

# THE USE OF PERSONAL EXPERIENCE IN ACADEMIC WRITING: TRAP OR TRACK FOR UNSKILLED WRITERS?

Pamela Easton

Massey University

## Introduction

Students bring relevant background knowledge and experience to their academic study. Their use of this knowledge and experience can be considered as a source for interpreting academic material. Indeed, this is consistent with schema theory, which proposes that language itself, either written or spoken, does not carry meaning, but that meaning is retrieved and reconstructed from the listener's previously acquired knowledge. When the student is taking up information therefore, a new text is recreated in line with this experience (Lebauer, 1981). These connections are constantly being made, and refined, in line with the input that students are exposed to in their lectures and readings.

The question then arises, what happens when these two broad sources (study programme sources and personal knowledge) interlock and are expressed in written output? One major problem in using personal experience in writing is that in many instances, it predisposes the writer towards writer-based prose; prose that has a personal orientation and takes little account of audience requirements. Flower (1996) describes it as "an associative narrative path of the writer's own confrontation of the subject" (p.62). That is, the focus is on the writer's thought processes as the writer seeks to explore the topic in relation to his/her own experiences, belief systems etc.

Reader-oriented writing on the other hand is issue based, and the discussion is developed with the reader in mind. Clarity of expression, lack of ambiguity, and a response formulated in relation to an issue, as opposed to a personal exploration of the topic, are expectations of this style of academic writing. One of the main academic writing genres, argument, requires such an orientation towards the reader. Argument text calls for adherence to a schema that demands attention to the presentation and ordering of ideas, as well as careful expression of relationships between ideas. One of the distinguishing factors therefore between skilled and unskilled writers, is the ability to manipulate their personal knowledge and to express it in appropriate written form in relation to task demands.

In the Language and Culture course which provided the context for the present study, students are encouraged to see that their own cultural experiences are as valid as those

they will be exposed to in the academic texts, and to draw on these experiences to demonstrate particular points in any written response. This is because the course provides opportunities for raising explicit awareness of sociocultural knowledge which can be, and is used, as content knowledge in written text. Content knowledge can be divided into two components: domain knowledge, and discipline knowledge, the two separated by the level of expertise in a given topic (Alexander, Schallert and Hare, 1991). For example, while a student may be aware through experience that different cultures have different role expectations, different body language, different world views of time and space, the knowledge may remain at a general domain level. A closer examination and organisation of such knowledge provides the opportunity to lift this to discipline knowledge. Alexander notes that when knowledge is organised around fundamental principles that define a particular field, then the individual's knowledge has progressed to the level of discipline knowledge (p.316). Therefore, when sociocultural knowledge is directly addressed, as it is in this university course, it is no different from content knowledge. For content knowledge to be used effectively in writing relating to the course however, prior knowledge and personal experience need to be represented as discipline knowledge.

### Methodology

The study aimed to investigate which sources a group of tertiary students used in examination-type writing tasks. It also sought to look at how these sources were integrated in that writing.

In total, 29 students including a number of L2 students, provided data for the study. The participants, who consented to their work being analysed, were members of a larger class enrolled in a first year university Linguistics paper entitled Language and Culture (72.132 Massey Calendar), which is a single semester paper. The participants were a group of internal, mostly first year students representing an intact group; that is, linguistics students who had opted to take the paper through interest and timetable considerations. The setting conformed to a naturalistic study, because it was the prescribed lecture and tutorial programme that the students would undertake to fulfil their study requirements.

At the tutorial stage of the weekly programme, all students were required after completion of other activities, (viewing video sequence, pair discussion based on short reading), to provide a written response to an examination-type question associated with one of the topics covered during the week. The question was framed to elicit an argument-type response; that is, the student needed to provide support for a particular claim. Time allocated to the writing task was about 25 minutes, during which time students were unable to directly access books or lecture notes. That is, students needed to recall from the inputs of the week. The essays were handed in at the end of the tutorial after

the students self-coded the sources of input that they recognised. This self-coding of text contributed to the researcher's analysis of data. While students wrote and received feedback on a regular basis, the data for analysis was taken from three points during the semester: weeks 2, 7 and 11 of the lecture timetable.

