An Emic Perspective on Academic Writing Difficulties among International Graduate Students in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The number of international graduate students choosing Malaysia as their destination of study is increasing. These students arrive to Malaysian shores with diverse academic, cultural and linguistic background with the intention of upgrading their academic qualification especially at graduate level. The students are confronted with a mismatch between the literacy practices in their native country and at graduate level currently. This leads to challenges in adapting to the current academic writing practices at graduate level. Academic writing is a productive skill that is pivotal to ensure academic success. However, students for whom English is a foreign language struggle in writing various sections of academic work at graduate level such as the methodology and discussion sections. This qualitative study focuses on academic writing difficulties faced by the non-native English speaking international graduate students while pursuing their Master's degree at a public university in Malaysia. Focus group interview was used on 70 international graduate students from taught Master programs to elicit qualitative data. The main objective of the focus group interviews was to analyze how these students negotiate academic writing from an emic perspective. Through this approach, the students were able to share their own experiences of struggling with academic writing practices in higher education. The findings indicate that non-native English speaking international graduate students faced difficulties coping with academic writing especially in English as a medium of instruction setting. This study highlights the need of host institutions in providing academic support to improve the most crucial literacy skill that contributes to academic success at graduate level.

Keywords: academic writing practices; academic writing difficulties; international graduate students; Master program; qualitative study

INTRODUCTION

Among South-East Asian countries, Malaysia and Singapore are increasingly attracting foreign students (Crewe, 2004; Reinties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet&Kommers, 2012). Malaysia is a popular destination for international graduate students, especially from the Middle East (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). The increasing number of international students studying in Malaysia has brought linguistic, educational and cultural diversity (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). The diversity brought about by incoming international students is however, viewed mainly from a deficit frame. The view point of this deficit frame is that the challenges faced by the international students are attributes of their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The challenges in academic writing faced by international students in higher education in Malaysia are similar to the challenges faced by international students in higher education in English speaking countries. These academic writing challenges are largely related to students' language proficiency and cultural differences (Andrade, 2006; Sawir, 2005).

Kaur (2000) highlighted that the majority of non-native English speaking international students enrolled in taught Master programs in Malaysia are required to attend lectures, participate in tutorials and fulfill various academic literacies demands facilitated through classroom lectures, tutorials, seminars, individual project work, industrial or business placement, problem-solving classes, group projects, research dissertation or discussion groups. However, Kaur (2000) indicated that these students are not able to accommodate to the expectations of academic literacies at Master's level. The inability to accommodate to the expectations of academic literacies at Master's level is further aggravated by the lack of English language proficiency among the students as English language is the medium of instruction in graduate programs.

These students are qualified to further their study at graduate study in Malaysia based on the cumulative grade point average (CGPA) of their first degree and supplemented with English language qualifications such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or International English Language Testing System (IELTS) results. By fulfilling all the necessary qualifications, they are assumed to be prepared for graduate study. However, with all the necessary qualifications, they are still unable to grasp and adapt to the new and different academic expectations in their academic writing practices as mentioned in past academic studies (Kaur & Shakila, 2007; Sidhu & Kaur, 2009).

Furthermore, much of the research on academic writing practices of non-native English speaking international graduate students is confined to students studying in native language environments, such as in Anglo Saxon countries. This creates a wide gap in research pertaining to the academic literacy practices of international graduate students in South East Asian countries including Malaysia (Crewe, 2004; Reinties et al., 2012). Therefore, the underlying motivation of this study is to explore the difficulties faced by non-native English speaking international graduate student in their academic writing in Malaysia.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Academic writing requires a complete, active engagement with the facts and principles of a discipline (Rose, 1985). Furthermore, Elder and Paul (2006, p. 38) indicate that academic writing process involves "intimate connection between the ability to write well and the ability to think well". Arkoudis and Tran (2007) further add that academic writing as a form of thinking is fundamental for academic success of the international students. Hyland (2007) also highlights that as a form of thinking especially in tertiary literacy, students' ability in sustaining arguments and synthesizing ideas to write in English for academic purposes is crucial for academic success. Later, Ansarimoghaddam and Tan (2014), and Mansourizadeh and Khairi (2014) also indicated that academic writing is a major language skill used for communicating and developing ideas. However, tertiary learners struggle in creating a coherent and extended piece of writing to share their research findings with other researchers around the world.

