

An Exploration of the Graduate Students' Writing Competencies in Educational Research

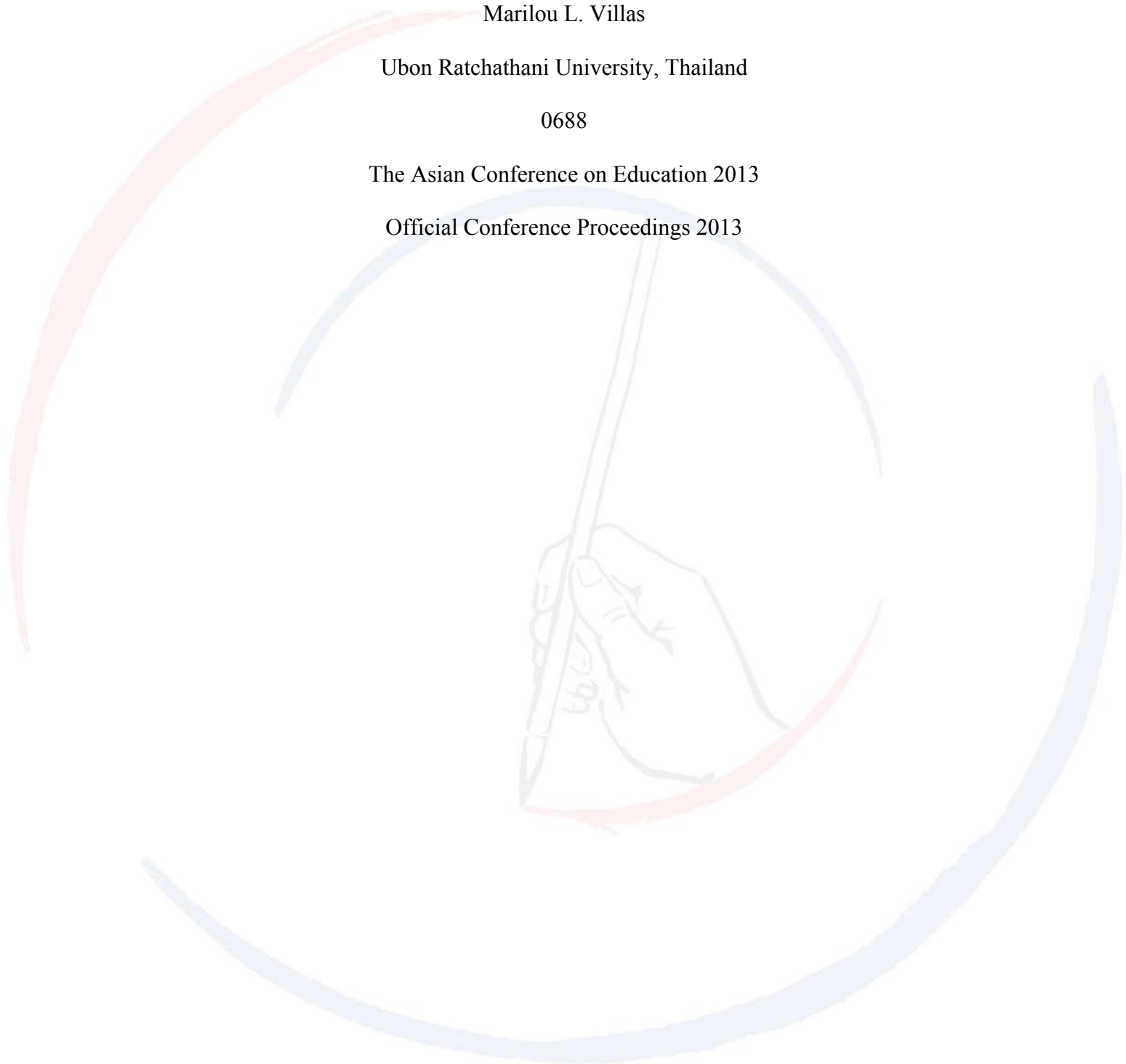
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Introduction

Writing is often perceived as one of the most challenging aspects of second language learning and difficulties in writing different types of texts may come from the fact that writers have to understand the linguistic features of these different text types (Hyland, 2003b). In addition, being able to write cohesively according to the conventions of a specific academic context is even harder for second language learners to accomplish (Flowerdew, 2002).

