Revisiting relevance – the problem with Hong Kong university students’ writings

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0. Introduction

In academic writing textbooks of the Anglo-American style, relevance is essentially defined in terms of the notion of unity, which, together with coherence, is a criterion to measure the success in essay organization or even the whole essay. Unity, or relevance, refers to the state where all material in an essay supports or proves a thesis statement which sums up and controls what is said in it.

This paper examines the issue of relevance in some Hong Kong university students’ academic essays as this is one of the common concerns that markers of these essays express. This is illustrated in example (1).

(1)  Marker A:
“You have written something that is not much relevant to the question, for instance, the status of English in HK, the spread of English, or English cultures in different places.”

Marker B:
“The arguments and material presented are almost invariably relevant to the issue of language and identity.”

These relevance comments are usually not explained in detail – exactly why this problem occurs and what strategies to adopt in order to improve on it, except perhaps some suggestions on the relevant points that should be included. Also, it has been found that there has not been much formal research on the relevance issue in academic writing, especially in relation to the use of cognitive skills.

This research has analyzed 52 academic essays written by some undergraduate students of an open university in Hong Kong. It has revealed that there are some common patterns underlying the students’ style of writing that might be the causes of the frequent occurrence of irrelevancies in their essays. These patterns include:

• Two dominant patterns of essay structuring, the Building-block Approach and Pseudo-inductive approach;
• The lack of a specific purpose or focus, which is expected to be a claim stated in the form of a thesis statement;
• A tendency to narrate or describe rather than to state or generalize;
• Poor elaboration skills – unaware of the strategies or the forms in doing elaboration;
• Preference for doing description or discussion before making generalizations, which may not be logically related;
• Use of very general or trite ideas as gap fillers in the writing process.
It is claimed the source of these problems is the students’ weaknesses in some higher order thinking skills, such as synthesizing, analyzing, discriminating, focusing or generalizing, which I will offer evidence to justify wherever possible.

2. Conditions for achieving relevance and previous research

2.1. Conditions for achieving relevance

As said in the introduction, most academic writing textbooks in the Anglo-American tradition consider relevance to be the state where the supporting materials or elaborations in any essay invariably proves the controlling idea of a thesis statement in terms of the rest of it. It is this condition that makes an essay unified.

A number of consequences will follow when a valid statement is formulated. It introduces the general paper topic usually expressed by the subject of the statement (sentence). The topic is limited to a manageable focus by the controlling idea which is usually expressed by the predicate of the statement (sentence). The thesis statement, as a whole, indicates the writer’s purpose – of what his or her opinion or attitude towards the limited subject to be discussed. Sometimes, the thesis statement may also indicate how the topic will be explored, using such means as comparison, contrast, causal analysis, process, and classification. But it is more common that these means are mentioned in a couple of sentences that follow.

The thesis statement sets a specific goal for an essay. Each sentence, whether a generalization or an elaboration, a major supporting idea or a minor one, a piece of direct or indirect evidence, must bear some logical relationship to the claim stated in terms of the thesis statement.

The above condition also implies that the supporting materials bear different levels or degrees of relevance to the thesis statement. The major supporting ideas will have a direct connection with the thesis statement while the minor ones, which are essentially elaborations of the major ideas, an indirect relationship.

On the other hand, any sentence that does not serve the purpose of proving the claim will be considered irrelevant and destroying the essay’s unity. In the case that there is no thesis statement, the essay is likely to result in digression and irrelevancies since the writer has no definite controlling idea to guide the selection of materials in the development.

Unity, or relevance, should also be affected by coherence – that is how well the ideas of the essays are integrated – since if the linkage of one supporting statement to the others is not clear or done properly, its relevance to the central issue will likely be obscured, or simply be misinterpreted by the reader.

2.2. Previous research

There has not been much in-depth formal research into the issue of relevance in
academic writings. Only one paper has been found to be most relevant to the present research study, and it is Lawe Davies’ (1999) on-line article “How do we define and teach ‘relevance’ in academic writing?”. It reported a large scale study of first- and second-year student examination essays she conducted in a School of Dentistry from an American university.