Academic writing at the tertiary level has been found to present various challenges for international students. For example, in taught Master programs, academic writing is an important component for many coursework assessments. The competency in academic writing is critical at graduate level and students need to continuously develop their academic writing skills (Stevenson, 2006; Thomas, 2005; Wasley, 2008). Involvement in academic writing in English language context is more challenging for graduate students whose mother tongue is not English. Studying in an English instructional environment exposes international graduate students to the complexity of discipline-specific, graduate level literacy requirement. Non-native English speaking students face challenges particularly in meeting the rigors of discipline-based writing (Bronson, 2004). As Brown (2008) discusses,

international graduate students in the UK face difficulties in adjusting to academic writing due to language barriers in terms of vocabulary and grammar, inadequate understanding of academic writing standards and expectations from the lectures and institution and lastly, academic cultural differences, particularly in regard to critical evaluation and participation in class discussions.

Studies by Casanave (1995), and Angelova and Riazantsewa (1999) explored students who were successful in educational settings in their home cultures but struggled to satisfy the literacy demands of their new environments. Angelova and Riazantsewa's (1999) findings showed that their respondents wrote and thought in ways that were outside of the dominant practices of their discourse community. This resulted in problems with topic selection, register, audience, organization, grammar and purpose. Directly, the problems negatively impacted their academic writing in their new academic environment. A study by Ruggles's (2012) indicated that students were definitely struggling with the demands of academic writing.

Academic writing experiences in the context of "integrating disparate ideas, synthesizing perspectives, and extending theory which demands a higher-level construction skills and perspective-taking, as well as greater concern for accuracy, voice, and audience" (Lavelle & Bushrow, 2007, p. 809). These skills should developed from international students' undergraduate years and are expected to assist them in their academic writing practices in the taught Master programs in Malaysia. However, Malaysian based research proved that international graduate students in Malaysian universities struggled in reading and writing practices (Ibrahim & Nambiar, 2011; Kaur & Shakila, 2007; Kaur & Sidhu, 2009). Ibrahim and Nambiar (2011) identified that the students' experiences in their home country where they obtained their first degree (bachelor's degree) did not prepare them for the rigors of a writing project in their present university located in a foreign country. The subjects in their study claimed that there were differences in teaching and learning styles between the higher education institutions in Malaysia and their home countries, and that they were not prepared for the autonomy given in the process of writing their academic papers. These differences led to challenges in handling the new expectations of academic writing.

METHODOLOGY

This paper draws on material from a completed doctorate study on academic literacies challenges among international graduate students in Malaysia (Manjet, 2013). The site of the research is one of the higher education institutions in Malaysia that offers various undergraduate and graduate programs (research, coursework and mixed mode) with an enrolment of more than 20,000 local and international students. The institution has graduate students from more than 50 countries all over the world.

RESEARCH DESIGN

SAMPLING

This qualitative study utilized purposive sampling for data collection purposes. Purposive sampling approach was utilized as it allowed the selection of all eligible respondents who could provide accurate and reliable information regarding the research problem (Bernard, 2002; Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008). This study focused on international graduate students in taught Master programs (hereafter referred to as "respondents") as they are academically required to complete a variety of academic writing tasks during their study. The selection criteria for the respondents are: (a) they have to be full-time international master students in

the coursework or mixed mode Master programs; and (b) they have to be in their second semester or more so that they would have had the opportunity in their first semester of graduate study to adapt to the new and different academic expectations in their academic writing practices; at the research site university.

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW (FGI)

The primary qualitative data gathering technique used for this study was focus group interviews (FGI) with the respondents. Focus group, a group interview that depends on question-and-answer format (Krueger & Casey, 2000) is applied based on the assumption that people are an important source of information about themselves, their experiences, knowledge, opinion, beliefs, feelings and the issue that affect their lives and they can articulate their thoughts and feelings (Best & Kahn, 2006). Collecting descriptive data in the respondents' own words also gave the opportunity to the researcher to develop insights on how participants interpret (Bogdan & Bilken, 1992) academic writing difficulties faced. This method also gave the respondents the opportunity to listen to the views of others and consider their own views accordingly. Furthermore, FGI was also able to reduce the influence and role of the researcher (Vanderstoep & Johnston, 2009).