In order to monitor exposure to sources it was important to separate the components of the course and to identify the types of input. The sources were placed in three bands: lecture, tutorial, and outside or exogenous sources, according to their origin (Hartman, 1995) and represented a partially sequential input (see Figure 1). Although the lecture was placed at the head as a primary source input, clearly outside input precedes the lecture. As can be seen, this band included personal experience which was identified through the students' self-coding of their text.

LECTURE	TUTORIALS	OUTSIDE
Lecturer Talk Blackboard OHT Lecture Handout Previous Lectures	Workbook Task Video	Outside Lectures Personal Experience Other: TV, Books, etc.

**Figure 1 Division of sources according to input**

The essay data obtained were mapped out, according to the argument text constituents identified by Hyland (1990). The major thesis or claim, the grounds or key ideas supporting the major claim, and the warrants which elaborate, provide examples or data support, were then represented in structural form. The warrants which are the supporting statements underpinning the grounds or subordinate claims, were categorised according to Mann and Thompson's (1988) relation classification, including elaboration, exemplification, contrast, concession, purpose etc (see Easton, 1998). For ease of classification these were called content units. Upon each of the moves thus mapped, the source or sources of information were identified, providing at the same time a ready indication of source integration as well a visual model of written text (Appendix 1). This allowed both a quantitative and a qualitative analysis to be undertaken.

## Results

The components of the lecture (Figure 1) consistently assumed importance as a source of uptake. Nevertheless, both L1 and L2 writers made high use of personal experience in their first essay at the beginning of the course, drawing upon their own general knowledge. As the course progressed through the semester however, results indicated that L1

writers accessed a wider range of sources, in particular the lecture and the tutorial tasks (see Figure 2). Their use of personal experience appeared more selective, and while not totally avoided, did show a steady decline. In contrast, throughout the course, L2 students always made more use of outside sources compared with L1 students. (Easton, 1998).

Analysis also revealed that the structural profile of many of the essays did not fit the hierarchical model of argument text. There was no major or superordinate claim, and the series of grounds linking discussion followed a more horizontal pattern akin to narrative prose (Appendix 2). It was observed that this constantly went hand in hand with a high use of personal narrative. It was not believed that time constraints had any significant effect on this pattern but rather, it appeared to differentiate between skilled and unskilled writers. It was clear then that personal experience was leading to a slip in