In his 2006 study, Lin explained that among the many areas of knowledge and skills in writing, these two emerged known as the textual and contextual exploration served as text models in communication. These are always evident and observable at all communicative processes such as making reports and presentation for business purposes and making poems, essays, reports and the like for academic purposes. In the area of academic writing for example, students use elements of the writing processes such as planning, drafting, revising, editing and publishing to compose a text. Through these processes, students' cognitive knowledge and skills are utilized and reinforced in completing a writing task. Moreover, this not only evaluating student's cognitive abilities but also stimulating them to incorporate past experiences to express their feelings and ideas about real or imagined people, events and ideas through writing.

In writing tasks, one of the necessary requirements in any graduate program is the writing of a thesis. This is a degree requirement student should comply to qualify as graduate. The written output is presented before a panel which compose of the Academic Program Director, professors and dean of the graduate program. In this writing requirement, it is presumed for those who are enrolled in this program to be readily equipped with the writing skills to cope with its writing demands.

According to Mullen (2006), in graduate circles, academic writing is expected to be a solitary activity for which students already are prepared. Yet, the reality is that students tend to find academic writing difficult and stressful, and they often look to university faculty members for guidance. This is evident from the feedbacks of the students enrolled in research subjects specifically on thesis writing. With the desire to address the prevailing writing problems of the students, the study of their research competencies was conceived.

This study attempted to find out the graduate students' research writing competencies. Specifically, it will seek answers to the following questions:

What are the writing competencies of graduate students in the following areas:

- Outlining;
- Summarizing;
- Synthesizing;
- Paraphrasing and;
- Developing paragraph?

What is the academic performance of the graduate students in the subject Methods of Research?

Is there a significant relationship on the writing competencies of the graduate students and their academic performance in research subject?

Scope and Delimitation

This study was conducted to determine the research writing competencies of Ramon Magsaysay Memorial Colleges Masters in Education students. The respondents of this study were the 59 graduate students of Ramon Magsaysay Memorial Colleges enrolled in Methods of Research subject in the first semester of the school year 2012-2013. These students were enrolled from the three major courses namely: Educational Management, Teaching English as Second Language and Guidance and Counselling. As stated on the curriculum, Methods of Research subject is required for graduate students with its aim to prepare them for an in-depth writing requisite that demands their skills and experience in order to pass the partial requirement for graduate student specifically Thesis I (Thesis Proposal) and Thesis II (Thesis Final Defence).

The study was delimited to the writing competencies of graduate students and their academic performance in the Methods of Research subject. The material employed in this study was delimited to outlining, summarizing, synthesizing, paraphrasing and developing paragraph.

RELATED LITERATURE AND STUDIES

Writing skills involve a combination of cognitive ability, solid foundation of relevant experiences and constant significant practice. Every time a writer is exposed to writing task, he uses his intellectual capacity and critical thinking to produce ingenious written output. This mental activity is highly influenced by motivation and intensive learning. Students develop interest when motivated, thus the chance to enhance their creativity and word exploration is high. Meanwhile, it is necessary that the students should focus on their weaknesses to keep at pace on the areas they need to improve more which subsequently result to advancing from low level to high level of writing skill. This is why Habulembe (2007) emphasizes the role of teachers in writing class to supply relevant topics that build their grammatical skills and explore on rhetorical skills for students. They should develop strategies to support students' growth as students begin developing in the first –year composition courses. Schilb (2011) also suggests that teachers should give feedbacks to students to give them idea on how to write clear and logical prose and integrate writing in other courses.

