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Engaging Readers' Attention in Academic Essay Writing

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Abstract: The ability to express ideas effectively in academic essay writing requires knowledge of the topic, correct essay structure and elements involved in each structure. One of the important structures in the academic essay is the introduction paragraph whereby in this paragraph the writer should make an effort to engage the interest of the readers to want to read on. Engaging the readers' attention can be achieved by setting the background of the topic written using strategies known as attention getters. Thus, knowing the various techniques of attention getters available to writers and using them effectively are extremely crucial in achieving this purpose. Despite this fact, students are still struggling to write an interesting opening to their essay using the available attention getters, hence, making their essay less appealing to readers even at the start. This study is aimed at investigating English as a second language (ESL) learners' ability in using attention getters as the introduction strategy of their essays. Using content analysis method, participants' essays of a given topic, specifically the introduction paragraph was analysed according to four attention getter strategies which were taught earlier in class. Data was processed using SPSS software *version 23* and statistical methods used for analysis were frequency analysis, cross tabulation and chi square tests. Findings reveal that students prefer using a particular attention getter strategy to capture the reader's interest instead of using all strategies available to them. It can be concluded that to enable students to apply all strategies available, they should be encouraged to use different strategy every time essay writing is involved.

Keywords: Academic Essay, Attention Getters, Engaging Reader

1.   Introduction

Making a good first impression is important not only in the first meeting with someone but the first sentence in an essay also seems to have that same impact on a reader. Without proper knowledge on how to write an effective introduction, many student writers would find beginning an essay to be a daunting task. Previous study by Manyasi (2013), for instance, found that the lack of knowledge resulted in the ineffective usage of attention getter strategies available to capture the readers' interest among the participants of her study. Abdullah et al., (2011) further noted that the key to producing good writing or essays relies on the types and amount of strategies used and on the regulation of the strategies for generating ideas. This clearly suggests that successful writing is dependent on the use of strategies required in the process of writing (Mu, 2005). One of the strategies, for example, is capturing the readers' interest which can be attempted successfully if the writer understands the purpose and the structure of each part of the essay and elements in it as he or she begins the writing process. Further, this study was deemed appropriate because the researchers could gather in depth understanding of writing strategies used by ESL learners specifically with regards to attention getters when writing essays. The researchers hope the results obtained from this study can be basis for future improvement of the teaching and learning process of academic essay writing as a whole.

2.   Academic Essay Introductory Paragraph

The main purpose of writing the introductory paragraph in an academic essay is to introduce the topic to the reader by stating what the topic is and giving some general background information. This will help the reader to understand what writers are writing about,

and show why the topic is important. In terms of structure, the introductory paragraph contains general statements about the topic and the thesis statement. The general statements serve two purposes; introduce the topic written and provide the background information of the topic. The background information can be reader engaging if it is provided in an interesting way through the use of several strategies. These strategies are best known as the attention getter strategies whereby effective use of these strategies will lead the reader into further reading of the essay.

3.   Attention Getters

As the name suggest, the purpose of using these devices is to engage reader's attention to want to read on. Attention getter according to Clouse (2012) and Langan (2008) is an attempt to impress the reader and consequently motivates him or her to continue reading the essay. Opening strategies are used by an effective writer who always has the reader's interest in mind and wants the audience to play an active role in the message he or she wishes to convey (Scott, n.d.). Thus, writers should make attempts to strengthen their introductory paragraph through the use of one strategy or a combination of strategies to get positive response from the audience (Grace et al., 2010).

Naginder and Nooraliza (2015) have listed four attention getter strategies namely facts and statistics, quotation, anecdote and question and also support the idea that a good introduction strategy is important to stimulate readers' interest.   The details of the different types of attention getters are as follow:

3.1   Facts and statistics

This strategy provides reader with factual information to show the importance of the topic written. The information provided can be in the form of general statements or numerical form that later narrow down to the thesis of the essay. Surprising statistics that are relevant to the topic and easy to comprehend can successfully engage a reader's interest (Connelly, 2011 & Clouse, 2013). The use of facts and statistics strategy can persuade the reader that it is important that they should continue reading to get more information about the topic.

3.2   Quotation

Quotation strategy uses popular saying or proverb, a popular slogan from advertisement and most used expression among friends or family. Quotation lends credibility to an essay as other people's opinion is included in the essay besides the writer's opinion, thus, making the opening more interesting.

3.3   Anecdotes

Three sentences or more that form a brief story can be a stimulating essay opening for a reader at the onset. This technique involves sharing writer's personal experience or experience of others that he or she has observed. A topic related story attracts the audience as it engages the reader emotionally to draw him into the essay as he tries to relate the story to the essay written.

3.4   Question

One or more questions are posed as an opening strategy to start the reader thinking, hence, to find the answers; he cannot but must read on Langan (2008) claims that asking a "why" question is better than a "yes" or "no" question. A "why" question will promote further reading of the statements following it to lead the reader to the answer of the question posed earlier.

The strategies above clearly show that each strategy is different from the other and that using one or multiple strategies can positively draw the response from the audience even at the onset of the essay. Further, a writer should always consider who his or her audience is before choosing the strategies available instead of using the same strategy all the time. However, many student writers being novice writers still find writing an interesting opening to their essay a challenging task and this consequently makes their essay less appealing to the reader. Hence, this study hopes to investigate ESL learners' ability in using various attention getter strategies available in their essay writing.

