

The Culture of Writing of L2 Writers in Transition from Secondary School to Postsecondary Education

Lee Lai Fong

Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam, Malaysia

Lee Su Kim

Siti Hamin Stapa

Saadiah Darus

Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

ABSTRACT

This study looks at the culture of writing of second language (L2) writers in English who are in transition from secondary school to postsecondary education. It looks at four case studies of students in their first semester of postsecondary education in a public university. It examines their negotiation of culture of writing in secondary school to the culture of writing in postsecondary education from the perspective of sociocultural theory. Data was obtained from interviews, personal narratives and observation. The findings show that sociocultural theory can offer an understanding of these ESL writers as they move from one culture of writing to another.

Keywords: *culture of writing, secondary school, postsecondary education, sociocultural theory*

Introduction

Writing in Secondary School and Postsecondary Education

English as a Second Language (ESL) students who are in transition from secondary school to postsecondary education often face problems in writing (Cornwell & McKay, 1998; Zuraidah Ali & Melor Md. Yunus, 2004). Problems in writing in postsecondary education can occur because of the different expectations of writing at this level and at secondary school level. Moreover, not all writing skills brought by students from school are important to university (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). There is a disparity in the cultures of the two educational institutions of school and university and writing can be “messy” (Budden, Nicolini, Fox & Green, 2002).

Students need to be aware of the purpose of writing assignments, their role as writers, expectation of readers, content of writing, degree of formality in writing and contextual elements in writing in postsecondary education (Reid, 1990; Preto-Bay, 2004). They need to be adequately prepared for expectations and approaches of university writing (Clerehan & Walker, n.d.). Lack of awareness of the complexity and the length of writing tasks (Clerehan & Walker, n.d.) and use of knowledge to write essays (Grayson & Stowe, 2005), poor language and vocabulary, weak organization and ideas (Chen, 2002; Silva et al., 2003) can impair development of writing. The negative experience of students moving from writing in high school to college has resulted in good writers in high school becoming underachievers in college writing classes as they are puzzled about college writing (Harklau, 2000, 2001). Generally, in learning to write at university, students are involved in the process of forming a new identity to meet the expectations of writing in university. This is not easy for L2 students as the two learning experiences of writing are different (Hyland, 2002).

This reflects that the culture of writing in secondary school is different from the culture of writing in postsecondary education, making transition possibly problematic and intimidating to students. Culture of writing in this research is defined as socially transmitted expectations, beliefs, and values of what good writing is as determined by a particular small setting or group and which is manifested in appropriate practices, impacting the writer and his writing (Holliday, 1999; Atkinson, 2003; Jin & Cortazzi, 1998; Cortazzi, 2000; Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995).

Writing in secondary school (Form Five) in Malaysia on the average takes up about two periods (1 hour 20 minutes) of the eight periods (one period is 40 minutes) of English lessons per week. The type of writing students do is directed writing where phrases related to a topic are given to help students write about 300 words in 35 minutes. This involves short reports, letters, essays, articles or others. Another type of writing is continuous writing where the written product is an essay of about 350 words and the time allocated is one hour. This involves descriptive, narrative or factual essays (Ministry of Education, 2003). This longer essay is the main focus for writing in secondary school in the context of this research. Writing in secondary school is geared towards preparing students for an important public examination, Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM) [Malaysian Certificate of Education] in Form Five.

In contrast, in postsecondary education, writing is more intensive. The writing syllabus of the postsecondary course in this research, pre-degree Teaching English as a Second Language (pre-degree TESL) semester One involves three hours of writing classes per week. Students are introduced to paragraph writing of about 250 words at the start of Semester One. Then, they are initiated into essay writing (500-600 words). They learn aspects of essay writing and different types of essays: narrative, descriptive, comparison-contrast, cause-effect and argumentative (This continues to Semester Two writing in addition to a required research paper of 1200 words). Evaluation is based on coursework, quizzes, assignments and exams (Pre-degree TESL writing syllabus, 2007).

Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory which stems from the work of Vygotsky views individual learning, culture and social interaction as closely related. The unit of analysis is the “tool-mediated goal directed action” and these tools can be physical artifacts or symbolic (Lantoff, 2000). One aspect of sociocultural theory is activity theory, which views human behaviour as the outcome of activity by individuals that is mediated by both social and cultural factors. In other words, “people’s ways of thinking and learning develop through and are shaped by the activities in which they participate, activities that are social in nature and have historically developed tools, structures, and settings” (Nelson & Kim, 2001, p. 38). The unit of analysis here is activity. The activity by individuals is motivated

by a need which in turn becomes a motive acted out in specific actions (Lantoff, 2000; Lantoff & Thorne, 2006). “To understand individual actions, therefore, one must know the context in which these actions are embedded, namely, a system of activity” (Nelson & Kim, 2001, p. 39).

The system of activity as shown in Figure 1 is based on Engestrom’s work, which is an extension of Vygotsky’s and Leonte’s models (Lantoff & Thorne, 2006, p. 222). The subject is the individual(s) whom the analysis is focused on. The subject transforms an object into an outcome (goal) by working on it. Tools which are symbolic or material artifacts mediate this goal-directed activity. Tools “shape the activity” and are also “shaped by the activity” (Nelson & Kim, 2001, p. 39). Rules guide the actions and interactions in the system. The community refers to participants who have the same object and division of labor refers to the horizontal and vertical distribution of tasks among the community members. The community, rules and division of labor connects “local human activity and the larger socio-cultural-historical structures” (Lantoff & Thorne, 2006, p. 222). Activity systems are not dormant and a number of activity systems can be present at one time. Besides, conflicts or collaborations can happen within or between activity systems. When conflicts happen, appropriation occurs and leads to development or expansion. This means that the conflicts are resolved or transformed and a different object and motive exist because the activity system is changed. This leads to learning in an activity system (Lantoff & Thorne, 2006; Johri, 2005; Nelson & Kim, 2001).

Research on writing and sociocultural theory has been used to provide explanations to understand students’ L2 development and writing. With regard to the former, activity theory has been used to explain how individuals who are doing the same task are involved in different activities. This is because they have their own agency: personal histories and different motives that influence the activities (Lantoff & Pavlenko, 2001 in Lantoff and Thorne, 2006). Agency refers to the idea that human beings have power to act (Roth & Lee, 2007). Pavlenko and Lantoff (2000) also bring up the idea of second language learning as participation in an activity.

As for the latter, sociocultural theory is used to understand writing in an attempt to empower students as writers. Donato (2000) utilizes it to explain how students approach the same writing task differently based on their agency: goals, actions, cultural background, etc. Thus, writing teachers should look into students’ goals and not just their writing. Lantoff’s and Pavlenko’s (2001 in Lantoff & Thorne, 2006) perspective on L2 development is along similar lines. Nelson and Kim (2001) apply activity

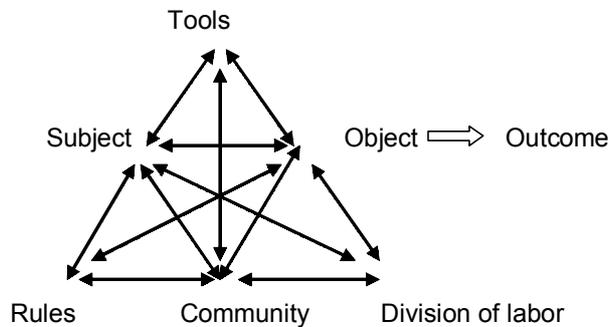


Figure 1: Activity System (in Lantolf and Thorne, 2006, p. 222)

theory in their research on first year international students who were taking a writing course at a university. They utilize it to understand how concepts and tools of rhetoric and self-evaluation were appropriated by the students, how they mediated their writing in English and how tensions in the class resulted in changes in the composition activity system. Meanwhile, Lantolf and Thorne (2006) use activity theory to analyse peer review in a Spanish writing classes and elaborate its pertinence for pedagogical intervention and innovation.

The Study

This paper is part of ongoing research on culture of ESL writing from a sociocultural perspective. Specifically, this paper looks into the transition from the culture of writing in Form 5 (secondary school) to the culture of writing in the first semester of a pre-degree TESL programme (postsecondary education); that is, how students deal with changes in writing and form their writing identity as they move from one culture of writing to participate in another. The aspects of culture of writing which are focused on in this paper are values and beliefs about writing and writing class.