Kruger's (1994) "rule of thumb" which recommends that a focus group should not have more than seven participants was applied. This research used pseudonyms to ensure anonymity of the respondents and confidentiality of data related to particular respondents. A coding scheme that could identify the respondent, the respondent's faculty or school was developed by the researcher to code the FGI respondents to ensure a trustworthy study that is valid, reliable and ethical. Seventy respondents who took part in the FGI were coded according to an identification number of each respondent and an identification alphabet letter to identify their school. For example, a respondent who responded in the interview session from a particular school is coded as *S2A*. The symbol *S* represents the respondent, *2* represents the respondent's number and *A* represents the school's code.

An interview guide with suitable questions regarding academic writing difficulties experienced by international graduate students was used for the FGI. A pilot study was conducted to determine the suitability and comprehensibility of the questions among 10 respondents based on random sampling. The FGI was done in a systematic and consistent manner and the respondents were given the opportunity to discuss the challenges and difficulties related to academic writing. Questions were framed by dimensions of time: past, present and future. Krueger's categories of questions (1998) (Table 1) and Krueger's (1994) (Table 2) focus group data collection flow chart guided the present study. Krueger's categories of questions was applied in order to explore the challenges faced by the respondents at three levels, at undergraduate level, at present (Master's level) and also how they were coping with these difficulties. However, the data on the coping strategies is not reported in this article.

TABLE 1. Categories of Questions (Krueger, 1998)

Question Type	Purpose
Opening	Participants get acquainted and feel connected
Introductory	Begins discussion of topic
Transition	Moves smoothly and seamlessly into key questions
Key	Obtains insight on areas of central concern in the study
Ending	Helps researcher determine where to place emphasis and brings closure to the discussion

TABLE 2. Data collection flow chart of FGI adapted from Krueger (1994)

Data Collection Flow Chart of the FGI	Description
Sequencing of questions	Opening questions, introductory questions, transition questions, key questions, ending questions.
Capturing and handling data	Audio-taping, field journal notes of researcher
Coding of data	Placing codes in the margin of the interview transcript
Member Checking	Emailing the transcript to the FGI respondents for member checking.

The FGI sessions were held at various locations at the research site university. Seventeen interview sessions were administered with a range of three to seven respondents in a group. (the interview data is presented as it is without any editing). The majority of the focus groups comprised four to five students. Each session lasted between 40 minutes to one hour. In each session, respondents were provided with an introduction to the study and purpose of the FGI. The respondents were also given a participation statement sheet and a consent form. All respondents signed the consent form and returned it to the researcher during their interview sessions.

Interviews were audio taped as audiotaping the interview increases the reliability and validity of the interview (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2008). The transcription was done at the end of each interview session by the researcher. The researcher's observation as an interviewer and researcher was recorded in the field journal during and immediately after the FGI for further analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

The researcher used Microsoft Word compatible qualitative research data analysis software, NVivo 10 to organize and analyze complex data and emerging patterns extracted from the transcription. The core feature of the qualitative data analysis of this research was coding. According to Miles and Huberman (1994) and Braun and Clarke (2006), NVivo 10 is useful for the researcher in moving data easily from one code to another and to document the data as it was analyzed. The use of the software increased the validity of the data analyzed.

The coding of the data was done using thematic analysis that is a qualitative analytic method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It organizes, describes the data set in detail and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 79). Evidence from the various databases was grouped into codes and codes were grouped into broader themes. The themes that captured the relevant data from the interview transcripts to answer the research questions and represent the patterned responses within the data set were created (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 82). Table 3 shows the analysis procedures design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) used in this study.

