

Method to their Madness: Analysing Students' Writings Against Research Development Skill (RSD) Framework

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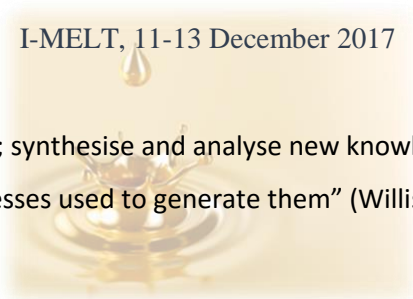
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Abstract

This paper presents qualitative analysis of essays written by second-year Bachelor of Linguistics students in a public university in Pakistan, based on the Research Skill Development (RSD) Framework (Willison & O'Regan, 2006a). The RSD framework has been used at several universities outside Australia, (e.g., in Canada, Ireland and Holland) to help students at the undergraduate and graduate levels develop research skills (Willison & O'Regan, 2010). Despite the fact that 90% of Government schools in Pakistan use Sindhi and/or Urdu as a medium of instruction in schools and that only ten percent conduct classes in English (Mahboob, (in press)), English is taught as a compulsory subject from grades 1-12, as well as in most undergraduate degree programs. It is also a medium of instruction in the universities in Pakistan. This study focuses on the research skills of students based on the facets of the RSD Framework when the participants were not aware of the framework. The researchers analysed essays written by students as class assignments. Findings revealed that there was some 'method to their (students') madness'. That is, the students, despite their unfamiliarity with the RSD framework, were able to demonstrate evaluative and analytical research skills that matched the facets of the RSD framework. Based on the study, we propose that the formal introduction of the RSD framework through online or on-campus workshops can enhance students' research skills.

Conceptual Framework

This study uses the Research Skill Development (RSD) Framework as a conceptual model for analysing student essays. The RSD includes six facets of inquiry: that the students “embark on inquiry and so determine a need for knowledge/understanding; find/generate needed information/data using appropriate methodology; critically evaluate information/data and the process to find/generate them; organise



information collected/generated; synthesise and analyse new knowledge; and communicate knowledge and understanding and the processes used to generate them” (Willison & O’Regan, 2007 p. 400).

Educational Structure in Pakistan

School Education

In order to understand the academic backgrounds of participants in this study and their proficiency in research skills, it is imperative for readers to understand Pakistan’s education system. Pakistan’s education system is chiefly inspired by the British system, as Pakistan was once a British colony. The average age of students at the time of admission in the primary level is five (Bughio, 2013), and it takes five years to complete primary education. The middle level of education lasts for three years, while high school (also called matriculation) lasts for two years. Higher secondary school (also called Intermediate) requires two years to complete. By the time students are 18, they may enrol in degree colleges/universities for further education. During the first eight years of their primary education, students study eight subjects: Urdu (the national language of Pakistan), English, Mathematics, Science, Arts, Social Studies, Islamic Studies, Computer Studies, and sometimes a regional language (e.g. Sindhi in the province of Sindh). Formative and summative assessments/examinations are conducted by the schools. From grades 9 to 12, students take selective subjects that may include Science, Arts, Commerce and Computer Studies. It is important to mention that school education in Pakistan does not include research-specific courses; students do not have to complete research projects at any stage of their school education. Nor do the students receive any formal research training during their school years other than completing some practical examinations in science laboratories and writing reports based on their procedures and results of the practicals/experiments.

University Education

After successful completion of higher secondary/intermediate education in Pakistan, students enrol in the undergraduate program offered by the university. The undergraduate/Bachelor program refers to a Bachelor (Pass), a two-year degree, Bachelor (Honours), a three-year degree, and a 4-year Bachelor degree. In addition to that, some Bachelor degrees (e.g., Bachelor of Architecture; Bachelor of Medicine) require five years. During the first three years of undergraduate study, students are not introduced to any research-specific subjects. However, most four-year or five-year Bachelor degrees offer students some knowledge of research design, principles and methods, and students are expected to work on a thesis as a pre-requisite for completion of their degree (Higher Education Commission of Pakistan, 2015).

According to the Annual Report 2013-14 of the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan (2013), an upward trend for the promotion of research culture was observed from 1000 research publications in 2009-10 to 5300 such publications in 2013-14 which included faculty members and research students.

English as a Medium of Instruction in University

Pakistan is a complex country when it comes to languages. There are seven major languages spoken across Pakistan in addition to Urdu as a national language and English as an official language. The English language was introduced by the British Empire to strengthen their rule in the sub-continent (Rahman, 1997). Despite being an official language of Pakistan and a medium of instruction in universities, English is still a language of the elite, with little or no functional value (Shamim, 2008) in the life of common people. It is hardly used in socially except among academics, in court proceedings and/or in official (mainly written) correspondence.

