplines has not been investigated yet. In fact, the studies reviewed above focused on Chinese students (Cai, 2013) and on undergraduate students (Gambell, 1991). Therefore, this study will be focusing on the sources of some of the Saudi graduate students' perceptions of academic writing. Understanding the sources of the graduate Saudi students' perceptions of academic writing will add to the existing body of research in the area of academic writing in general and the types of difficulty in particular.

Thus, the current study aimed to address the following research question: What might be the sources of Saudi graduate students' perceptions of academic writing?

METHOD

The overall approach

This study is an interview-based qualitative research using grounded theory for data analysis. The grounded theory influenced the qualitative research methodology used in this study because the current study aims to "reveal participants' views, feelings, intentions, and actions as well as the contexts and structures of their lives" in order to explore the participants' perceptions of academic writing and to find the sources of such perceptions (Charmaz, 2006, p. 26).

Interview as the data collection method

Interviews could help researchers find out what interviewees feel and think about their worlds (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), in this case, their

perceptions of academic writing. Interviews are opportunities to "explore with a participant, in an in-depth manner, a situation, experience, or issue" (Blakeslee & Fleisher, 2019, p. 129). The researcher can also reach a comprehensive understanding regarding the participants' experiences even if s/he did not take part in those experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Therefore, conducting interviews with the participants enabled the researcher to "ask open-ended questions so that the participants can best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past findings" (Creswell, 2015, p. 225) and to understand the participants' experiences.

The interview in this study was a semi-structured one because it "allows the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic" (Merriam, 1998, p. 74). The result of such method, when compared with other methods, is more reliable because the data are given in details; therefore, the researcher will be able to have better findings in his/her study (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Questions

The interview questions were prepared in a way that could reveal the participants' perceptions and the possible sources. There were thirty-eight questions. Some of the questions were adopted from other published studies and some were designed by the researcher.

The participants

12 Saudi graduate students (six males and six females) enrolled in different programs at various American universities were interviewed. The participants must be enrolled in their programs for at least one year to ensure that they have written at least several assignments at the graduate level. All the participants were fluent speakers of Arabic (their mother tongue) and they have fulfilled the English proficiency requirements of the respective graduate programs. More information about the participants in Table 1.

Table 1

Information about the Interviewees

Name	Gender	Major	Graduate degree
Reem	F	Educational Leadership	Ph.D.
Nader	M	Engineering Management	Master's
Lila	F	English	Master's
Sami	M	Business	Ph.D.
Deema	F	Food Science	Master's
Mohammad	M	Mechanical Engineering	Ph.D.
Huda	F	Finance	Master's
Turki	M	Industrial Engineering	Master's
Rakan	M	Hospitality Administration	Master's
Maram	F	Chemistry	Ph.D.
Adel	M	Computer Science	Ph.D.
Tala	F	Chemistry	Ph.D.

After receiving the participants' approval of their profiles, I started coding the interviews following the Grounded Theory method. Grounded Theory is the theory that is "inductively derived from the study of the phenomenon it represents [it aims to] build theory that is faithful to and illuminates the area under study" (Strauss & Corbin, 2015, pp. 23-24).

Data analysis

After interviewing the participants, I transcribed the interviews. The participants were also given pseudonyms in order to maintain their anonymity. I transcribed the interviews in Arabic and translated them in English. The translation accuracy was checked by a Ph.D. student in the English department. The translator is a native speaker of Arabic.

After that, I wrote a profile for each participant in English. The profiles include information based on their answers in the interviews. I sent the summary of the key points along with the individual profiles to the participants so that they can read them. My purpose for doing this was to confirm their answers and to make sure that what was written in those profiles clearly represented what they had said in the interviews.

The coding process took place in a few steps. First, I identified all the key points in the individual interviews. The next step involved the exploration of thematic similarities across the interviews. As a result, a number of common themes were identified which can be found under the findings and discussion section. During the coding process, I recursively reduced the number of codes and sub-codes in order to capture a more organized and hierarchical picture of the participants' perceptions' sources. Finally, the coding process was completed using the help of another researcher with prior coding experiences. When we had a disagreement, we would talk about its reasons till we reached a complete agreement about which code should be assigned for that particular sentence.