TABLE 3. Data Analysis Procedures' Design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007)

Qualitative Procedures	General Procedures in Data Analysis
1.Organizing documents and visual data 2. Verbatim transcribing of interview (Merriam 1988) text from the FGI. (audiotaped data) 3. Checking transcription accuracy (e.g. member checking) which functioned to enhance the reliability and validity of the data (Fraenkel&Wallen, 2008). 3.Preparing the data for computer analysis (Nvivo 10)	Preparing the data for analysis
1.Reading through the data 2.Writing memos 3.Developing qualitative codebook to organize data	Exploring the data
2.Assigning labels to codes 3.Grouping codes into themes (or categories) 4.Interrelating themes (or categories) or abstracting to smaller set of themes	

5.Using qualitative software programs (NVivo 10)	
1.Representing findings in discussions of themes or categories	Representing the data analysis
1.Using the researcher, respondents and reviewers' standards 2.Employing validation strategies (member checking and peer review)	Validating the data

[Note: Qualitative codebook is a statement of the codes for a database (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). It was generated during research and depends on the codes that emerged during an analysis. It helped to organize the data (adopted from Miles & Huberman, 1994; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007)].

FINDINGS

ACADEMIC WRITING DIFFICULTIES

Based on the findings of the FGI, four themes were identified. The themes are academic writing techniques, English language proficiency, influence of prior academic culture and feedback from lecturers.

ACADEMIC WRITING TECHNIQUES

The respondents faced various challenges in the academic writing process. The challenges highlighted by the respondents were identifying what to write, expressing ideas, linking ideas, sequencing, organizing the assignment and the issue of clarity in their writing. One of the respondents, S1D, an English language teacher from Saudi Arabia noted that she faced difficulty in expressing ideas and in linking her ideas.

> Maybe because I didn't get used to writing before. Here I have to write more professional way so you know it requires more proficiency in writing. I think at the first the most difficult is all student have. Keep the linking between sentences at the first, consequently do the same, linked the part is really important, recently we have to say one idea. And in every program we have to just say one thing out. When they were try to write in English and sometime before got to say one thing in one sentences and when you want to write the report for sure and we mix everything together and may be mix two sentences together is awful.

The respondents faced difficulties in writing various parts of an academic piece. They (S4E and S1I) stated the title and the introduction sections are the most important and the most difficult to compose. They faced difficulties in initiating the writing of the introduction as they lacked the knowledge on introduction writing techniques. The respondents (S1B, S7G, S10G, S13G, S2I, S3I, S3J) also faced challenges in supporting recommendations and analysis with evidence based literature although a lot of information is available. Writing the research methodology is considered a technical-based section and requires knowledge of special terminology. The discussion and conclusion sections are also some of the most difficult parts to write. These parts were difficult to write because the respondents lacked academic writing ability and exposure from their first-degree to utilize the information from the literature review and findings' sections and write in a clear and unambiguous manner.

Composing the literature review section of the dissertation was also difficult as the respondents were worried about plagiarizing. The respondents highlighted that they faced challenges in avoiding plagiarism as they did not understand the exact meaning of plagiarism and were only informed that they cannot plagiarize without any detailed briefing. They further explained that the host institution did not actively educate the students on the issue of plagiarism.

> Sometimes you know that knowledge ...you know
> what is the concept and you want to say what you
> don't know what word you have to use and
> sometimes you know the words but you think
> the word is not suitable for the academic writing" [S3J]

In the context of referencing and adhering to the American Psychological Association (APA) writing style, the respondents (S1E, S3E) commented that although the APA style of writing, punctuation and spelling played an important role in the presentation of one's writing, they were not familiar with it. The respondents (S7G, S12G) also added that they experienced academic shock because the academic tasks were done differently in their first-degree compared to the Master's level. Writing in accordance to the APA style is a challenge as they were not trained to do much writing in their first-degree. Furthermore, they also lacked the knowledge and technique of referencing to avoid plagiarism and doing research before writing their assignment or dissertation.