The paper, nevertheless, was a preliminary discussion of the issue of relevance. She followed the Shorter Oxford Dictionary to define relevance as ‘bearing on, connected with, pertaining to, the matter in hand’, and commented that the definition related both to the selection of information to be presented, and to the logical organization of that information.

Relevance, in her view, was more related to the reader’s expectations than any other prescribed or preconceived conditions, differing from what is proposed in this paper. She suggested that the reader formed expectations of relevant information on the basis of the essay title or essay prompt, while expectations of the form of logical presentation could be based both on the essay prompt and on the essay itself. Concerns of irrelevance would arise if the information presented did not accord with the reader’s expectations and where information units did not fit with the reader’s expected sequence.

There are, however, some problems if we appeal to the reader’s expectations for setting relevance criteria as Lawe Davies (1999) suggested. One obvious question is: What rationale underlies the reader’s expectations or judgements? If there is none, then the reader’s expectations can vary from one person to another.

Lawe Davies’s (1999) observations on the writing style of non-native speakers of English seem to be more agreeable to our intuition. She claimed that

‘….. judgements of relevance vary according to the nature of the writing exercise, the academic discipline, and the cultural background of the writer and the reader.’ (p. 3)

And that

‘Non-native speakers of English, particularly those with advanced literacy in their first language, may digress in accordance with other cultural norms of written genre. Digression may serve the purpose to display knowledge, present something interesting, but of marginal ‘relevance’, or display elegance or mastery of genre.’ (p. 3)

In fact, one finding in the present research suggests that Hong Kong or Chinese students prefers an inductive-like approach in their structuring of the essays, presenting descriptions or discussions of the major topics before making generalizations about the main issues

3. Data and methodology

52 essays of an average length of 1800 words were collected for analysis from an undergraduate English course offered by a Hong Kong distance-learning university. The title of the course was The English Language: Past Present and Future. The
course was a yearly course about the subject knowledge of English covering the historical, social and cultural aspects of the language across a vast expanse of time and space. These essays were taken from four different presentations, 2002-2005, and there were 11 different questions for which the essays were written. Except for one, all the essays selected received pass scores which fell in the range from 30 to 93. Essays with fail scores were not seriously considered since the students’ poor performance, including irrelevancies, could simply be related to factors such as limited understanding or inadequate coverage of the subject matter or plagiarism.

In each presentation for the course, seven essays questions and their accompanying guidelines, including both the major sources of ideas and the structuring methods, were given in a assignment file. As a practice, there was a long paragraph in Assignment one, laying out the structuring method of a deductive-based approach. This approach advised students to include a thesis statement that presented the claim they made, which was to be elaborated by several major supporting points functioning to tie the other examples and ideas together. In the end, the students should also supply a conclusion summarizing the main points that have been discussed.

The 52 essays were analyzed according to the criteria set by the ‘thesis-statement’ approach. They were studied in terms of the overall structure and then the introduction, development and conclusion, in order to look for some common patterns that these essays shared. The various forms of the students’ writings in these three parts were identified. The problems with these patterns, which were the potential causes for irrelevancies, were enumerated and explained. The source of these problems, which I attributed to the students’ weaknesses and inadequate training in some higher-order cognitive skills, was then discussed (for taxonomies of these cognitive skills, see Anderson et al. 2001 and Iowa Department of Education 1989).

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. The structuring of the essays – two dominant approaches

Two approaches have been identified and they are referred to as the Building-block Approach and the Pseudo-inductive Approach. Essays with these two approaches usually started with an introduction including some background information. Then the students listed out the topics or the subject matter that would be discussed. However, very few students made an effort to formulate a claim in terms of a thesis statement consisting of a specific controlling idea. The following is an example.

(2) “First, I’m going to define the terms “playful” and “literary” uses of English. Secondly, I will draw on different forms of linguistic analysis known as stylistics to find out how stylisticians use a key idea “foregrounding” to give surprises to the reader and to give them a fresh perception and appreciation of the subject matter. Thirdly, I’ll illustrate in what way “foregrounding” can be achieved by focusing on sounds, grammar, or meanings. Lastly, in order to gain impact, English literary and playful texts writers will “break the rules” of English.”