FINDINGS

Listening to the participants' interviews multiple times and reading the interview transcripts recursively enabled me to identify several possible sources for their perceptions and misconceptions. These sources are: The perceived effects of the participants' professors, the perceived effects of their fields of study/occupations, the perceived effects of their peers, and the perceived effects of the Saudi culture.

The perceived effects of the participants' professors

Several participants talked about the effects of their professors on their perceptions of academic writing

in several situations. Mohammad, a Ph.D. student in Chemical Engineering, for example, says:

(Excerpt 1)

"I go to the writing center..because I want my professor to know that I was there and then get a better grade." (Mohammad, Interview Transcript, p. 26)

Mohammad believed that going to the writing center would enable him to get a better grade on his academic papers. Mohammad's claim for having better grades was not because the writing center would help him in his papers but because the instructors at the writing center would inform his professors that he was a client and this would affect his grades positively.

Another participant, Rakan, a Master's student in Hospitality Administration, was directed to go to the writing center because his professor wanted to focus on the content of the paper and not to be distracted by the need to correct the grammatical mistakes in every sentence, as we can see in excerpt (2).

(Excerpt 2)

"The first term paper I wrote was thrown at my face by my professor..he said: I want to focus on the content of the paper not to teach you grammar." (Rakan, Interview Transcript, p. 42)

Since that incident, Rakan started perceiving his weak grasp of grammar as a major difficulty in writing a paper. Therefore, he would have any academic paper he wrote proofread before submitting it to make sure that it did not have any grammatical errors. He felt strongly that grammar instruction should be a component of an academic writing course and that writing teachers should correct grammatical errors when reading their students' papers. His professor's comment made Rakan limit the successful academic writing skills to only the ability to write a term paper that lacks grammatical errors.

Huda, a Master's in finance, perceived non-academic writing as easier than academic writing because with non-academic writing, the writer is not trying to please the reader, contrary to academic writing where students are motivated to satisfy their professors. Such a perception came as a result of one of her professor's comments when she was asked to write about the differences between a city and a village. This is a short piece of what she wrote for that assignment:

(Excerpt 3)

"A city is like a woman in grief, always wearing black [a reference to the tall buildings that are built of cement]..with bad habit which is smoking [fumes from factories]..while a village is like a happy woman wearing colorful clothes." (Huda, Interview Transcript, p. 31)

Because her professor in her Bachelor's degree program told her that her writing assignment was

not satisfactory because academic assignments are not written in that way, Huda stated that she lost confidence in her ability to master writing skills. As a result, she started preferring to collaborate with classmates in her Business Administration courses (she majored in Business Administration for her Master's degree), where she could focus on numbers, while any member of the group can be responsible for the writing process for the projects they are working on.

Whether the professors are native speakers of English or not play a major role in Adel's case. He says:

(Excerpt 4)

"Because my advisor is a non-native speaker of English, he makes mistakes in the sentences just like me, so why should I care about improving my term paper?! But if my advisor is a native speaker of English, I will pay more attention." (Adel, Interview Transcript, p. 49)

From the previous excerpt, we can see that there are at least three misconceptions in the way Adel perceived the importance of academic writing. The first one is that Adel assumes that because his advisor is a non-native speaker of English, he (his advisor) would not be able to identify the grammatical mistakes he makes. The second misconception is that the native speakers of English do not make grammatical mistakes. The third misconception is, similar to Rakan, Adel limits academic writing skills to be able to write academic sentences that lack any grammatical mistakes.

The perceived effects of the participants' fields of study/occupations

I also noticed how the participants commented on the influence of their majors on their academic writing skills in several cases. Turki, who majors in Industrial Engineering, for example, says:

(Excerpt 5)

"My major does not help [to have good academic writing skills]. I always deal with numbers and graphs..it is mainly mathematics..since I was doing my Bachelor and Master's degrees, I only wrote academic papers that are composed of texts in Composition 1 and 2 courses." (Turki, Interview Transcript, p. 37)

Because he believed his major necessitated that he used numbers and graphs in his assignments rather than words, Turki did not seem to believe that he had any chance to practice some academic writing skills (for example, referencing, writing style, audience). Although Turki's major did not help him improve his academic writing skills as he claimed, he did not search for other opportunities to improve such skills.