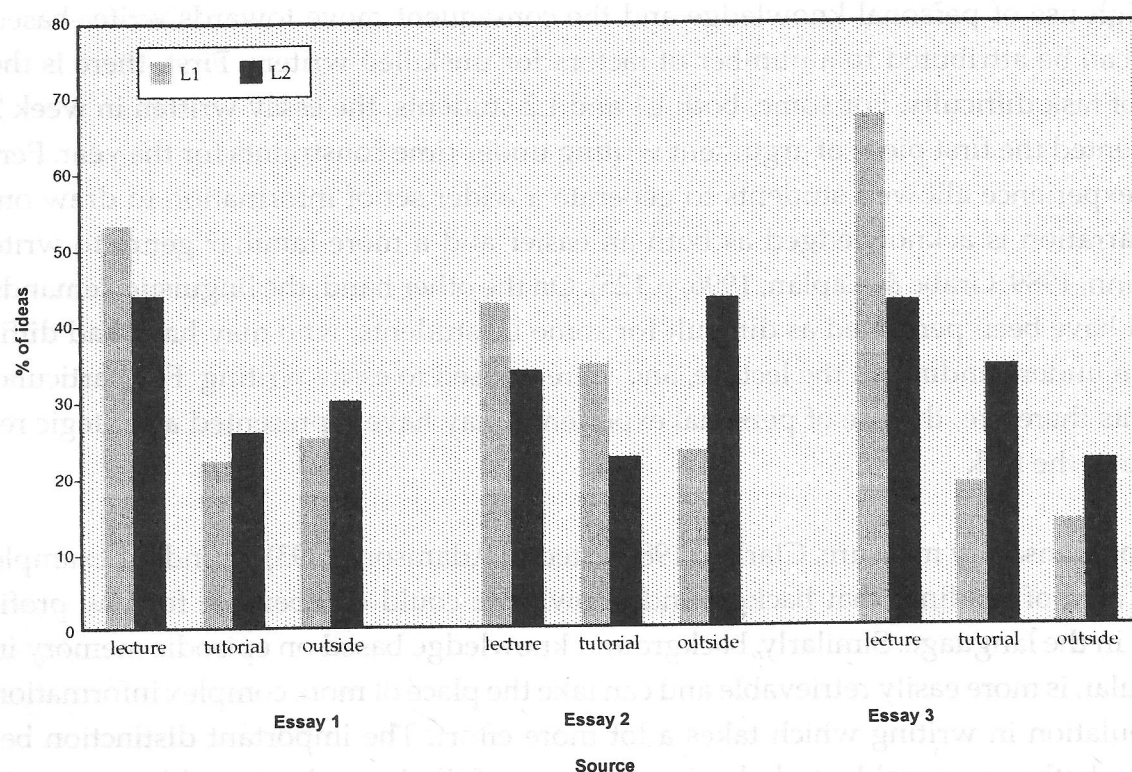


Figure 2 Source origins for ideas in written texts

genre for some students, creating a negative impact on both writing style and topic response. They were in fact, engaging in writer-based prose.



## Discussion

Argument text calls upon complex language manipulation in response to particular principles of organisation (Hyland, 1990). In argument text, the superordinate claim introduces the major proposition and forms part of the thesis stage. The student needs to identify and reiterate the thesis in the topic s/he is responding to. Grounds or subordinate claims on the other hand are key concepts which relate to and support the superordinate claim. Usually they relate to paragraph heading statements. These should be followed by an elaboration of the concepts, thus moving from general formulation of concepts to specific support (Appendix 1). It is within the lower level aspects of argument hierarchy that personal knowledge or experience can be used to demonstrate particular key points. It is here that personal knowledge needs transforming into discipline knowledge. However, the transformation from domain knowledge to the other proved to be difficult, not only for students operating in an L2 but also for unskilled L1 writers.

The high use of personal knowledge and the consequent move towards writer-based prose can be attributed to a number of factors for unskilled writers. First, there is the issue of task difficulty. For some, both L1 and L2 students, the essay written in week 2 represented the first piece of argument writing under time constraints for the year. Personal experience allowed students to generate a wider set of information to draw on, and narration is acknowledged as both an easier and a more familiar genre to write (McCann, 1989; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996, p.125). On the other hand, the linguistic demands would have been perceived as difficult for some L2 students, who may have had difficulty in understanding all the lecture, and were unused to essay writing. For particular students therefore, the use of personal experience may have represented a strategic response to the task.

As a compensatory measure, Clarke, (1980) cited in Adamson (1993), found for example in the area of reading, that background knowledge could compensate for low proficiency in the language. Similarly, background knowledge based on episodic memory in particular, is more easily retrievable and can take the place of more complex information manipulation in writing which takes a lot more effort. The important distinction between whether personal knowledge is used successfully in academic writing or not, is whether information in memory is reported as it comes to mind, or whether it is transformed and expressed as discipline knowledge in the written text, which is a more demanding task. To keep on target, the personal examples *must* link to the concepts raised in the course.

The following example demonstrates how this has been successfully achieved. The first sentence identifies a point raised in the lecture. This is followed by an example the student has selected from personal experience, and finally the cultural values extrapolated

from this are linked back to the topic.

"Another example that shows culture learning through language is greeting and how to address the elders. In some cultures, i.e. Maori, children learn that you greet people in very different ways by listening, and being told what to say. e.g. greetings such as Harae Mai and Tena Koe are not used when greeting Mum while Kiaora is an inappropriate way to greet an Elder. This teaches children that they must always accord their elders with respect". (A11)

In contrast to the above example, personal experience or knowledge is often not well adapted and expressed as discipline knowledge (Alexander et al, 1991). First, there is the tendency to *engage in personal narrative* and the overuse of 'I' in which the writer directly relates his or her thoughts and experiences.