4.1.1. The Building-block approach
• **Form**

In this approach, the students usually separated the major topics as given in the essay prompts from the discussion of the central issues when they wrote up the development part. The following is a typical example as the outline indicates.

(3) Essay prompt:
‘Different approaches to the teaching of English language are underpinned by desires for different outcomes: their advocates often suggest that a version of future adult (and a future society) is being shaped by the decisions made by the English teacher’. Discuss.

Essay outline:
i. Introduction (without a thesis statement)
ii. Approaches about the purposes of English teaching
iii. Approaches to English Teaching
iv. Adults in the Future
v. Conclusion
(All the headings were taken from the sample essay without any modification.)

• **Potential causes for irrelevancies**

As shown in the outline in example (3), the major topics are essentially independent of each other without a clear connection. That is why it was quite easy for the students to include irrelevant materials in their descriptions or discussions since they did not have a definite focus to guide them to select information even for the topics under discussion.

• **Source of the problems**

Clearly such an approach demonstrates a lack of synthesizing skill – combining parts to form a new whole (Iowa Department of Education 1989, p. 27) – since the discussion was fragmented and often the connections between the different topics and the main issue were not made clear. The failure to formulate a thesis statement suggests that the students were weak in hypothesizing skill – developing a testable explanation for a given situation or set of facts (ibid, p. 30).

4.1.2. **The Pseudo-inductive Approach**

• **Form**

In this approach, the development parts of the related essays were mainly composed of sections of description which were the major topics derived from the essay prompts. There might be, however, some critical ideas or generalizations embedded, although they were usually not well connected to the related descriptions. Many students also drew a conclusion at the end, consisting of either a weak summary or generalization that bore little relationship to the discussions in the development.

The preference for making generalizations in the conclusion rather than in the
introduction makes one wonder if the approach is an inductive one. Nevertheless, very often, the discussions in these cases did not bear a logical or a direct relationship to the conclusion. Therefore I refer to this structuring method as the *Pseudo-inductive Approach*.

The following is a structure outline illustrating such an approach.

(4) Essay prompt:
“Discuss the claim that English always carries cultural values rather than being a ‘neutral language’. Assess the implications for its use as a language of education.”

Essay outline from a relevant essay:
i. Introduction (without a thesis statement)
ii. Cultural values and language
iii. Cultural values and English
iv. Use English as a language of education
v. Conclusion

‘English is an international language now; many countries concern the learning of English as it is really important in trading, economic, science and technology and many international events. People may learn English as a subject or learn it through the combination with curriculum. No matter what way is used to learn English, cultural values are transmitted.’

- **Potential causes for irrelevancies**

Since students used a lot of description in this approach and since there were no thesis statements, they often included many details which were not relevant to the issues as defined in the essay prompts. As the issues were not clear, it was not at all surprising that their conclusions were often made up of generalizations having no logical relationship to the issues concerned.

- **Source of the problems**

Student using such an approach may probably be weak in three major thinking skills, discriminating, inferring and focusing. The preference for a descriptive-based approach is likely the result of not being able to discriminate relevant from irrelevant information, or important from unimportant information. The strong inclination to describe rather than to discuss reflects that the students were not good at inferring or abstracting which involves finding a pattern within a series of examples or instances. The often out-of-place generalizations were quite likely the inability to focus on the topics discussed or the main issues involved.

4.2. **The introductions of the essays**

- **Forms**

Most essays did not give a thesis statement or make any claim in the introduction. There were, however, some notable patterns of how the students presented the
introduction. The most common one was that they just listed the topics to be discussed in the development after giving some general background information, as shown in example (2). Sometimes, the listing might take the form of indirect wh-questions about how the topics would be analyzed, for example,

(5)a. ‘I will examine whether language play can be considered a verbal art form or not.’

‘Also, cultural factors will be considered to see whether they are suitable to be count as ‘art’ or ‘play’ with supporting examples.’

b. ‘In this essay, there will be an analysis of how and why children are learning to take on a particular identity as they learn English.’