The influence of Turki's major, Industrial Engineering, can also be seen as an influencing factor in his perception regarding the best way to correct English writing assignments to improve

students' writing skill. Since most of his assignments employ numbers and graphs, he believed that he lacked the ability to make his writing coherent; therefore, he believed that writing instructors should focus on the cohesiveness and transitions between sentences and between paragraphs, as we can see in excerpt (6).

(Excerpt 6)

"[writing instructors should focus on] the flow of sentences and of paragraphs.. all the sentences should be connected and coherent." (Turki, Interview Transcript, p. 40)

Adel also said that because almost all of his assignments in his major, Computer Science, were written in programming languages, academic writing skills were not relevant to him, as can be seen in excerpt (7).

(Excerpt 7)

"Since [assignments] in our major [Computer Science] are written in programming languages, English is not important to us [students]." (Adel, Interview Transcript, p. 49)

Therefore, he perceived using transitional words and sentences in academic writing as the greatest difficulty for him, as can be seen in excerpt (8). Such perception might be a result of not being required to write full academic papers in his courses.

(Excerpt 8)

"I have a problem with transitional words and phrases." (Adel, Interview Transcript, p. 50)

Both Adel and Nader viewed academic writing and academic papers as lengthy (Excerpts 9 & 10). Such perception is probably as a result of effects of their majors, Computer Science and Industrial Engineering, where they are required mostly to use programming languages, graphs, and numbers in their academic papers and not academic texts. Although they did not write academic texts, their use of the word "lengthy" probably came as a result of reading journal articles.

(Excerpt 9)

"[Academic writing] is lengthy and not to the point." (Adel, Interview Transcript, p. 51)

(Excerpt 10)

"Journal articles require so much time to finish reading them." (Nader, Interview Transcript, p. 7)

Similarly, because her major is Chemistry, Tala was mostly required in her assignments to write numbers and chemical formulas. Because she rarely, if ever, writes academic texts, she perceives academic texts to be lengthy. Hence, when she tried to paraphrase a paragraph that she found in a book or in an article to write it in her dissertation, she said that she encountered difficulties doing that, as we can see in Excerpt (11).

(Excerpt 11)

"I have a problem..when I have a complete paragraph and I want to paraphrase it..it [the

paragraph] becomes less than the original paragraph.” (Tala, Interview Transcript, p. 54)

The previous excerpt shows that Tala perceived that a paraphrased paragraph should be as long as the original one. This belief seems to have made her perceive the paraphrasing process as a difficult task to do in academic writing.

Students in some majors are required to work alone when they do their assignments. Not working collaboratively with other students, according to Adel, might have affected their academic writing skills negatively, as we can see in excerpt (12).

(Excerpt 12)

“One of the problems encountered by some students is that they are given the assignment and then left alone to do it ..if he had other students with him, he could have come up with better ideas and better paper in terms of the writing style.” (Adel, Interview Transcript, p. 51)

Adel perceived working collaboratively with other classmates would make students come up with better ideas for their assignments. Additionally, working collaboratively, from Adel’s point of view, would improve the academic writing skills of the students. Probably Adel was referring to not being able to work collaboratively with his classmates as one of the reasons for his weak academic writing skills.

From excerpts (5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 & 12), I noticed that not being required to write academic papers in texts due to some majors’ requirements which emphasized using codes, numbers, and graphs instead of using complete sentences and paragraphs could be considered a reason for some students to start losing some academic writing skills (for example, lacking coherence). They may start to lose the incentive to improve their academic writing as well, which might endanger their academic lives (for example, considering plagiarism as an acceptable issue).