"Which do I like better to be silent or to be talkative? For my opinion I'm pretty shy, and I often keep silent....." (B3)

Second, there is the risk that students inadvertently move into a *topic tangent*, or in other words demonstrate a loss of purpose or task aims. This "associative path" described by Flower (1996) takes the thought processes beyond the boundaries of the topic, and where argument text is concerned, into increasing unrelatedness of the discussion to genre requirements. The student becomes diverted by ideas which come to mind through the next string of connections. The excerpt below demonstrates just how far the thoughts may move. The topic required students to support the thesis that young children learn cultural values as they learn their language:

"Sometimes children tend to rebel and enter a new exposure. This may be by adopting a new fashion, new religion or leave their education. This is done perhaps so they can create their own process to obtain their own social group rather than the taught one". (A22)

Finally there is the problem of *untransformed narrative*, or in basic terms 'talking (or writing) off the top of the head'. The student makes no effort to tailor the information to fit the demands of the topic. Because of the obviously higher fluency levels of L1 writers, it was this option that unskilled L1 writers often displayed. In the following example, the student communicates in writing as she would speak; the lack of punctuation reflecting limited or no consideration of the relationship of ideas to each other. The source in this instance was a recent television news item:

"What would also be hard to adapt to would be the laws for instance in America a European woman left her baby outside in a pram unattended while she dined

in a restaurant. Where she came from this was OK but the police arrested her and put her in jail for two days". (A3)

While the above demonstrates what happens to student writing when engaging in writer-oriented prose, an examination of student texts also revealed three levels of personal experience used. This enabled a hierarchy to be established, and it was found that these three levels corresponded closely to Alexander et al's (1991) domain and discipline knowledge.

1 *Personal narrative*. This represents highly personalised knowledge which is narrated at first hand, as was demonstrated above.

"When I went to USA a lot of people came up to me and talked to me. In Japan we can not have this kind of experience so often". (B3)

2 *General personal knowledge*. Corresponding with Alexander's domain knowledge, such examples represent generalised knowledge which needs to be more formalised into the text structure for the student to benefit fully from this source.

"In most societies they are male oriented. Where boys have unconsciously learnt to be more direct than females. Females have a tendency to be consciously socialised into being more ladylike, using more elegant words -pretty dress, soft toy, lovely day". (A3)

3 *Personal knowledge expressed as discipline knowledge, integrated with concepts raised in the course*. The first example provided at the beginning of this discussion shows that it is possible to actively draw on the personal knowledge source to demonstrate understanding of the issues. Examples one and two are not wrong in terms of appropriate examples to be used in an essay response, merely in the way they are expressed in relation to academic demands. Any example needs to tie the general knowledge or experience in closely to discipline demands, showing a close link to the specialised field of study. The ability to do this represents this third level of the hierarchy.

## Conclusion

While the use of personal experience can be a trap for unskilled writers, it is not all negative, and being part of top-down processing it is not possible nor even desirable to eliminate. Indeed, integrated appropriately into the discipline structure of the academic course, personal experience is a strong resource which the student can access.

One might question whether using personal knowledge as opposed to information from the lecture set up a framework for narrative writing, or whether narrative, as an easier model, meant that the writers drew on their own experiences. It would appear that both occurred within the range of students. It is also likely that the less proficient writers were unaware of what was happening to their writing form. When personal experience

remained the dominant source throughout the semester, there was a subsequent detrimental effect on such students' effective response to an argument topic.

In helping our students in the writing demands of specific courses, it is important to recognise that with some guidance, students can maximise what knowledge they do have by fitting it into an appropriate structure or genre. The demands of argument text and the pitfalls of untransformed narrative may need to be made explicit, as semesterised courses are too short to hope that students might pick these requirements up. Personal experience can be a trap for the unwary, but it also releases a lot of content knowledge, which can be used as a strategic track to enrich and help students engage with course demands.

