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## Task-based Writing Instruction to Enhance Graduate Students' Audience Awareness

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### Abstract

This case study investigated the effects of task-based writing instruction on graduate students' audience awareness. The researchers chose six graduate students purposefully and invited them to a focus group interview to understand their current sense of audience in writing. Accordingly, a series of audience-focused tasks were designed, validated and piloted. The participants had been exposed to these tasks through a series of online workshops for six months. During this time, they were asked to keep journals. The analysis of students' journals and the content analysis of their writing products showed that the participants could develop a sense of audience over time.

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*Keywords:* Audience awareness; Task; Revision, Thesis-writing, Genre

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### 1. Introduction

One of the important skills that graduate students need to acquire to write effective theses is audience awareness. Audience awareness refers to the ability of writers to answer their audience needs and maintain the flow of communication with readers through words (Wong, 2005). Developing this skill among student-writers necessitates practice (Midgette, Haria, & MacArthur, 2008). Practice is beneficial, because it develops constant awareness of audience while writing (Alamargot, Caporossi, Chesnet, & Ros, 2011). Revision is an important aspect of practice writing, which is regarded as a task or part of a task (Fitzgerald, 1987). Many scholars investigated the effects of writing tasks on learners' sense of audience in CMC and Web 2.0 environments (cf. Bloch, 2007; Chen & Brown, 2012; Rezaee & Oladi, 2008). The majority of these studies were empowered by

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collaboration, joint decision making, and equal participation of learners in co-construction of texts. What remained less explored in this area is the effect of writing tasks on individual learners' sense of audience while producing texts. This is a gap in our knowledge that the researchers of this study are interested to bridge. Within the scope of this study, we tried to understand the development of non-native graduate students' sense of audience through analyzing a series of well-written texts and revising the part-genres (i.e. sections and chapters) of their thesis drafts accordingly.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

This research used Johns' (1997) socioliterate approaches to teaching. In socioliterate views, literacy is socially constructed by being exposed to discourses. This view of literacy takes into consideration roles, purposes, conventions, writers, and readers (Johns, 2002). A teacher, who runs a socioliterate classroom, needs to create a situation for students to produce different genres and fulfill various purposes. Writing tasks in such classrooms include writing in different contexts and following discourse communities' conventions. Engaging in such writing tasks helps learners to study and develop awareness of texts, readers, writer roles, and contexts (John, 1997). The teaching model that we employed in this study aimed to give our participants the opportunity to analyze authentic texts produced by experts of their own discipline. Through this process we were expecting the learners to raise awareness of how proficient writers consider readers in different thesis part-genres and revise their own manuscripts accordingly.

## **3. Methods**

### *3.1. Research design*

In order to investigate the effects of task-based writing instruction on graduate students' audience awareness, a case study was employed. The sources of data for this study were preliminary focus group interview, participants' journals, and their writing products. Focus groups according to Bogdan and Biklen (2007) are group interviews through which a researcher seeks a range of views about an issue. The ultimate goal for using focus group interview as a research protocol was to gain background insight for developing audience-focused tasks. Accordingly, participants were invited to participate in a 90-minute focus group to give us the opportunity to explore their sense of audience while writing and the difficulties of keeping themselves aware of their readers. The questions of the interview were semi-structured to gather descriptive data based on a planned, but flexible theme framework. The focus group interview was audio recorded, transcribed, and qualitatively analyzed. The findings then were utilized to design audience-focused tasks.

Participants' journals were one of the two sources of data collection for investigating the usefulness of the designed tasks. Writing journals is a purposeful collection of content, and self-reflection (Woodward, 1998). They are appropriate tools for assessment, because learners document their progress of attaining audience awareness. In addition to the journals, the contents of participants' primary and final thesis manuscripts were comparatively analyzed for the purpose of data triangulation.

### *3.2. Tasks*

Tasks included genre analysis. To do genre analysis, according to Bitchener (2010, p. 11), learners focus on the content types and structures of different part-genres and investigate what strategies were used by the authors to present units of content. In this study, the participants reviewed some sample well-written theses on Psychology and Counseling with critical thinking at the forefront. According to Scriven and Paul (1992), critical thinking is "the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing,

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