Setting and Subjects

The subjects for this case study were four pre-degree Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) students from a public university in

Selangor, Malaysia. The pre-degree TESL programme is a postsecondary preparatory programme for a four year Bachelor of Education TESL degree programme. It aims to improve students' English proficiency and fluency in core English language components: reading, writing, listening and speaking, and grammar. The four subjects were Malay female students in their first semester of pre-degree TESL and they volunteered to be subjects for this research. They obtained Grade 1 in their SPM and obtained A1 for their English paper. Student 1 (S1) was from a private Islamic boarding school, student 2 (S2) was from a public boarding school, student 3 (S3) was from a private Arabic school and student 4 (S4) was from a private Islamic boarding school. These subjects reflect the diverse background of students enrolled in the pre-degree TESL programme.

Research Data

The research data for this paper were taken from interviews, personal narratives and observation in an attempt to achieve validity through triangulation.

Interviews were conducted with the four subjects individually and consent was obtained to audiotape the interviews. The interviews were based on the responsive interviewing model proposed by Rubin and Rubin (2005). The interviews took one to one and a half hours. It aimed at obtaining information on the cultures of writing of the students in secondary school and in pre-degree TESL, how they shifted from one culture of writing to another, the factors that influenced them and the changes that occurred to them and their writing. These interviews were conducted at the end of Semester One of pre-TESL.

The personal narratives were utilized to obtain further information besides being used to verify information from the interviews. More importantly, these narratives were for students to portray their inner voice in an attempt to confront their writing problems and to come to grasp their identity as writers (Steinman, 2005; Meng, 1999; Van Sluys, 2003) in postsecondary education. Narratives have been lauded to enhance knowledge of L2 writers and L2 writing (Tupas, 2004; Casanave, 2005; Matsuda, 2002; Pavlenko, 2002). The subjects were asked to reflect and write about their writing experience in secondary school and postsecondary education and how they navigated the challenges in writing and the impact on them and their writing. They were asked to write about four pages and were given two weeks to write.

Four observations of the Semester One writing class were conducted by the researcher. The role of the researcher was that of an observer with insider information. Each observation was for two hours and field notes were taken.

In the qualitative analysis of data, the students' interviews were transcribed and themes were identified to code the data. Data from personal narratives and observation were used to triangulate the data from the interviews. The data was analysed in the following manner. First, the culture of writing for secondary school and postsecondary education for each student (within case) was analysed according to the identified themes. Then, commonalities across cases were identified. Following this, sociocultural theory was used to interpret the negotiation of writing from secondary school to postsecondary education.

Discussion

Culture of Writing in Secondary School and Transition to Culture of Writing in Postsecondary Education

The following discussion of cultures of writing for the two educational settings covers some of the areas identified under values and beliefs about writing and writing classes.

Values and Beliefs about Writing

Exam Oriented

One of the predominant values seen in the culture of writing in secondary school is that writing was important to students as they wanted to get good marks and to do well in their SPM examinations.

The strong impact of the SPM exam was a factor in students being prepared by their teachers to write according to exam format (S4) and more writing exercises were given to students (S1). S1 pointed out, "In Form 5, I do more exercises on essays for SPM preparation, at first, quite stressful, in a week, more than three essays but teacher motivates, can cope". Aside from these, the choice of essay type was also influenced by the desire to do well in the SPM exam. To illustrate, S4 chose factual writing which helped her to score A1 in SPM English. She commented, "It saved me during SPM".

Students S2 and S3 who were not getting sufficient input and help from their teachers took steps on their own to improve their writing to do well in exam. S2 felt frustrated and depressed and wondered how to get high marks. She formed a group with five friends to discuss essay topics, generate ideas and challenge each other to improve ideas and it worked out “great”. S3 said, “I felt frustrated and it was very hard to improve (from) own effort to learn”. She went to tuition classes during her school holidays and read a lot to get ideas to improve her writing. She also went to cyber cafes to find information for writing and followed BBC programmes to improve her grammar for writing as she “loved to write factual, opinion (essays)”. The value placed by these students on writing has been mediated by the SPM exam, the importance they placed on it and their goal to do well in the exam.