> To get the idea, to write don't copy paste just
> write your own of any title. This is the first time
> I hear that. [S10G]

> I have to re-phrase the content. I have to be
> think and write what the exact meaning of
> that word to rephrase the content like that.
> I have to think and write...its difficult for me. [S13G]

> …when I start is *(name of institution is deleted)* is
> maybe hard for me, and this semester also when
> I have assignments to search, how to write my
> my paper, how to complete my assignment I
> don't know. I don't know this, how to do but after month,
> two month three month I can now I have idea how
> to write the paper, how to read, how to search about
> my assignment, how to read the complete, program
> the code, I have the idea about this. [S18G]

Lack of explicitness in the academic writing's requirement and instructions given by the lecturers also leads to different interpretations among the students. S2G stated that the assignment requirements were very ambiguously and implicitly stated. This is a hurdle in ensuring the assignments meet the academic expectations of the lectures. S11G who was very confused and could not understand the requirements of report writing only found out later from her lecturer that she did not fulfil the requirement of report writing when she submitted her report and no feedback was provided.

> Even for the assignments like that you have to
> read, understand it, at times and the language,
> why the structure at times is ambiguous. You
> don't just know which way to go or which
> one to go. You just keep trying so it takes more
> time to get it. [S2G]
> I ask someone about my friends but also didn't

tell me much more about what should I do but
I gave the report to our lecturer after one month,
yes after one month he told me that this not report.
I don't know what's the meaning of report. [S11G]

Researcher: No feedback is given?
S11G: He just told me that, that's not a report, you
should have more complete but I don't know what
should I write. [S11G]

ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Lack of English language proficiency presented a huge challenge for the respondents in their academic writing. One respondent, (S6E) commented that note taking during lectures and extracting important information from journals and books while reading are challenges faced due to low English language proficiency. Other respondents (S7B, S5D, S8E, S10G, S12G) stated that they did not have a wide range of vocabulary and expressed difficulty in using the correct vocabulary as English is either a foreign or second language for them. Specifically most of them, such as S4E, S7G, S11G and S14G lacked the specialized discipline content vocabulary in English. It was also asserted that it was a struggle to write grammatically correct sentences and ensure paraphrased sentences as grammatically correct sentences. The difficulty was further aggravated with the weakness of using the correct tense in writing. The respondents also indicated that a big number of vocabulary with similar meanings led to difficulty in choosing the correct vocabulary for the specified context. Therefore, a lot of time was taken to memorize and create a self-made dictionary that consists of vocabulary with similar meanings.

The majority of the respondents who did not have strong English language background had to complete two major academic tasks. They not only have to master the content knowledge of their individual Master programs, but simultaneously have to learn English language to help them in learning their course content.

…need to perform two in one operation... [S1E]

you'll be in the hall like you take 10-20 minutes,
still reading the question to really understand
what the lecturer is saying. Sometimes it takes a
lot of time before you understand, then you start
approaching it, something like that. [S2G]

I know in Thailand language how to explain
but I don't know how to explain in English
because… maybe we don't know that word.
Yeah vocabulary or ... some specific word
in our program. This is my problem. [S4E]

INFLUENCE OF PRIOR ACADEMIC CULTURE

Students from the Arts and Hybrid asserted that they did not do writing assignments or projects in their first-degree. This indicates that the academic context of their first-degree program did not prepare them for academic writing at graduate level. Thus, the respondents experienced academic difficulty in writing their assignments in their Master program.

>   I studied English translation for 4 years
>   during my Bachelor but I never wrote even
>   one assignments [S5B]

Furthermore, the problem was aggravated as the content knowledge in the Master's study differed from the first-degree. Three respondents from China also explained that *Chinese (in the students' own words)* as medium of instruction in their first-degree influenced how they wrote in the Master's program as the grammatically constructed sentences in English differed based on logic. This indicates the differences in writing strategies in *Chinese* influence their translation into English.

>   in Chinese and English very different in
>   logic [S3C]

>   Especially for the Chinese because we have
>   different language logic for the writing, not
>   like for the speaking you can speak in wrong
>   form, wrong grammar but other people can
>   understand but the, for the academic writing
>   if you do in wrong grammar is fully wrong so
>   if you do it wrong logic is fully wrong so this
>   is the most difficult part for me. [S5C]

S2C noted that she was aware of what she intended to write in English but was unable to identify the suitable vocabulary or word to describe and write clearly. This is due to two reasons. Firstly, is the influence of insufficient vocabulary to ensure a successful transfer of information processing from the students' L1 into English. Next, is the lack of grammar knowledge in their L2. S2D, whose medium of instruction in his first-degree was Thai language also supported the explanation. S4E also asserted that prior degree's medium of instruction (Thai language) has definitely caused him difficulty in doing writing in English language at Master's level.