The success in writing is relatively constituted on the view that writing involves processes. When these processes are ignored, difficulties in writing occur. Individual writer needs to follow certain basic steps to consider in the process. First, initial brainstorming process, secondly, drafting process, thirdly, revision process and the final process is editing. This means that the processes are the writing skills to evolve for better research writing results Nordquist (2004). For students to do these processes, they must first acquire the basic competencies needed in any writing task. Therefore, they should be taught how to outline, summarize, synthesize, paraphrase, develop a paragraph etc. to produce a good output.

Mastering the basic skills in writing is a fundamental tool for the students to succeed in writing. Outlining presents a picture of the main ideas and the supporting ideas of a paragraph. It is writing information in an order from the most important to the least important. Outlining will help you learn how to take notes and remember the main ideas of what you've read. Secondly, summarizing is where writer distils only the most essential points of someone else's work. It moves much farther than paraphrase and away from point-by-point translation. Thirdly, synthesizing involves combining

two or more summaries. Next, paraphrasing is where writer expresses someone else's work in one's own language. It is a tool in essay writing in allowing other people's ideas included without cluttering up the essay with quotation. Finally, developing paragraph where writer make sentences consists of a words or a group of words, a group of closely related sentences. In developing a paragraph, it has observed good qualities: unity, coherence and emphasis.

Knowing all the importance of writing competencies for students, certain studies related to it were investigated. There are findings which show that college students need to improve on the areas of grammar, content, organization, vocabulary and mechanics Salinas (2005). So, he suggests that teachers need to provide more writing opportunities. On the other hand, Alamagort and Chanquoy (2001) discovered that there was a cognitive basis for writing. The basis is shown to be closely related to working memory, maturity and practice. Meanwhile, Genuino (2002) examined the interplay between the language and the culture. The study revealed the rhetorical patterns of the three speech communities where cohesive devices occupied three positions in discourse: within the sentence, between sentences and between paragraphs. In relation to this, Ellis et. Al (2005) pointed out the fragmented and cohesive subscale approach to writing present in writing processes. The findings showed that both fragmented and cohesive approaches had an impact to the students' skills in writing.

Every second language learners possesses strengths and weaknesses in language acquisition either oral or written tasks. It is likely for student to earn high academic performance when the skills are continually developed throughout the academic years. Since, all educational programs demands writing competencies in some other fields/subjects not only English class, those students who can execute good written output achieve high academic performance compared to those who cannot based on the findings of Shaw et.al (2007).

To sum up, writing is a significant key for a student to succeed in a competent world of academe. It is a combined effort between the teacher and the student to learn and master the art of writing in a constant and relevant experience.

Research Design and Methodology

This study utilized descriptive-correlational design in which two variables will be measured. Its purpose according to Aquino (1992) is to investigate relationships between variables and extent to which variations in one factor correlate with variations in one or more other factors based on correlation coefficient. The two variables of this study are the writing competencies and the academic performances that were measured whether variables show cause and effect relationship respectively. In this study, the writing competencies of the first year students enrolled in research subject specifically Methods of Research was measured in terms of strength and relationship to determine the result of this study.

In determining the numerical values of the variables in this study, a competency test was used. The test includes five writing competencies: (1) outlining; (2) summarizing; (3) synthesizing; (4) paraphrasing; and (5) developing a paragraph. Each writing competency was rated according to specific criteria with 5-point rated value. Each value has an equivalent description applied in all competencies from which raters can evaluate the test objectively. This method used is called rating scale that requires raters to assign a value sometimes numeric to the rated object as a measure of some rated attribute (en.wikipedia.org). The test was evaluated by separate raters who are Master Degree holders in the field of English. Mean was utilized for problems 1 and 2. To determine whether the presence of relationship exists between the two variables, chi square was employed for problem number 3 as well as frequency and percentage to show the respondents' level of academic performance. Additionally, it utilized ranking to show the result of the level of writing competencies. To interpret the scores from the writing competency test, the modified Likert rating scale, with its quantitative descriptions and interpretation were used. It is a pre-arranged system, one dimensional scale from which the interviewee will be choosing one option that reflects to their opinion. There are classically five options to be offered as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Likert Rating Scale (Adapted from Sauro & Dumas, 2009)

Scale	Interval Range	Description	Interpretation
5	4.21-5.00	Excellent	The Writing Competency of the student is very highly achieved.
4	3.41- 4.20	Very Good	The Writing Competency of the student is highly achieved.
3	2.61- 3.40	Good	The Writing Competency of the student is fairly achieved.
2	1.81- 2.60	Satisfactory	The Writing Competency of the student is satisfactorily achieved.
1	1.00-1.81	Poor	The Writing Competency of the student is not achieved.