When these students entered pre-TESL, three (S1, S3 and S4) of them still placed importance on writing well for exam purposes. Their past educational experience has strongly influenced this value. However, this value is not given as much importance as in secondary school (refer to section on career goal).

This similarity in the value placed on writing for exam in the two different cultures of writing; two different activity systems is not surprising in view of the dominant impact of the examination oriented education system in Malaysia. The apparent goal of education is to pass examinations with a string of ‘As’, giving rise to stress on perpetual schoolwork, homework and tuition. In general, writing in Malaysian schools is very exam oriented (Tan & Miller, 2007; Joseph, 2005) and this value is held on by students going into postsecondary education.

Career Goal

At secondary school level, only one student (S1) viewed writing as important to achieve her goal of being a writer. This is linked to her ambition since her lower secondary year (Form 2), “I have great interest to be a writer”. She attributed this ambition to her English teacher in Form 2 who used fun ways to teach her to express her ideas in writing.

At postsecondary education level, there exists a wider outlook with regard to values and beliefs about writing. It was viewed as essential for future careers. All of the students wanted to write well to achieve their career goals in contrast to only S1 who valued writing in secondary school to achieve her career goal. S1 still believed writing was important

for her ambition to be a writer and for work as she would need to write comments, prepare presentations, and others. Writing was important to S2 to achieve her goal of writing a small column in a newspaper. S3 valued writing as she hoped to be a professional writer, teach others and gain money. As for S4, writing was important for her to achieve her ambition of freelancing for a well known newspaper or magazine or becoming an author.

These students moving into the new activity system, culture of writing in postsecondary education show that their writing was directed at their career goal, an outcome which was also a tool which mediates their values and beliefs about writing. There was an expansion in the values and beliefs students placed on writing that is, it is not only for exams as seen in secondary school. This could be because being in postsecondary education writing acts as a present sociohistorical influence which impacts them to foresee a career as the next step after postsecondary level and thus link it to their values of writing.

Expectations of Postsecondary Writing

Only S1 and S4 who had positive writing experiences in secondary school seemed to be ready to meet the challenges of the new culture of writing. They formed expectations of postsecondary writing, that is, it will be more in-depth, structured and demanding. S1 anticipated it to be more serious, to involve more library research and to be more discussion oriented. She was very excited to approach postsecondary writing. S4 expected writing in postsecondary education to be “harsher” and more structured. She was prepared for the worst as she expected “lots of writing” and she needed to discipline herself to avoid last minute work.

In contrast, S2 and S3 were not as ready as S1 and S4. This could be due to past sociohistorical influences such as their negative experience with their writing teachers in secondary school. They asserted their own agency to cope with writing and obtained A in SPM for their English. Even though S2 and S3 had formed a sense of “self” (pleased with their results) at the end of secondary school writing, they were still “scarred” by their previous negative writing experiences with their writing teachers in secondary school. Their “recovery of self” (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p. 167) in secondary school was not totally complete for them to be ready to form expectations for postsecondary writing.

Writing Class

Topics

With regard to secondary school writing, the topics of writing preferred by three of the students (S2, S3 and S4) were factual topics even though they had a choice between factual writing and narrative writing. Only S1 preferred narrative writing and writing about personal experiences as she could relate them to friends and memories and wrote in-depth about them. She only chose factual topics if they were interesting as she found herself lacking in ideas for factual topics. "I felt like giving up. I made up facts which did not help in doing essays and did not get good marks". Generally, the topics in secondary school were not considered difficult. S3 pointed out, "The topic is very simple as everybody knows about it".

When the students shifted to the culture of writing in postsecondary education, they were influenced by their previous writing experience in secondary school and expectations of postsecondary writing. The students preferred factual writing which was viewed as more intellectual for postsecondary writing even though it was challenging (S2). Even S1 who preferred narrative writing earlier "encouraged (herself) to write on more factual and serious topics". She realized there were certain expectations about writing in postsecondary level. "I have to work hard and play by the rules. If not, I'll be left behind. I'm willing to try and try again". S3 said postsecondary writing topics were more complicated, for example, genetically modified food and abortion. "I had culture shock. I feel in other planet. I feel it is better to quit but I can't stop. I have to remember my target".