Several participants worked in various jobs before they started their graduate studies, and we can see the effects of their previous jobs on their perceptions of academic writing. Working in a company for ten years where he had to write user manuals affected Nader’s perception regarding the differences between academic writing and non-academic writing. He perceives academic writing as more difficult than non-academic writing because:

(Excerpt 13)

“It looks strange and difficult to read ..probably they see it as comfortable but it is not .. when all the sentences are written in one way ..that will not allow you to focus on some points that you want the readers to pay attention to ..when the font size is the same for the whole sentences, it looks odd and does not encourage you to read ..on the other hand, if I want to make a user manual or write a letter, I’ll arrange it to you and it will be clear and can be easily read and the information you are looking for will be easy to find ..while academic writing it is

not like this at all.” (Nader, Interview Transcript, p. 6)

Nader considered academic writing difficult not because of the academic writing skills but because of its appearance (organization and format).

In excerpt (14), Nader also referred to structure as one of the differences between academic writing and nonacademic writing. The structure of the papers that are written in an academic writing style is complicated which, according to Nader, makes them boring for the international students because English is not their mother tongue and for the Americans as well even though English is their mother tongue.

(Excerpt 14)

“Its [academic writing’s] structure is different ..but academic writing is boring ..you don’t enjoy [reading it]..so you are eager to read the results [in a journal article] but they come at the end ..journal articles do not provoke you into reading them ..may be because we are nonnative speakers of English ..English is not our mother tongue ..but I believe that academic writing is difficult ..even the American guy [as a native speaker of English] would not enjoy reading ..but you have to do this kind of writing which is not enjoyable at all.” (Nader, Interview Transcript, p. 7)

He also claimed that academic writing is lengthy which makes the article boring to be read. These three features, complicated structure, being lengthy, and font style (in excerpt no. 14), are contrary to what Nader used to do in writing the user manuals (which require simple sentences and short paragraphs) when he used to work before deciding to pursue his Master’s degree. Therefore, his experience in writing users’ manuals has affected his perceptions regarding the features of academic writing, leading him to perceive academic writing as boring.

The prospective jobs of the students had influenced their perceptions regarding academic writing. As can be seen in excerpt (15), Lila points out that some students perceive academic writing as something that they are not compelled or required to learn. Such students, according to Lila, claim that academic writing is not needed in their prospective jobs. Those students might be looking at academic writing as a means to get their degrees only and not as a skill that could be used outside the academic life.

(Excerpt 15)

“They [students] say that writing is not their majors, we are majoring in something else so why do we care about writing ..they think that it [writing] is not going to be beneficial to them ..they would not write in their jobs so why do they care about it.” (Lila, Interview Transcript, pp. 13 & 16)

The perceived effects of participants’ peers

The effects of the participants’ classmates and friends on their perceptions of academic writing can

be seen in several cases. Deema and Huda, for example, noticed that their classmates wrote more than they did. They concluded that academic papers should be lengthy. Deema, for example, said:

(Excerpt 16)

"I think I have a problem ..I do not write much [in the term papers]..because I can see that my classmates write more than I do." (Deema, Interview Transcript, p. 21)

Huda says:

(Excerpt 17)

"I think those around me are better than me in writing ..I see others write more [than me] and I write less [than them] so I think they are better than me." (Huda, Interview Transcript, p. 32)

Although Deema mentioned during the interview that she received better grades than her classmates did, she did believe that writing lengthy papers was something necessary in academia because not being able to do that is considered a problem from her point of view.

The perceived effects of participants' national culture

Reem claimed that Saudi students do not have good academic writing skills because they were not taught those skills in Saudi Arabia. When asked about the reasons that make English teachers and professors in Saudi Arabia neglect teaching academic writing skills to their students, she enumerated three reasons. Those reasons are:

(Excerpt 18)

"Because teachers and professors themselves lack the academic writing skills ..and teachers are told by their supervisors to focus mainly on grammar.. and non-Saudi teachers are primarily motivated by generous salaries rather than the wish to improve students' writing skills." (Reem, Interview Transcript, p. 5)

From this excerpt, I can see that Reem focused mainly on the teachers and professors. She may have neglected the effect of students and the effect of English textbooks on the process (neglect teaching academic writing skills), and this neglect could be attributed to the effects of the Saudi culture which considers the teacher as the only source of knowledge (Grami, 2012).