4.   Objectives

Previous grading of students' essays seems to point to the usage of one particular strategy and although multiple strategies are allowed, very few have used more than one strategy as the opening of the essay. The researchers hope findings of the study will be proofs that the use of attention getter strategies is important to stress on in academic essay writing. The objectives of the current study are as follow:

1. To determine the attention getter strategies frequently used by ESL learners
2. To determine whether gender and attention getter strategy used are dependent on each other

5.   Methodology

Participants in this study consisted of fifty seven female and fifteen male diploma students of UiTM Pahang, Jengka campus in their semester 3 taking Integrated Language Skills: Writing (ELC230) course. They were selected for this study as the course taken by these participants focuses on the teaching and learning of academic writing. For the purpose of this study, one of the assessments was selected which was writing an essay of a given topic of about 180 to 200 words. Participants' essays from the assessment were analysed for the purpose of identifying the attention getter strategies used in the introduction paragraph of the essay written. Using content analysis method, the introduction paragraph of the essay was analysed based on the availability of four types of attention getter strategies that were taught in class prior to the study. The four types of attention getter strategies (Naginder & Nooraliza, 2015) identified were Facts and statistics (Strategy 1), Quotation (Strategy 2), Anecdote (Strategy 3) and Question (Strategy 4). Attention getter strategy identified can be a single strategy or multiple strategies used. The types of strategies used were recorded and statistical processing of the data by means of a Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) *version 23 for Windows* was applied. Statistical methods used for analysis were frequency analysis, cross tabulation and chi square tests. Chi square test can be used to test for independence between two variables; strategy used and gender. The findings are presented below.

6.   Results and Discussion

Table 1. Attention getter strategy used according to frequency

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Strategy 1	66	91.70%
Strategy 2	0	0%
Strategy 3	3	4.20%
Strategy 4	27	37.50%

It is shown in Table 1 that from the four attention getter strategies, the most used was Facts and Statistics (Strategy 1). Results show that 66 (91.70%) out of the 72 participants preferred using Strategy 1, 27 (37.50%) used Strategy 4, 3 used Strategy 3 (4.20%). No participant (0%) was found to use Strategy 2. These findings support the findings of an earlier study which illustrate that participants were mostly using facts as the introduction strategy (Manyasi, 2013) compared to the other strategies.

Table 2. Combination of attention getter strategy used

Strategy	Frequency			
	Strategy 1	Strategy 2	Strategy 3	Strategy 4
Strategy 1	66	0	0	24
Strategy 2	0	0	0	0
Strategy 3	0	0	3	0
Strategy 4	24	0	0	27

As shown in Table 2, only one multiple strategies were found used which was a combination of strategy 1 and strategy 4. 24 participants were found to use the combination of these two strategies. The findings contradicts what Manyasi (2013) found in her study whereby none of the participants was found to use any multiple strategies as the introduction strategy. Data also show that besides the combination of strategy 1 and strategy 4 used, no attempt to use other combination of strategies was recorded among the participants.

Table 3. Attention getter strategy used according to gender

Strategy	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Strategy 1	12	54	66
Strategy 2	0	0	0
Strategy 3	1	2	3
Strategy 4	7	20	27

Attention getter strategy used according to gender is shown in Table 3. Results show that from the 66 participants, who used strategy 1, 54 of them were females and 12 were males. The next most used strategy was strategy 4 where it was used by 20 females and 7 males. The least used strategy was strategy 3 where only 2 females and 1 male used this attention getter strategy. However, no male and female made any attempt to use Strategy 2 as their attention getter.

Table 4. Chi-Square tests on gender vs. strategy

	Value	P-value (2-sided)
Strategy 1		0.1
Strategy 3		0.509
Strategy 4		0.550
N of Valid Cases	72	

The nominal variables are the gender (male or female) and the Strategy 1 used (yes or no). The chi-square test in Table 4 shows that the Strategy 1 used between the gender is not significant ($P = 0.100$). Since the P-value is greater than 0.05, there is no evidence that gender and Strategy 1 used are dependent on each other. This shows that these two variables are significantly unrelated to each other.

The next test also concerns the nominal variables that are the gender (male or female) and the Strategy 3 used (yes or no). The chi-square test in Table 4 shows that the Strategy 3 used between the gender is not significant ($P=0.509$). Since the P-value is greater than 0.05, findings suggest that gender and Strategy 3 are independent of each other. In other words, these two variables are significantly unrelated to each other.

The nominal variables are the gender (male or female) and the Strategy 4 used (yes or no). The chi-square test in Table 4 shows that the Strategy 4 used between the gender is not significant ($P = 0.550$). Since the P-value is greater than 0.05, there is also no evidence that gender and Strategy 4 are dependent on each other. Hence, these two variables are significantly unrelated to each other.

7.   Conclusion

It can be concluded that participants of the study are aware of the attention getter strategies available to them but are mostly using one strategy in the introduction paragraph to capture the reader's interest. Limited number of participants involved in the study may contribute to the findings obtained regarding the most applied strategy. However, if the number of samples is increased, findings on the strategy applied by participants may differ from findings of the current study. It is also important to note that the introduction paragraph is not merely a structure of an essay but an opportunity to be taken by the writer to gain audience to his or her writing. The writer, for instance, should make an effort to use more than one attention getter strategies available to engage the reader (Grace et al., 2010). It is therefore recommended that students should be encouraged to use different or multiple attention getters during essay writing practices. Frequent practice allows students to be familiar with other introduction strategies available, hence, leading to the effective use of the strategies and a successful attempt to draw the readers into their essay.

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