Structure of Essay and Ideas

In the culture of writing in secondary school, the students were taught five paragraph essays that consisted of introduction, body (3 paragraphs) and conclusion and content for their essays. The word limit for essays was 350 words. S4 said when her teacher taught structure of essay, she would tell "what to go into the introduction, body and conclusion". She learned about writing three paragraphs for the body and to expand one point for one paragraph so that she did not "muddle up things". She also learned about supporting details, how to expand ideas and "give examples,

idioms, and proverbs”. Her teacher taught her how to be more focused in writing ideas and she began to read current issues in newspaper for ideas. The length of the essay made her use more specific and concise sentences in her writing. Even students who did not get enough input from their teacher also adhered to this structure. S3 who took her own effort to learn the five paragraph essay also spoke of introduction, three paragraphs for body and conclusion. She added, “I put one point in one paragraph, elaborate and prove examples”.

In the culture of writing in postsecondary education, when the students started off with essays, they were also introduced to the structure of a five paragraph essay: introduction, body (3 paragraphs), conclusion in addition to thesis statements, topic sentences, supporting details and expansion of ideas for content. The students were also given information on writing well and in organizing paragraphs. The word limit for the essays was 500-600 words.

The main difficulties students faced in the transition were with thesis statements, topic sentences and development of ideas. S1 didn’t understand how to write a good thesis nor why it was important. S2 said, “The lecturer was extremely stressing on the main idea and topic sentence... When she asked to write about thesis statement, (I) don’t know”. She continued, “Failure to understand thesis and topic cost a lot ... low marks in quiz”. She commented that she felt “blank” having to write thesis statement. S3 felt lost too and said, “I felt absolutely that I was nothing. I did not know thesis, topic sentence, only know supporting details”. The five paragraph essay was enough for her at postsecondary level. She elaborated points and knew she had to organize them well even though it was hard for her to grasp the ideas. “I feel so strange because it is so complicated to think of examples about force feeding the anorexics...” But she continued, “By the way, it’s cool to know new things”. S4 says writing at this level was more structured and she had to learn thesis and topic sentences and ideas “count”. S1 agreed that “generating ideas is important in university”. She realized that at the start, her content in writing lacked examples and that for it to be in-depth, she included news, statistics, ideas and quotations. Moreover, she realized she needed to give “specific explanation and not to just “dump” for example, quotations without explanation”.

Negotiation of Transition from the Culture of Writing in Secondary School to the Culture of Writing in Postsecondary Education

The transition to writing in postsecondary education caused tensions when the students attempted to participate in it. The tensions stemmed from the differences between the two cultures of writing. They were topics, thesis statements, topic sentences, as well as ideas. Although the majority of the students favoured factual topics in secondary school, at postsecondary level they caused tension as the topics were more “factual”(S1), more challenging (S2) and more complicated (S4). All four students faced difficulties with thesis statements and topic sentences in postsecondary writing. Development of ideas for essays was another problem area. There was a need for more specific explanation of ideas (S1, S2, S4) and more detailed ideas (S4).

These students needed to participate in the culture of writing in postsecondary education to achieve their goal of writing. They needed to appropriate the new aspects of writing, that is, topic, thesis statement, topic sentence and in-depth ideas. However, each student’s transition from the culture of writing in secondary school to that in postsecondary education was different because each had their own agency and sociohistorical and cultural makeup. This echoes the view of second language learning “as a struggle of concrete socially constituted and always situated beings to participate in the symbolically mediated lifeworld of another culture. These individuals have intentions, agency, and above all histories...” (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p. 155). Consequently, there were different ways used by these students to appropriate these aspects of topics, thesis statements, topic sentences and development of in-depth ideas in the culture of writing in postsecondary education. They used different or similar tools to mediate and negotiate their participation into this new culture of writing. In addition, they portrayed themselves as agents who were responsible for taking action to cope with the unsettling changes they were facing.