‘In this essay, I will first talk about the process of acquiring the working knowledge of the language system. Then I will discuss how children learn the social rules of using spoken English.’

Sometimes the students might draw some generalizations in the introduction about their personal views or observations on the issues concerned. These generalizations might be so valid and relevant that they could indeed be treated as some potential thesis statements. In the cases where students did write up some thesis statements, they were usually very general in nature and not accompanied by explanation as to how they would be developed and argued for.

• Potential causes for irrelevancies

Obviously, the absence of a thesis statement means that the essay did not have a clear and specific purpose or controlling idea to tie together all the details. The student might be able to provide some description or discussion for the various topics or sub-topics they identified from the essay prompts. But this way, without a specific purpose, there would always be opportunities that the students would go astray and talk about irrelevant ideas or materials. Indeed, in the introductions of the 52 essays, it is not uncommon to find irrelevant or very general background information, trite ideas or gap-fillers (which we will have more discussion in Section 4.5) that could simply be omitted.

• Source of the problems

The inclusion of irrelevant and trite ideas in the introduction exemplifies the need for enhancing the students’ discriminating and focusing skill in writing. That they failed to draw up a thesis statement points to the necessity of improving their skill in synthesizing and inferring inductively.

4.3. The Development

• Forms
As mentioned in the previous section, many students listed in the *introduction* the major topics – as prompted by the essay questions – that they would discuss in the development. Following this schema, the students separated the development part into several topics whose logical relationships were usually not made clear. As a result, these sections were not so connected as to form a coherent whole with a specific purpose to support.

In some essays, the purpose may be more specific, such as making a comparison or giving the reasons for some phenomena. The students would describe some general information relating to the major topics, and then make the comparison or expound the reasons without showing the connection between the descriptive and discussion sections.

The third common practice in structuring the development is that the students mainly described the various topics suggested by the essay prompts, but they were interpolated with some relevant generalizations which could be treated as topic sentences. Nevertheless, the logical relationships between the generalizations and the related descriptions were not always made clear or understood.

- **Potential causes for irrelevancies**

The problems identified from examining the development parts of the 52 essays are as follows:

A. Independent description of relevant topics but their relationships are not signalled.

The essay outline in example (3) discusses three major topics which are related to the essay question but which are quite independent of each other.

B. There was too much description with no significant generalizations or grouping facts and opinions into categories.

(6) ‘Education in Hong Kong has a similar system to that of the United Kingdom, in particular the English education system, as Hong Kong was colonised by the British from 1841 to 1997. The teaching medium in most of the local schools is Chinese with English as a second language. Nearly every student in Hong Kong learn English from the age of four or even earlier. Most children grow up bilingual from infancy as they grow up. Naturally the presence of English (especially various varieties of Chinese or Cantonese) has influenced the English of Hong Kong. Hong Kong people always add in English terms in conversations. English is also very often code-mixed in the columns like advertisements and popular songs to attract the sights of the people. It is the distinct language combining the features of the East and West, which creates a “sense of identification” among speakers after the decolonization in Hong Kong. Chinglish is a badge of identity for many Hong Kongers.’

C. Supporting statements were not logically related to the topic sentence or generalization.
(7) ‘The conversation between the child and mother, we can see that they sometimes lack the formal completeness of exchange structure models. Anna’s mother uses some no verbal responses to communicate with her daughter such as some actions, gestures and facial expressions. They do not talk only with words.’

D. Major ideas without appropriate definition or qualification

In example (7) above, the term ‘formal completeness of exchange structure models’ was neither defined nor elaborated.

E. Crude generalizations

(8) (Section heading: Economic Factor)
‘In addition, economic factor does influence English teaching a lot. …..’

(Section heading: Attitudes towards English)
‘Apart from the above factors, attitudes of learners and policy makers to English may influence how it is taught in schools.’

F. Failing to limit the discussion

(9) Essay prompt:
‘Can we make a clear distinction between ‘literature’ and other creative and artistic forms of English language use such as songs and advertisements?’