>   …for Chinese we speak English sometimes
>   we don't realise that the English we spoke is
>   like Chinese English or Sing-English that not
>   a pure English so grammar problem is very
>   serious and about the vocabulary is that sometime
>   we know what we want to write in English but
>   we cannot find the correct or suitable vocabulary…[S2C]

S4C also stated that writing in English at Master's level is challenging for him because his L1 is Kurdish and he completed his first-degree in Persian language. Different cultural based learning experience in Persian language and influence of Kurdish as the respondent's L1 have an effect on his writing style.

>   now the grammar different Farsi and the English
>   is so different, and is the sentences that I want to
>   write, I write by the Kurdish grammar not English
>   grammar and is so difficult for if I want to adopted
>   to the English, I think the meaning is about that and

> the other one I think is about the some item at the
> my course academic some item is so difficult for the
> remember [S4C]

FEEDBACK FROM LECTURERS

S4C, S1H and S3J expressed lack of feedback from lecturers as a challenge in recognizing and rectifying their challenges in writing. S3C and S3J commented that their supervisors' busy schedule prevented the supervisors from providing feedback to them on their dissertation's content.   The supervisors only corrected the language aspects such as punctuations. The respondent's cultural influence from the first-degree learning experience affects her expectation of feedback from the supervisor in her Master program. Authoritative learning environment and unfamiliarity with independent study leads to conflicting views of feedback. There is a mismatch of type of feedback given by the lecturer/supervisor and the type of feedback expected by the respondent.

> Actually for example I give my supervisor all my
> thesis because he didn't have time to give him chapter
> by chapter, and after a long time when I take it give
> it back, just some correction not ..I mean it was not
> based on the knowledge. It was based on the how
> can I for example… I put the full stop, I didn't put
> full stop, or I forgot parenthesis something like this. [S3J]

S4H commented that she wanted to get feedback from her lecturers but the lecturers did not provide any. S7C, S6G and S4H asserted that they wanted constructive feedback to improve their weaknesses. However, the grade given for their coursework did not provide information on their weaknesses and improvement measures. Two respondents highlighted that lecturers were aware that the students did not have good writing assignment background; however, the lecturers did not help them much. Furthermore, very limited time was spent or none at all with supervisors for dissertation or assignment writing consultation.

> No they don't help very much, they do sometimes
> give some tips but for me because I have no idea
> to do." [S3B]

> Supervisor, ah how to say that? Actually I'm not
> familiar with the supervisor, I don't know why
> because like for our foreign students I don't know
> others but for me, I just went to this lectures for
> assignments; if he or she is my supervisor, sometimes
> that. I never go to the supervisor for anything else, for
> advice or what, or just for assignment. [S6B]

DISCUSSION

There is an adherent mismatch between the students' academic writing experiences based on their prior academic learning background with their current Master's communities of practice. Their academic writing, which is affected by previous academic writing experiences patterns, does not help them to quickly adapt to the new and different academic expectations

in graduate programs. Research indicates that to become accustomed to an unfamiliar culture, a new education system, and navigating these differences in a foreign language or second language (Andrade, 2008; Campbell & Li, 2008; Wong, 2004) is a lengthy process.

The results of this study indicate that the respondents found writing the literature review, methodology and findings/analysis sections, using appropriate academic style, writing coherent paragraphs and expressing ideas in correct English as very difficult compared to writing introduction, recommendation, conclusion, references/bibliography sections and referring to sources. Similar difficulties faced by the international graduate students in their academic writing practices were also previously reported in a quantitative study by Manjet (2015). Overall, this study found that it was more difficult for international graduate students to make the necessary adjustment to study for their Master programs in English language. Most of them lacked English language exposure in their first-degree to prepare them for their graduate study in English.