The tools used by the students to mediate their transition between the two cultures of writing were their lecturer (S1, S2, S3 and S4), their own initiative (S1, S2 and S3), friends (S1 and S2), reading materials (S3 and S4), and the Internet (S3). The students used these tools in different ways according to their agencies and histories.

S1 used her lecturer to explain to her new methods of writing and to get feedback on her marked work, S2 used her lecturer’s criticisms to

correct her work, S3 got her lecturer to check on her ideas even before she wrote her essays and asked her lecturer to comment on the mistakes in her corrected work very thoroughly, “sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph”. S4 was very dependent on her lecturer and got very detailed information about essay writing prior to writing and saw her personally for feedback to improve her writing.

As for their own drive or self initiative, S1 encouraged herself to struggle on to improve. She commented, “I felt like giving up. I encouraged myself to struggle. Negative impression can ruin my future”. She tried hard to find ideas and references for writing, did outlines and added more ideas before she wrote the drafts. S2 did research on her own to get ideas for writing and put in great effort and time to compile her arguments and opinions and rewrote as many as four to five drafts of her essays to “perfect” her writing. S3 compared herself to better writers, felt envious and pushed herself to work harder at writing. She said, “I feel jealous, I work hard to be better”.

Friends were used by S1 to obtain ideas. She had discussions with them and also got them to check her ideas in her outlines. S2 used her friends’ work to understand thesis statements and topic sentences.

S3 read reference books before she wrote to obtain ideas and S4 also engaged in reading for the same purpose. As for the Internet, S3 used it as a source of ideas for writing.

Aside from these, the personal narratives, which were part of the data collection, written by the students were another tool they used to negotiate their transition in writing. All four of these students when initiated into another world of writing that was different to them encountered conflict and experienced loss of agency, that is, “severing one’s union with the world inhabited by others, and ... losing the connection to their own inner world – the world of the mind” (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p. 165). Their inner voice or private speech, namely their personal narratives, was an attempt to mediate between themselves and their consciousness in order to feel “connected” (Daniels, 2001). It was an attempt to make sense of the changes in their writing world and of themselves as writers.

There was expansion and development after the students used the aforementioned tools in their specific ways to deal with the contradictions between the two cultures of writing. They became more adept at postsecondary writing and were aware of the expectations of postsecondary writing.

S1 found that writing in postsecondary education needed more specific explanation of ideas, more serious discussion, more explanation for

introduction, body and conclusion and more factual topics were given. S2 got the idea of what postsecondary writing was like at the end of the semester. “(I) learned a lot about academic writing, writing strategies, supporting details, thesis statements, topic sentences ...” S2 said writing in postsecondary education was not much different from writing in secondary school except for more challenging topics, more current issues, more specific points, more consultations with the lecturer and freedom to voice her opinions. She felt the tasks were more mature, challenging and fun. S3 found writing in postsecondary education similar to secondary school writing in terms of five paragraph essay, introduction, body and conclusion. However, she was still learning about writing and improving as a writer. It cannot be denied that although S4 still wrote according to her mood and still needed to fully understand postsecondary writing, she had grasped it to an extent. She found postsecondary writing to be more specific. She got the “big picture” of what to do that is, what the writing course was and the types of writing were although there were still many things to learn “like maths, always practise to sharpen it”.

When the students shifted to writing in postsecondary education, they faced tensions in their writing identity even among S1 and S4 who formed expectations about postsecondary writing and seemed more prepared for it. The reformulation of identity occurred despite the fact that when the students finished secondary school, they had formed a positive identity of themselves as writers. This change in identity was a result of the transformation which occurred in their writing as they dealt with the tensions they faced in their new activity system, the culture of writing at postsecondary level.