Results

Outlining

The result of these data reflects that in the area of outlining, the item on showing writer's or speaker's plan had a mean equalled to 3.45 with a descriptive rating of very good. It ranked second among the four items. On the criteria of presenting order of topics, the respondents showed that they are also very good with a mean of 3.47. It was the top criterion among the four presented under outlining. Rank third was on the presentation of relationship between the various parts of the topic (mean= 3.07) and finally, the presentation of relative importance of each topic (mean= 3.01) which also reflected that graduate students were good at. The total mean equivalent for outlining was 3.25 with a descriptive rating of very good. This value meant that there were two out of the four criteria of the research writing in the use of outlining were missing or were not observed by the graduate students. The importance of observing the outlining was in the study of Lynch (2001) who said that students can be helped in improving their critical thinking and solving problems by improving their writing abilities. Thus, outlining is very basic.

Summarizing

Data revealed that the item on discussing the over-all problem had mean value equalled to 3.20 with a descriptive rating of good. It ranked first among the seven criteria on Summarizing. On the criteria of shortening and expressing the author's ideas, the respondents showed that they are also good with a mean value of 2.68. It ranked sixth among the seven criteria presented under Summarizing. Rank four was on the use of topic sentence and arrangement of paragraph from general idea to conclusion (mean= 2.80). Rank five was on the recasting ideas using own words (mean =2. 78). The criterion on absorbing the meaning of the passage ranked second with mean value of 3.0, while observing correct grammar on presentation of ideas had mean value of 2.83 and finally, the organization of thoughts and utilizing topic sentences and coordinating sequence of sentence got a mean value of 2.46 which ranked first among the seven criteria under Summarizing. The mean value reflected that most of the respondents were satisfactory in this criterion. The total mean equivalent for Summarizing was 2.46. It reflects a descriptive rating of satisfactory. This value meant that they were four to five out of the seven criteria of the research writing in the use of summarizing were missing or were not observed by the graduate students.

Synthesizing

In terms of the use of Synthesizing, the result reflects that the item on presenting tied ideas from the different sources had mean value equalled to 1.63 with a descriptive rating of poor. It tied with the observation of the graduate students on the presenting a holistic body of context at 3.5 with a mean value equalled to 1.72. Presenting linked ideas from one sources to another ranked second among the five items with a mean value equalled to 1.72 and descriptive rating of poor. On the criteria of observing correct grammar in presentation of ideas, the respondents showed that they are also good with a mean of 3.05. It was the top criterion among the five presented under Synthesizing with its mean value. Lastly, with a mean value equalled to 1.34 reflected that graduate students were poor at the organization of thoughts in utilizing topic sentence and coordinating sequence of sentence. The total mean value 2.19 in Synthesizing had a descriptive rating of poor. This value meant that they were four

out of the five criteria of the research writing in the use of Synthesizing were missing or were not observed by the graduate students.

Paraphrasing

With the use of five criteria, data showed that the graduate students were good in using appropriate words and grammar (mean= 2.97) which ranked first among the five presented criteria under Paraphrasing. The evidence of an expanding vocabulary got a mean value equalled to 2.64 which reflected a good descriptive rating. The respondents were also good in stating ideas in their own words (mean= 2.56) which ranked third. The observation of correct grammar in the representation of ideas also got a good rating with a mean value of 2.75. Data finally revealed that the graduate students were satisfactory in the organization of thoughts in utilizing topic sentences and coordinating sequence of sentence. Upon looking the total mean value in Paraphrasing which was 2.68 with descriptive rating of good, this value meant that they were three out of five criteria of the research writing in the use of paraphrasing were missing or were not observed by the graduate students. These results showed that the students must heed what was stated by Plotnick (2008). He said that those who are writing must follow sequences that are advisable, must use references and not just merely following his own mere substituting of phrases. Writers, he said must learn to convert ideas from quoted sources into full sentences.