According to Ringbom (1987) and Odlin (1989), a justification for this challenge is the language distance between their first and second language or third language has an effect on the amount of transfer that can take place between languages. Ringbom elaborated that Arabic speakers consume longer time to acquire English vocabulary because transfer from third languages seems to depend very much on relative language distance. Therefore, it is difficult for them to learn English language for their academic writing.

When the respondents are confronted by academic challenges such as writing a research paper, there is likelihood that the absence or lack of the 'correct' understanding of the academic culture might lead the respondents to apply their earlier held assumptions, values, beliefs and approaches that had given them stability, consistency and meaning (Schein, 2004). Issues such as not being familiar with the APA format and plagiarism from their first degree learning is are a setback for the students. The lecturers often fail to recognize the complexity of these issues confronting foreign students, particularly those issues associated with writing. They do not provide writing samples that demonstrate the academic writing genres (e.g. research proposal, literature review, article critique) and are unable to reduce the challenges in the academic writing practices for the students who are new to academic writing in a particular discipline (Casanave & Hubbard, 1992).

The findings of this study strongly advocate that although the international graduate students are qualified as competent users of the language based on the language requirement (TOEFL, IELTS, or its equivalent) set by the university, they still have academic writing difficulty. Therefore, their English language qualifications are not the true indicator of their English language proficiency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the analysis of the data, strategies need to be employed to assist international graduate students improve their academic writing practices. The students, their lecturers as well as the university have an important role to play in ensuring the students are able to improve their academic writing practices throughout the duration of their graduate study. Before embarking on a Master's degree, international students should have improved their academic writing practices through independent self-study, attending courses or workshops relevant to academic writing techniques as this is crucial if they want to embark on a higher level degree.

During their graduate program, the students should play a more active role in encouraging constructive feedback from their lecturers to improve their academic writing. The students should also be more actively involved and in various classroom-based teaching and learning activities such as brainstorming sessions, discussions and presentations to assist

them in academic writing.

Lecturers have a crucial role to play to ensure academic success of the international students. Cultural sensitivity and cultural knowledge of each individual international student's learning style is very important in gauging the students' academic competency. Lecturers are in the best position of assisting the students in improving their academic writing practices as they have immediate contact with the student. In the context of academic writing, the lecturers should be able to engage with the students by providing constructive feedback in the writing tasks produced by the students. Concurrently, the lecturers are also responsible in ensuring the students are provided sufficient resources such as academic writing skills training to improve their academic writing. At the same time, lecturers should have the knowledge of how these students operated in their first degree and the measures that can be executed to ensure that there is scaffolding between their undergraduate study and currently at the graduate level.

The university also should take the initiative to organize pre-orientation academic writing workshops to introduce the international graduate students on the academic writing conventions and expectations in their graduate programs. Progressively, academic writing workshops should also be made available for the students to improve their academic writing practices.

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the academic writing difficulties experienced by 70 international graduate students who come from different academic literacy backgrounds and differ from the present institutionally accepted codes and conventions of academic writing. These students were pursuing their Master programs at a tertiary level institution in Malaysia. The findings present only a small part of a much larger picture of the academic endeavor especially the academic writing experience of the students within a broader context of their past and present cultural, linguistic and educational experiences. The findings provide an avenue for a more expansive understanding of academic writing that recognizes value in linguistic and cultural diversity of international graduate students in target English language discourse communities.

The findings of this study should be used as a platform by South East Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and others to be more prepared for the academic experience of international students. For example, international graduate students can be provided with sustainable academic assistance in coping with their academic study. Students' views on the academic difficulties in their writing provides a reality of the day-to-day difficulties experienced by the students and what they expect from their lecturers and the university. Students' voice should be taken seriously to put into place effective academic writing strategies. Academic support centers should be set up in the universities for the students to refer and seek language and academic assistance. The findings also have profound implications for other countries involved in higher education globally. The findings also highlight the existence of mismatch between the student preparedness for graduate study and expectation of graduate study. This mismatch needs to be overcome either before or at an early stage of these students' graduate study as they are expected to produce a variety of academic writing tasks such as project reports, assignments and dissertations.

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