S1 who liked writing at the end of secondary school felt less worried as she perceived postsecondary writing to be similar to secondary school writing in terms of introduction, body and conclusion but the reality was different as she “found it harder than (she) thought”. She felt confused and had difficulties in coping with new methods of writing. However, by the end of the semester, she was more interested in writing, was more positive and knew how to be a good writer. Her identity changed from being confused and helpless to a person who was interested in and confident about her writing. S2 who loved writing and felt self-satisfaction in getting A1 for her English in SPM, felt lost and down in writing at the start of pre-degree TESL. She became confident and happy at the end of the semester as she enjoyed learning new things in writing. S3, who was proud of her writing achievement in secondary school, felt lost and inconspicuous at the start of postsecondary writing. However, she found

herself challenged by her struggle in writing and was more comfortable with her writing. At the end of the semester, she had the “curiosity to improve as she wanted to write books”. S4 who also enjoyed writing at the end of secondary school, was prepared for postsecondary writing to be “harsher”. She became anxious about writing as she did not do as well as she expected. Through her development in writing, she became more attuned to the culture of writing in postsecondary education than when she first encountered it and in the end was passionate about writing.

The new self or identity that emerged for each of the four students showed more confident writers who did not totally lose the old but adapted to postsecondary writing. This was seen at the end of the semester in postsecondary education when the students could reflect on the two cultures of writing and compare them. S1 and S4 could compare and contrast the essay structure: introduction, body and conclusion and pointed out that in postsecondary level, more explanation and depth was needed. S3 claimed that the five paragraph essay, introduction, body and conclusion were similar for both levels. However, it should be noted that she was still finding her way in writing at that point of time although there was development in her writing. Next, all four acknowledged that factual topics and the need for good ideas existed at both writing cultures, except that the topics (factual and current issues) were more challenging (S2) and complicated (S3), and ideas had to be more in-depth and specific (S1, S2) at postsecondary writing.

Conclusion

This paper indicates that beliefs and values about writing in postsecondary education are shaped by exam and career goals. The gap in transition from the culture of writing in secondary school to the culture of writing in postsecondary education lies mainly in essay topics, thesis statements, topic sentences and development of ideas. It also shows the tools that students appropriated to close the gap and participate in the new culture of writing. These include their lecturer and self initiative, followed by friends, reading materials and the Internet. The idea behind participation is that learning entails “a process of becoming a member of certain community” (Sfard, 1998 in Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p. 155). Learners have to be able to communicate using the language used by the community as well as behave in accordance with the norms of the community. In other words, the students participated in the culture of writing in

postsecondary education, adopting the importance of writing factual topics, learning thesis statements and topic sentences and the development of ideas by using tools to mediate the transition.

These four students went through transformations in their writing and personal selves as writers as they moved from secondary school writing to postsecondary writing. They actively participated and interacted socially as well as reformulating themselves to belong to the new culture of writing in postsecondary education. The use of activity theory, an aspect of sociocultural theory is utilized to understand these students as they move from one culture of writing to another. It can provide answers as to how students deal with contradictions, reformulate their identity and be part of the new writing culture and the factors that shape them and the kind of interventions that can be offered to students and their writing. For example, scaffolding by the writing lecturer is still needed by students who have just made the transition to postsecondary writing as they seemed to be dependent on lecturers at this stage as this was the main tool used by the students. This reflects that in Malaysian education, teachers are still viewed as “omniscient” (Asmah Hj. Omar, 2003). Another intervention that can be used is having students and their friends scaffold each other through reciprocal teaching which gives the students a “teacherly identity” (Thorne, n.d.). This division of labor which gives more vertical power to students can encourage transformation and growth in writing at postsecondary level.

Besides, it should not just be assumed that secondary school writing and postsecondary writing are totally separate worlds. The students could compare and contrast the topics, basic structure and development of ideas for essays in these two cultures of writing. This suggests that school writing can be used as an artifact for comparative purposes in the early stage of writing in postsecondary education. Those involved in teaching writing may want to rethink their stance and perception of these two cultures of writing. They can build on the connected areas to ease the transition in writing between the two cultures of writing for students.

More importantly, the sociocultural perspective indicates that students should not be stereotyped in their writing experiences, for example, that postsecondary writing poses similar difficulties for all students. A portrayal of students that looks into their sociohistorical and cultural background to reduce the struggles they face to be participants of their writing world should be advanced. It also indicates that the objectives behind students' writing and not just the writing they produce should be understood by writing teachers (Donato, 2000). Hopefully, such an approach can

encourage students to reach their potential in writing for postsecondary education and for future needs.

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Email address: 11f90@yahoo.com

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