Developing Paragraph

Finally, to find out the writing competencies on the use of developing paragraph, data showed that the respondents showed satisfactory observation on presenting unity in showing coordinate or subordinate relationships between major or minor ideas about the topic (mean= 2.66) which ranked third among the five criteria presented under developing paragraph. In presenting of coherence in orderly arrangement or organization of sentences and proper use of connectives or transitional devices, the mean value of 3.41 showed that the graduate students were very good at it. They were also very good in presenting emphasis in giving more space or sentences to more important ideas (mean= 3.54) which was ranked one among the five criteria. Tied in rank 4.5 were the students' observation of correct grammar in presentation of ideas (mean= 2.98) and on the organization of thoughts in utilizing topic sentences and coordinating sequence of sentence (mean= 2.98)

The total mean equivalent for developing paragraph was the highest among the other writing competencies. It garnered a mean value of 3.22. It reflects a descriptive rating of very good. This value meant that there were two out of the five criteria of the research writing in developing paragraph were missing or were not observed by the graduate students.

The Academic Performance of Graduate Students in Methods of Research Subject

This sub-problem intended to show the academic performances of graduate students in Methods of Research subject.

There were indicators given to determine the academic performances of graduate students in Methods of Research subject using the frequency and percentage to treat the data gathered as these were presented in Table 2.

As shown in the data, there were 59 respondents whose academic performances were rated as excellent, very good and good. Of the 59 respondents, 15 or 25 percent had a level of academic performance described as excellent 34 or 53 percent were very good and 10 or 17 percent had an academic performance labelled as good.

Table 2
Academic Performance of Graduate Students in Methods of Research

Level of Academic Performance	Frequency	Percentage
Excellent	15	25%
Very Good	24	58%
Good	10	17%
TOTAL	59	100%

The writing competencies of graduate students and their academic performance in research subject

Table 3 presented the writing competencies of graduate students and their academic performance in research subject. Chi-square test was employed to treat the data gathered.

Data were tested at a level 0.05 with the df equals 10. The computed value of 14.84 was greater than the tabular value which was 9.488. This result led to reject the null hypothesis formulated. It implied that the writing competencies of graduate students could affect their academic performance in research subject.

It means that the writing competencies of the graduate students could mean the same or congruent to their academic performance as reflected in their research subject. These two variables might affect each other. Thus, the writing competencies may reflect or may become one of the bases for the students' performance in research subject.

Table 3
Writing Competencies and Academic Performance

Writing Competencies	Excellent			Very Good			Good			Total	X	14.84 > 9.488
	O	E	X	O	E	X	O	E	X			
Excellent	5	2.28	3.24	3	3.19	0.92	1	1.53	0.18	9	4.34	
Very Good	6	8.90	0.94	26	20.02	1.79	3	5.93	1.45	35	4.18	
Good	4	3.82	0.08	5	8.64	1.53	6	2.54	4.71	15	6.32	
Total	15			34			10			39	14.84	

Conclusions

The graduate students were good in outlining, paraphrasing and developing paragraph. They were satisfactory on summarizing and synthesizing.

Most of the graduate students had very good academic performance followed by students whose academic performance was excellent and the last number of the respondents had good performance in research subject.

The writing competencies mastered by the graduate students could affect their academic performance in research subject.

Recommendations

Graduate students must learn more about summarizing and synthesizing and to write more in order to develop their skills in paraphrasing, outlining and developing paragraphs.

Students must consider their skills in writing to be the basis improving their academic performance.

Professors and Teachers in Research subjects must provide more avenues for the graduate students to develop their writing competencies in order to help students improve their academic performance.

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