With the exception of Deema, all the participants did not talk about their voices in their academic papers. A suggested reason for such absence could be attributed to their culture which views professors as the only authority of knowledge and considers the teacher as the only player in the teaching process (Grami, 2012).

DISCUSSION

In this study, I attempted to explore what the sources of some Saudi graduate students' perceptions of English academic writing might be.

The identified sources were: The perceived effects of the participants' professors, the perceived effects of their fields of study/occupations, the perceived effects of their peers, and the perceived effects of the Saudi culture.

The participants in the current study did not claim that some of the sources affected their academic writing skills negatively. It was my interpretation after comparing their perceptions with the students' perceptions in other studies and with the researchers' perceptions in the narratives.

Interrelated sources

Firstly, a closer look at the identified sources suggests that some of the discussed perceived sources of perceptions might be interrelated (for example, the effect of professors on the participants' perceptions). We can assume that the Saudi education system can shape professors' perceptions of academic writing. Moreover, since teachers and professors are viewed as the only sources of academic knowledge in Saudi Arabia (Grami, 2012), they usually pass down such perceptions to their students. Therefore, a more in-depth study of student perceptions and their sources is still needed, because we need a broader picture of how such sources might interact with each other.

Negative effects of professors

One of the sources of the participants' perceptions of academic writing was their university professors. Because teachers and professors were viewed as the predominant sources of knowledge in Saudi Arabia (Grami, 2012), it was not surprising that the participants' perceptions can be affected by what those professors say and do. Limiting good academic writing to only writing papers that lack grammatical mistakes (Rakan's case) and not being interested in improving one's own academic writing skills (Huda's case) are two examples of how the participants' perceptions and academic writing skills might have been influenced by their professors. This finding is consistent with that in a recent study by Basturkmen et al. (2014). They noticed that graduate students' supervisors in a New Zealand university often focused on linguistic accuracy and appropriateness, a finding that they considered to be consistent with the findings from previous studies such as Kumar and Strack (2007) and Gulfidan (2009). Basturkmen et al. (2014) offered a number of explanations for the widespread use of linguistic accuracy/appropriateness-focused comments. Through providing multiple comments on linguistic accuracy/appropriateness they wonder whether the supervisors may have wished to highlight the need for meticulousness in grammar and expression in order to "underscore the need for precise expression and appropriate phrasing in terms of academic English expectations" (p. 441). They may not wish to take on an editing role, but they "may wish to flag that a thesis needs to be highly articulate and well

proofread,” according to Basturkmen et al. (2014). In this study, however, I was not able to find out the reasons why the instructors, according to the participants, often focused on grammar and accuracy in their writing. The key finding, however, does speak to the negative effect that such a focus have on the students in this study, something that suggests certain training for supervisors/professors that I will talk about in the next section.

We can also see the effects of professors on their students’ perceptions in some published studies. Cai (2013), for example, claims that graduate Chinese students find referencing a very easy task to do because their professors dedicated many courses to teach students how to do that. Bhatia (2001) also points out that the encouragement, participation, and direction he received from his advisors and mentors had affected his academic writing skills positively. In the current study, on the other hand, it was shown that the impact of professors might be different. In particular, the findings indicate that the participants’ professors may have influenced the students’ perceptions negatively. The participants’ professors, for example, led them to stop practicing writing and focusing on analyzing numbers (Huda’s case), to perceive good academic papers as the ones that lack grammatical mistakes (Rakan’s case), and to lose interest in improving academic papers because of an advisor’s being a non-native speaker of English (Adel’s case). The above cases are just some examples of the negative effects of professors, at least as seen by the participants, on their students’ perceptions. The negative effect of professors can also be seen in the study conducted by Basturkmen et al. (2014). In their study, the authors reported that the advisors had given their students very few comments which were focused on cohesion and coherence even though that the advisors pointed out that their students encounter difficulties in that aspect of writing.

In the current study, I compared the negative effects of professors on my participants’ academic writing skills with the positive effects of professors on the academic writing skills of the narratives because the participants talked only about that kind of effect during the interviews. Similarly, the researchers in the narratives talked only about the positive effects of their professors and mentors in their academic writing skills.