Since English is a medium of instruction in elite private schools, many students from public sector institutes feel marginalised due to their lack of proficiency in English (Bughio, 2013). When these students reach public sector universities, they are expected to be proficient in English and capable of comprehending the course content and lectures delivered in English (Channa, 2007). Despite students' lack of sufficient proficiency in English language, they write their assignments and take examinations in English. The focus of this study was to analyse student essays in terms of their research skills based on the RSD framework. It was assumed that the facets of the RSD framework could be demonstrated even if there were occasional inaccuracies in English.

Methods

This study presents qualitative analysis of secondary data gathered from tertiary students. The total number of students for this study was three, and each student had submitted five essays as one document. Hence, the total number of essays analysed was 15. There were five topics for these essays: linguistic imperialism in Pakistan, gender discrimination, social problems in Pakistan, internet addiction, and the downfall of the education system because of private or government institutions.

These students were enrolled in a Bachelor of English Linguistics, and when they wrote these essays, they were in their second semester. It is worth mentioning that participants in this study were not formally taught any research-related subjects during their undergraduate study; as mentioned earlier, research methodology is only taught at the fourth year.

The first step of this research paper involved gaining access to students' essays. The research team wanted to analyse essays written by at least five students. The third author gathered secondary data from his previous students. He approached 15 students in semester 2, 2016 for their consent to include their essays in this study. The students had already been assessed on these essays, and results were finalised in 2016. They were informed that the essays were to be used only for the current research and that this would have no impact on their future academic assessment. As a result, three of them agreed to participate. As no formal ethics approval was required for this in Pakistan, students were requested to sign the consent forms if they consented to the inclusion of their essays in this research project. This ensured that students' names would remain confidential and unknown to other researchers.

Essays were analysed in line with the RSD framework in order to determine the facets of research involved in these essays. One author took the lead in this procedure and incorporated the other authors' opinion/coding as well as part of the analysis. The process of analysing essays took about two months, with regular team meetings between the authors.

Findings and Discussion

Facets of research		St 1	St 2	St 3	Total
a	Embark & clarify	0	0	0	0
b	Find & generate	4	16	7	27
c	Evaluate & reflect	12	21	11	44
d	Organize & manage	5	10	4	19
e	Analyse & synthesise	11	17	3	31
f	Communicate & apply	4	9	2	15
		36	73	27	136

It is informative to note that all students practiced five facets (Table 1) of research without being formally taught these facets through any courses during their Bachelor degree. This analysis is based on the essays students wrote on different topics such as social issues and the issues of first and second language in Pakistan. While writing on these topics, the students used *evaluative and reflective* facets the most, followed by facets related to *analysing and synthesising*, then *finding and generating*.

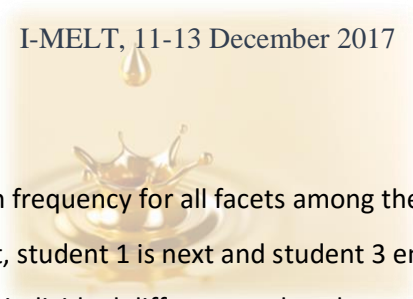


Table 1 also shows a difference in frequency for all facets among the three students. Frequency of research facets for student 2 is the highest, student 1 is next and student 3 employed the lowest frequency of research skills. This suggests that individual differences also play a role in the employment of research facets in students' essays. In addition, there may be many other factors that influenced their research skills which may not be limited to their academic background.

This paper emphasises that students were able to employ the research facets without being formally exposed to them through specific subjects related to these facets. This also establishes that students do pick up these facets on their own, as they are important skills needed not only for their academic performance but also in real life scenarios outside the classes. However, it will be interesting for future research to determine how these skills are acquired. We hypothesise that students have always been encouraged to approach such topics in an evaluative and critical manner, without being consciously aware that they are essential components of the research process. They might also have developed these skills while learning how to write and compose essays, reports, debates and speeches during their study at the school and university. It is also likely that they have uniquely developed this writing style of evaluating and analysing topics in this way. Further research should probe into sources of learning, as this could have important pedagogical implications.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper recommends that when students are able to employ these research facets without any formal learning or understanding of them, their research skills can be enhanced by introducing the Research Skill Development (RSD) Framework through detailed workshops either face-to-face or online, using interactive software such as Skype or Zoom. The RSD framework can provide an opportunity for creating conditions where learning can be more systematic and organised by building on students' previous knowledge through specially-arranged workshops (Willison and O'Regan 2007). Therefore, a thorough understanding of the RSD framework can result in developing, refining, and recording the progress of the students' research skills at all levels. Employing this framework can improve students' research skills and help them learn better. It is expected that write-ups generated after the RSD framework is formally introduced will yield better results.



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