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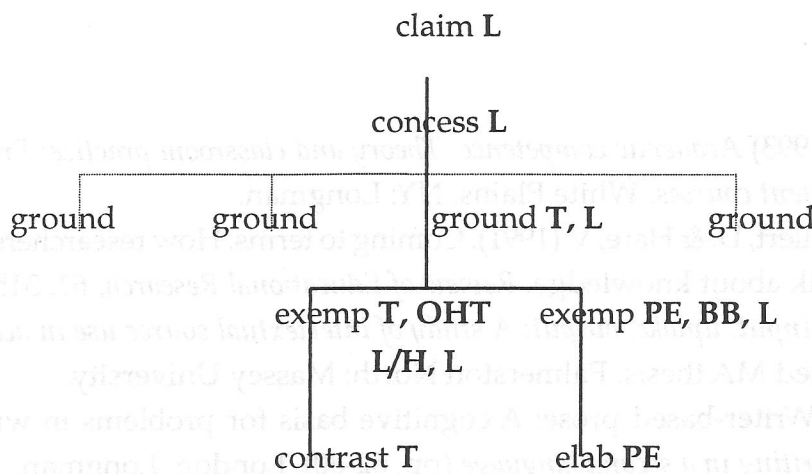
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APPENDIX 1: Example of argument text hierarchy

*"While the basic form of silence may be universal, its functions and interpretations vary among cultures."* Samovar & Porter, 1994:248. Discuss this statement using examples to support your points.

Note that the bolded text represents the given section of text while the remainder of the diagram shows where other elements of the text fit. The dotted section does not show full textual development but only the positioning of the grounds (see Appendix C for the coding).



Graphic representation demonstrating argument text hierarchy

- Claim** Silence often signifies the same thing in different cultures
- Concession** however there are different ways of using it.
- Ground** In some cultures the use of silence will reflect different styles of resolving conflict.
- Exemplification** For example the Western Apache remain silent if they are uncertain
- Contrast** where as the !Kung will talk out and often shout to resolve differences.
- Exemplification** In N.Z. culture people often remain silent to let a person know they are displeased.
- Elaboration** In this case they have withdrawn the privilege of being spoken to from that person. (Student A 9)

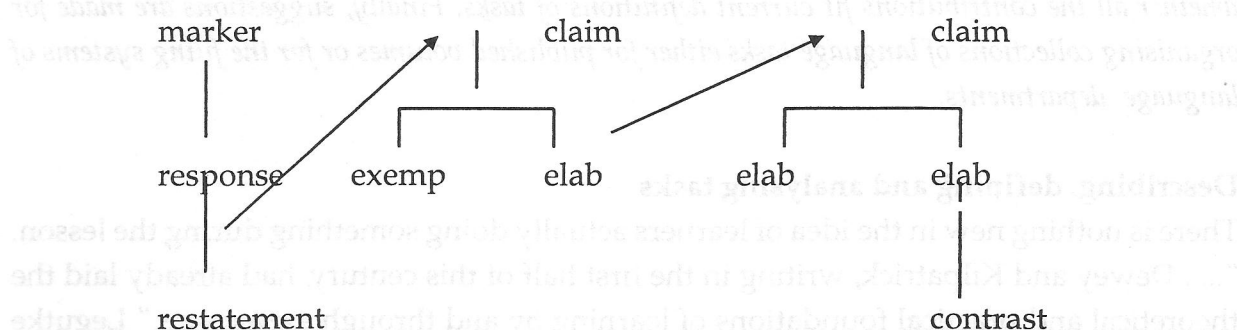
Code:

L	Lecture	L/H	Lecture handout
BB	Blackboard	T	Tutorial
OHT	Overhead transparency	PE	Personal experience

## APPENDIX 2: Narrative lacking superordinate claim

*"While the basic form of silence may be universal, its functions and interpretations vary among cultures." Samovar & Porter, 1994:248. Discuss this statement using examples to support your points.*

Note the lack of a superordinate claim. While key points are labelled as claims, they in fact are not claims in an argument sense of the word. All units written from **personal experience**.



### Graphic representation demonstrating idea chaining

**Marker** Which do I like better to be silent or to be talkative?

**Response** For my opinion, I'm pretty shy and I often keep silent although I want to talk a lot.

**Restatement** I'm always trying to talk a lot, but in fact I cannot do that because of my shyness.

**Claim** In Japan silence has been traditionally respected,

**Exemplification** especially for men.

**Elaboration** Even now, men are sometimes looked down upon in Japanese society.

**Claim** On the other hand, American people usually talk a lot.

**Elaboration** They are open to talk with stranger and to have a lot of new relationship.

**Elaboration** When I went to USA a lot of people came up to me and talked to me.

**Contrast** In Japan we cannot have this kind of experience.