Misunderstanding the connection between academic writing and requirements of various fields of study

Some of the participants’ perceptions may have also come as a result of the effect of their fields of study. This source indicates that some of the participants, for example, might have misunderstood the connection between academic writing and requirements of various fields of study. Because

most of the participants were expected to use numbers, codes, and formulas in their assignments and term papers, they attached less importance to their academic writing skills and, hence, encountered difficulties when they started writing their theses or dissertations. The students’ connection of the role of writing and certain majors is interesting. One may wonder whether such a connection is accurate, if not simplistic. For example, Tsai, in a literacy narrative, made such a claim: “chemistry is an experimental science. Thus, one would think that a chemistry professor should spend most of the time in the laboratory” (Tsai, 2001, p. 135). Indeed, that seems to be the perception of some of the students in this study, as we can see how they link certain number and code-intensive majors, such as chemistry, with the lack of writing. However, Tsai continues to point out very cogently that “for the right or wrong reasons, I now spent more than half of my time [as a chemistry professor] writing in my office. The proportion of writing in my daily work has been increasing throughout my career” (p. 135). Of course, Tsai concedes that, “at first, it was only recording experimental procedures,” something quite similar to what the participants in this study admit in the interviews. However, later, writing started to figure more prominently in his career as a chemistry academic. Maybe our students need to take the long view and change their perceptions of the role of writing in some majors, possibly through some courses and training programs, something I will discuss in the next section.

A possible reason for such misunderstanding is that the participants limited practicing their academic writing skills to the required writing assignments only. Indeed, Tsai (2001) acknowledged that he started to make “the biggest progress” as a writer when he engaged in authentic writing tasks, such as thesis and dissertation writing (p. 138). Another way to make students’ writing tasks authentic and, possibly, alter their perception of the role of writing is to engage in the research process. In fact, not limiting practicing academic writing skills only to assignments and making attempts to publish could be the causes for the success of the NNEs in Belcher and Connor’s book (2001) in academic writing skills and could be the causes for the participants’ perceived weakness in academic writing in the current study. Bhatia (2001), for example, noticed that active participation in the research process has helped him see the role of writing in knowledge creation. He remembered that “whenever my advisor took home some of the texts I was struggling with and the following day brought back his own analyses and interpretations, however tentative, I used to gain new understanding of the discipline” (Bhatia, 2001, p. 44). This interpretation of the role of writing in disciplinary understanding is certainly more positive and

sophisticated than our students' perceptions. It raises interesting questions on whether the perceptions of writing could be changed if instructors first focused on the role of writing and its importance.

Tsai (2001), who is majoring in chemistry, and Kubota (2001), who is majoring in education, claimed that learning English and how to write in English is a lifelong process. This, however, was not observed in most of the participants of the current study who never talked about a continuous learning of English after leaving English language institutes.

Although some of the participants in the present study indicated that their majors have negative effects on their academic writing skills (because their majors required only using codes, numbers, and formulas in their assignments), we can see many examples of non-native English speakers who are successful in English academic writing in Belcher and Connor's book (2001). Some of the successful academic writers' majors were similar to those of the participants' in the current study (for example, Tsai (2001) majoring in Chemistry and Hemami (2001) majoring in Engineering). Hemami (2001), for example, claimed that not limiting himself to reading about his major only and reading books in literature is what made him a successful academic writer.

Simplistic understanding of the effect of culture

The final perceived source of the students' perceptions of academic writing was their national culture, including the educational system. The effect of such a source can also be seen in different studies. Kubota (2001), for example, was taught how to read from an early age. Kubota (2001) claimed that being asked to read books in English and starting to write a diary in English helped her become a good academic writer. The participants in the current study, on the contrary, believed that they were not encouraged to read and to write anything in English not relevant to their academic lives. As a result, they believed that their lack of academic writing skills might be attributed to the effect of their culture.