Irrelevant information on the topic of ‘advertisements’:
‘Advertisers try to engage us on several levels: visual, emotional, intellectual. Words which have connotations or second meanings can arouse emotions, or they can challenge us to think, or they can bring visual images, unbidden, into our minds. Magazine advertisements, however, are not reliant on words alone: visual images can underline the message, or convey the message in themselves. Words will tend to be used sparingly, and therefore, where they are used, in a well-thought advert, the words may bear a heavy load in terms of communicating with readers.’

• Source of the problems

The students with these problems probably lacked the following skills: synthesizing (problem A), categorizing and generalizing (problem B), inferring deductively or identifying causal relationships (problem C), elaborating (problem D), abstracting and generalizing (problem E), discriminating and focusing (problem F).

4.4 The conclusion

• Forms

As expected, some essays gave a summary of what they had discussed or described –
some might even simply repeated the major topics that had been listed in the introduction. But quite a number of them included some personal views, with or without a summary, perhaps as some kind of extensions from the issues discussed. These personal views, however, were often extraneous to the main issues, as the following example illustrates:

(9) Essay prompt:
‘Using Stephanie Marriott’s research as a starting point, discuss the extent to which new communications media are influencing the form and function of modern English.’

Essay outline:
i. Introduction
ii. Considering Stephanie Marriott’s research findings
iii. Considering other media and their influences on English
iv. How far new forms of English are being generated by the use of new communication technology?
v. Conclusion
‘Having a global computer network that link up the entire world is certainly a miracle and amazing. The Internet is a great source of information, thus broaden people’s horizon. It is obvious that people use English, as it is the most common language and the global language. Therefore make the rapid spread of English. For the convenience of communication, the form and functions of English language is changing. The widespread of English throughout the whole world brings about positive outcomes to the language itself, the persons who use the language and the English-speaking countries.’

Nevertheless, a few of the essays included some effective generalizations which could be useful thesis statements for the respective topics or issues they described or discussed. Most of them, however, were not directly related to the discussions before, and therefore not valid inferences

- Potential causes for irrelevancies

As is just said, quite a number of essays included in the conclusion personal views that were extraneous to the topics or issues under discussion. Sometimes, these views were simply trite ideas or unfounded generalizations and they constituted some blatant irrelevancies. This means that the conclusion did not bear a logical relationship to the ideas discussed or described in the development. This should not come as a surprise since most of the essays did not have a clear and specific purpose or theme to elaborate on.

- Sources of the problems

Students who wrote conclusions as exemplified in (9) were probably weak in summarizing and focusing skills.

4.5. Gap fillers and trite ideas
In quite a number of the essays examined, there were *gap-fillers* or trite ideas which could appear in any sections or paragraphs. These expressions were common sayings or very general ideas which did not contribute much or indeed anything to the presentation of the arguments. The following are some examples:

(10) ‘English is a language used all over the world, either a subject learned in schools, or as a means for communication.’

‘English is the language of international communication, commerce, education and entertainment.’

‘It is crystal clear that we all learn through language. With the spread of English all over the world, it has become an international language.’

These *gap-fillers* or trite ideas were obviously irrelevant information since they did not have a clear and logical connection to the topics or the issues as defined by the essay prompts.

5. Conclusion

This research has re-examined the issue of *relevance* in academic writing from the perspective of the Anglo-American tradition which emphasizes the formulation of a thesis statement embodying a central claim to be defended or argued for in the rest of the essay. Statements or ideas that directly contribute to this action are said to be relevant; otherwise, they are likely to be irrelevant.

Six major potential causes for irrelevancies have been identified in this research, which analyzed 52 academic essays collected from an undergraduate English course offered by a Hong Kong distance-learning university. The source of these problems is suggested to be the students’ weaknesses or inadequacies in higher-order thinking skills such as synthesizing, focusing, inferring, discriminating and generalizing. As these thinking skills can be taught, it is suggested that in academic writing classes, students should be given exercises that raise their awareness and enhance their ability in using these skills for better writing.

References