Despite the fact that the participants in the current study were studying for at least two years in the United States (in fact, some of them have been studying in the U.S. for more than eight years), the findings indicate that the participants were still claiming that their culture negatively affected their perceptions negatively (for example, teachers in their country did not teach them the academic writing skills). This can be something very interesting if we consider the more nuanced role culture plays in others' academic literacy development. For example, Hemami (2001) talked about culture in more complex ways. When he came to the US, he decided to stop using his native language (Persian), even with people from his country. He attributed that to the fact that Persian

started to introduce into his psyche "a whole bunch of old memories and reflections and feelings and so forth" that are linked to political conflicts in his country that he did not find very helpful (151). In order to cope with such memories, he started reading books in human behavior and psychology. Hemami (2001) claimed that reading was one of the reasons that made him a successful academic writer.

Liu (2001) pointed out that he did not receive formal training in English composition while he was studying for his bachelor degree in English language and literature in a Chinese university. He also claimed that even when he became a faculty member in the same department, the "lack of the need as well as a sense of self-protection through avoidance had a negative impact on my L2 writing" (127). Liu (2001) mentioned that because his father was an English teacher, the Red Guards would come without notice to inspect their house looking for Western books that might poison their thoughts. Liu and the rest of his family were hiding the English books his father purchased under their beds. He claimed that he enjoyed those days that he did not go to school for being sick because he "could be left alone at home with the doors shut and concentrate for hours and hours on going through all the books underneath our beds" (122). Those books, Liu (2001) indicated, helped him to improve his academic literacies.

In contrast with Liu, Julia (2001) claimed that she did not like reading and writing in English when she was student. Although she came from a verbal culture and her parents valued the skill of being able to write properly, she did not like the encouragement she received from her parents and from her school to learn English. In fact, she considered English as "a school activity, and once out of the classroom, there was no use of it – at home or with peers, anywhere. I never practiced it, in fact, I avoided it" (178). Although she did not enjoy reading and writing in English at that time, she started considering them as "a need or as a quality that one should possess, but not as a pleasurable activity. It was always a tool of survival for me" (179).

Finally, it is important to indicate that although the persons in the narratives had complicated and sophisticated views in comparison with my participants because the participants' demographics are different from that of the persons in the narratives and that the participants in my study may have instrumental motivation when they study academic writing, the persons in the narratives were graduate students just like my participants before they (persons in the narratives) become professional.

CONCLUSION

It is essential to seek students' feedback on a regular basis if we want to improve their academic writing

experience. Such feedback could be used to improve their areas of weakness with academic writing skills. This study aspires to contribute and provide insight that ultimately will help Saudi students to master academic writing skills and lead to greater success academically.

This study shifts the focus of attention and responsibility from students who feel blamed for their weakness in academic writing skills to include the perceived effects of the participants' professors, the perceived effects of their fields of study/occupations, the perceived effects of their peers, and the perceived effects of the Saudi culture.

Implications

It is suggested that since the findings showed that professors might have negative influence on the participants' perceptions of academic writing, they should be taught about how unintentionally that could have negative effects on their students' academic writing skills. Professors, when there are opportunities, should engage in workshops to discuss the cues that could affect students' academic writing skills negatively. Professors should also discuss how to influence their students' academic writing skills positively.

The findings also revealed that there might be a misunderstanding from the students between their writing skills and their majors. Professors and students should make attempts to clarify such misunderstanding. They, for example, should be aware that not practicing writing for a long time might lead students to start losing their academic writing skills. Therefore, professors and students are encouraged to create writing opportunities to improve their academic writing skills. Students are also encouraged not to limit their readings to materials related to their disciplines only. As Hemami (2001) pointed out, reading books in literature and in psychology did improve his writing skills. Additionally, students are encouraged to practice writing in English beyond the curriculum.

Because the findings indicated that the effect of culture on the participants' perceptions of academic writing is deeply rooted in participants and culture tends to be negative mostly, it could be said that writing instructors and professors might need to pay special attention to this source and help their students to overcome the negative effects of such source. Writing instructors and professors, for example, could talk with their students about their academic writing skills rather than grading their term papers only.

Future studies

Looking at the effects of culture on the participants in the current study and on the narratives, it is important to understand why culture plays such a negative role in these students while it is more complex for other students in the narratives. Since

the perceived sources of perceptions might be interrelated, a more in-depth study of student perceptions and their sources is still needed, because we need a broader picture of how such sources might interact with each other.

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